

**COLLIDING PERSPECTIVES:
THE NOTION OF 'FOCUS' REVISITED,
FROM RENAISSANCE OPTICS
TO SENTENCE ANALYSIS AND BACK
AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH**

Je souhaite ici rendre hommage à un professeur dont l'immense savoir et la finesse intellectuelle, mêlés d'humilité et de dévouement ne sont plus à démontrer. Tout au long de sa carrière, elle s'est brillamment distinguée tant par ses qualités de chercheuse exceptionnelle, que par ses enseignements riches et pointus, ainsi que par sa remarquable implication dans ses fonctions administratives. En cela, elle a pour ses étudiants toujours incarné un guide au parcours exemplaire. Ses travaux s'inscrivent dans la grande tradition de l'érudition classique de l'anglistique tout en opérant une prodigieuse percée dans des domaines du savoir relevant non pas d'un passé lointain mais du présent immédiat, les univers virtuels, adimensionnels des humanités numériques auxquels jusqu'alors peu d'anglicistes s'intéressaient. Pionnière en la matière, elle a su cerner ces nouveaux médias tant du point de vue de leur technicité que du point de vue de leur portée théorique, ce qui mérite d'être souligné. Ses travaux sur l'image et les théories des représentations offrent des perspectives variées, toujours justes et percutantes sur les champs abordés. Ses séminaires sur la culture visuelle, en particulier ses cours d'agrégation et ses séminaires de DEA traitaient de questions parfois ardues ou techniques, mais rendues accessibles par des mises en pratique foisonnantes, en grande partie grâce au recours au support numérique qui n'a aucun secret pour elle. Ainsi, ses enseignements gagnaient en densité herméneutique à la fois du fait de leur nécessaire multi-dimensionnalité mais aussi de par leur caractère éminemment réflexif¹.

¹ "The new information technologies throw into focus the mediation of thought by machines, and therefore, by analogy, they retrospectively make us reflect on this mediation process in the traditional media (see McCarty 1998). They cause a critical awareness not only of the relation between medium and message in past media, but

Plus personnellement, je souhaiterais ici rendre hommage à la belle personne, humaine et sensible, qu'est le professeur Marie-Madeleine Martinet, et exprimer tout ma gratitude à celle qui a toujours vu dans la démarche atypique que j'avais entreprise le moyen de jeter des passerelles entre des domaines du savoir distincts. Sans jamais se départir de son calme et de sa bienveillance, et en faisant preuve d'une grande générosité intellectuelle, elle m'a encouragée à persévérer dans cette voie. Il s'agissait de faire fi des obstacles, en prenant soin de toujours tenir compte des remarques les plus constructives. Chaque angliciste doit, de fait, faire coexister l'étude d'une histoire, d'une civilisation et de ses idées, d'une littérature, d'une langue et des règles qui la régissent, d'une culture, etc. Savoir embrasser et faire converser des perspectives habituellement très circonscrites tout en préservant leur singularité, voilà ce qui me semblait être un aspect de l'anglistique qu'il était utile d'explorer et d'approfondir. Or c'est la démarche résolument interdisciplinaire de ce maître à penser qui me donna le courage d'envisager un projet de thèse instaurant un dialogue entre deux régimes de signes (linguistiques et visuels), une hybridation du champ exploratoire visant à mieux dégager ce qui se logeait au cœur de la construction du sens. Replacer le sujet-pensant à l'origine de la perspective même, voilà ce vers quoi la recherche dans le domaine de l'anglistique pourrait tendre : un voyage aux confins, vers des horizons mouvants, une excursion loin du rivage de domaines strictement balisés. Je lui en suis infiniment reconnaissante.

Je reprends dans l'article ci-dessous l'examen croisé de la notion de « focalisation » entamé dans ma thèse, étude synthétisée ici en anglais et enrichie de mes plus récentes réflexions sur le sujet. Ce métaterme issu de l'optique, né à la Renaissance, semble avoir circulé, parfois très subrepticement, entre différents champs du savoir, de la géométrie à l'optique, à l'astronomie, plus tard à la photographie puis à la linguistique en passant par la narratologie, sans jamais, semble-t-il, complètement se départir de sa dimension visuelle.

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The metalinguistic notion of “focus” has long been a familiar term among linguists, one that has transcended most linguistic schools of thought. Focus, focusing and focus-marking seem to have steadily replaced the old, more literary notion of emphasis to refer to the foregrounding of a specific element in the sentence. Generally

also, as a consequence, in present-day media, including themselves, which they historicise. They are a tool of ‘metaperception’.” (Gallet-Blanchard & Martinet 2002)

Palette pour Marie-Madeleine Martinet (2016)

speaking, it is achieved via prosodic means and/or syntactic reordering. Emblematic focusing structures are emphatic accent and cleft-sentences or the like (pseudo-clefts, reverse pseudo-clefts, etc.), that somehow split the original S-V-O structure into two embedded clauses (bi-clausal syntax).

This paper is an interdisciplinary study meant to explore the incidental comparison drawn by Danish linguist Jespersen between focusing phenomena via cleft-sentences and photographic devices ([1937] 1969, 72-79 & [1949] 1961, 147-148), to try and explain why this expression has come to be widely accepted among linguists and why it has known such a phenomenal success. I hypothesize that, even though most linguists tend to neglect that aspect of Jespersen's simile, part of its metalinguistic efficacy lies in its optical origins. Not only does the expression gain in technicality due to its origins as an optical term, a Latin loanword, but also it points to a remarkable natural contrastive process here transposed in the field of linguistics, elicited by syntax, prosody and, beyond, the whole range of means available to the utterer. The structures involved in focus-marking may indeed literally facilitate internal visualization of what the semantic segments emphasized point to, hinting at a link between sensory-motor simulation and meaning construction (both in written or oral forms).

To support my argument, I shall first provide a historical overview of the scientific term, starting from Renaissance geometry and optics and then moving on to modern photography contrasting it with earlier terminology. I will then argue that the notion came to be used in linguistics almost certainly because of its strong scientific connotation, and its degree of abstraction in an era when linguistics staked its claim to the status of a scientific field in its own right, thus gradually pervading all trends of thought in the field. Particular attention will be paid to the transformationalist and generative approaches as well as to the information-structure tradition, whose more holistic approach may prove valuable. Lastly, I will center on cognitive psychology and cognitive linguistics that use data outside the four grammatical levels of representation, phonetics, morphosyntax, semantics and pragmatics, to understand conceptualization processes at stake in language.

Optics and photography

In the 7th volume of his extensive study of modern English grammar, the Danish linguist Jespersen makes the following remark:

A cleaving of a sentence by means of *it is* (often followed by a relative pronoun or connective) serves to single out some particular element of the sentence and very often, by directing attention to it and bringing it, as it were, into focus, to mark a contrast. ([1949] 1961, 147-148).

I have found no mention of the word “focus” in a linguistic context before this publication dating back to 1949, and have every reason to believe that Jespersen’s simile led to the introduction of the optical notion in the field of linguistics.

This is first, of course, because Jespersen remains one of the most influential “pre-Chomskyan intellectual forbears” among American linguists (Langendoen 1979, 145), who later started using the term in a quasi-systematic way, as we shall see below. Second, because the phrase “to bring into focus” is here closely connected to cleft constructions, which we know are emblematic grammatical foregrounding devices in linguistics, and are regularly mentioned when discussing focus in that field. But, before turning to the specifics of the use of the phrase in linguistics, and more particularly, to the linguistic meta-term “focus” extracted from it, it is worthwhile examining the expression’s etymology, and the exact process it refers to. This will enable us to fully appreciate the scope of Jespersen’s simile.

The term “focus” is a Latinate expression that originally meant “hearth”. The linguistic sign <focus> thus initially referred to a calorific locus, not the actual source of light and energy but the place where it was to be found (see Koch 2003, 147-148). The same linguistic sign was later chosen by the Renaissance astronomer, mathematician and physicist, Johannes Kepler (1571-1630), to denote the geometrical point where beams of light meet when refracting, as they enter and exit lenses made of glass or any other transparent material, thicker at the center than at the edges ([1604] 1939, 91)².

² “Nos lucis causa, et oculis in Mechanicam intentis ea puncta Focos appelabimus. Centra dixissemus, quia sunt in axibus sectionum, nisi in Hyperbola et Ellipsi conici authores aliud punctum centri nomine appellarent. Focus igitur in circulo unus est A. isque idem qui et centrum: in Ellipsi foci duo sunt B.C.” (Kepler [1604] 1939, 91).

While there is no clear-cut explanation for this, one may venture that this geometrical point of light ray convergence actually corresponds to external calorific locus of the lens, or “burning point”, hinting at the fact that magnifying glasses had hitherto been empirically used to provoke ignition:

The Latin word was first used in sense I [In plane geometry: One of the points from which the distances to any point of a given curve are connected by a linear relation] by Kepler (*Astron. pars Optica* iv. 4, written in 1604); his reason for the choice of the name is not stated, but it is conjectured that the optical sense 2, “burning point of a lens or mirror” (which is easily derived from the lit. Sense) must have been already in existence; this would account for Kepler’s use, as the “burning point” or “focus” of its curvature. (*OED* 1989, 1127).

In Kepler’s days, the rectilinear nature of the propagation of light had long been established (as far back as Antiquity by Hero of Alexandria [10 – c. 70 AC] and even before that, when hinted at by Euclid³). This made the study of light prone to geometrical apprehension via lines and curves. The astronomer thus used his mathematical skills to improve his knowledge of dioptrics, which in turn led him to a better understanding of the phenomenon of atmospheric light refraction⁴, for the latter phenomenon warped his celestial observations. In his case, vision was all the more hampered as he was afflicted with severe myopia (Gheyselinck 2005, 27). Refraction indeed posed challenging difficulties for astronomers who wish to collect accurate and reliable scientific data. Variations in optical density alter the propagation speed of light waves, which tends to slow down as they travel from vacuum to air, or air to glass or water for instance, they also bend for part of the light rays hits the transparent substance first while the other sustains its original pace

³ Hero’s reasoning is developed in his *Catoptrics* and fully explained in Smith (2015, 65): “Like arrows shot at a high velocity, visual radiation follows rectilinear trajectories because being incredibly swift, it is inclined to travel the shortest possible distance”.

⁴ “Refraction is described for the first time in the optical work of Ptolemy, the Greek text of which is lost, but of which an Arabic version was translated into Latin” (Bridges, footnote 1, in Bacon, [1267] 1897-1900, 112). We know that Kepler had extensively read the works of the famous erudite Franciscan friar Roger Bacon (1214-1292) and the Arabic astronomer Alhazen (965-1040); (on Alhazen’s problem see Martinet 1995, 83).

slightly longer. In our atmosphere, the phenomenon will make cosmic objects appear higher than they actually are and cause compelling mirages⁵.

Accordingly, combining plane geometry, the study of conics, optics and astronomy proved a necessity, especially in an era when observations of the sky were still mostly made with the naked eye (Tycho Brahe, Kepler's Danish predecessor and mentor, was endowed with exceptional eyesight [Lombardi, 2001, 39]).

