

Focus association of 'most' and 'only' in a Visual Verification Task

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The English sentence in (1) can receive three readings because the superlative expression 'the most expensive cake' needs to be interpreted with respect to a 'comparison set'. On the 'absolute' reading, (i), it is the set of contextually salient cakes. This set is narrowed down to the set of cakes that someone bought for Mary on the 'relative' reading in (ii) and to the set of cakes that John bought for someone in (iii). The presence of focus in a sentence presented out of the blue disambiguates between the two relative readings, (2), (Szabolcsi 1986, 2012, Heim 1985, 1999, Sharvit and Stateva 2002).

(1) John bought Mary the most expensive cake.

Readings:

- (i) 'John bought Mary the cake that was more expensive than any other cake.' *Absolute*
- (ii) 'John bought Mary a more expensive cake than anyone else bought her.' *Relative*
- (iii) 'John bought Mary a more expensive cake than he bought for anyone else.' *Relative*

(2) a. [**John**]_{Focus} bought Mary the most expensive cake. Readings: (i), (ii), but not (iii)

b. John bought [**Mary**]_{Focus} the most expensive cake. Readings: (i), (iii), but not (ii)

Focus signals the presence of alternatives in the discourse context, but, as first noticed in Pancheva and Tomaszewicz (2012), the focus on 'cake', as in (3), cannot result in the comparison among the alternatives to 'cake', which would yield the reading in (iv).

(3) John bought Mary the most expensive [**CAKE**]_{Focus}.

Unavailable reading:

- (iv) 'John bought Mary a more expensive cake than anything else he bought her.' *Relative*

Unlike the superlative in (3), *only* in (4) can associate with the focus on 'cake'. Unlike in English, in Polish the superlative can associate the same way as *only*, (5-6, 7-8), and the relative reading in (iv) can be derived. In fact, this is the only reading available for (8), where split-topicalization forces 'cake' to be focused (Tomaszewicz 2013, 2015).

(4) John **only** bought Mary an expensive [**CAKE**]_{Focus}.

(5) Jan kupił Marii **tylko** drogie [**CIAstko**]_{Focus}. Polish
Jan bought Mary only expensive cake

(6) Jan kupił Marii **najdroższe** [**CIAstko**]_{Focus}.
Jan bought Mary most-expensive cake

(7) Drogie_i Jan kupił Marii **tylko** t_i [**CIAstko**]_{Focus}.
expensive Jan bought Mary only cake

(8) **Najdroższe**_i Jan kupił Marii t_i [**CIAstko**]_{Focus}.
expensive Jan bought Mary cake

The availability of the 'extra' relative reading in Polish is a result of the absence of the definite determiner *the*, which in languages like English creates an intervention effect at LF precluding the derivation of that reading (Pancheva and Tomaszewicz 2012, Tomaszewicz 2015). This approach creates a prediction that focus association patterns for *only* and the superlative should parallel in Polish. In this talk I will present supporting data from a visual verification experiment.