# The Role of Focus in Syntax

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**Abstract**: Punjabi has a generally flexible word order. The movement to Focus position analysis presented here investigates wh-movement and LDA. Focus-driven movement can be extended to further account for the scrambling seen in Punjabi in various other constructions.

## I. Introduction

Focus structure (f-structure)[1] is a basic component of the language faculty that interacts essentially with phonology, syntax, and semantics as well as pragmatics. F-structure marks the organization of sentences into focus and topic constituents.

Focus is a concept in linguistic theory that deals with how information in one phrase relates to information that has come before. Focus has been analyzed in a variety of ways by linguists.

### Approaches to Focus

Historically, there are two main approaches to focus: the Generative Approach and the Functional Approach. In the generative approach, the term "focus" is used to refer to words or expressions that are either prosodically or syntactically prominent, generally because they introduce new information. In the Functional approach, the term focus is used to refer to words or expressions that establish coherence in the text or conversation.

### Generative Approach

In generative linguistics, focus determines which part of the sentence contributes new or textually and situationally non-derivable information. Focus may be highlighted either prosodically or syntactically or both, depending on the language. In English this can be done assigning focus markers, as shown in (1) and (2), or by preposing as shown in (1.a.) and (2.a) :

1. I saw [JOHN] $_f$.

1.a. [JOHN] $_f$, I saw.

2. 𑁦𑁦𑁦      [𑁦𑁦𑁦] $_f$       𑁦𑁦𑁦𑁦𑁦𑁦𑁦
   mɛ səpp dekʰɪa

2. a. [𑁦𑁦𑁦] $_f$ 𑁦𑁦𑁦     𑁦𑁦𑁦𑁦𑁦𑁦𑁦
   səpp mɛ dekʰɪa

In (1) and (2), focus is marked syntactically with the subscripted 'f' which is realized phonologically by a nuclear pitch accent. Clefting[2] induces an obligatory intonation break. Therefore in (1) and (2), focus is marked via word order and a nuclear pitch accent.

### Functional Approach

In Functional approach, there is a difference between Focus and Topic. In linguistics, the topic is the part of the proposition that is being talked about (predicated).Once stated, the topic is therefore "old news", i.e. the things already mentioned and understood.   For example, the topic is emphasized in italics in the following sentences:

5. *The dog* bit the little girl.

5.a. The little girl was bitten by the dog.

5.b. *The little girl*, the dog bit her.

The predicate that gives information on the topic is also called Comment. Many languages, like English, resort to different means in order to signal a new topic. The topic can be the subject or the object of a verb, but it can also be an indirect object or even an oblique complement of any kind. It is always dislocated to the front of the sentence. Signaling the topic as such serves the pragmatic function of avoiding repetition. In

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[1] The term *focus* has been in general use only since 1970; it seems that Halliday (1967) and Jackendoff (1972) were particularly influential in spreading the term.

[2] Cleft is a construction in which some elements in a sentence is moved from its normal position into a separate clause to give it greater emphasis.

many languages, old topics are replaced with a pronoun. The term focus in Functional approach is used to refer to words or expressions that establish coherence in the text or conversation.

**Position of Focus in Punjabi Syntactic Structure**

Punjabi has relatively free word order. The examples from (6.a) to (6.e.) show the possible word orders for the question 'What did Ram give to Sham?'

> 6. a. ਰਾਮ ਨੇ ਸ਼ਾਮ ਨੂੰ ਕੀ ਦਿੱਤਾ?
>   ram ne ʃam nu ki dɪtta
> 6.b. ਰਾਮ ਨੇ ਕੀ ਦਿੱਤਾ ਸ਼ਾਮ ਨੂੰ?
>   ram ne ki dɪtta ʃam nu
> 6.c. ਸ਼ਾਮ ਨੂੰ ਰਾਮ ਨੇ ਕੀ ਦਿੱਤਾ?
>   ʃam nu ram ne ki dɪtta
> 6.d. ਸ਼ਾਮ ਨੂੰ ਕੀ ਦਿੱਤਾ ਰਾਮ ਨੇ?
>   ʃam nu ki dɪtta ram ne
> 6.e. ਕੀ ਦਿੱਤਾ ਰਾਮ ਨੇ ਸ਼ਾਮ ਨੂੰ?
>   ki dɪtta ram ne ʃam nu
> 6.f. ਕੀ ਦਿੱਤਾ ਸ਼ਾਮ ਨੂੰ ਰਾਮ ਨੇ?
>   ki dɪtta ʃam nu ram ne

There is an unmarked default word order for focused constituents. The default position for focused constituents is in the immediately preverbal position, which is represented in example (6a).

Kidwai (1999) talks about two kinds of relevant focus distinctions, Wide focus and Narrow focus. Wide focus is seen in responses provided without context and answers to wh-questions such as "What happened?" Additionally, it is often unclear as to which constituent is focused in such sentences. Narrow focus on the other hand is unambiguous as to which constituent in the sentence is focused.

The following examples illustrate the difference between wide focus and narrow focus:

(7) a. kitaab    kɔ̃ṉ    lIayega
      book    who    bring-future
      'Who will bring the book?'

7.b.    kitaab        raam        lIayega
book            Ram.Foc        bring-future
'It is Ram who will bring the book.'