That is the reason why the German astronomer investigated how light travelled and when entering and exiting different transparent bodies as its speed increased or reduced - in the atmosphere, or when incident on artificial convex or concave lenses, or on the natural biconvex supple structure of the eye's crystalline (case of convergence); hence the title of his major publication in 1604: *Astronomiae pars Optica* i.e. literally "the optical part of astronomy". Such cross-analyses later led him to groundbreaking discoveries in terms of the formation of images on the retina, the making of magnifying optical instruments such as telescopes, and the accurate depiction of astronomic phenomena such as the orbital trajectories of planets (see Gilchrist 2014).

Yet, novel adequate scientific terminology was required for those findings to be properly exposed. Kepler thus coined numerous new expressions, among which we find such common words today as "satellite" (Gheyselinck 2005, 27). In this context, he came to select the Latin word "focus"⁶, first to refer to an abstract point in plane geometry where ideally straight converging lines meet, then to the convergence on artificial lenses of external points of the light waves, as well as the physiological area at the back center of the retina where

⁵ Mirages are caused by a real modification in light orientation due to contrasted air temperatures and refraction indices. An interesting example is the Novaya Zemlya effect where the sun is made visible even when below the horizon because of its rays trapped in some "optical duct", being refracted and reflected on the surface of the Earth. The first scientifically recorded Novaya Zemlya was witnessed by Dutch navigator Barents in the High Arctic in 1597 and elicited by Kepler (see Waldemar H. & van der Werf 2005, 5633).

⁶ When perusing the writings of the 13th century English friar Roger Bacon, who also extensively wrote on refraction (obviously in Latin like all scholars would do in those days), I found no mention of the word "focus", the geometrical converging point is referred to merely as *punctum unum*: "Si ergo speculum concavum sphaericum ad solem ponatur, concurrunt radii infiniti in punctum unum per reflexionem" (my emphasis, Bacon, [1267] 1900, 115)

the reflection of the object observed forms in reverse and inverted mode (left to right and right to left)⁷, due to the same refraction process – prior to Kepler, it had been postulated that vision was processed on the cornea (see Ross 2013, and Ilardi 2007, 244-247). Without accounting for it, Kepler even goes on to mention that the reorientation of the image upright and left to right must later be achieved in the brain:

I say that vision occurs when the image of the whole hemisphere of the world that before the eye... is fixed on the reddish white concave surface of the retina. How the image or picture is composed by the visual spirits that reside in the retina and the nerve, and whether it is made to appear before the soul or the tribunal of the visual faculty by a spirit within the hollows of the brain [...] this I leave to be disputed by the physicists. For the armament of opticians does not take them beyond the first opaque wall encountered within the eye. (Kepler quoted in Lindberg 1976, 203)

Due to obvious geometrical affinities between rectilinear light refraction, the curvilinear shape of lenses and planets' elliptical orbital trajectories, the mathematician and astronomer later used the same expression to refer to the two points around which planets orbit – namely the Sun on the one hand and an abstract point on the other; a point that owes its theoretical existence to its symmetrical position relative to the Sun but refers to no real celestial phenomenon concretely and is therefore purely abstract:

[Kepler] showed, first, that the center of the planetary revolutions is not an abstract geometrical point in the vicinity of the sun but the center of the sun's very body, and that the orbits of the planets are not circles but ellipses, the sun being located in one of their foci (first Keplerian law). (Panofsky 1954, 21)

Hereafter the word “focus” became a scientific term denoting matters of a highly technical nature, notably on a scale that far exceeded human dimensions and required arduous calculation to be identified and elucidated, and therefore was made easier by sophisticated optical instrumentation. Incurring some kind of epistemological shift, the word that originally referred to the fairly prosaic “fireplace” in vernacular Latin, had thus become a key notion in the field of dioptrics and the study of light refraction, in that of optics, as well as in the conception of artificial lenses and telescopes

⁷ As opposed to mirrors that reverse images front to back, not left to right.

meant to observe celestial phenomena and, last of all, in order to name those extremely distant phenomena *per se*.

A few centuries later, Kepler's terminology found a new lease of life with the vulgarisation of the photographic process. Artificial lenses were then no longer the sole province of expert astronomers working with telescopes or biologists working with microscopes. In the course of the twentieth century, any American was likely to enjoy his/her own private photographic device (adjusting light and time exposure by changing shutter aperture, adapting distance and vantage points, etc.) He or she could even process films at home (transferring the recorded light pattern from the light-sensitive silver-base film or negative onto photographic paper):

To answer the demand for a film the photographer could process himself, Ansco brought out in 1942 its *Ansco-Color* film, which was followed by Kodak's *Ektachrome* film [...] (Newhall 1982, 277).

Soon, many could start using the expression "to bring into focus" knowingly, by manipulating the photographic lens to adjust its length and enhance the convergence of light beams, thus intentionally sharpening the image of the picture to be shot while blurring its background. Prior to that, anyone whose sight was not impaired could have experienced the same visual foregrounding; for natural eyesight is based on the same constant adjustment of the supple organic crystalline lens and focal length to objects placed at varying distances. Yet, natural accommodation is so instinctive that it is barely noticeable. When using an artificial tool that duplicates the workings of ordinary vision, people are made more aware of the physiological phenomenon that lie at the core of visual perception: the deliberate selection, extraction and prioritisation of data. By duplicating vision artificially, photography, like any other medium, tells us the complex tale of our own sensory system and cognitive intentionality. It is a tool of meta-representation and of meta-perception which, once it has come to the fore, becomes epistemologically telling.

All those considerations may bear little in common with verbal representations and linguistic issues. Yet, in order to consider Jespersen's simile and understand how his photographic comparison has circulated and literally pervaded the field, not only was it important to show what the phrase "to bring into focus" meant technically, but it was also necessary to appreciate that the word had

undergone various alterations from the more concrete and mundane, to the more abstract and technical as knowledge itself improved and developed, which is also the case in the field of linguistics, as we are going to see.

Literary criticism and linguistics

In the nineteen forties, the photographic device had become sufficiently widespread, to be expressive outside of the strict boundaries of optics and photography and enough of a novelty to open up fresh perspectives and become a fertile epistemological model. This undoubtedly accounts for the coincidental introduction of the terms “focus” and, later on, “focalization” in two neighbouring fields of knowledge, namely narratology and linguistics which cross-over on occasions, as we are going to see.

A year after Ansco released a film that could be processed at home (1942 see above), the expression “focus of narration” was coined by the American literary critics Brooks and Warren as a substitute for narrative “point of view” (Brooks and Warren 1943, 206). Here the term “focus” is taken loosely to refer to the source of the narrative discourse, no longer suggesting the warmth of a calorific locus, but an abstract *punctum* echoing one of Kepler’s orbital *foci*, the Sun’s inexistent counterpart, virtually set for cognitive purposes: a mental hitching-post from which the narrative allegedly unravels, the story is told.

Thirty years later, in 1972, the same year one of the first occurrences of the term “focalisation” is spotted in a French linguistics dictionary (see below Ducrot and Todorov 1972, 346), the French literary theorist Genette claimed he had taken his inspiration from Brooks and Warren’s “focus” to establish his own narrative typology, thus opting for the meta-analytical term *focalisation* in French to refer to the various possible virtual vantage points through which fictional events are captured, mainly internal, external and zero focalization (1972, 206). Such a notion he clearly distinguished from that of narrative voice, which only refers to the source of the narrative discourse, not to the “center/orientation that determines the perspective from which the narrated events are presented” and governs the nature and amount of knowledge the reader may have

access to (Nieragden 2002, 688). Thus if the story is “seen”⁸ through the eyes of a particular narrator-character speaking in the first person singular and involved in the plot (homodiegetic discourse), the narrative voice and overall narrative impression will greatly differ from a situation whereby the narrator embraces a character’s perspective but uses the third person singular, and chooses to sever all ties with the course of events (heterodiegetic discourse). Yet, the extent of data available might well be equivalent as it stems from a single analogous source, except insofar as the degree of mediation rises, which is not altogether negligible. Sometimes, the situation can reach the heights of complexity when there is a shift in “focalizer” or a multiplicity of “focalizers”, to use narratologist Bal’s terminology (1981), for instance if we move from an outer perspective and suddenly things, or focalized objects, are seen from one or more internal character(s)-actor(s)’s perspective(s) (as is the case in epistolary novels for instance).

Those various strategies that play on the fluctuating intricacy of the mediation processes at stake in narratives obviously impact the notion of focalization itself, adding to its technicality (and leading to possible confusions). At first, Genette actually favoured the term *focalisation* (in French) due to its abstract qualities ([1972] 1980, 206); and perhaps also for its processual nature, denoting a possible intrusion into a character’s psyche, as opposed to the phrase *point de vue* (“point of view”) which he felt was too static, visual and confined to an external onlooker position. It is worth noticing that, quite obviously, no literary object is ever plainly visible. It is just that some of the signified content refers to fictitious visible entities in the extralinguistic world that can be “focalized” from the outside (characters, objects, landscapes, spatiotemporal events), whereas others refer to mental states, endogenous images, feelings, memories, ideas or concepts that bear little or no visibility, whether in the real world or in that of fiction but that are still objects of focalization, technically speaking. As a matter of fact, when Genette established a distinction between internal and external focalization, he “originally deployed it to distinguish visible objects of focalization (characters, events, locations) from invisible ones (thoughts, mental states)” (Nieragden 2002, 689).

⁸ In narratology, the verb “to see” functions only as a paradigmatic example of various virtual perceptual and cognitive processes (Nieragden 2002, 688).

In other words, if the expression *focalisation* in French may be understood as less visual than its more ordinary counterparts, namely *perspective* or *point de vue* (point of view), directly borrowed from the visual arts, this is first because it is perceived as more accurate and technical, and because it denotes a gradual shift from the outside to the inside and, from the visible to the invisible, from action and direct speech to thought, inner speech and feelings, all of which can function as focalized items of sorts; a process allowing spatio-temporal shifts in perspective (analepsis, prolepsis) as well as a plurality of viewpoints on a similar object synchronically, via various characters or, diachronically, via that of a single character evolving in time, etc. Yet this is exclusively achieved via written speech i.e. words, not directly visualized scenes, a property posing major issues, especially in terms of the structuralist dichotomy between “who sees” and “who speaks” perceived as too rigid (Herman 2009, 126); for, at times, speech and mental states may be the sole objects of focalization.

This is why, when the term “focalization” became of mandatory use in the field of narratology with Genette’s celebrated essay, it almost immediately raised a host of technical issues among narratologists, for the strict structuralist dichotomy between “seeing” and “speaking” was felt as too rigid to account for all the possible narrative constellations.

