

Focus semantics

Chris Potts, Ling 390a: Controlling the Discourse, Fall 2007

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1 Q and A

The arrows match the questions with their (potentially) felicitous answers.

- (1) Who did Bart tease? → a. BART teased Lisa.
(2) Who teased Lisa? → b. Bart TEASED Lisa.
(3) What did Bart do to Lisa? → c. Bart teased LISA.

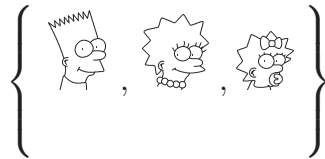
Hypothesis Discourse-new material can be focussed. Discourse-old material cannot be focussed.

2 Alternatives

- The regular semantic value of the name *Bart* is the actual creature Bart Simpson.
- The focus semantic value of *Bart*, which is triggered by the focus accent in pronunciation (and capitals or italics or something in print), is the set of all *alternatives* to Bart.

- (4) *Bart* means 


- (5) The meaning of *BART* is (in a context in which the Simpsons kids form a salient set)



3 Focus composition

(6) *Bart WON*

a. Regular value: True if and only if Bart is a member of the set of winners

b. Focus value:  + $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \{x \mid x \text{ won}\} \\ \{x \mid x \text{ jumped}\} \\ \{x \mid x \text{ lost}\} \\ \vdots \end{array} \right\} = \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{Bart Simpson won,} \\ \text{Bart Simpson jumped,} \\ \text{Bart Simpson lost} \\ \vdots \end{array} \right\}$

(7) *BART won:*

a. Regular value: True if and only if Bart is a member of the set of winners

b. Focus value $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{Bart Simpson,} \\ \text{Lisa Simpson,} \\ \text{Marge Simpson} \end{array} \right\} + \{x \mid x \text{ won}\} = \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{Bart Simpson won} \\ \text{Lisa Simpson won} \\ \text{Marge Simpson won} \end{array} \right\}$

4 Questions

Questions don't have truth values or truth conditions. What, then, do questions mean?

4.1 Meanings

(8) **Hypothesis** A question's meaning is the set of all possible answers to it.

4.2 Polar (yes-no) questions

(9) Did Lisa win?

- a. (Yes,) Sue won.
- b. (No,) Sue did not win.

(10) *Did Lisa win* means $\{\text{Lisa won, Lisa didn't win}\}$

4.3 Constituent (Wh-) questions

- (11) Who won?
- a. Bart won.
 - b. Lisa won.
 - c. Maggie won.
 - d. Bart and Lisa won.
 - e. ⋮

(12) *Who won?* means $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{Bart won, Lisa won, Maggie won} \\ \text{Bart won and Lisa won} \\ \vdots \end{array} \right\}$

5 Felicity of question–answers pairs

- (13) **Hypothesis** If Q is a question and A an answer, then A is a felicitous answer to Q only if the meaning of Q is identical to the focus value of A .

6 Focus and conversational implicature: A detailed look

- (14) A: Did Lisa pass?
 B: Well, BART passed.

Observation B did not really answer A’s question. Thus, B violated — perhaps flouted — at least one pragmatic maxims. We can expect this to give rise to conversational implicatures.

Alternative set for Bart (the meaning of *BART*)

$$\left\{ \text{Bart, Lisa, Homer} \right\}$$

The meaning of B’s answer

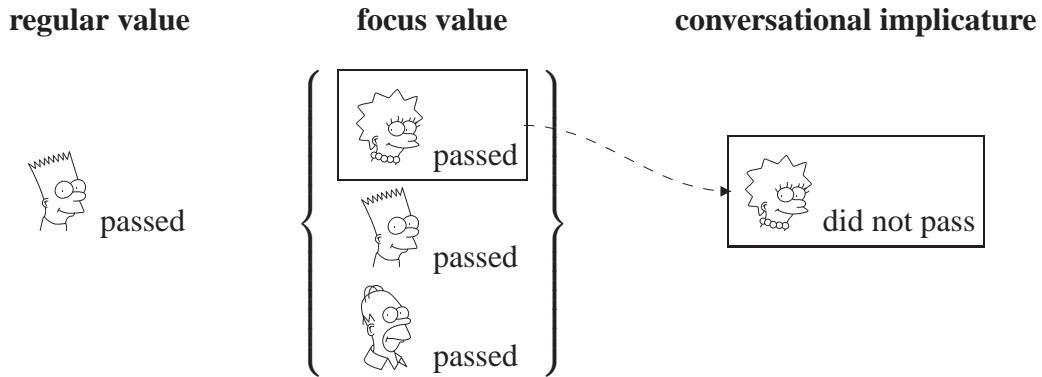
regular value

focus value

$$\text{Bart passed} \quad \left\{ \text{Lisa passed, Bart passed, Homer passed} \right\}$$

Scenario 1

- B knows everything
- A knows that B knows everything.
- Both A and B are cooperative speakers.
- There is no mutually understood ranking of the salient individuals according to their likelihood of passing.



Scenario 2

- B knows everything
- A knows that B knows everything.
- Both A and B are cooperative speakers.
- The salient individuals are ranked according to their likelihood of passing: Lisa is the most likely, then Bart, then Homer.

