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Accent and the notion of contrast. A cross-linguistic approach.

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1. On Contrast and Information Focus

Across languages, the application of pitch accents is one of the most important means of making certain parts of a sentence stand out at the expense of others. This highlighting of specific constituents by means of accent involves two dimensions. On the one hand, it creates a relief within the sentence: the pitch-accented parts are singled out, whereas the parts not affected by the accent(s) serve as a background. The highlighted constituent brings the conversation or the story forward – it names what is new in the relational sense. See for instance the sentence in (1):

(1) **John** bought this book yesterday.

The core of the message in (1) is that the one who bought this book yesterday was John, not that it was a book that he bought or that he bought the book yesterday. This horizontal aspect of highlighting is what I would like to call *Information Focus* or simply *Focus* in the following.

On the other hand, another effect of the pitch accent can be traced: what we might call the *paradigmatic* or *vertical* aspect of highlighting. The pitch accents mark sentence constituents or even whole sentences as especially important compared to relevant alternatives. The
prominent part of the sentence – the Information Focus – is at the same time marked as chosen at the cost of something else. Thus, in (1), John is prominent also because John is chosen instead of e.g. Peter, my sister, no one, and so forth.

These two dimensions of highlighting, one of them involving a foreground-background relation within the sentence, the other involving a comparison with alternatives outside the sentence, play an important part in different theories of focus – but, of course, they should not be conflated. They are different phenomena that must be kept apart to be properly understood.

That something is highlighted at the cost of relevant alternatives seems to be directly related to the pitch accents of the sentence – and a sentence may have several pitch accents. One of the pitch accents has a special status: it does not only invoke alternatives in the above mentioned vertical sense, it also denotes the Focus of New Information in the relational sense.

The two aspects of highlighting described above are interwoven in Jackendoff’s definition of focus: according to Jackendoff, focus assignment derives two formal objects from the semantic representation of the sentence, the ‘focus’ and the ‘presupposition’. The presupposition is a one-place predicate, formed by replacing the focus by a variable. This is the horizontal aspect of highlighting. The variable that replaces the focus, Jackendoff says – and here the vertical aspect of highlighting comes in –

\[\ldots\] must be chosen in such a way that it defines a coherent class of possible contrasts with the focus, pieces of semantic information that could equally well have taken the place of the focus of the sentence, within the bounds established by the language, the discourse and the external situation. \[(\text{Jackendoff} 1972: 243)\]

Jackendoff talks about “possible contrasts with the focus”. Now – what is contrast? One property seems to be a precondition for the appropriateness of the label contrast: that something is chosen at the expense of something else. But there is room for variation, for instance with regard to the set within which contrast applies.

Is it possible to talk about contrast at all when the elements that are compared constitute an open set? Let us see how Bolinger (1961: 83) uses the term. If contrast is understood,
Bolinger says, “as the phenomenon […] by which two or more items are counterbalanced and a preference indicated for some member of the group, contrast is found in every sentence.” In a sentence like (2):

(2) Let’s have a pícnic, (Bolinger 1961: 87)

read as an out-of-the-blue utterance, no explicit contrast can be pinned down. But there is an inherent contrast, of course, between picnicking and anything else the group might do. In this identificational meaning even a sentence like (2) can be said to be contrastive – in some sense.

Here lies the core of the ‘alternative semantics’ view of focus – and this is where Information Focus always meets Contrast.

According to the alternative semanticist Mats Rooth, the general function of focus – in all sentences – is to signal that alternatives are under discussion. Thus in (3b), the pitch accent indicates that the alternatives discussed belong to the semantic type matching the focus Sue:

(3) a. Who did John introduce Bill to?
   b. John introduced Bill to SUE. (Rooth 1985: 13)

In Rooth’s dissertation (1985), the set of relevant alternatives to a focused constituent comprises the entire range of type-identical individuals. This view is modified in his 1992 paper: here the relevant set of alternatives is confined to a subset, including only contextually salient and plausible choices. Probably even Bolinger had a restricted set of alternatives in mind when discussing the ‘contrast’ of the sentence in (2): Let’s have a pícnic. The inherent contrast to ‘have a picnic’ is described as ‘anything else the group might do’ – this set is, of course, highly restricted by extralinguistic factors, but – all the same – arguably an open set.

