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Gussenhoven (1983, 2007) notes that while intransitive predications often (but not always, cf. ibid. and Selkirk 1995, i.a.) carry the last accent (or ‘nuclear stress’) on their subject (1a), this does not seem to hold if an adverb separates the subject from the predicate (1b), unless the adverb itself is ‘stressless’ (1c):

(1)  
a.  Our dóg’s disappeared.
b.  Our dog’s mysteriously disappeared.
c.  Our dóg’s just disappeared.

Gussenhoven interprets this observation as evidence that [+focus] adverbs (such as ‘mysteriously’) block the formation of accent domains, while [-focus] adverbs such as ‘just’ do not. The precise definition of the class of [+/-focus] adverbs was left open. A similar explanation that draws a distinction between two different adverb types (phasal/non-phasal) was offered recently in Kahnemuyipour 2004 and Kratzer and Selkirk 2007. Other authors have interpreted the observation as evidence for the role of branchingness in nuclear stress assignment (e.g., Zubizarreta 1998). However, a rendition of (1b) with stress on the subject is evidently possible, including in out of the blue contexts:

(2)  
Our dóg’s mysteriously disappeared.

The choice between (1b) and (2) is subtle. All authors agree that one of the two requires accommodation of some information as given or discourse related, and have assumed that it is (1b) that has the less marked prosody. A strong argument that, contrary to received wisdom, it is (1b) that requires accommodation, and that (2) is the less information-structurally loaded rendition can be based on verbs of coming into existence. Consider:

(3)  
a.  Why are you late? A traffic jam emerged. #A traffic jam emérged.
b.  What happened after you ate it? A rash formed. #A rash fórmed.

It is hard to construct the traffic jam in (3a) or the rash in (3b) as discourse related, i.e. as either being given in the discourse or as picking out an individual from a discourse given set, two typical conditions that allow shift of nuclear stress to the predicate. The obvious reason is that they didn’t exist before the described event (cf. Eckardt 2003). Now, the preference for subject-stress persists when adverbs are
inserted, showing that the subject is marked as discourse related when stress is shifted to the predicate even in those cases:

(4)  
   a. Why are you late?  
      A traffic jam suddenly emerged. #A traffic jam suddenly emerged.  
   b. What happened after you ate it?  
      A rash mysteriously formed. #A rash mysteriously formed.

The apparent preference for (2) over (1b) perceived by earlier authors may be due to the fact that it is easy construct a context in which ‘our dog’ is discourse-related, and that adding certain modifiers to the predicate may make this accommodation more likely. Changing the possessive determiner to an indefinite one (as in ‘a dog’) already tips the balance more toward subject stress.

References