7.c.    # raam        kitaab        lIayega
Ram            book            bring-future
'Ram will bring the book.' (wide focus) (Kidwai 1999, p.218)

In the paradigm above, (7.b) is the only acceptable response to the question in (7.a). In (7.a) and (7.b), both the wh-element and the focused answer to the wh-question appear in the immediately preverbal position. Moreover, (7.c) is not an acceptable response to (7.a) as it consists of a neutral response where it is unclear as to which constituent is focused, which is not the case in (7.b). Since (7.c) has wide focus, it can be said to be the default word order, and that (7.b) is derived from (7.c). As only (7.b) is an acceptable response to (7.a), it also follows that it carries a different meaning from (7.c). Thus, *Ram* in (7.b) is an example of narrow focus.

According to Butt and King's analysis, varied word order can result from semantic effects like specificity or for stylistic purposes of focus and topicalization. They reassert the idea that focused constituents occur preverbally in languages that project focus syntactically. If we apply same theory on Punjabi sentences, the following examples illustrate their claim:

> 8. a. ਰਾਮ ਨੇ ਸ਼ਾਮ ਨੂੰ ਕਿਤਾਬ ਦਿੱਤੀ
>   ram ne ʃam nu kɪtab dɪtti
> 8.b. ਰਾਮ ਨੇ ਕਿਤਾਬ ਸ਼ਾਮ ਨੂੰ ਦਿੱਤੀ
>   ram ne kɪtab ʃam nu dɪtti

It can be seen from example (8.a) that the object can be either specific or non-specific in the immediate preverbal position; however, when the object has moved higher than the immediately preverbal position as in (8.b), the object must obligatorily be interpreted as specific. It is important to note that the interpretation can be either non-specific or specific in the immediately preverbal position.

## II. Scrambling and Focus

The optionality of Long Distance Agreement (LDA) also vanishes in response to wh-questions. It is widely accepted that the answer to a wh-question[3] is focused, and Kidwai (1999) shows that the answer to a wh-question has narrow focus. Therefore, if the embedded object does in fact move to [Spec,FocP] when focused, it is expected that the response to a wh-question should be ungrammatical if LDA does not occur. This prediction is borne out in the examples in (9) and (10):

9.  ਰਾਮ ਨੇ ਕੀ ਪੜ੍ਹਨਾ ਚਾਹਿਆ?
     ram ne ki pəṛna cʰaɪˈa

10.a. ਰਾਮ ਨੇ ਕਿਤਾਬ ਪੜ੍ਹਨੀ ਚਾਹੀ
     ram ne kɪtab pəṛni cʰaiˈ

10.b.\* ਰਾਮ ਨੇ ਕਿਤਾਬ ਪੜ੍ਹਨਾ ਚਾਹਿਆ
     ram ne k kɪtab pəṛna cʰaɪˈa

(10.a) is the only acceptable response to the question in (9). A construction without agreement as in (10.b) is unacceptable as a response to (9). Thus, the sentences in (10) show that the focused constituent moves to the specifier of the focus phrase, and consequently triggers LDA. As seen earlier in the paper, movement to [Spec,FocP] enforces a specific reading on the embedded object in (10.a). The fact that the embedded object has a specific reading shows that the DP has scrambled out of the VP.

Kidwai (1999) proposes a focus projection immediately outside the VP to account for the default position for focused elements. In this analysis, wh-elements are taken to be inherently focused, and must undergo obligatory movement to the specifier of the focus projection. Although this claim accounts for the preferred position of wh-elements in the immediately preverbal position, it does not account for the different word orders of wh-elements when there are modifiers present in verb phrase. The following sentences illustrate this issue:

11.a. ਰਾਮ ਨੇ ਕੀ ਰੱਜ ਕੇ ਖਾਧਾ?
     ram ne ki rəjj ke ki kʰaˈda

11.b. ਰਾਮ ਨੇ ਰੱਜ ਕੇ ਕੀ ਖਾਧਾ?
     ram ne rəjj ke ki ki kʰaˈda

In (11), 'ਰੱਜ ਕੇ' is a manner adverb that modifies the verb and is adjoined at VP. Kidwai's analysis predicts the order in (11.a), where the wh-element has raised to a focus projection outside the VP. In contrast, if wh-elements obligatorily raise to a projection higher than the VP, then (11.b) is expected to be ungrammatical, which is not the case. However, both word orders can be derived from an analysis that treats wh-elements as constituents that may or may not carry a [Focus] feature. If wh-elements are focused and carry a focus feature, it must raise to [Spec,FocP] to value the focus feature.

The default position for the obligatory movement of wh-elements is claimed to be in the specifier of V, thus analyzing Punjabi as a language with partial wh-movement. However, the sentences in (11.) are evidence that the wh-movement does not always take place.

In (11.a), the verb is no longer in-situ and is focused. Contrastively, the wh-element in (11.b) remains in situ, and it is not focused in this question. Therefore, we cannot assume that the wh-element has a default position. There has to be an independent motivation for which the wh-element scrambles to a higher position in the tree. When this motivation is lacking, the wh-element remains in-situ as in (11.b). This discrepancy is resolved if the wh-element is said to move to [Spec,FocP] as in (11.a) in order to value the focus feature.

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[3] Wh-question words have different interpretation in Punjabi language that is discussed by Dr. Suman Preet in her unpublished research paper 'Position of Wh-Quwstion words in Punjabi Language.'

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