‘Contrast’ in this broad and rather loose sense is not the most common use of the term, but it is there in the literature, especially in connection with the alternative semantics view of focus. One could discuss, of course, whether it is appropriate or sensible to use the term ‘contrast’ in
this very open sense: just picking one out of an open set of possible, but unspecified alternatives and saying nothing about the rest.

A more common use of the term ‘contrast’ relates it to a closed set. Let us have a look at Chafe’s view of contrast. In contrast to Bolinger, Chafe argues that there is a qualitative difference between contrastive sentences and sentences in which new information is selected from an unlimited set of alternatives. For the sentence (4),

(4) Rónald made the hamburgers, (Chafe 1976: 35)

with Rónald as ‘focus of contrast’, Chafe formulates the following interpretation from the point of view of the speaker:

I believe that you believe that someone made the hamburgers, that you have a limited set of candidates (perhaps one) in mind as that someone, and I am telling you that the someone is Ronald, rather than one of those others. […] All contrastive sentences follow this pattern, mutatic [sic] mutandis. (Chafe 1976: 34f.)

According to Chafe, it is also possible to use the sentence (4) as an answer to the question (5):

(5) Who made the hamburgers?

In this context, Rónald does not function as a ‘focus of contrast’, but simply as ‘new information’. One crucial difference between ‘focus of contrast’ and ‘new information’, as defined by Chafe, lies in the delimitation of the set from which Rónald is chosen in the two cases. According to Chafe, a contrastive interpretation presupposes that the speaker believes that the hearer has a limited set of candidates in mind, whereas ‘new information’ is chosen from an open, unlimited set of possible alternatives.

So, in Chafe’s view, contrast never meets New Information – the two notions do not overlap. This is a consequence of Chafe’s definition of the two terms: ‘focus of contrast’ is chosen from a closed set, and ‘new information’ is, for Chafe, taken from an open set of possible alternatives.
There is a special subtype of contrastive focus – connected with open or closed sets – which has contributed to interweaving the two notions ‘contrast’ and ‘Information Focus’ even more tightly: the so-called ‘exhaustive’ focus of Hungarian. In Hungarian, an Information Focus (as I use the term here) is placed in a designated position on the left-hand periphery of the sentence just in case it also excludes all relevant alternatives, i.e. just in case it is exhaustive.

Here Information Focus does meet a subtype of contrast: exhaustive contrast. One and the same constituent carries two very different properties at the same time:

a. the property of being chosen as the core of the message in the relational sense, i.e. the property of being the Information Focus, and

b. the property of being contrasted with every other possible alternative, i.e. the property of being exhaustive.

2. German sentences with contrastive topics;
   English sentences with contrastive topics and contrastive foci.

According to Bolinger, no pitch accent can be regarded as uniquely contrastive. But when one sets out to compare the effects of different pitch accents, there is, in fact, one accent that does stand out as a very good candidate for the label ‘contrastive accent’: the fall-rise, the contour that Pierrehumbert (1980) labels H* L¯ H%.

This accent plays a key role in the discussions of contrastive topics – and partly foci – of languages as different as English, German, Hungarian and Korean. It is of vital interest, both from the point of view of comparative phonology and from the point of view of information structure, to find out with what kind of contrast the fall-rise is associated, and to explicate the relations of the fall-rise contrast to other relevant varieties of contrast.

As already mentioned, I will use the term Focus (or Information Focus) for the ‘horizontal’ sense of highlighting – in the relational sense – for what has been called ‘primary focus’ (cf. Jacobs 1983), ‘nuclear focus’ (Molnár 1998), ‘rheme’ (Vallduví/Vilkuna 1998), or ‘semantic
focus’ (Gundel 1999). Now let us have a closer look at the fall-rise and let us start with the situation in German.

