

The Common Ground is not enough: Why Focus-sensitivity matters for Presupposition triggers

EXPERIMENTS IN LINGUISTIC MEANING - SEPTEMBER 16-18, 2020

ALEXANDER GÖBEL, UMASS AMHERST/MCGILL



Introduction: Trigger Variation

⚡ Presupposition triggers are heterogeneous class

■ E.g. *soft vs hard* triggers differ in projection (Abusch 2010):

- (1) a. I have no idea whether Haley ended up participating in the Road Race yesterday.
But if she **won** it, then she has more victories than anyone else in history.
- b. I have no idea whether Joe read that proposal.
??But if Gordon read it **too**, let's ask them to confer and simply give us a yes-no response.

Empirical Scope

- Present work investigates role of Focus-sensitivity

- STANDARD DIAGNOSTIC: stress-placement
 - (2)
 - a. Gretchen **also** met [JIMMY]_F at a wedding.
 - b. Gretchen **also** met Jimmy [at a WEDDING]_F.

→ PSP of *also* varies with Focus = *Focus-sensitive*

 - (3)
 - a. Gretchen met [JIMMY]_F at a wedding **again**.
 - b. Gretchen met Jimmy [at a WEDDING]_F **again**.

→ PSP of *again* doesn't vary with Focus ≠ *Focus-sensitive*

Hypothesis & Predictions

Focus Presupposition Antecedent Hypothesis (FoPAH)

-FOCUS-sensitive: *Common Ground entailment*

+FOCUS-sensitive: *Antecedent in Discourse Model*

- *Prediction #1:*

- +FOCUS: subject to QUD-salience of antecedent

- FOCUS: indifferent to QUD-salience

- *Prediction #2:*

- +FOCUS harder to accommodate than -FOCUS

Experiment 1: Design

(4) Sample Item (16 items, plus 12 fillers; N=35), 2x2

A₁: When did Robert leave for school on Tuesday?

B₁: He left the house around 8am.

(A₂: *When did he leave on Thursday?*

B₂: *He got a stomach ache and stayed home.*)