For this reason, thinkers have aimed at instilling a greater degree of suppleness into Genette’s taxonomy and in order to do so, have adopted a “post-classical” approach emphasizing the kaleidoscopic dimension of narrative stance-taking (Herman 2009, 119), which thus led some of them to restore a fully-fledged visual paradigm, by introducing, for instance, the notion of “field of vision” along with two distinct *foci* organized along a whole gamut of possibilities, ranging from a merging of F1 and F2 into an external, ever-shifting abstract standpoint, to F1 wholly encompassing F2:

[...] the field of vision is represented as having a conical shape like that of the area lit by a torch. It is taken in by an eye and its shape determined by an angle of vision. The eye, represented more technically, is a convex lens that collects rays by refraction – a kind of controlled distortion – in a ‘burning point’ of focus, referred to hereafter as *focus-1*. Like a photographic lens, the eye is adjustable, allowing it to pick out and concentrate on a subsection of the visual field, also commonly called *focus* or *areas in focus* (F2), henceforth

focus-2 of focus of interest or focus of attention. If focus-1 stands metonymically for the eye's owner, then focus-1 and focus-2 are alternate terms for [...] respectively, the subject and the object of focalization. Finally, the field-of-vision area covers a part of 'the world' [...]. (Jahn 1996, 242)

In this "mental model of vision" (Herman 2009, 126), aspects of what has been discussed beforehand in optics abruptly resurface as potent interpretive tools, as if the fully conscious assimilation of phenomenological knowledge was the only valid way of accounting for more abstract singularities: "story-telling are grounded in the perceptual-conceptual abilities of embodied human minds" (Herman 2009, 128). Moreover, this model enables Jahn to refine the notion of "zero focalization" by making clear that it cannot suggest a total absence of focalization, but more a series of "panoramic views [that] present tangible modal presences" along a shifting continuum, in keeping with what Nelles terms "free focalization" (1999, 369; see Jahn 1996, 250). Along the same line, Jahn explicitly refers to Lakoff's and Johnson's works on natural metaphors (1996, 241). Jahn's fellow narratologist Herman takes the idea further by referring to the writings of the cognitive grammarians Talmy and Langacker and the "cognitive turn", thus adopting a fertile interdisciplinary standpoint to account for what is proven to be a cognitively grounded phenomena:

Although cognitive grammarians tend to study such construal operations at the clause and sentence level, my claim is that the operations themselves are scalable and can be mapped onto discourse-level structures in narrative. (2009, 129)

The potential correspondences between cognitive grammar and narratology find an illustration in the following considerations by Langacker, when studying prototypical transitive sentences in the active voice with third-person participants:

A second facet of this model is the position of the viewer outside the setting in which the observed event occurs, with the consequence that the viewer is not himself a participant. [Recently], I described a detailed and pervasive analogy between PERceptual and CONceptual relationships, wherein the relation between the perceiver and the scene he observes is treated as parallel to that between a conceptualizer and the idea he entertains. (1991, 212-213)

This has been recently taken a step further, by taking into account the reader's full participation in the enactment of the scenes, virtually living and acting what is depicted either from the outside or the inside, literally moving about within the narrative's landscape or "textscape"; in which case the various degrees of focalization correspond to "the degree to which the imager's body is felt to be actively at work":

Stance in mental imaging can be either *inner* as in the former image of David conjured from within, or *outer* as in the latter image of David conjured from without. That is, although all mental images are necessarily internal to the imager's body, their contents differ in the degree to which the imager's body is felt to be actively at work. The two variables of domain and stance, having two instantiations each, slice up the field of imagery experiences into four, combining in four possible ways into four distinct imagery varieties. [...] even though separated here for the sake of clarity, the four varieties are meant to serve as prototypes only, constituting in fact a continuum of sorts and thus allowing for quick transitions and in-between experiences. (Kuzmičová 2014, 281)

As we are about to see, the notion of "focalization" has met with a similar fate in the neighbouring field of linguistics, gradually evolving from a structuralist and abstract status to a more holistic approach drawing on functional analyses, and, later, the return to metaphorical and perceptual-conceptual approaches, more in keeping with Jespersen's original photographic simile. The fact that the meta-terms "focalization" and "focus" can be found in both fields, with possible crossovers, should come as no surprise insofar as linguists and narratologists tackle closely related issues whereby stance taking is considered more and more as a fully embodied process.

Focus in the French and English lexicons

Let us now consider how the word "focus" came to be introduced in the field of linguistics proper. It is noteworthy that in the French lexicon, the word actually only exists in this very specific field, typically referring to an emphasized segment in the sentence (Charaudeau and Maingueneau 2002, 265). Again in French, the optical term "focus" translates into *foyer* while the verbal phrase "to bring into focus" translates into *mise au point*, thus stressing the geometrical convergence of light beams on a *punctum* prompting visual acuity, and disregarding the calorific dimension of the

phenomenon. Before being added to the French lexicon via linguistics, the term had in fact no existence in the language. As a matter of fact, French linguists initially seem to have been reluctant to mention it plainly. As stated above, the earliest occurrence of the term I have found in a French linguistics dictionary dates back to 1972, the same year Genette published *Figures III* in which the term *focalisation* was introduced in narratology. The explanation that matches it in Ducrot and Todorov's dictionary points to a loanword coined by the proponents of transformational grammar (1972, 346). Twenty years later, in a revised edition of the same dictionary, the expression is cited along with the same definition, the sole modification being that its transformational origin is no longer stated (Ducrot and Schaeffer 1995, 452). In all likelihood, the phrase had, by then, become sufficiently prevalent in the field of French linguistics, to the point where it no longer typified any specific school of thought anymore. Accordingly, its foreign origin need no longer be mentioned. As it happens the meta-term *foyer* was also later used by French linguists (Riegel *et al.* [1994] 1999, 431). Yet the expression "focus" still exclusively belonged to the restricted domain of linguistic metalanguage as remains the case today; as opposed to the term *focalisation* which, apart from its recent narratological acceptance in 1972, had long existed in optics (in accordance with the evolution already mentioned). This acceptance is attested in *Le Grand Robert de la langue française* as far back as 1877, while the verbal form *focaliser* is attested in 1929, according to that same dictionary (2001, 860).

In English, the situation is altogether different, insofar as in that language the word "focus" is commonplace, by no means a rarity at all. It seems that it was introduced in that language in the 1650s by Hobbes, who used it to refer to a "point of convergence" (see Online Etymology Dictionary)⁹. It is omnipresent in everyday expressions such as "the focus of attention", as well as in the ordinary verbal form "to focus on," metaphorically referring to one's mental or visual concentration on a specific element: "to focus on: pay particular attention to" (OED 1989, 1128) while the substantive form refers to: "the center of interest or activity – an act of focusing on something" (COD 1999, 549). Clearly those acceptations are straightforward

⁹ http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=focus
Last consulted January 14, 2016.

emanations deriving from the optical Keplerian use of the term, where *focus* refers to a very precise *punctum* in which light rays meet, the analogy between vision and thought, mental concentration and visual acuity being, as we know, extremely widespread and vivid (see the case of narratology above mentioned). This is all the more so as it has now been proven that mental images of a scene involve the same eye movements (and activity in the same brain areas) as concrete scene identification in the real world (see Bergen 2012, 64).

Due to obvious morphological proximity between the verb and the noun, “to focus”/“focus”, the phrase “to bring into focus” can easily have led to the sole substantive “focus” used to denote the emphasised element in cleft-constructions. According to Chomsky, the linguistic meta-term can be directly derived from this routine use: “Without checking sources, I am pretty sure it is a standard term in traditional grammar - pre-structuralist, pre-generative.”¹⁰ Yet, as we are about to see, I have found no trace of this use before Chomsky, neither in Harris nor in Bloomfield. Moreover, in an article by Gussenhoven dating back to 1983, dealing with the notion in various schools of theoretical linguistics, Chomsky’s 1969 article “Deep structure, surface structure and semantic interpretation” is the earliest mentioned on the topic. Let us therefore examine the case further.

Transposition theory, transformationalists and the mathematical paradigm

After examining the way in which the term “focus” seems to have journeyed from one linguistic theory to another, I am inclined to believe that the word ‘focus’ was introduced in American linguistics through Jespersen’s “transposition theory”¹¹, which he devised when considering *it*-cleft constructions in 1927 but actually only coined as such ten years later, when choosing to give it up in favour of another analysis which we shall examine further on. This method consists in demonstrating that such constructions may result from an underlying

¹⁰ In an email in which I asked him if he was one of the first linguists to have used the term ‘focus’ (in 1969) in linguistics (see Gussenhoven 1983, 380): “The concept of focus has been discussed in the literature as FOCUS: Chomsky 1969, (‘Deep structure, surface structure and semantic interpretation’).” (08/04/2004)

¹¹ A concept he seems to have borrowed from his contemporary and fellow Danish linguist Sandfeld, who devised similar transpositions when studying how subordinate relative clauses formed in French (see Jespersen 1937, 83-89 and Sandfeld 1936, 119-120).

subject-predicate clause. Here, we are logically led to argue that his theory was probably a great source of inspiration for future distributionalists and transformationalists alike, as it bore strong resemblance to their own parsing and derivational techniques. As Lambrecht aptly put it:

Anticipating the methods of Transformational Grammar, Jespersen explains the meaning of a sentence containing *it is* by relating to another sentence with the same meaning but which does not contain this sequence. For example, he explains the meaning of the sentence “It is champagne I like best” by relating to the sentence “Champagne is what I like best”, in which the noun champagne is substituted for the pronoun *it*. (2001, 464 quoting Jespersen 1927, 89).

Along with his transposition theory, Jespersen coined new expressions, namely “focus” and “cleft constructions”, to refer to the specific parenthetical clauses depicted above and the highlighted element that results from such a process ([1937] 1969, 72-79). In this respect, it would not be much of a surprise if it were shown that transformationalists had later also borrowed Jespersen’s terminology while investigating the specifics of *it*-cleft constructions. All the more so as the latter correlated these expressions to another widespread neologism, “extraposition”, in order to pinpoint an alternative case of syntactic reordering for emphatic purposes and, again, insofar as he used a similar primitive version of syntagmatic parsing and label bracketing¹².

If we turn to Jespersen’s direct American contemporaries, we find no trace of the word “focus” among distributionalist linguists whose main figurehead is Bloomfield. Perhaps because the latter had earlier stated in his own writings that he favoured a more classic, literary or psychological terminology,¹³ with the phrase “emotionally dominant element” referring to the foregrounded element in the case of inversions, extra-positions or what he terms “introductory sentences”:

¹² He thus “symbolizes” to use his own terms, the sentence “It is the wife that decides” in the following formula:

S* V P 2* (S₂^c V). ([1937] 1969, 72).

¹³ Although in a somehow odd refutation of his own earlier stance, he later claimed that “we are casting off our dependence on psychology” (Bloomfield 1922, quoted in Hockett 1970, 92)

While the sentence has its foundation in the discursive analysis, other forces also play a part in determining its form. Most important of these are perhaps the emotional relations of the elements [...] A method in English, for instance, is to place the emotionally dominant element in some way out of its usual position, preferably first or last. Thus *He came last* is turned into *Last he came*. This inversion can be effected also by making the dominant element predicate of an introductory sentence: *It was he who came last*, *It was last that he came*, *It was me they beat*. The introductory words are here entirely abstract and are spoken with very low stress, so that phonetically the dominant element practically comes first. (1914, 114-115).

We know however from Falk's in-depth study on the topic that while there are indeed "few references [to Jespersen] in American linguistic writings of the post Bloomfieldian American structuralist period" (1992, 480-481):

During much of his professional life, the Danish linguist Otto Jespersen (1860-1943) was well known and well received in the United States. His works were widely cited by American scholars, he lectured in the United States in 1904 and again in 1909-10, and he was among the first European scholars to be elected an honorary member of the Linguistic Society of America. (1992, 465)

According to Falk, Bloomfield had read a great deal of Jespersen's plethoric writings, mentioning him in his own works all throughout his career: "In Bloomfield's *Language* Jespersen is the chief single European source for references on synchronic and descriptive linguistics." (1992, 479). As mentioned above, distributionalists base their work on the parsing of sentences into various kernel clauses, i.e. simple clauses that then coalesce to form more complex sentences on a syntagmatic level. In this respect, cleft sentences or "introductory sentences" must have been of particular interest to them. All the more so as one of their main concerns was how the more complex syntax sprang from simpler structures. So, while examining bi-clausal morphosyntax and cleft constructions, they probably grew accustomed to Jespersen's syntactic analyses without however adopting the more technical terminology he had introduced when studying cleft-sentences.