There has been a lively debate lately in the literature on German about a two-peaked accent pattern, characterised by a fall-rise (or a rise) followed by a fall, cf. the sentence in (6):

(6) \(\sqrt{\text{Peter ist klug}}\)
‘Peter is wise’
(, aber Klaus ist dumm.)
‘but Klaus is stupid.’

This pattern has been discussed under different labels – it has been called the ‘hat pattern’ (Féry 1993, after Cohen and ‘t Hart 1967), the ‘bridge accent’ (Wunderlich 1988, Büring 1997), the ‘bridge contour’ (Wunderlich 1991), and the ‘root contour’ (Jacobs 1996, 1997). The phenomenon as such was called ‘I-Topicalisation’ (that is: topicalisation by means of intonation) by Jacobs (1982).

Within Rooth’s and Jacobs’ early focus theories, the prominent topic of a sentence like (6) clearly qualifies as a focus as well: both accented constituents in (6) are contrasted with salient (but not necessarily explicitly mentioned) type-identical alternatives. Both the topic and the information focus are highlighted as especially relevant. The prominent topic in (6) is an example of a ‘contrastive focus’ in the sense of Gundel (1999) and a ‘Kontrast’ in the sense of Vallduví/Vilkuna (1998).

Daniel Büring (1997) develops a theory of contrastive topics, building on Rooth’s alternative semantics focus theory. Within this theory, Büring explains the meaning of sentences with contrastive topics, like the one in (7),

(7) \(\text{Die /weiblichen Popstars trugen Kaftane.}\)
‘The female popstars wore caftans.’

on the basis of a three-level analysis, as shown in (8):

(8) a. \(^\text{the female pop stars wore caftans}\)
(‘ordinary meaning’)

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b. \{\begin{align*}
&\text{\textsuperscript{^the female pop stars wore caftans,}} \\
&\text{\textsuperscript{^the female pop stars wore dresses,}} \\
&\text{\textsuperscript{^the female pop stars wore overalls, ...}}
\end{align*}\} \quad (\text{\textsuperscript{focus value'}})

c. \{\begin{align*}
&\{\text{\textsuperscript{^the female pop stars wore caftans,}} \\
&\text{\textsuperscript{^the female pop stars wore dresses,}} \\
&\text{\textsuperscript{^the female pop stars wore overalls, ...}}\} \quad (\text{\textsuperscript{topic value'}})
\{\begin{align*}
&\text{\textsuperscript{^the male pop stars wore caftans,}} \\
&\text{\textsuperscript{^the male pop stars wore dresses,}} \\
&\text{\textsuperscript{^the male pop stars wore overalls, ...}}
\end{align*}\}
\{\begin{align*}
&\{\text{\textsuperscript{^the female or male pop stars wore caftans,}} \\
&\text{\textsuperscript{^the female or male pop stars wore dresses,}} \\
&\text{\textsuperscript{^the female or male pop stars wore overalls, ...}}\}
\{\begin{align*}
&\text{\textsuperscript{^the Italian pop stars wore caftans,}} \\
&\text{\textsuperscript{^the Italian pop stars wore dresses,}} \\
&\text{\textsuperscript{^the Italian pop stars wore overalls, ...}}
\end{align*}\}\}
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\} (\text{cf. Büring 1997: 68})

(8a) is supposed to spell out the so-called ‘ordinary meaning’ of the sentence, the proposition proper, with its truth conditions. (8b) explicates the ‘focus value’, building on the focus theories of Rooth (1985, 1992) and von Fintel (1994). The focus value contains a set of propositions with alternative values for the focus: instead of caftans, the female pop stars might have worn dresses, or overalls, or something else, depending on the possibilities available in the relevant context.