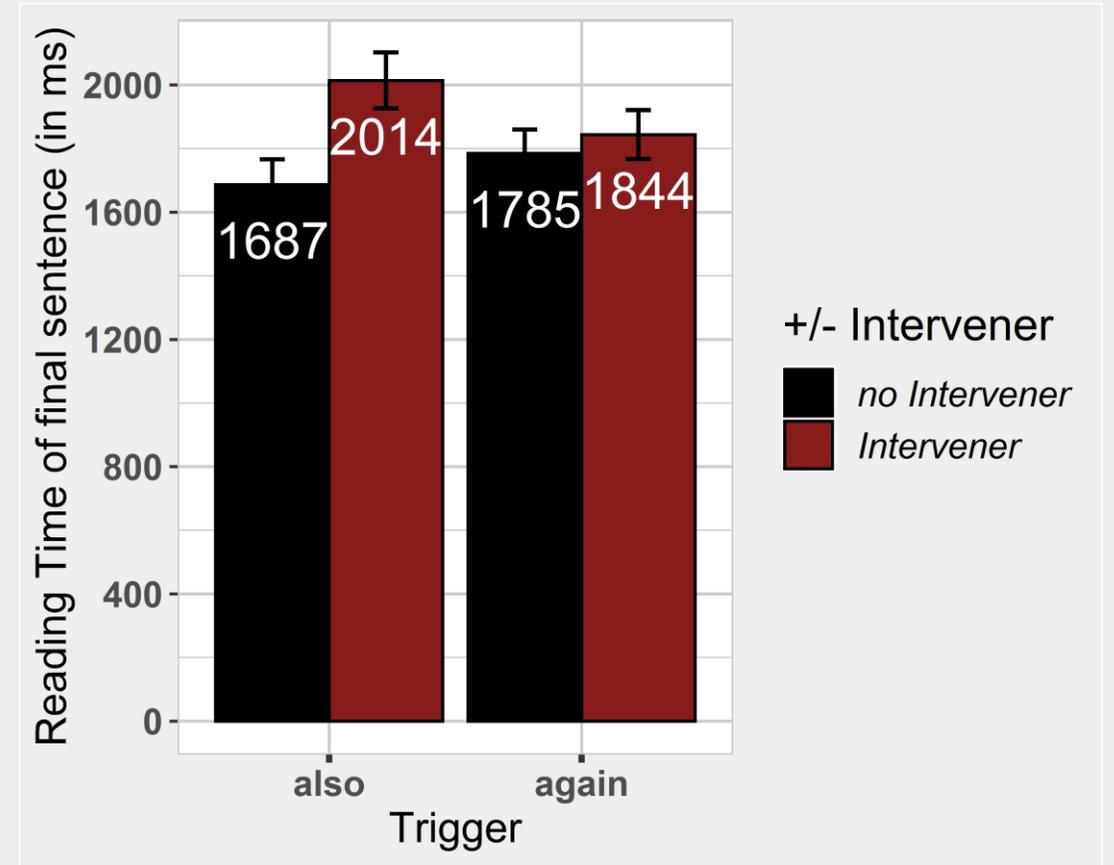
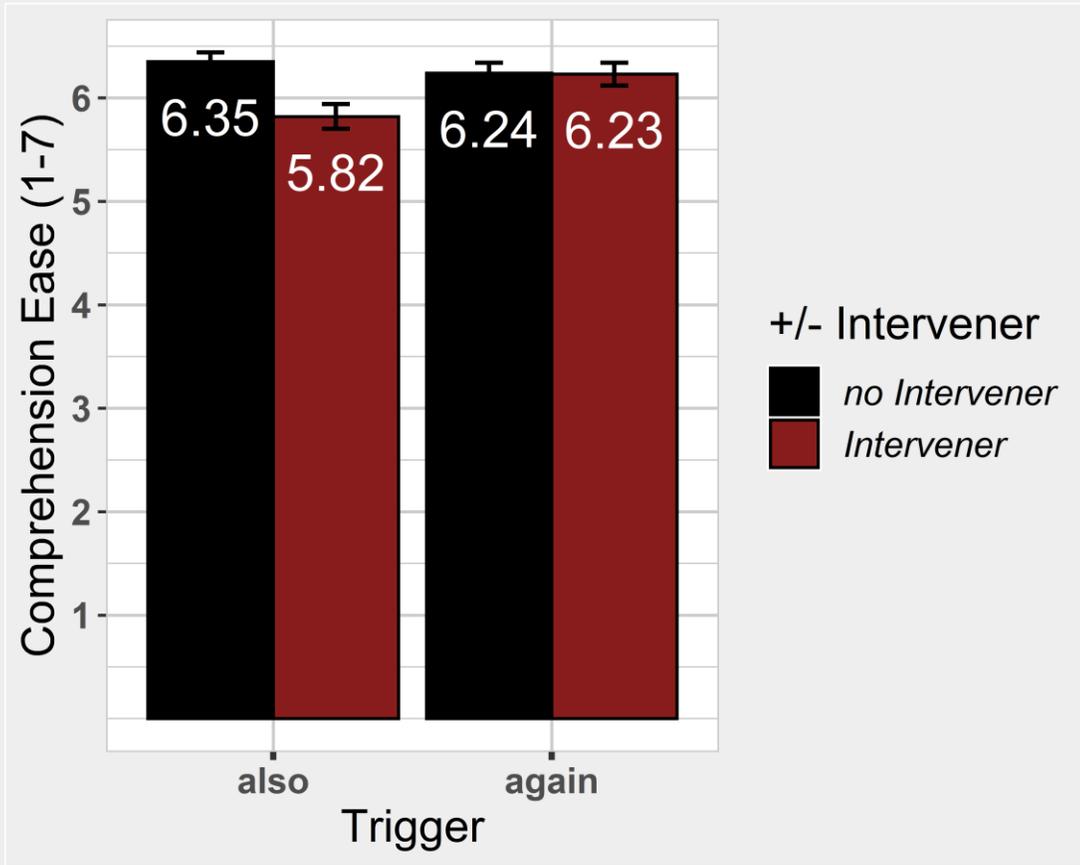
A₃: When did he leave on Friday?