Their immediate intellectual successors, transformationalists, furthered this trend by converting the syntagmatic parsing, emblematic of American structuralism, into some kind of paradigmatic genealogy of the sentence based on well-known arborescent structures. In the following, I will only examine Chomsky's works, in particular his "Standard Theory", for it is where I have first found the mention of the word "focus". According to this model, the sentence is split into various constituent parts, hierarchically organised in embedded structures that take the shape of branching diagrams, or that of labelled bracketing, with subscripts signalling each constituent's category - noun phrase NP, verb phrase VP, etc. (see Ruwet 1967). In other words, generativists devised a series of rewriting rules "that in some explicit and well-defined way assigns structural descriptions to sentences" (Chomsky 1965, 8). This enabled them to connect a deep structure containing the gist of the logical "semantic component" to a surface structure "that determines its phonetic interpretation" via various grammatical transformations (Chomsky 1965, 16).

Those arborescent constructions point to the fact that all surface syntactic structures originate from deeper ones which can be represented as having incurred various transformations according to recursive rules, leading to various truth-conditionally equivalent surface structures, the infinite thus stemming from the finite:

Let us assume further that the grammar in some manner specifies an infinite class of surface structures, each of which is mapped onto a phonetic representation by a system of phonological rules. I assume further that grammar contains a system of grammatical transformations, each a mapping of phrase-markers onto phrase-markers. (Chomsky 1969, 63).

These considerations are based on the claim that syntactic analysis is necessary in order to account for globally ambiguous sentences where a similar pronunciation or phonetic realization gives way to two or more possible semantic interpretations, as in: *It's too hot to eat* (Smith 1999, 33). Thanks to accurate syntactic parsing into meaningful segments, the deep structure of the sentence is gradually attained and will eventually correspond to the underlying logical form with the proper semantic interpretation. However the surface structure will display a phonetic form, i.e. a level of representation distinct from its syntactic counterpart (that might well have stemmed from a different deep structure, in the case of globally ambiguous sentences

for instance [see Chomsky 1965, 16]). For this reason, language can produce nonsensical sentences that are still grammatically correct, I here refer you to the “classic, clichéd Chomsky sentence” (Polcar 1997): *Colorless green ideas sleep furiously* (Chomsky 1956, 133)¹⁴, because of underlying logical links that generate and govern more intricate ensembles on the surface. Here for instance, the nonsensical sentence on the surface can be grammatically accounted for in terms of the following logical form: S = NP VP, with the NP containing [[Adj. + [Adj.P. +N’]_{N’}]_{NP} and the VP containing [V’ + Adv.P]_{VP}. Again, there is no denying that this derivational process is not entirely new, as is underscored by Lees’ thought-provoking comments on Chomsky’s *Syntactic Structures* (1957) with respect to Jespersen:

[...] in a sense, transformational analysis is essentially a formalization of a long-accepted, traditional approach to grammatical relations. To cite only a single example of classical grammatical thought which is basically a kind of transformation theory: ‘It is different when we come to such a combination as *an early riser*, which it is quite impossible to turn into *a riser who is early*. Here the adjunct is a shifted subjunct of the verb contained in the substantive *riser*: *he rises* (vb) *early* (adv) = *he is an early* (adj) *riser* (sb)’ [Otto Jespersen, *A Modern English Grammar* 2.283 § 12.12]. Here Jespersen correctly perceives that the difference in the way that we understand, on the one hand, *he is an early riser*, and, on the other, *he is an early bird* can be accounted for by *he is an X* and *early bird* (which in turn is a transform of *the bird is early*). (1957, 388).

If many writers have underlined the fact that Chomsky and fellow generativists had taken inspiration from Jespersen’s transposition theory, their approach nonetheless differs in that its main goal is to access infinitely varying surface structures via an excessively formalised metalanguage (Chomsky 1956, 113). Such a metalanguage shares many features with symbolic logic and mathematical algorithms, and may be fruitful when it comes to computational models and artificial language.

Now it is only in Chomsky’s writings that I have found the meta-term “focus” used extensively, especially in his seminal article

¹⁴ Interestingly enough, Chomsky does not fail to notice here that the intonation contour is that of a normal sentence in English, whereas, with a different syntax, each word would have been pronounced separately (1955, 123), which hints at the fact that the surface syntactical processing does affect the overall intonation contour.

written in 1969 entitled “Deep structure, surface structure and semantic interpretation”. Although I am fully aware of the fact that generativism has greatly and variously progressed since that early period, this article is still worth examining because of the strong impact it later had, and the fact that its terminology has endured until today. In this article, the notion of “focus” is a meta-term referring to a portion of the sentence which is emphasized prosodically in the surface structure, and can take the shape of a subscript of the type: $[X]_F$ in the tree-diagram, X referring to the focus phrase, or just F in the deep structure.

Within this framework, I hypothesize that such a subscript displays interesting formal qualities, very much akin to mathematical functions of the input-output type, in which the focus corresponds to a variable X: $f(x) = \text{“It is } [X]_F \text{ who/that/whom P”}$ (again this is but my interpretation). The rest of the equation amounts to the “presupposition” - a notion with which that of “focus” is often paired, and which we are led to think refers to data that is taken for granted as opposed to less known, newer information, or some that is not shared by speaker and addressee (although this is not made explicit in the article). In this respect, the focus will serve to refer to the “new” entity in the deep structure. Chomsky gives the following example: “(a) is it JOHN who writes poetry?” (Chomsky 1969, 89) whereby the deep structure and semantic representation “must indicate that *John* is the FOCUS of the sentence and that the sentence expresses the PRESUPPOSITION that someone writes poetry.” (1969, 89)

Nevertheless, with this basic postulate that distinguishes between surface form and content, as if the former embodied a contingent manifestation of the latter, attained via a series of upward transformations that do not affect meaning dramatically, Chomsky acknowledges that the pre-identification and semantic representation of the focused variable poses serious difficulties. This may be because it is precisely what embodies an upward movement from deep structure to the surface in terms of mental representations, which is in reality deduced downwards from idealised surface sentence fragments:

Only under the idealization set forth in the preceding paragraph is performance a direct reflection of competence [...] A grammar of the language purports to be a description of

the ideal speaker-hearer's intrinsic competence. (Chomsky 1965, 4)

And, as it happens, some of the information conveyed does not exist prior to its actual verbalisation, notably the FP (focus phrase) which can only be known by considering the surface representation and therefore proves hard to identify without a specific context of utterance; a context which is often artificially recreated in order to enable a possible representation of the FP in the deep structure's semantic interpretation and representation:

Choice of focus determines the relation of the utterance to responses, to utterances to which it is a possible response, and to other sentences in the discourse. The notions 'focus', 'presupposition', and 'shared presupposition' (even in cases where the presupposition may not be expressible by a grammatical sentence) must be determinable from the semantic interpretation of sentences, if we are to explain how discourse is constructed (Chomsky 1969, 105)

Here are a few of the difficulties exposed by Chomsky himself regarding FP identification. One of them is that, formally, the variable X in cleft sentences may sometimes be impossible to represent independently from the rest of the surface structure, as in: *It was an ex-convict with a red SHIRT that he was warned to look out for* (Chomsky 1969, 91), where there is no simpler syntactical way of expressing the presupposition: **It was X that he was warned to look out for an ex-convict with a red shirt*. In this case, the $f(x)$ equation representation fails to account for the focusing process at stake, in spite of a superficial similarity with cleft-sentences.

Another problem may arise when the FP has been identified as the "phrase containing the intonation center" in the PR (phonetic representation) (1969, 205), and the presupposition is obtained by considering what is left once the variable X has been removed, for in this case, the deep structure may end up containing more than one clause (1969, 91). For instance, the underlying structure of *John writes poetry in his STUDY* would be: *[the place where John writes poetry]_P is [in his study]_E*, with an embedded structure acting as the presupposition and requiring further analysis "to reach the deep structure" (1969, 92). Indeed, if the standard theory is to be

preserved, the deep structure needs to contain an unmarked logical form represented by a minimal predication of the type [subject [predicate]] (Stalmaszczyk 1998, 103), “the focus being the predicate of the dominant proposition of the deep structure” (Chomsky 1969, 90). To put it simply, in such instances there is no end to the generative process.

There are also cases in which there is just a focus and no presupposition, i.e. shared information, because the whole of the surface clause contradicts what was thought to be the shared presupposition as in:

(John isn't (certain (to WIN)))

(56) c No, the election will never take PLACE

Here “certain to win, corresponds to no element of deep structure if, [...] the deep structure is something like:

(57) [_s John win]_s is certain (Chomsky 1969, 94-95)

Moreover, with a prosodically grounded focus, the variable may end up shifting in scope. Indeed, the intonation center being located on one distinct syllable, it may affect a sole nominal entity or a whole nominal syntagm (from “an ex-convict with a red SHIRT” to “SHIRT” alone [see Chomsky 1969, 93]), with “larger and larger phrases containing the intonation center [...] considered as a possible focus” (Chomsky 1969, 99). In which case, again, it is difficult to strictly sever the focus from the presupposed entity as the standard theory would require.

Finally, again in the case of a prosodically grounded focus (what Chomsky postulates 1969, 89), it proves hard to account for the differences in meaning in the deep structure, between marked structures (i) and (ii) below:

(i) did John give the book to BILL

(ii) did John give Bill the BOOK¹⁵

In both cases, although the deep structure remains the same (*John gave Bill the book*), “they differ in the range of possible focus and

¹⁵ “Under normal intonation the capitalized word receives main stress and serves as the point of maximal inflection of the pitch contour” (Chomsky 1969, 89).

presupposition in the way predicted by the position of intonation center” (Chomsky 1969, 96).

The only way to preserve the standard theory and the generative principles established is to reduce the elements in the deep structure to “minimal meaning-bearing items” (1969, 102) that only specify the gross grammatical relations established, while subtle shifts in meaning remain to be decided superficially i.e. by referring to the surface structure, in accordance with the following schema where F = focus and P = presupposition:

There is one obvious way to preserve the standard theory in the face of considerations of the sort just discussed, namely, to set the rule (74) as the first rule of grammar, where F and P are arbitrary structures and S' functions as the initial symbol of the categorial component of the base:

(74) $S \rightarrow S' F P$ (Chomsky 1969, 101)

In this paper that aims to link form and meaning according to the standard theory, Chomsky gives a first transformationalist account of focus marking. It seems to be one of the first papers in which the meta-term “focus” has been mentioned extensively since Jespersen’s photographic simile. In the article the identification of the focus is prosodically grounded, i.e. it depends on the phonetic representation of the sentence or PF but proves very difficult to be represented semantically in the deep structure deprived of all PF. My aim here is not to debate the adequacy of the generative approach to language analysis and focus-marking¹⁶, it is rather to show that this seminal article yields considerable insights into why the term “focus” was introduced in the field of linguistics in the first place, even though it seriously challenged the standard theory.¹⁷

First of all, the technical connotation of the term, devoid of all “psychological” or literary dimension (still present in Bloomfield, as aforementioned), is very much in keeping with the mathematical and

¹⁶ On the limits of the recursive rules see Hagège (1976, 45).