The concept ‘topic value’ in (8c) is Büring’s own contribution – it contains a set of sets, namely the alternative sets that one gets when in every proposition belonging to the focus value the \textit{topic} is replaced by alternatives from the relevant context.

Büring formulates a condition for contrastive topicalisation that is particularly interesting in our context:

\[
\text{Given a sentence } A, \text{ containing an S-Topic, there is an element } Q \text{ in } [[A]]^1 \text{ such that } Q \text{ is still under consideration after uttering } A. \quad (\text{Büring 1997: 69})
\]

\[\text{1 } \text{Here } Q \text{ represents what Büring calls the 'residual topic', a question that is still disputable after } A \text{ has been uttered. } [[A]]^1 \text{ is the 'topic value' of the analysed sentence.}\]
Büring’s claim is that after a sentence with a contrastive topic has been uttered, there necessarily remains a question Q, the so-called ‘residual topic’, that is still open and disputable. According to Büring, it is an essential property of sentences with contrastive topics that the issue discussed is not completely settled, see (7) again, this time triggered by a question, in (9):

(9) Q: What did the pop stars wear?
    the female pop stars wore caftans
    ‘The female popstars wore caftans.’

On uttering (9A), the speaker implicates a possible contrast: that there might be other contextually relevant persons, to whom the focus does not apply. For instance, one could think of the male pop stars and phrase (10) as the still ‘disputable’ question:

(10) What did the male pop stars wear?

The openness can be closed by a sentence of adversative content, as Jacobs puts it, see for instance (11):

    the female pop stars wore caftans
    aber die männlichen trugen andere Kleidung.
    but the males wore other clothes

Büring (1997) identifies three variants of fall-rise topics in German, three subtypes; he calls them ‘contrastive topics’ (in the narrow sense), ‘partial topics’ and ‘purely implicational topics’. A closer look at these three topic types in the languages German and English gives us a distinct impression of the striking similarities of the interpretation of fall-rise-accented constituents in these two languages.

The subtype that Büring calls ‘contrastive topics’ functions by introducing a new topic, i.e. by signalling a topic shift, see (12):
Do you think that Fritz would buy this suit?

I certainly wouldn’t.

√ICH (or I) contrasts with the old discourse topic Fritz. The question which remains unanswered or open after (12A) has been uttered, as demanded in Büring’s theory, is – among others – the one that was posed in the first place: ‘Do you think that Fritz would buy this suit?’

The variant of sentence topics called ‘partial topics’ has the function of delimiting an already given discourse topic, see (9) again:

What did the pop stars wear?

The female pop stars wore caftans.

After (9A) has been uttered, it is still open to discussion what the male pop stars were wearing. The sentence (9A), with the given intonation, implicates that the males belonging to the group may have worn something else than the females.

As an example of the third variant of S-topics, the so-called ‘purely implicational topics’, Büring cites (13):

Did your wife kiss other men?

My wife didn’t kiss other men. (But what about YOUR wife?)

The topic accent is not obligatory in the case of the ‘purely implicational topics’. If it is there, however, it calls up ‘alternative topics’, see (14):

My wife didn’t kiss other men.
In languages like German – and also Hungarian – where the intonation of declarative sentences is falling (or ‘level’), it is clear that a fall-rise accent cannot be the final pitch accent of a complete declarative sentence. In these languages the Information Focus has to be marked by the rightmost accent – and this accent has to be a fall. But in a language like English, there are other strategies for marking the Information Focus of a sentence. In English, there seems to exist a hierarchy of accents, as regards their capacity to represent the Information Focus in sentences with more than one pitch accent. If an English sentence has a combination of a falling and a rising accent, the falling accent seems to be given the interpretation of Information Focus, irrespective of its position compared to the rising accent, see Jackendoff’s example in (15):

(15) Q: Well, what about the BEANS? Who ate THEM?
   A: $\text{FRED ate the } \text{BEANS.}$
   \begin{tabular}{ll}
   [Inf. Focus, & [background,] \\
   falling accent] & fall-rise accent] \\
   \end{tabular}

(15A) is fine – with a fall on Fred, followed by a fall-rise; (15A’) is not possible in this context.

