

Deconstructing Information Structure

Angelika Kratzer & Elisabeth Selkirk

University of Massachusetts at Amherst

Information Structure, as the term is commonly used, covers pretheoretical concepts like ‘focus’, ‘givenness’, or ‘topicality’. In spite of many years of research, there is no common ground on how those concepts relate to each other, what their place in grammar is, or whether there is any theoretical unity to them at all. In this talk, we will set aside topicality and limit our discussion to ‘givenness’ and ‘focus’. We will argue that the grammars of natural languages make available two distinct morphosyntactic features for overtly marking discourse coherence. One feature, Givenness Marking, is sensitive to whether an individual, a concept, or a proposition has been mentioned before and is still salient in the current discourse (Rochemont 2016). The other feature, FoCus Marking, evokes alternatives to a mentioned individual, concept, or proposition, and might thereby establish a contrast with an earlier part of the discourse (Rooth 1992). The alternatives triggered by FoCus are used by overt and non-overt FoCus-sensitive operators to produce the traditional distinctions between types of FoCus, including Exhaustive FoCus, Mirative FoCus, and Contrastive Topics.

If Givenness and FoCus are represented by morphosyntactic features, we expect those features to behave like other morphosyntactic features. They should have

stable meanings across languages, for example. We would also expect to see distinctive syntactic behavior like feature-driven movement. For phonological spell-out, there should be a fair amount of variation, including segmental, suprasegmental, and silent options. Our talk will be a contribution to a bigger ongoing project ultimately showing that, crosslinguistically, those expectations are borne out.