¹⁷ Which we know Chomsky was to later give up in favour of a more accurate model (see Radford 1988).

While we know that later on, Chomsky gave up the standard theory and the idea that deep-structure contained the core semantics of the surface structure and just imagined various representation levels such as LF (logical form) and PF (phonetic form).

logical paradigms Chomsky seems to apply to his mental model; which is evidence enough of the way different fields of knowledge often tacitly interact, thus fostering fertile epistemological exchanges. In this respect, such a choice echoes that of Genette when he opted for “focalization” instead of “point of view” due to the term’s abstract qualities which, as explained before, date back to Kepler’s original geometrical use of the term. Moreover, the fact that the transformationalists’ main interest lies in generating complex structures via simpler ones, an approach that echoes Jespersen’s transposition theory, means that the latter’s vocabulary might have influenced later linguists in their will to adopt a more rigorous metalanguage (as we have seen, Bloomfield and his disciples wished to depart from all psychological influence and were therefore reluctant when it came to using a terminology perceived to be too literary). This is probably why the notion of focus was cut off from the original literary simile “to bring into focus,” and was used alone, no longer referring to the foregrounding process at stake but to its sole result. Yet, because the generative approach to language aims at disclosing the logical semantic links underlying truth, conditionally synonymous sentences via syntactical analysis, it may find itself at a loss to account for phenomena based on iconic pitch variations exclusively, which may at times superficially signal a discrepancy between what speaker and addressee take for granted datawise. Paradoxically, it can only do so via grammatical transformations which turn a simple clause into a more complex cleft structure that expresses syntactically what prosodical prominence achieves in the surface structure, and where the focused element, although preserved, proves hard to pre-identify. Besides, adopting a strict structuralist stance has led to the isolation of the notion “focus” from its original visual simile and its coupling with the afferent notion of presupposition, but it has failed to give a fixed definition of the term because of the great contingency of the phenomena in terms of utterer’s performance, closely linked to the context.

Of course this does not run counter to Chomsky’s revolutionary intuition according to which “Universal Grammar may be regarded as a characterization of the genetically determined language faculty” (1985, 3), which seems to theoretically follow from the arbitrary nature of signs, but merely sheds light on the fact that certain semantic surface aspects of the sentence may only be defined locally, within a specific context of utterance, and perhaps also via iconic

means, as we are about to see. To overlook this may lead to a possible confusion in terms of focus and sentence analysis.

Some definitions of “focus” and its various counterparts, a possible source of confusion

The fact that the notion of “focus” is often paired with that of “presupposition” as mentioned earlier, shows that meta-terms of various origins may combine, firstly because presupposition is not a specific term introduced in the literature by Jespersen, and, secondly because it belongs to a different meta-linguistic level of analysis altogether, “focus” stemming from the realm of heightened perception (heat, accurate vision, higher pitch accent) and is thus originally identified as the prosodically prominent part of the sentence, whereas “presupposition” serves to designate that part of the sentence’s semantic content that is knowledge shared by both speaker and addressee. This lack of coherence points to the limitations of establishing a strict partition between deep structure and surface structure, or in severing prosody and surface syntax from deeper logical meaning and articulation, for even at the level of the terminological choices that are made, those stringent rules are not being observed. For the same reasons, “focus” is often associated with synonymous or antonymous expressions that greatly vary from one school of thought to the other, expressions which may or may not cross over, belonging as they do to various levels of analysis, and that sometimes even refer to distinct phenomena according to the stance adopted. This is made obvious in the non-exhaustive list of possible synonyms and antonyms for the word “focus” drawn up by Gussenhoven (1983, 380):

The concept of focus has been discussed [...] as FOCUS (Chomsky, 1969 ; Jackendoff, 1972; Quirk *et al.*, 1972; Dik, 1978; Ladd, 1980), COMMENT (Bloomfield, 1933; Kraak, 1970; Schmerling, 1976), RHEME (Prague School), NEW (Information) (Halliday, 1967b; Chafe 1970, 1976), while their counterparts are called, respectively, PRESUPPOSITION (Chomsky, 1969; Jackendoff, 1972; Quirk *et al.*, 1972) or DEACCENTING (Jackendoff, 1972; Ladd, 1980), TOPIC, THEME and GIVEN (Halliday, 1967b) or OLD (INFORMATION) (Chafe 1970, 1976).

Interestingly enough, the oldest terminology referred to here, correlates focus to “rheme” as opposed to “theme,” which we know

were terms coined by the early twentieth-century Prague School whose main figurehead was Mathesius¹⁸ and whose approach was both structural and functional (Paveau and Sarfati 2003, 113). It aimed at disclosing the intra-phrastic organisation of the information conveyed within the context of the sentence structure, a “functional sentence perspective” to use the expression later coined by Firbas (1993, 4):

A closer examination of sentences from the viewpoint of assertiveness shows an overwhelming majority of all sentences to contain two basic elements: a statement and an element about which the statement is made. The element about which something is stated may be said to be the basis of the utterance or the theme, and what is stated about the basis is the nucleus of the utterance or the rheme. (Mathesius [1929] 1975, 81)

Here the propositional content of the sentence prevails, with an examination of the relationship that exists between semantic and grammatical structures. Yet, the same propositional content is still considered independently of any context outside of the sentence, thus clearly echoing the older logico-semantic bipartition between subject and predicate (Prévost 1998, 16). This dichotomy is reminiscent of others, later developed, such as that of old/new information (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 1369), given/new (see Prince 1981 and Gundel 2003) and topic/focus or topic/comment (see Danes 1974). All of which is mainly concerned with the way data is formally prioritised within the sentence according to the degree of “relevance”¹⁹ it holds for the speaker with respect to the addressee (a phenomenon also sometimes referred to as “information packaging” [Chafe 1976]). In this list, it is worth underscoring a peculiar

¹⁸ Although those notions “can be traced back at least to the second half of the 19th century, when the German linguists von der Gabelentz (1868) and Paul (1880) used the terms psychological subject and predicate” (Gundel & Fretheim 1993, 175).

¹⁹ To use the valuable pragmatic notion devised by Grice and later developed by Sperber & Wilson: “Intuitively, relevance is not just an all-or-none matter but a matter of degree. There is no shortage of potential inputs which might have at least some relevance for us, but we cannot attend to them all. Relevance theory claims that what makes an input worth picking out from the mass of competing stimuli is not just that it is relevant, but that it is more relevant than any alternative input available to us at that time. Intuitively, other things being equal, the more worthwhile conclusions achieved by processing an input, the more relevant it will be. In relevance-theoretic terms, other things being equal, the greater the positive cognitive effects achieved by processing an input, the greater its relevance will be.” (2002, 252)

combination: the “topic/focus” pair whereby the notion of “topic”, often associated with “aboutness”²⁰ evokes the discursive domain more than sentence structure proper, as the ordinary meaning of the word clearly suggests - a thematic starting point or axis around which dialogue can unravel - paired with that of “focus”, hinting at a prosodically or syntactically prominent sentence fragment that aims to specify something about the topic (Trask 1999, 316). This “lack of uniformity” in the terminology is often underscored by linguists (Gundel and Fretheim 1993, 176) and, again, it may be confusing. As to the accenting/deaccenting process depicted by Ladd (1980), it does not refer directly to information status as such but to the perceptual strategies adopted for attentional purposes, namely phonological prominence, and to the subsequent repercussion undergone by the rest of the sentence as a result (post-focal deaccenting), with words normally stressed here being unstressed.

When considering intra-phrastic layout, Huddleston and Pullum have detected “general tendencies” that can help us understand why all these terms came to be paired:

Some general tendencies regarding information structure:

- i. Heavy constituents tend to occur at or towards the end of the clause.
- ii. The focus typically appears at or towards the end of the clause.
- iii. Subjects are the dependents that are the most likely to be addressee-old.
- iv. Information that is familiar tends to be placed before that which is new.
- v. Information-packaging constructions tend to be restricted with respect to the range of contexts in which they can felicitously occur. (2002, 1372)

As explicitly pointed out, we are dealing here with “general tendencies”. And it is true that, often, what comes first cognitively, may become the syntactic basis for comment that comes last, hinting at a structure-concept kind of iconicity in which morpho-syntactic features reverberate the semantics of the sentence. In this respect, in a simple canonical sentence, typically neutral or “unmarked” (to use Trubetzkoy’s famous concept [see Gundel 1986]), subject or

²⁰ See Chafe 1976 and Trask 1999, 316: “The topic of a sentence is that part of which the whole sentence is about.”

argument comes first as referring to the given, presupposed, or topical data under discussion, while predicate comes last as some sort of comment, new information, rheme, new element supplementing the issue at stake. Coupled with the fact that “normal sentence stress” generally occurs at the end of the utterance, we are naturally led to associate “focus” with “new information” and prosodical prominence, as opposed to what is given and presupposed, as Chomsky posited above and as Quirk *et al.* explain:

It seems natural to place the new information after providing a context of given information so we can regard focus (identified prosodically) as most neutrally and normally placed at the end of the information unit since the new information often needs to be stated more fully than the given one. (1985, 1306)

This may also be due to some kind of concept-structure iconicity, the end being what is most expected, it bears some kind of “resolutory effect” well-known in music:

In reading aloud, the resolutory effect of the final clause is often pointed by intonation [...] rising tones have implications of non-finality, the effect of this pattern is to build up a continuing sense of anticipation, which is at last resolved by the finality of the falling tone. (Quirk 1985, 1306)

Yet, those “general tendencies” extracted from neutral configurations i.e. not marked for focus or “unmarked” (Gussenhoven 1983, 387), have gradually become tendencies that have been perhaps too swiftly generalised for terminological purposes, which has led to a series of erroneous statements that may be listed and contradicted as follows:

- Focus generally occurs last in the sentence. Obviously, it is not always the case, as seen above with cleft-constructions and often with constructions that are marked for focus and are based on syntactic reordering or accent placed at the beginning of the sentence (see Jespersen’s *PETER said it* “in which the subject is a focus constituent and in which the clause final pronoun *it* is a topic expression” [Lambrecht 1994, 50]).
- Focus is always marked prosodically. Yet, “for all we know, a given [– focus] – [+ focus] structure may well require the nucleus to fall OUTSIDE the material marked [+ focus]” ([Gussenhoven 1983, 380] see also Ladd 1983).

- Focus refers to semantic material that is new (not always the case as in “contrastive stress” or cases where “theme” and “focus” are superimposed for attentional purposes, see Schaefer 2001, 139).

- Focus occurs along older, non focused elements (not always the case as in “news sentences”, see Schmerling 1976: “JOHNson died [news sentence]” quoted in Gussenhoven 1983, 380).