Whereas in German rises or fall-rises are not found as the only pitch accent of a completed declarative sentence, this pattern is fine in English. The shades of contrast involved in an English fall-rise Information Focus seem to be the same as in the case of German (or English) contrastive topics, see (16A), which is a question:

(16) a. How will Henry get home?
   b. \^How will \^Jane get \^home, you \^mean.
   (Henry’s journey’s simple.)

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2 # here indicates unacceptability in the given context.

Jackendoff (1972) uses the terms ‘A accent’ and ‘B accent’ for falls and fall-rises, respectively, referring to Bolinger. In fact, Bolinger himself does not use the term ‘B accent’ for the fall-rise, he calls it the ‘A-Rise Accent’ (cf. Bolinger 1958). Jackendoff’s terminology has nevertheless become well established in parts of the relevant literature. See Ladd (1980) for discussion.
This is an example corresponding to what Büring called a ‘contrastive topic’. In this case Jane is the Information Focus of the sentence, however. If Jane had been a topic in (16), it would have exemplified a topic shift.

The example in (17) contains a sentence with a ‘partial’ fall-rise Information Focus, a parallel to Büring’s sentences with ‘partial topics’:

(17) a. I thought they all took one.  
   b. ‘Ann did.  
   (O’Connor/Arnold 1973: 170)

After (17b) has been uttered, it is still an open question whether the other relevant persons ‘took one’. It is possible to continue as in (18):

(18) But the ‘others didn’t.  
   (O’Connor/Arnold 1973: 170)

Let us finally have a look at an example of a ‘purely implicational’ fall-rise Information Focus, see (19):

(19) a. But ‘Peter’s quite satisfied.  
   b. ‘Peter’s satisfied.  
   (O’Connor/Arnold 1973: 174)

The speaker in (19b) implicates that some other person(s) may not be satisfied, see (20):

(20) ‘I’m not though.  
   (O’Connor/Arnold 1973: 174)

According to Chafe (1976), it is possible for a sentence to have more than one ‘focus of contrast’. But obviously, the contrastive interpretation of Chafe’s examples of ‘double contrast’ has nothing to do with the fall-rise accent: Chafe does not have ‘bridge accents’ or ‘root contours’ in mind at all when he compares the two sentences (21) and (22) with respect to the status of the constituent Álice. In (21), Álice is interpreted as ‘simply new information’:

(21) Q: What happened at the meeting?  
   A: They elected Álice président.  
   (Chafe 1976: 36)
In (22), Álice is seen as a ‘focus of contrast’:

(22) (They elected Hénry tréasurer, and …)  
they elected Álice président.  

(Chafe 1976: 36)

With regard to the intonation of the two sentences, Chafe gives the following comment:

A normal pronunciation for Alice when she is simply new information (as in 2) [i.e. my (21), JH] is with a pitch that falls only slightly on the second syllable. But when she is a focus of contrast (as in 3) [my (22), JH], the pitch must fall steeply.

(Chafe 1976: 36, my italics, JH)

But obviously it is possible to apply all three intonation patterns in (23) in the context quoted in (22):

(23) (They elected Henry treasurer and …)  
a. they elected Alice  
\underline{\text{president.}}

b. they elected /Alice  
\underline{\text{president.}}

c. they elected ’Alice  
\underline{\text{president.}}

Are there differences of interpretation between the first accents of these three sentences that amount to more than just nuances?

What the three accents on Alice have in common, is that in all cases, Alice is highlighted at the expense of some alternative that might have taken her place. The feeling that possible, but not explicitly mentioned alternatives are present behind the accented constituents, may normally be conveyed rather weakly in the case of the low rise – and perhaps also in the case of the high fall. This depends on the context, however.

