A contrastive topic is not the associate of a focus operator taking wider scope

Thuan Tran
University of Potsdam

Scalar additive particles, additive particles, and exclusive particles (i.e. English even, also and only) are referred to as focus sensitive particles in the formal semantic literature: particles that associate with focus for their semantic contribution (Krifka 1991; Rooth 1992; Beaver and Clark, 2008; among others). This consensus is challenged by Zimmermann (2012, 2014) who proposes that exclusive particles and (scalar-) additive particles cross-linguistically illustrate significant differences in their syntactic distribution and their association behavior. For instance, while across languages (scalar-) additive particles can associate with contrastive topic, exclusive particles cannot. On this view, contrastive topic differs from focus in that a focus-marked utterance is a felicitous answer to the immediate question under discussion (IQUD) while the contrastive topic-marked utterance is a partial answer to a higher question under discussion (QUD). Wagner (2012), however, holds an opposite position, according to which there is no contrastive topic and focus distinction since they both denote constituents that associate with focus operators. It is the scope relation between these constituents that leads to the contrastive topic versus focus distinction. That is, a focus associate constituent with the wider scope is called a contrastive topic, and that with the narrow scope a focus. In this paper, I show that Wagner’s hypothesis cannot be extended to Vietnamese. First, unlike English, Vietnamese displays a rigid order among the focus sensitive particles, and takes surface scope, as shown below.

The additive particle always precedes the exclusive particle, and only surface scope reading is available.

(1) QUD: Who invited whom?
   IQUD: Who did Trung invite? Trung only invited Hoa.
   IQUD: What about Nam? Who did he invite?

   [Nam]CT cũng chỉ mời [Hoa]F.
   Nam also only invite Hoa
   ‘Nam, too, only invited Hoa.’ (Nam invited no one else but Hoa.) (Someone else invited no one else but Hoa.)

(2) *Nam chỉ cũng mời Hoa.
   Nam only also invite Hoa

Also, the surface scope and the fact that the scalar additive particle surfaces higher than other particles, on Wagner’s analysis, naturally lead to the prediction that the associate of the scalar additive particle is always a contrastive topic, contrary to fact.

(3) What’s wrong with the students?
   They were not happy because the exam was too difficult for them.
The context given in (3) does not indicate ‘the easiest problem’ as a contrastive topic. (3b) felicitously provides a sentence focus/all new utterance: specifying in detail how difficult the exam was.

Finally, a contrastive topic-focus distinction is necessary to account for the association patterns of the focus sensitive particles in the language. That is, while the utterance with an additive particle can address the higher QUD in addition to the IQUD, that with an exclusive particle provides only the answer to the IQUD. In other words, the additive particles associate simultaneously with the contrastive topic and the focus as opposed the exclusive particles that associate exclusively with the focus. This is illustrated in (4).

(4) QUD: Who invited whom?
IQUD: Who did Nam invite? Who did Trung invite?

a. [Trung]CT chỉ mời [Hoa]F.
   Trung only invite Hoa.
   ‘Trung only invited Hoa.’

b. [Trung]CT cũng mời [Hoa]F.
   Trung also invite Hoa
   ‘Trung also invited Hoa.’

The context in (4) indicates that in (4a, b) the subject Trung is the contrastive topic and the object Hoa is the focus. However, the associations of the exclusive particle and the additive particle in these sentences are not parallel. The additive particle in (4b) can associate with both the subject and the object, that is, (4b) not only answers the intermediate question under discussion (IQUD), but also the question under question (QUD) in that it requires a propositional antecedent of the form ‘x invited Hoa’ where x differs from the subject Trung. By contrast, the exclusive particle in (4a) associates with the object only: The interpretation in which both the subject and the object are associated with the exclusive particle is not available. That is (4a) cannot mean ‘Only Trung and Hoa stood in the invite-relation, nobody else invited anyone else’.

References

Zimmermann, M. 2012. Even gives even more information: Scalar particles and discourse structure. Talk given at Johan-Wolfgang-Goethe University Frankfurt Main.