B_{3a}: He **also** left the house around 8am on Friday.

B_{3b}: He left the house around 8am **again** on Friday.

▪ Method:

- each sentence presented on its own and read in self-paced fashion after final sentence, asked to rate comprehension difficulty on 7-point scale (with 1 being hard and 7 being easy)



Experiment 1: Rating & RT Results

Experiment 2: Design

(5) Sample Item (18 items split across trigger pairs, plus 62 fillers; N=48)

A: Who is having dinner in New York tomorrow?

- a. B: Saul is having dinner in New York. CONTROL
- b. B: Saul is having dinner in New York **again**. -FOCUS
- c. B: Saul is having dinner in New York **too**. +FOCUS

(6) a. A: What's Mary been up to recently?

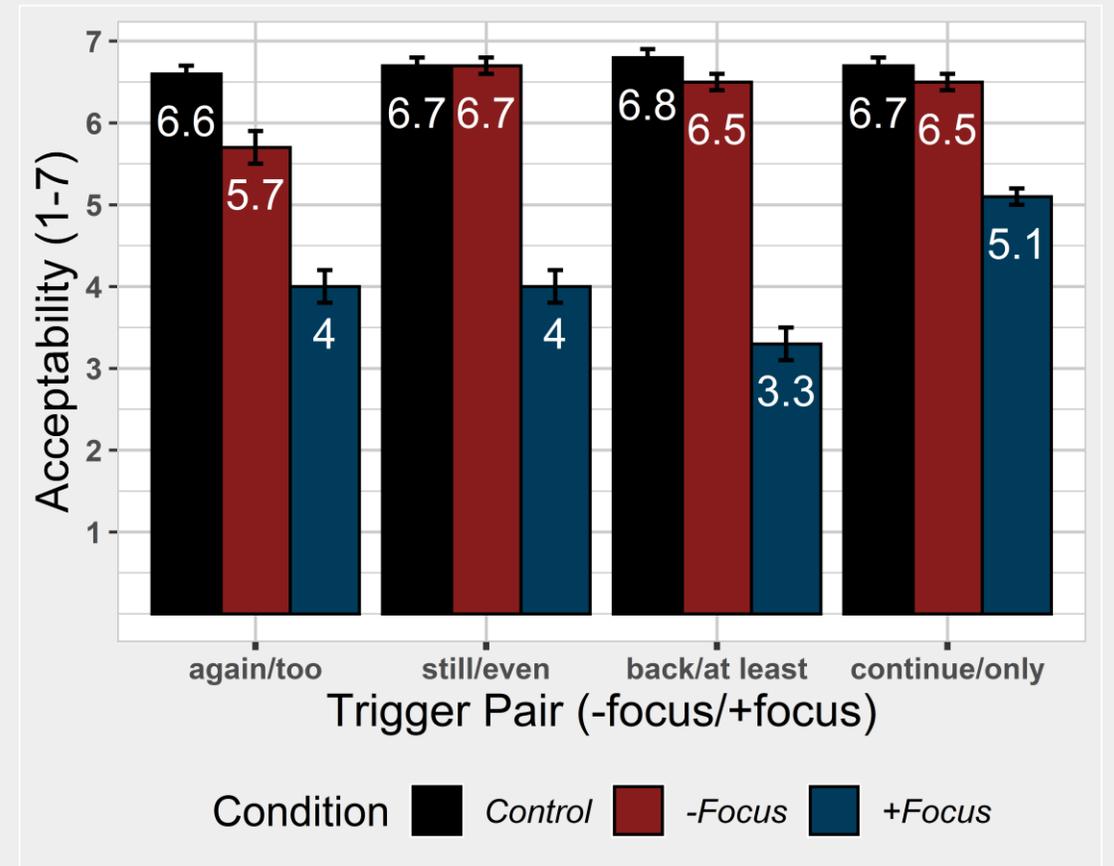
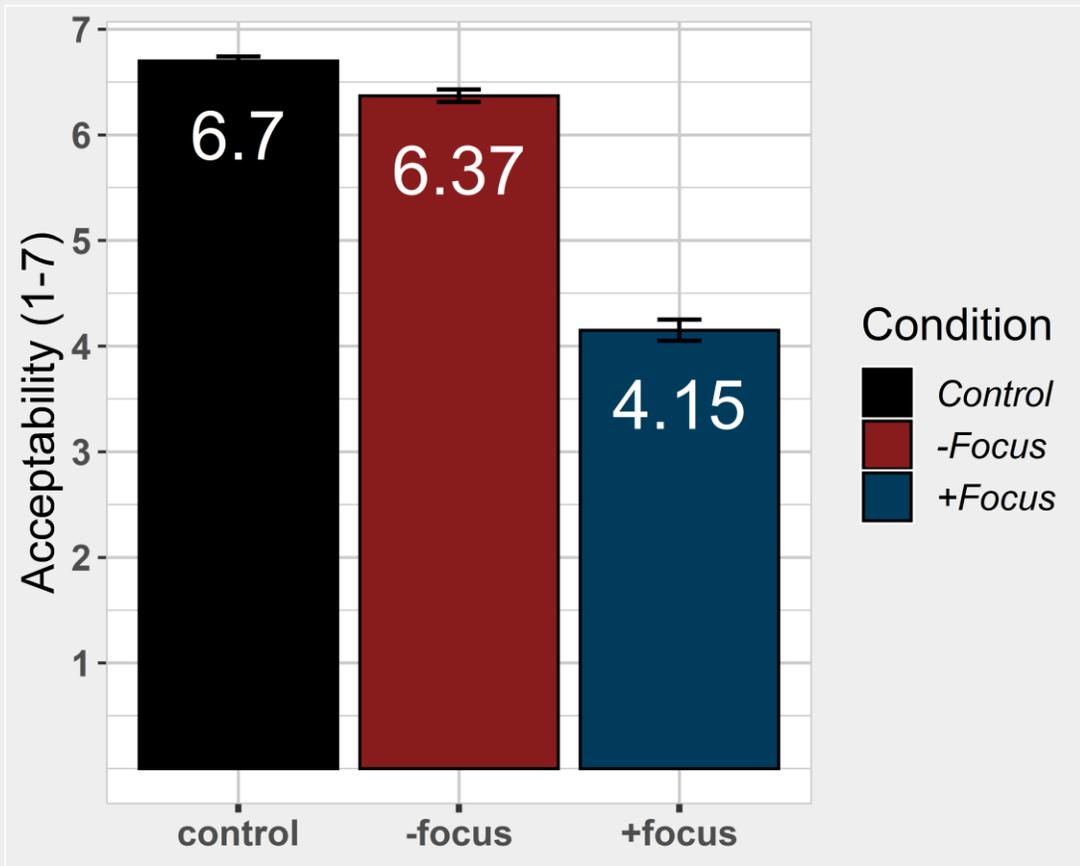
B: She's (**still**/**even**) on vacation.

b. A: What did Jack do last winter?

B: (**At least**) he flew (**back**) to Chicago for Christmas.

c. A: What did Sue do yesterday?

B: She (**continued** building/**only** built/∅ built) a tree house.



Experiment 2: Total & Split Rating Results

Takeaways

- Main findings, supporting hypothesis:
 - 1) +FOCUS subject to interference, -FOCUS is not
 - 2) +FOCUS harder to accommodate than -FOCUS
- *Same kind of meaning (=PSPs) accesses distinct representations, depending on other property (=Focus-sensitivity)*
- *Novel contrast btw. again & also/too, which pattern together in previous distinctions (e.g. Abusch)*

More details and experiments
can be found in my thesis,
which you can access [here!](#)