As for the two rising accents in (23b) and (23c), they do have a certain ‘openness’ in common: in English – as in most languages – a rising accent does signal non-finality and expectancy, whereas falls sound definite and complete. But again, this does not prevent a language like English from using falls to express the first contrast in a sentence with double contrast (see 23a) – and it does not prevent rising accents from being the last or the only pitch
accent of an English declarative sentence, see (24A) with a plain rise on the Information Focus,

(24) Q: Where are you going?  
A: Just to post a letter.  

(cf. O’Connor/Arnold 1973: 160)

and (25A) with a fall-rise:

(25) Q: Did they all take one?  
A: Ann did.  

(cf. O’Connor/Arnold 1973: 170)

So what is it that the fall-rise has that the plain rise and the fall do not have?

The main difference seems to consist in the property of the fall-rise to induce a contrastive interpretation *also in cases where the discourse context gives no clue that any contrast is intended*. But, of course, the fall-rise is also very often used when alternatives are specified in the given context. If we take a look again at Büring’s three subclasses of what he calls ‘sentence topics’ we can see very clearly the spectrum of more or less contextual specification found in connection with fall-rise accenting.

In what Büring calls ‘contrastive topics’, the contrast is *always* explicit, cf. (26):

(26) a. ‘Didn’t Frank agree to the plan?’  
   b. Yes but Peter was ‘very much against it.’  
   
   (O’Connor & Arnold 1973: 258)

*Peter* is contrasted with *Frank*, and of course this would also have been a contrast if *Peter* had been pronounced with a high fall, which is evidently the accent that Chafe has in mind when talking about double contrast. There is an extra flair about the fall-rise, however, which is not found when falling accents are applied. The fall-rise seems to induce an impression of *some sense of ‘givenness’* of the accented constituent itself or of the set to which it belongs: Ladd (1980: 150) describes the ‘meaning’ of the fall-rise as “something like focus within a given set”. This effect is totally absent in the case of falling pitch accents – any givenness associated with constituents accented by falls, or of the sets that they belong to, is *always* due to the context, as in Chafe’s example in (22).
The plain rise seems to be quite neutral in this respect, compare (22) (where Alice is clearly part of a given set that also comprises Henry) to (24):

(24) Q: Where are you going?  
A: Just to post a letter.  
(cf. O’Connor/Arnold 1973: 160)

In (24), a letter is chosen from an open set and brand-new, also in the referential sense.

In the case of ‘partial’ and ‘purely implicational’ fall-rise-accenting, the contrast is less or not at all explicit. The ‘partially’ fall-rise accented constituents name an element or a subset of some contextually given set, and thus invoke alternatives to this element or subset, cf. (27):

(27) a. Did you eat well?  
b. The food in Paris was superb.  
(O’Connor & Arnold 1973: 258)  
(but the food in Vienna …)

With the question “Did you eat well?” the speaker asks about the overall quality of food; the answer delimits this discourse-topic to the food in Paris. Again, it is perfectly appropriate to pronounce Paris with a fall – or with a plain rise. In that case, any feeling of contrast would probably be due to the (contextually based) inference that Paris is just one of several places relevant in this case.

In sentences with ‘purely implicational’ fall-rise accents, the implicature of contrast has no support in the preceding discourse context whatsoever; the implicature depends crucially on the fall-rise accent, cf. (28):

(28) a. [’What was the soup like?]  
b. The soup was terrible.  
(O’Connor & Arnold 1973: 258)

With a fall or a plain rise on soup in (28b), this sentence would probably not be perceived as contrastive at all – with one reservation: an accent may – just by being there – induce an implicit feeling that something is chosen at the expense of something else – like in Bolinger’s out-of-the-blue sentence Let’s have a picnic. In this sense alternatives are lurking behind
every pitch accent. This is what I called the ‘paradigmatic’ or ‘vertical’ aspect of highlighting in part 1.

3. Korean data

In a recent paper by Chungmin Lee (1999), Korean sentences with ‘contrastive topics’ are compared to their English counterparts. Lee documents astonishing parallels between English and Korean declarative sentences with respect to the relation between a so-called ‘B accent’ (which is Jackendoff’s term for the fall-rise accent) and an implicature of contrast.

