

Sign me a focus: Focus realization in American Sign Language

Languages express focus differently (Drubig, 2003). This paper explores the strategy ASL adopts to signal focus (Wilbur, 1991, 1999; Neidle, 2003; Sandler and Lillo-Martin, 2006). We follow Rooth (1996), taking the focus to be the prominent element that instantiates the open variable contributed by a *wh*- word in a prior question and that can affect the truth-conditional and non-truth-conditional meaning of a sentence. On the basis of newly elicited data, we claim that ASL signals focus by a combination of (i) a strict constituent order: (Top*) (FOC) (V XS/ XS V); (ii) phonology: use of non-manual markers, namely brow-raise and head-tilt; and (iii) prosody: use of duration and spatial displacement, and prohibits *in situ* marking. This interdiction is explained by the fact that ASL uses a visual medium rather than an auditory one; it does not have one specific correlate to encode intonation. Therefore, ASL adopts the only remaining universal coding strategy: syntax. Thus, we argue that ASL can be considered what Buring (2006) would term a ‘Strict Position Language’ which implies that the way ASL realizes focus is typologically unusual and unattested.

Buring (2006, 21) defines a ‘Strict Position Language’ as including languages that “obligatorily put focused constituents into a syntactically distinct position”. We provide evidence showing that ASL meets all the criteria for such a classification. We start by demonstrating that ASL does not allow an alternative *in situ* marking; the non-manual marker ‘brow-raise’ (br) is necessary to signal focus but not sufficient since it is also used to mark other syntactic features (e.g. yes/no questions). Despite being specific to focus marking, the ‘head-tilt’ (ht) alone is infelicitous. Therefore, a focused element must move to a specific position in order to be realized; more specifically into a left-dislocation. Proof of this structurally distinguished position resides in three facts. First, the focus element forms a prosodic unit of its own. It is ‘spatially dislocated’ to the left of the neutral signing space while the rest of the clause is signed in the neutral signing space, in front of the signer’s bust. It is also realized more slowly than the rest of the clause. Thus, even a focus-subject must appear in the left-periphery (1). Second, the focus can be ‘repeated’ in the main clause under the form of an indexical point - PT - serving as a resumptive, emphatic pronoun. This point is optional, but has to occur in a rightmost position if realized. Finally, no sign can occur between the focus and the right edge of the dislocation.

- (1) $\overline{John}_i^{br/ht}$, PAINT HOUSE (PT_i). (2) $\overline{House}_i^{br/ht}$, JOHN PAINT (PT_i).

These remarks are clear indicators of a “focus movement” into a left-dislocation, which constitutes a structurally distinguished position and not just an “information structurally ‘loaded’ construction” (Buring, 2006, 21). Strict Position Languages should also realize all foci in that construction. We present evidence for that criterion too, showing that different types of focus all appear in a left-dislocation: contrastive (3) and correction focus (4).

- (3) Do you want tea or coffee? (4) Did you put cinnamon in your cake?
*Coffee*_i, I WANT (PT_i). No. *Vanilla*_i, I PUT IN CAKE (PT_i).

These findings suggest that, despite having a great flexibility in word-order, the syntax of ASL constrains the realization of focus to a strict position.

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