



snippets

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Contents

1. Elissa Flagg. *Questioning innovative quotatives.*
2. Thomas Graf. *Agreement with hybrid nouns in Icelandic.*
3. Heidi Harley and Jason D. Haugen. *Are there really two different classes of instrumental denominal verbs in English?*
4. Mikko Kupula. *A visible trace of movement?*
5. Go Mizumoto. *On the relationship between children's working memory capacity and their use of contextual information in sentence comprehension.*
6. Eva Monrós. *A neglected foundation for the distinction between inherent and structural case: ergative as an inherent case.*
7. Yosuke Sato. *P-stranding generalization and Bahasa Indonesia: a myth?*
8. Michael Wagner. *A note on stress in intransitives in English.*
9. Hedde Zeijlstra. *Zero licensors.*



8.

Michael Wagner – Cornell University

A note on stress in intransitives in English.

mailto:mchael@cornell.edu

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 tráffic jam emerged. #A traffic jam emérged.
b. What happened after you ate it? A rásh formed. #A rash fórméd.

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 tráffic jam suddenly emerged. #A traffic jam suddenly emérged.
b. What happened after you ate it?
A rásh mysteriously formed. #A rash mysteriously fórméd.

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.

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