The Korean facts are highly interesting, and they show very clearly that what is called ‘topic’ in a language like Korean denotes something else and something more than ‘topic’ in the sense of ‘Satzgegenstand’, as ‘what the rest of the sentence is about’. Lee shows that the Korean ‘topic marker’ (N)UN is used in (at least) the following three cases:

(i) as a marker of noncontrastive topics (in this case normally without a pitch accent), cf. (29):

(29) \[\text{inshaeki -NUN}\]T hankuk saram \text{-i palmyonghae-ss-ta} \[\text{kind-object predicate}\]
\[\text{printer Top Korean person Nom invented}\]
‘The printer, a Korean invented it.’ (Lee 1999: 325)

(ii) as a marker of contrastive topics in the sense of Szabolcsi (1981a,b), Lambrecht (1994) and Molnár (1998), among others. In this function it carries “a similar high tone [as the English B accent]” (Lee 1999: 318), cf. (30):

(30) na \[\text{sa-wol -e -NUN}\]B cungkuk \text{-e ka}
\[1 \text{April in CT China in go}\]
‘In [April]B I’m going to [China]A’
\[\text{(in May to Mongolia)}\] (cf. Lee 1999: 323)

(iii) as a special contrastive variant of the category Information Focus (what Lambrecht 1994 would call a ‘contrastive focus’, and what in Gundel’s 1999 paper would qualify as a case of overlapping between her categories ‘contrastive focus’ and ‘semantic focus’). Also in this function the constituent with the (N)UN marker is pronounced with a ‘B accent’, cf. (31):
(31) Q: Do you have money?
A: na [tongceon-UN]B iss -eo
I coin CT exist Dec
‘I have [coins]B
(but I don’t have bills).’

(cf. Lee 1999: 322)

Lee marks the constituent [tongceon-UN]B, corresponding to the English coins, as a contrastive topic (CT), although it carries the only pitch accent of the sentence and denotes the core of the message in the relational sense. In fact, he labels all constituents combining the ‘B accent’ with the ‘topic marker’ (N)UN ‘contrastive topics’.

On the basis of Lee’s data, the status of the Korean ‘topic-marker’ (N)UN as an unambiguous marker of topicality in the sense of aboutness cannot be upheld. To isolate a common denominator for the meaning of (N)UN, we have to look for some property that all topics, contrastive and noncontrastive, have in common with contrastive Information Foci. Should (N)UN be seen simply as a marker of some special cognitive status, some degree of (assumed) accessibility that may – but does not have to – coincide with topicality in the sense of ‘aboutness’?

Lee also compares the sentences in (32) and (33) below, (32) with a fall-rise-like ‘B accent’ and (33) with a fall:

(32) pi-NUN [CT] o-n-ta
‘Rain-CT is coming.’

(Lee 1999: 339)

(33) pi-ka [Nom] o-n-ta
‘Rain is coming’ = ‘It’s raining.’

(Lee 1999: 339)

In (32), with rain marked by the particle NUN and a ‘contrastive topic accent’, rain is contrasted with relevant alternatives, for instance snow. In (33), no contrast is implied at all.

It seems as if the Korean ‘topic morpheme’ (N)UN has the same status as the Japanese marker wa. As reported by Kuno (1972: 270), the wa particle signals either the ‘theme’

3 This holds under the assumption that there is no hidden ’A accent’ on iss (exist).
(corresponding to the ‘topic’ in Lee’s paper), which is, according to Kuno, ‘previously mentioned’ or ‘generic’, or it marks a contrasted element of the sentence, cf. (34):

(34) *Ame wa* hutte imasu ga, *yuki wa* hutte imasen.

> (Lit.) ‘Ráin is falling, but snów is not falling.’