Prévost warns us against a possible confusion between “most frequent occurrences” and “theoretical principle” (1998, 20-21). For this reason, she aptly entitled her paper dealing with the afferent notion of *thématisation* in French, which is sometimes associated with that of *focalisation*: “Theme: a terminologically and conceptually unclear notion” (1998, 13). Thus, when extracting meta-terms via specific yet frequent occurrences, one is led to excessive extrapolations.

What strikes us most here are the numerous and variegated terms that seem to proliferate to adapt to each and everyone’s definition for theoretical purposes, almost as if each school of thought, each linguist even, wished to depart from his/her fellow researcher and was naturally led to coin new terms or re-define old ones, according to their own perspective and slightly differing standpoints (see Dubois, Mathee and Guespin 1999, VII). Prince explains the lack of clarity that typifies the “given/new” dyad in sentence analysis in the following terms:

Of all the linguists who have used these terms or their synonyms, those that are perhaps the most strongly associated with the notion are Chafe, Clark and Haviland, Halliday, and Kuno. It is rather surprising, then, that, when their discussions on the subject are closely examined and compared, it becomes evident that no two of them mean quite the same thing, and that, in some cases, the differences are quite large. (1981, 225)

Those strict dichotomies betray a common structuralist tendency to distinguish between syntax, semantics and prosody which tightly co-occur and are so securely interwoven that as soon as one tries to unravel them, they no longer make sense. To subject sentence fragments to excessive dissection, as if they were made of discrete entities, without considering their holistic, organic and embodied nature may prove helpful only to a certain extent, beyond which a

strict examination of each dimension taken in isolation is no longer tenable (see Nølke 2006, 59). In other words, there is a limit to linguistic modularity i.e. to the degree according to which each linguistic component may be extracted and recombined, outside of any context. As Schmerling deftly puts it:

The more a citation is divorced from context, the more it is divorced from semantics: the person uttering the citation is not producing a real, natural-language sentence with both a phonetic and a semantic representation, he is producing a string of phones. [...] Thus if normal stress means that assigned to a contextless citation, then it must mean the stress assigned to a sentence with no semantic representation [...] when semantics is excluded from grammar. (Schmerling 1974, 71)

Focus, *markedness* and perceptual strategies

A useful overarching concept when it comes to understanding focus and terminological pairings is that of “markedness” as opposed to “unmarkedness” as devised by Trubetzkoy and Jakobson in the field of phonology (1958). In an attempt to identify the underlying structures that govern the distribution of the phonemes of a given language, Trubetzkoy listed a series of binary distinctive features such as sonority vs. non-sonority, nasality vs. non-nasality, compact vs. diffuse, grave vs. acute, etc. which led him to establish a system of significant asymmetrical oppositive pairs that help in the identification and localization of phonemes with respect to one another in terms of acoustics and articulation (Jakobson and Waugh [1979] 2002, 134-135). These distinctive features can be present and “marked”, or absent and therefore “unmarked”. Although the phenomenon was first observed and depicted by Trubetzkoy in the sole field of phonology, Jakobson later developed it in other conceptual domains:

It seems to me that it has a significance not only for linguistics but also for ethnology and the history of culture, and that such historico-cultural correlations as life~death, liberty~no liberty, sin~virtue [...] are always confined to relations *a*~non-*a*, and that it is important to find out for any epoch, group, nation, etc., what the marked element is. (Jakobson quoted in Waugh 1982, 300)

In order to fully appreciate the scope of the discovery, it is worth underscoring, as Waugh does, that those correlated oppositive pairs form a hierarchical and dynamic dialectic (1982, 315). They are not fixed, fossilized, pre-existing antagonistic pairs, being rather an

indication that cognitive processes often rely on shifting asymmetrical polarities. This bears considerable significance insofar as it reveals some sort of general rationale behind all perceptual, cognitive and conceptual processes, seemingly governed by the same marked/unmarked asymmetrical pattern, with pairs made up of one element which stands out because of its remarkable status, as opposed to a less prominent counterpart. This is all the more significant as our own perceptual system instinctively tends to amplify those discrepancies in order to enhance detection – quite obviously for survival purposes, which would seem to suggest that duality is essential to both perceptual and cognitive processes at least to a certain degree (see Lakoff and Johnson 1999, 198).

To come back to linguistics proper, structures that are marked for focus, whether syntactically or prosodically, have attracted linguists' attention due to their relative anomalous configuration, compared with the more canonical morpho-syntax of a sentence or the "normal" prosodic contour of an utterance²¹. Again, in an unmarked context [-focus], focus, accent, new information and predicate will tend to coincide whereas in constructions marked for focus, [+focus], those particulars, which manifest autonomously at each level of grammatical representation (syntax, semantics, etc.), may mismatch and/or take precedence over one another as they depart from the norm in miscellaneous ways for expressive purposes. Depending on the various strategies adopted, they will logically give way to an infinite range of idiosyncratic forms. Still, in each occurrence, something is bound to stand out and be felt with a comparatively greater acuity. The intrinsic imbalance mentioned above may account for a comparable disequilibrium in the terminology, with pairs where one notion directly derives from the other or predominates, such as in: "focus/focus-frame" (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 1369)²², "accenting/deaccenting" (Ladd 1980) or "focusing/defocusing"

²¹ Even though the concept of normal stress is a highly controversial issue: "it seems to have been generally assumed that every sentence has a 'normal' pronunciation, and that any special prosodic properties can be described in terms of deviations from this norm." (Schmerling 1974, 69)

²² "The focus of a clause (or portion of a clause) is the constituent bearing the strongest, or 'nuclear', stress, as indicated by the small capitals notation: 'Mary bought RICE yesterday.' Here "rice" is the focus. The residue we refer to as the focus-frame." (Huddleston & Pullum 2002, 1369)

(Erdmann 1990, 3)²³. Here the predominant phenomenon entails the deflation of the focus “residue”.

At this point of the demonstration, it is worth mentioning another notion, crucial to our study, that of “salience”, which in a way transcends the asymmetrical polarity just examined and is also afferent to that of focus. Generally speaking, what is salient comes to the fore, protrudes, sticks out into sharp *relief* and acts as a cohesive magnet of sorts, more worthy of attention, or at least more likely to typify the overall ensembles it dominates. In cognitive linguistics, it can be defined as follows:

The notion of salience may [...] denote both a temporary activation state of mental concepts (*cognitive salience*) and an inherent and consequently more or less permanent property of entities in the real world (*ontological salience*) [...] ontologically salient entities are more likely to evoke corresponding cognitively salient concepts than ontologically nonsalient ones. For example, a dog has a better attention-attracting potential than the field over which it is running. (Schmid 2007, 120)

According to Schmid, once mental concepts have been activated, they require less cognitive effort, consequently “a high degree of cognitive salience correlates with ease of activation and little or no processing cost” (2007, 219). Cognitive salience seems to bear a lot in common with the notion of topic, examined earlier within a discursive setting, acting as a federative structure, facilitating intersubjective exchanges as well as semantic and conceptual priming. Nonetheless, in its most common acceptation as in *ontological salience*, it amounts to the heightened perception of a particular entity endowed with features which make it more distinctively noticeable because it is louder, bigger, stronger, etc.²⁴ and therefore displays sharper contours, whether visually, auditorily or, more generally, in terms of perceptual magnitude. In this respect, it is to be paralleled with that of *emphasis*, the lexical forerunner of the metalinguistic notion of “focus”, an expression later superseded, perhaps due to its deriving too straightforwardly from stylistics and

²³ “[...] the attribute of removing subjects from the centre of the interest which they usually have when they occupy the position before the finite verb.” (1990, 3)

²⁴ Insofar as it matches something which is relevant in our *Umwelt*. Indeed, the fact that we only ever notice what is actually meaningful to us clearly impacts our perceptual system and its development in return.

rhetoric²⁵, where it came to designate some form of pompous exaggeration verging on the preposterous (see Levesque and Pédeflous 2010, 7-17, and Macé 2010, 21-35). In linguistics, the term is far more neutral. It logically takes us back to phonetics, intonation contour and prosodic prominence, one of the most important focusing devices in English. In fact, according to Lambrecht:

[...] the only device which occurs by itself, without being complemented by another coding system (as e.g. in English) [...] is no doubt a consequence of the iconic relationship between pitch prominence and the degree of communicative importance assigned to the focal portion of a proposition. (1994, 225)

Also, if we consider the etymology of “emphasis” and “salience”, we realize how closely connected they are, in that they both refer to very similar processes, emphasis stemming “from *emphainein* ‘to present, exhibit, display, let (a thing) be seen; be reflected (in a mirror), become visible’ ”²⁶ which bears strong resemblance with the idea of something “coming to the fore” denoted by “salience”, while “to be reflected in a mirror” reminds us of the reflection of light rays and of the self-reflexive dimension that suggestively duplicates fragments of reality, hinting both at the meta-representation earlier mentioned with photographic devices, and at the redundant phenomena present in stylistics (and, to a certain extent, to the stronger modality that focus-marking induces).

Focus-marking may also be associated with *hyperthesis*, (from the Greek, *ὑπέρθεις*, “exceedence”) hinting at the idea that something may be “over-asserted” via specific constructions (see the case of emphatic “do” over-asserting the predicative relation in Joly and O’Kelly 1990, 36) or prosodic means (see Wales [1990] 2011, 134). It is true that prosodic prominence is systematically based on speech productions that are proven to contain syllables which are acoustically higher pitched, longer in duration and display higher frequency²⁷, all of which can never be considered in isolation and

²⁵ Up until recently, “emphasis” was still favored by many French linguists, to quote but a few: Groussier (1995, 223), Adamczewski & Delmas ([1982] 1998), Joly & O’Kelly (1990, 36). Besides, others still use *mise en relief* which is very close to what “salience” denotes (see Larreya & Rivière 1991, 242).

²⁶ <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=emphasis>

²⁷ “In the majority of languages described in this volume, focalisation and/or emphasis is said to be best manifested by an extra-pitch prominence, giving rise to

collaboratively produce an “emphatic speech style” (see Dujardin-Herment 2006, 309). When artificially manipulating synthetic speech to test these criteria separately and gauge their efficiency as focusing markers, Dujardin-Herment did not fail to notice the critical role played by semantics, with words that are marked semantically (“freezing”, “absolutely” [2006, 316-317]) and need not be emphasized prosodically to be more noticeable, while more neutral ones will gain in emphasis as soon as they receive some prosodic prominence, even the slightest, insofar as they are not normally accented (2006, 317). In the same vein, Nølke studies the case of “paradigmatic adverbs” in French, a sub-group of “lexical focalizers” (2006, 72), such as *même*, *aussi*, *seulement*, etc. Those markers have also been investigated in the literature as “focus particles” (see König, [1991] 2005) or “focus modifiers” in English linguistics (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 586-587). What is telling here is the fact that the heightened perception of one element stems from its extraction and targeting thanks to another lexeme located on the same syntagmatic axis acting as a “focalizer” (a term already encountered in narratology)²⁸. Each time, what is made more conspicuous is necessarily more contrasted in its context of occurrence, either paradigmatically or syntagmatically (Nølke 1994, 129), either via immediate dilation or extraction and triggering from afar.

