Initial thoughts about "focus"
An attempt to at least start to set the scene.

1 "What is focus (in language)?"

Welcome to CAS LX 518 ("Focus"). In (1) is a question that we will not be answering.

(1)   What is focus (in language)?

We will not be answering (1) because it is neither a meaningful nor interesting question. There are some similar, perhaps related questions we will be asking (and perhaps to some extent answering), but not (1). The reason is that it's really a question that's being asked the wrong way around.

There is a set of things that language does, properties languages and conversations have, and things people know about them, which—upon closer investigation—might be said to arise from some linguistically definable properties that we can choose to call "focus." We could also choose to call them properties of "deliciousness" or "wugnitude." We could in fact call some of them properties of "wugnitude" and distinguish them from properties of "deliciousness." It doesn't matter what we call them, it matters what they are, what the properties are. When we figure those out, then we can decide what word is best to describe them.

It is of course convenient to have some way to refer to these properties when discussing and exploring them, and the things we will look at here are all properties that people have decided can be sensibly named by using a concept like "focus" (which does have at least a kind of definition independent of the phenomena we're investigating).

And it is convenient to know what properties people have, in the course of the historical investigations into these phenomena, meant when they use the term "focus." We'll use the term, but it is still important right here at the outset to understand that "focus" is not the object of inquiry. Language is, phenomena in language, some that may wind up not being related to others, but which have still wound up being described by use of the term "focus." The thing they really have in common is that they're all things that are of interest in the larger project of understanding human knowledge of language and language use.

2   What is focus?

Stepping back from language, what is the essential concept of "focus," such that people might have found it useful to relate language phenomena to it?

Probably the best way to think about focus is that it is about what you *ignore*. To *focus on* something is to *ignore everything else*. That which you focus on is in the foreground of your attention, your perception, leaving everything else in the background.

The linguistic phenomena that we call "focus" often tend to single out one part of a sentence (to the exclusion of the rest), and/or trigger this kind of cognitive focus effect on something about the sentence's content. But there are a lot of shades to this.

3   What is focused?

A good place to start is with the phonological phenomenon of stress, focus, emphasis. That is, even holding the basic sentence constant, we can pronounce it in different ways that seem somehow to convey different things.

(2)   a.   Jo wrote a book about wizards.
        b.   Jo wrote a book about WIZARDS.
        c.   Jo wrote a book ABOUT wizards.
        d.   Jo wrote a BOOK about wizards.
        e.   Jo WROTE a book about wizards.
        f.   JO wrote a book about wizards.

We have at least the intuition (and this is for the most part phonetically quantifiable) that the different versions of the sentence have an emphasis on one of the words. We also have an intuition that it makes a difference to what the sentence "means." So, there we have something to explore. What is the effect on the "meaning" that placing these emphases has? (Or, to look at it another way, if you have a "meaning" that you want to convey, where should the emphasis be placed?)

I was somewhat diligent in putting "meaning" in quotation marks, because there is at least one sense of "meaning" (discussed in, e.g., the Semantics class) that takes a central component of "meaning" to be a division of possible situations into those in which the sentence is true and those in which the sentence is false. That is, when we know what a sentence means, we know the conditions that would make it true.

Thing is: if Jo actually wrote a book about wizards, they're all true. If Jo did not write a book about wizards, they're all false. In this kind of "truth conditional" view of meaning, they all mean the same thing. So, whatever it is that our intuition that

these sentences have different "meanings" is about, it isn't (at least here) about the truth conditional meaning.

Even worse (or even better, depending on what the goal is), the notation used here is not sufficient to describe the phonology accurately either. There are different kinds of "stress" one can place on the "focused" word that also seem to change what is being conveyed.

(3) a. No, it wasn't a pamphlet. Jo wrote a BOOK about wizards.

b. Jo wrote a BOOK about wizards, and an ARTICLE about marriage.

c. What did Jo write about wizards? She wrote a BOOK about wizards.

The differences between the sentences in (2) seem to be one that is more about the circumstances in which the sentences can be used. Or why one would choose to use the sentence pronounced this way rather than pronounced some other way.

4   Other examples, things to ponder

(4) a. Mary only introduced [Bill]$_F$ to Sue.

b. Mary only introduced Bill to [Sue]$_F$.

(5) John only introduced BILL to SUE.

(6) a. John only introduced BILL to Mary.

b. He also only introduced BILL to SUE.

(7) a. Both Sid and his accomplices should have been named in this morning's court session.

b. But the defendant only named [Sid]$_F$ today.

c. Even [the state prosecutor]$_F$ only named [Sid]$_{SOF}$ in court today.

Homework. Go to the course blog http://ling-blogs.bu.edu/lx518f11/ and email me the answers to the survey questions I will post there about who you are and what your background is.

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5   Reading notes (Chafe): Terminology alert: "case" and "subject"

There are a few pieces of terminology that Chafe uses in a way that is not now standard, and I want to comment on those a bit. (This is kind of a general problem that we always seem to run into, though it seems to have hit discussions of "information structure" particularly hard. It stems partly from terminological choices people had made in the past that were tied to their understanding of the phenomena at the time, and which become entrenched, so that even when the analysis changes, the common terminology doesn't. It also stems partly from an almost opposite angle, an attempt to be kind of "theory neutral" by using common and comprehensible labels for things that ultimately turn out not to be precise enough. You can see in Chafe's own article that he grappled with this: "Terms like 'already activated' and 'newly activated' would convey the distinction [in givenness] more accurately, but are awkward; we will probably have to live with the terms 'given' (or 'old') and 'new.'")

What we usually mean by *case* is the morphological marking that informs us about where in the syntactic structure a noun phrase is. In English, personal pronouns have different forms depending on whether the pronoun is the subject of the sentence or not. *I* is a subject, *me* is not a subject; *she* is a subject, *her* is not a subject. The subject is what controls agreement on the verb as well.

(8)   a. The article is incomprehensible.

b. The articles are incomprehensible.

(9)   a. They are incomprehensible.

b. The article is incomprehensible to them.

Chafe, on the other hand, generally seems to be using the term "case" to refer to something like the "semantic role" that a noun phrase plays in a sentence. A noun phrase can refer to an **agent** (10) or to a **theme** (11), (12).

(10)   John shouted.

(11)   John tripped.

(12)   I punched John.

Chafe also has an unusual definition of "subject," which we will generally not want to adopt. The definition of "subject" that we want to adopt is the one above, it controls case marking and agreement, and has to do with where in the structure the noun phrase finds itself.

Chafe's definition of "subject" is really, confusingly, rather more like what most everybody in recent times has called "topic." I guess what he had in mind was probably like "subject" in "subject of inquiry." We'll return to this as we proceed, but be alert.