A comparable sentence with the subject marker *ga* instead of *wa* has no implication of contrast, see (35):

(35) *Oya, ame ga/*wa* hutte iru.*

> ‘Oh, it’s raining.’

Kuno does not comment on intonational facts, however. For this reason it is not possible to draw any conclusions on the basis of the given data with respect to potential prosodic parallels between contrastive utterances in Korean and Japanese.

The cognitive status of topics has been much debated in the literature. Undoubtedly, unmarked topics (as for instance the subjects of SVO languages when in their base positions) can be brand-new in the sense that they are discourse-new and also hearer-new, as argued by Molnár (1998), see the newspaper headings quoted in (36) and (37):

(36) *Jetliner Crash Kills 131 in Philippines.*  
(The Herald Tribune, April 20, 2000)

(37) *Cult papers reveal new massacre links.*  
(The Guardian, April 18, 2000)

Under the precondition that the speaker is almighty with regard to his treatment of all aspects of information structuring, one might argue that simply in choosing one special constituent at the expense of others as point of departure for the predication, he somehow treats the topicalised constituent as if it were accessible to the addressee. Or, should unmarked ‘new’ topics – as in (36) and (37) above – be considered topics at all? I must admit that I am very hesitant about taking a stand in this matter.

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Assumed accessibility – that the speaker assumes that the hearer has access to, or can reconstruct, a set to which the fall-rise-accented constituent belongs - is clearly an underlying factor for both fall-rise topics and fall-rise foci, however. The use of the fall-rise implicates that the hearer can construct a set of relevant alternatives to the accented constituent – via discourse, general knowledge, or implicature.

In Korean (as in English and German), it is obviously the ‘B accent’ that is responsible for the implicature of contrast in cases where there is no reference to alternatives in the context. The Korean ‘B accent’ distinguishes contrastive NUN-marked topics from noncontrastive NUN-marked topics. As for the fall-rise Information Foci in Korean, they differ formally from other Information Foci in two respects: in pitch accent (‘normal’ noncontrastive Information Foci are marked with falling pitch accents, cf. Lee 1999: 327), and with respect to NUN-marking: only contrastive foci (in the sense of Lambrecht 1994 and Gundel 1999) are NUN-marked.

Korean seems to emerge as a language whose focusing, strangely enough, has very much in common with English: the Information Focus of Korean declarative sentences can be marked with fall-rise accents – with the well-known implicatures of contrast – if this accent is the only pitch accent of the sentence. Two-peaked sentences with ‘root contours’ apparently occur frequently in Korean, – with implicatures similar to those of English, German and Hungarian. In every two-peaked ‘root contour’, i.e. a contour consisting of a fall-rise followed by a fall, the last (falling) constituent is obviously interpreted as the Information Focus.

The Korean facts do strengthen the suspicion that phonological prominence may play a more important role in the marking of information structure than hitherto assumed, also in languages where it has up to now been taken for granted that information structure is established by other means than pitch accents. More empirical work is obviously needed in this field.

Let us go back now to the notion of contrast and ask again where the fall-rise comes in. We can sum up that
as a pitch accent, the fall-rise – like other pitch accents – induces contrast in the broadest sense of the term – it highlights a constituent at the expense of relevant alternatives.

all accents can be used to signal contrast in this narrow sense, depending on the context. But the fall-rise seems to be better suited than the other accents to induce contrast in cases where there is no sign in the context that contrast is intended, cf. the accent combinations in (38):

(38) Q: What was the soup like?
   a. A1: The \underline{\textit{soup}} \underline{\textit{was}} terrible.
   b. A2: The \underline{\textit{soup}} \underline{\textit{was}} terrible.
   c. A3: The \underline{\textit{soup}} \underline{\textit{was}} terrible.

Could the reason for this be that the fall-rise itself (cf. (38c)) creates or conjures up the illusion of a closed – and thereby an accessible set – in a way the other accents do not? And could this be the reason why the fall-rise combines with the so-called topic-marker in Korean to mark Contrastive Information Foci?

References