Other fruitful concepts are those developed in the psychological field of *Gestalttheorie* (“a general theory of form and organization deemed to lay a unified groundwork for several domains of scientific endeavor” [Rosenthal and Vizetti 1999, 147]) which has exerted a strong influence on cognitive linguistics (see Köhler [1929] 2000 and Langacker 2002, 131). It is of uttermost relevance when discussing focus analysis, notably when considering the emergence of forms in terms of figure and ground, a configuration prone to alterations according to changing perspectives:

The fact that we can do figure-ground reversals in perception – as in the case of Necker cubes – indicates that figure-ground organization is a separable dimension of cognition. In other words, the other aspects of a scene can be held constant while figure-ground

larger F0 movements often accompanied by extra intensity and duration.” (Hirst & Di Cristo 1998, 32 quoted in Dujardin-Herment 2010, 309)

²⁸ The focus of the focalizer may not always receive the main accent in the sentence, hence the necessity to refine the terminology, with “scopal focus” and “information focus” (Huddleston & Pullum 2002, 589).

organization is changed. Perception requires a figure-ground choice. We do not perceive scenes that are neutral between figure and ground. The phenomenon of duality reminds us that the same is true of concepts. Metaphorical duals may be figure-ground reversals of one another, but some choice of figure and ground is necessary for human concepts. (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, 198)

In this respect, the relation of the local to the global needs to be addressed, very much in keeping with what is suggested by the Latin etymology of the term *saliens*: “the quality of leaping”²⁹. As a matter of fact, when examining the concept, Lakoff and Johnson give the example of what is more dynamic as opposed to a “stationary background” (1999, 197). This is a thought-provoking remark lending support to the claim that focus can be construed as a “variable” inserted into a fixed “focus-frame” (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 1369), and which recalls the “trajector/landmark” dyad devised by Langacker to typify active and passive predication (Langacker 2002, 223).

All the notions we have considered refer to the fundamental discriminative process at stake in the “marked/unmarked” dyad, necessary for any meaningful form to emerge at various levels, and which is therefore also operative in any canonical structure starting with the founding universal alternation between consonantal and vocalic forms for instance³⁰, stressed syllables within the word, the extra salience of subject and predicate at the level of semantics and morpho-syntax as “focus participants” (Langacker 1991, 301), not to mention, obviously, the prosodic prominence of sentence accents in “well-formed surface structures”³¹, with the four main intonation

²⁹ <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=saliens>
Last consulted January 27, 2016.

³⁰ “Vowels function in languages as the only or at least as the most usual carriers of the syllabic nuclei, whereas the margins of syllables are occupied chiefly or solely by consonants.” (Jakobson & Waugh 2002, 87)

³¹ See Chomsky and Halle’s Nuclear Stress Rule (1968) and Bolinger who somehow qualifies the argument on how predictable accent placement may be with respect to syntax: “The NSR rule is a way of recognizing this performative intonation: the main accent goes, normally, on ‘the last stressable constituent’. The intonational reality is rather that the speaker will put the main accent as far to the right as he dares, when assertive pressure is high; and he frequently dares to put it on a syllable (almost but not quite always one containing a full vowel) farther to the right than the recognized lexical stress. This is one more reason why I insist on the

groups manifesting an alternation of more or less accented and non-accented syllables, namely pre-head, head, nucleus, and tail. For this reason, focus can be considered as “a binary variable which necessarily marks all or part of a sentence as [+focus], no sentence can be entirely [- focus]” (Gussenhoven 1983, 379)³². For this reason too, salience, focus and emphasis are detectable at various levels from the more concrete to the more abstract, from the tiniest perceptible form to larger entities, in accordance with an almost fractal-like regularity (see the notion of *superfoci* developed by Chafe 1994, 145).

But then again, as it is to be found at the core of all cognitive processes, the phenomenon is also present horizontally with strong correlations between the senses at the level of perception. What is considered as normally confined to the sole domain of audition may for instance impact other senses. Consequently, what is graver may be felt as darker, and what is higher pitched may be considered brighter: hence the expression “highlighting device” or “highlighter,” often encountered when typifying focus (Gussenhoven 1983, 378). Jakobson has made extensive study of this phenomenon and, as many psychologists had done before him, has shown that this was not a mere metaphor:

The fundamental role of the light~dark opposition in the structure of both the vocalic and consonantal patterns was first outlined by Köhler. Let us now repeat and underscore that for him, lightness and darkness as names for this phenomenon were far from being ‘mere metaphors’, but were rather designations of actual ‘intersensorial analogies’, phenomenological correspondences pointing to a ‘central physiological perceptual correlate’ [1915] (Jakobson and Waugh 2002, 194)³³

distinction between ACCENT and STRESS. Stress belongs to the lexicon. Accent belongs to the utterance.” (1972, 643-644).

³² Interestingly enough, in the same article, Gussenhoven decides that “We will here leave ‘focus’ semantically undefined, but nevertheless assume that it exists as a formal category available in speakers’ grammars. It is important to keep the concept of focus, as a linguistic prime, distinct from on the one hand, the REASON or REASONS why speakers mark part or all of their sentences as [+focus], and on the other, what such a choice implies for the PHONETIC/SYNTACTIC REALIZATIONS of those sentences.” (380)

³³ The dynamic effects generated by the contrasts between light and dark have been extensively studied in painting (see Martinet 1999).

Here a common iconic quality shared by sound, vision and various other impressions such as shape and magnitude or size is pointed out. It has been furthered exposed by Jakobson who mentions the writings of Chastaing on the symbolism of French vowels:

His main essays treat in particular the vowel /i/ and its associations with acuteness and smallness, and are accompanied by excurses on lightness, rapidity, and closeness (1958); as well as the light-dark opposition of front and back vowels [...] (2002, 190-191)

Since the article by Werner, the German psychologist, on the “unity of the senses” (1934), there has been evidence to suggest that sound perception can distort visual perceptions when they occur together and *vice versa*. More recent studies in the field of neurology back the hypothesis that luminance and digit magnitude are inherently linked because “in our cortical organization and mapping [...], the maps linking magnitude are inextricably linked” (Cohen-Kadosh *et al.* 2009, 835). In this respect, what is louder may naturally be perceived as darker, and what is higher-pitched as brighter and more acute, while what is more significant semantically or morphologically may be perceived as “dilated” (Lapaire and Rotgé [1991] 2002, 424). We also better understand why in the field of French linguistics, more inclined to establish analogies with other related domains such as narratology and cinematography, the meta-term “focus” has been used in a hybrid sense, half way between its linguistic and cinematographic acceptations, namely to typify the *zooming* effect of the “be + V-ing” form (Joly and O’Kelly 1989, 97-98). Lastly, we have also acquired the capacity to better grasp why other visual meta-terms abound when it comes to characterizing focus-marking, to name but a few: *chiaroscuro* (a pictorial technique, Jakobson and Waugh [1979] 2002, 132), highlighting device or “highlighter” (Gussenhoven 1983, 378), background/foreground (borrowed to the field of landscape painting, Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 592), and why the *Gestaltist* paradigm is so prevalent in the field.

Focus in perspective: transposition theory, Lambrecht, functional analysis and grounding cognition

At the close of this study, I shall now come back to Jespersen’s simile, in particular to the specifics of its context of occurrence, insofar as it may provide us with a better understanding of why it was to have such resonance in the later development of linguistic

terminology, but also give us a better idea of the linguist's original potent intuition.

In spite of the incredible extent of the literature concerning focus marking, it is worth signalling that I have found no one who commented upon the original photographic simile straightforwardly, even among those who have actually cited Jespersen's account on cleft-sentences where it is to be found. To my knowledge, neither Lambrecht (1994 and 2001), nor Patten (2012) who have both extensively used Jespersen's writings actually comment upon it, nor those who have quoted the passage and who only refer to the "contrastiveness" it conveys (Chafe 1976, 37, and Khalifa 2004, 224-225)³⁴. Nonetheless, it seems to me that this is no accident but, in all likelihood, due to Jespersen relinquishing his 1927 "transposition theory" – the very same I earlier argued inspired American transformationalists, irrespective of the fact that the Danish linguist himself had given it up. Indeed, in his 1927 writings, Jespersen exposed his theory, but did not name it as such until a few years later when reconsidering it ([1949] 1961, 148). A first depiction of the process can be summarized as follows: Jespersen takes the example of the following cleft construction: *It is the wife that decides* ([1937] 1969, 73), and shows that this complex sentence is made up of two distinct clauses where the pronoun "it" actually stands for the sentence final clause "that decides", having somehow migrated from an initial subject position in a virtual ungrammatical clause such as: **That decides is the wife*, towards the end of the sentence thanks to "it", acting as an extra-posed surrogate subject for the relative clause, which later specifies what the pro-form "it" stands for. According to Patten, this approach dating back to 1927 amounts to a "specificational copular construction" (2012, 9), which suggests that the real antecedent for the sentence final clause is an extra-posed "it," and not the post-copular element. In this respect, those constructions are comparable to *wh*-cleft constructions, *th*-cleft constructions and pseudo-cleft constructions.

It is not really the antecedent (or what looks like the antecedent) that is restricted by a relative clause. When we say 'it is the wife that decides' [...] what we mean is really 'the wife is the deciding

³⁴ Of course, my intention is not to give an exhaustive list of all the linguists that have quoted Jespersen's simile, but to underline the fact that none, among those that I have read, had retained the photographic dimension of the simile.

person' [...] the relative clause thus might be said to belong rather to 'it' than to the predicative following after 'it is'. (Jespersen 1927, 88, quoted in Patten 2012, 8)³⁵

Jespersen thus establishes a distinction between restrictive relative clauses, where the antecedent is entirely determined by the finite subordinate (not the case here), and what shall be later termed pseudo-relative clauses where the antecedent is not entirely identified by its subordinate, insofar as it only serves to characterize it. In other words, he distinguishes between: *It is the wife that decides* as in: *The wife decides (not the husband)*, and *It is the wife that decides* as in: *This is the deciding wife* as if referring to a particular kind of wife, as opposed to wives that would be more submissive to their husbands and would therefore hardly ever decide for instance; in which case the relative clause is clearly restrictive.

What matters to us most here is that Jespersen later rebutted this account in order to favour a “semantically expletive approach” (Patten 2012, 5-6), where the structure “it is ...that” is devoid of meaning or, to use Patten’s own terms, semantically expletive, i.e. it no longer acts as a pro-form, but more as a plain syntactical foregrounding device, in order to emphasize the focal post-copular element. In which case, these markers are “dummies” acting as “diatomic”³⁶ devices splitting a single clause into two, in order to extract, differentiate and exhibit the post-copular element by contrasting it with the rest of the sentence. What obviously justifies such an approach is that in *it*-clefts, where the real subject of the predicate is the variable N, there is in fact but one single clause split into two; the non-cleft version *The wife decides* being truth-conditionally synonymous with its cleft version: *It is the wife that decides*. It is when holding such considerations that Jespersen used the photographic simile. However, due to the various syntactic manipulations those structures have given way to, it is logical to surmise that the term “focus” was soon deprived of its photographic connotation, to refer to the sole effects of the syntactic reordering,

³⁵ Patten again underscores that many linguists have taken their inspiration from these derivational techniques, some arguing for instance that *it*-clefts stemmed from pseudo-clefts as in Akmajian (2012, 8), or were “reduced forms of right-dislocated pseudo-clefts, where *it* [was] a pronominal reference to the topic which appear[ed] at the end of the sentence” (Gundel 1977, 543).

