The Focus Sensitivity of Sentence Adverbs

Sophia Döring, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin
s.doering@rz.hu-berlin.de

Within the field of information structure, focus sensitivity still is the topic of ongoing discussions. Focus-sensitive expressions crucially refer in their interpretation to the placement of focus in the sentence. While only and other so-called focus particles have been investigated as prime examples of this phenomenon, the question of whether sentence adverbs (SADV) display a similar behavior has received much less attention in the literature. Only quantifying adverbs as usually have been mentioned with regard to focus, (cf. Lewis 1975, Rooth 1995, Krifka 2001), a systematic analysis of the focus-sensitivity of modal adverbs (probably, definitely) as well as of evaluative adverbs (fortunately, surprisingly) is still missing.

The following examples illustrate that evaluative adverbs like unfortunately are indeed focus sensitive:

(1) a. Unfortunately George gave [the letter] to Mary.
   b. Unfortunately George gave the letter to [Mary].

According to (1) a, the speaker resents the fact that it is the letter that George gave to Mary, in sentence (1) b, he is unhappy about the fact that it was Mary who the letter was given to. If unfortunately is replaced by probably or maybe, the adverb meaning likewise takes into account the sentence focus.

The goal of the present paper is to analyse in detail the focus sensitivity of SADVs and to relate it to the adverbs' meaning. Although modal adverbs are intensional operators and evaluatives are not, we want to show that they basically work in the same way.

For the detailed analysis of an expression's focus sensitivity, Beaver/Clark's (2008) classification of different mechanisms of association with focus proves highly valuable: An item can be quasi-, free- or conventionally associating with focus depending on whether its focus sensitivity is “lexically encoded or a non-conventionalized epiphenomenon” (Beaver/Clark 2008:41). These different mechanisms or “strengths” of focus sensitivity determine whether the item requires an intonationally stressed element within its scope: Conventionally associating expressions as only are “strongly” focus sensitive and always need such an element they can associate with, while quasi-associating expressions do not.

Applying this characteristic to our analysis of SADVs, our testing involves the use of leaners on the phonological level, movement of the focus outside the scope of the operator on the syntactic level, and, on the semantic-pragmatic level, the addition of presuppositions which the operator can associate with alternatively. All of these lead to constructions where the scope of the adverb lacks a stressed element. Interestingly, modal and evaluative adverbs behave differently in some of these tests, as (2) illustrates:

(2) A: Do you know whether Paul ate anything during the party?
   B: Yes, [chocolate cake] I think Paul probably ate t.
B': Well, yes! [Chocolate cake] I think Paul surprisingly ate t, although he always tells me that chocolate cake makes him put on weight!

Usually, the SADV would associate with a constituent in its c-command domain, but as the verb is already mentioned in A’s question, it constitutes background information. The reading where probably associates with chocolate cake, which is focused but moved outside the adverb’s scope, is readily available in answer B. In the case of surprisingly in B', however, this reading is much less easily available, although not impossible. Another difference can be observed when choosing a sentence that involves a presupposition, as (3) does:

(3) a. Charlotte probably took [someone] to the movies.
    b. #Charlotte surprisingly took [someone] to the movies.
    c. Charlotte typically takes [someone] to the movies.

The adverb could associate with the focused constituent someone, but that would result in a completely uninformative statement: 'The single person that Charlotte probably/surprisingly/ typically took to the movies was someone'. In (3), however, only the version with the evaluative adverb is uninformative, a and c are not. In these two cases the adverb obviously does not associate with the focus, but instead with the presupposition which can be paraphrased as: 'It is probable that, when Charlotte has gone to the movies, she took someone there'.

Following Beaver/Clark's (2008) model, we claim that modal as well as evaluative adverbs display free association with focus. The examples above, however, also suggest that evaluative adverbs seem to be less flexible with respect to the placement of their associated focus. This observation might be attributed to differences in the adverb semantics, which will be illustrated by formal analyses of the two classes of adverbs. The graduation of certainty as expressed by modal adverbs can be described in terms of modal logic, using an epistemic accessibility relation and the notions of possibility and necessity as proposed by Kratzer (1991). Evaluative SADVs, on the other hand, can be treated as expressive meaning which may be analysed as a conventional implicature that operates upon at-issue content (cf. Potts 2003).

References