³⁶ To use a different terminology also inspired by science (see Guillaume quoted in Tollis 2006, 99).

namely the highlighting of a specific phrasal segment, removed from the rest of the sentence to draw the hearer's attention onto it, as if the very extracting properties it denotes had paradoxically affected the original phrase it stemmed from: "to bring into focus". For the same reason, the soon-celebrated meta-term came to be considered as a variable, impossible to pre-identify³⁷, while the structure that encompassed it, and generated it, was perceived as more "entrenched" i.e. "conceived of as [a] single *gestalt*" (Schmid 2007, 121), namely some sort of receptacle or shrine for what is to be exhibited, its focus.

As it happens, Lambrecht, one of the tenants of functional grammar, who have adopted a more holistic approach to sentence analysis compared to their generativist predecessors, explicitly favours "Jespersen's second non-derivational analysis of *it*-cleft", for the very reason that is it the "expression of a single proposition via biclausal syntax" (2001, 467). He thus suggests that the matrix clause predicator plays a pragmatic role as a focusing device whereas the subordinate predicator would play a semantic role (2001, 463). To lend support to his thesis, he serves a host of arguments among which Jespersen's remark that when the element that follows "it is" is an adverb, there is "no possible substitute for 'it'" (2001, 464 and Jespersen ([1937] 1969, 75). According to discourse-functional analysis, this does not mean that the pro-form "it" is absolutely devoid of meaning though, but rather that it refers to something outside of the sentence formal scope proper, something that belongs to the realm of the knowledge, consciousness, or centres of interest which both co-addressees may partake or seek to partake (those three categories of presupposition Lambrecht lists and respectively terms: K-presupposition, C-presupposition, T-presupposition, the former containing the second which contains the latter in a series of concentric circles of sorts 2001, 473-474):

If both the copula and its overt or covert pronominal subject IT are semantically empty and if the FP [focus phrase] receives its theta role indirectly, from the RC [relative clause] predicator, the question naturally arises as to what the actual function of the matrix predication is a functional role to its object [...] this role is *pragmatic* (information-structural), not

³⁷ On the unpredictability of focus phrases see Lambrecht 2001, 473.

unlike subjects, normally function as *foci* the occurrence of the FP in the object position of the copula is naturally interpreted as a signal that its denotatum has a *focus relation* to the proposition in which it plays a semantic role i.e. the RC proposition. In sum the FP has its pragmatic role assigned via the empty syntactic structure of the matrix clause, while its semantic role is assigned by the argument structure of the embedded clause. (Lambrecht 2001, 470)

These considerations open up a myriad of perspectives in terms of linguistic interpretation and shed light on all the analyses previously developed. The idea that the sentence was intentionally cleft by the utterer, means that a more “primitive”, “unmarked” predication lay in the background binding together its internal “logical” constituents (the deep structure), but also that the linguistic structure is supple enough to welcome in its core markers referring to the “outside” of the sentence, within the limits of the “competing grammatical, syntactic, and pragmatic motivations in a given language” (Lambrecht 2001, 488). Consequently, the natural contrasts generated by the alternation of grammatical morphemes and lexemes can be taken advantage of to heighten the perception of this or that phrasal fragment along with its informational denotatum, while strengthening the ties with the general context of utterance, and enhancing intersubjective convergence of views. We can take the idea further and hypothesize that those phenomena are more organic than what structuralists, generativists or “pragmaticists” are willing to admit, and that cleft sentence distortions literally display a meaningful “fold in the fabric,” insofar as those “constructional units’ global meaning is not equal to the sum of the meanings of its parts”. This is what Lambrecht rightfully reflects when observing that in the French cleft construction *C’est à toi que je pense*: “the FP [focus phrase] bears the case-marking assigned by the RC [relative clause] predicator to the (null-instantiated) relativized argument”, a phenomenon he terms: “long-distance theta-role argument” (2001, 469)³⁸.

Now, research in the field of cognitive psychology and grounding cognition point to the fact that words generate endogenous

³⁸ Thus using a transformational terminology, the theta-role referring to “the set of thematic functions which Arguments can fulfil [and] are drawn from a highly restricted, finite, universal set [...] agent, patient, benefactive, etc.” (Radford [1988] 1996, 373).

multimodal images, prompting sensory-motor activity in the same parts of the brain activated when the actions, or general impressions referred to are actually performed or more directly perceived (a phenomenon that has recently been investigated in various fields of knowledge ranging from cognitive linguistics, cognitive neurosciences, to artificial intelligence, etc. see Kiefer and Barsalou 2010, 716-724). For this reason, when people are asked to recall memories for instance, they “tend to avert their gaze from engaging visual stimuli (presumably to reserve processing resources for answering the question)” (Spivey and Geng 2001, 239). Bearing this in mind, why not consider, that grammatical morphemes point to something like a blank or opaque screen with no “asperity”, a *pregnanz* devoid of salience in the mind’s eye, to use the *Gestaltist* terminology (aside from the natural salience generated by the acoustic or graphic renditions of course), a backdrop against which the rest of the sentence will unfold more sharply? We may also venture that they could act as abstract arrows pointing to the internal semantic core of the sentence as Jespersen already suggested: “*It is* serves as a demonstrative gesture to point at one particular part of the sentence to which the attention of the hearer is to be drawn especially” ([1937] 1969, 76), with the proviso that recent research could give evidence that the sensory-motor activation is no abstraction. This is not incompatible with the various uses of “it” Jespersen lists, namely anaphoric, unspecified, or preparatory which could also gain a new lease of life thanks to those recent discoveries, the former for instance literally pointing backwards, the second, inside and the latter, behind ([1937] 1969, 72-73). As Bergen explains when considering eye-movements thanks to eye-tracking instrumentation, and visual tests meant to better comprehend image processing, “people [are] faster to identify the matching picture - high resolution pictures after sentences about clear vision and low resolution pictures after sentences about obscured vision” (Bergen 2012, 70 mentioning the experiments conducted by Yaxley and Zwaan 2007). Now if this is true of verbal depictions of visible scenes, why would it not be true of the meta-terms that linguists forge when spending long hours staring at graphically fixed sentences on paper? In which case, various focusing phenomena would superimpose: that operating on the denotatum and that operating while examining fixed graphic renditions of utterances on paper. Of course superimposition does not mean absolute concordance as recent research on the topic has shown. I have no

space or time to develop this here but refer the reader to an extensive study that has been devoted to the possible congruence or non-congruence between “attentional focus”, “visual focus” and “verbal focus” (see Diderichsen 2001 on Tomlin’s fish film design). Accordingly, if we take Jespersen’s original cleft construction: *It is the wife that decides*, graphically, the post-copular element would stand in the foreground while the “/it is/ and /that decides/” act as a frame surrounding what is being put forward: “the wife”. In terms of informational structure, these elements would refer to something already acknowledged: “/who decides?/someone decides but who?/”, nothing very inventive here, apart from the fact that it could be demonstrated that what is being triggered are multimodal images that literally hover in the background of both co-utterers’ mindscapes, as pieces of shared information already activated. Acoustically, its emission follows a linear and uniform pattern that only leaves space for phonetic distortion thanks to a stress pattern emphasizing “the wife” and thus giving the impression of a vocalic inflation followed by a deflation (although Jespersen clearly indicates that “Emphasis (and stress) is [...] frequently laid on another word than the one singled out by being made the predicative of *it is*” [1937] 1969, 75). The framing effect would therefore lie more in the graphic rendition of the sentence, or in a representation where dynamism seems to be refrained at the end of the sentence thanks to syntactical means. Which is perhaps what Jespersen meant when he stated that emphasis was only conveyed by sentence accent:

It is often said that the insertion of *it is* serves to give emphasis to the word thus singled out. But this is not quite correct. Emphasis is better given by stress (or) intonation, and these phonetic means generally accompany the construction. ([1937] 1969, 75)

Perhaps what is suggested here is that cleft constructions, whether represented graphically or acoustically, tend to address the mind’s eye more than the ear to generate salience.

Those are ideas I wish to explore in the future by stepping outside of linguistics proper and considering literary analysis, for writers have indeed made extensive use of the mind’s eye to generate fictitious mental spaces sometimes richer, more profound and seemingly less finite than what an outward perspective alone would offer, precisely because they have learned to develop that ability more commonly referred to as “imagination”. This entails a shift of the subject’s gaze inwards, towards an invisible, mental locus where

meaning seems to concentrate. Martinet has written numerous articles on the topic (a few of which are mentioned in the bibliography).

Conclusion

When considering the way in which the term “focus” evolved from the more mundane to the more technical and abstract, I have argued that it was introduced in American linguistics via Jespersen’s “transposition theory”, a derivational technique he used to find a way of “symbolizing” cleft constructions ([1937] 1969, 74) and from which transformationalists and generativists had taken their inspiration to devise their own rewriting rules and parsing technique. In the process, the term “focus” was extracted from the original photographic simile, “to bring into focus” Jespersen had used, to ultimately refer to the emphasized element in the PF (phonetic representation) of the surface structure, no longer characterizing the sole cleaving process. Interestingly enough, the term endured, even though it openly challenged Chomsky’s standard theory; its unpredictable nature making it inherently difficult to pre-identify and represent in the deep structure, which contributed to obfuscating its exact denotatum.

However, due to the amazing surge and echo generativist grammar has benefited from, the term has been used extensively, and in miscellaneous ways by various schools of thought, adapting it to their specific needs and preferences, alone or more typically coupled with an antonym referring to its less conspicuous counterpart (formally, or in terms of informational content). Incidentally, by the time the metalinguistic word “focus” had made its way in French linguistics via American transformationalism, the narratological terminology had also become prevalent with the French *focalisation* travelling the other way across the ocean, thus adding to its significance.

All these considerations lend support to the claim that potent concepts may transcend epistemological barriers, especially if they refer to a phenomenon prevalent both in normative configurations (cf. sentence stress assignment rules) and in more atypical ones. The notion of focus, naturally correlated to that of markedness and salience, refers to a phenomenon crucial to all semiotic process, while its scientific connotation may have appealed to linguists and narratologists who wished to avoid the earlier, more literary, pictorial or psychological terminology (emphasis, viewpoint, *mise en relief*). It

displays features that are operative in different ways and in diverse fields, whether we take the phrase “to bring into focus” literally or in a more figurative sense, to list but a few: intentionality, extraction and prioritization of objects of perception or pieces of information, accommodation and concentration hinting at a gradual process of convergence either visually or in terms of co-addressee’s viewpoints, concatenation (due to the superimposition of various layers of data syntagmatically or paradigmatically) and lastly, a cognitive treatment that entails transiency and relentless shifts in perspective.

Meta-terms are not just expressive metaphors. They may denote deeply rooted mechanisms hidden underneath apparently idiosyncratic phenomena (see Landragin on the afferent notion of “salience” in vision and language, 2011, 67-83). They come suffused with their own history, which cannot be ignored.³⁹ Accordingly, when linguistics gradually departed more or less dramatically from the generativists’ strict structuralist stance with the cognitive turn, the term endured. Perhaps because it had already travelled far and wide, its origins as a meta-term going back to the Renaissance, and could henceforth be fully taken advantage of.

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³⁹ In this respect, adopting an interdisciplinary stance proves instructive because it enables one to distance oneself from what might have been “focused” upon too closely.

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