

Diversity in verum focus phenomena

Introduction. An ongoing debate in semantic theory asks whether the meaning of verum focus constructions is due to truth operators or general focus operations. This paper shows that the two mechanisms can be identified independently in verum phenomena, and suggest that verum focus is an umbrella term for a class of constructions that handle cases of contradictory statements in context.

Background. The term Verum Focus was introduced in Höhle (1992) to describe the prosodic pattern in (1), where focus on the auxiliary (or verb) is used to resolve an epistemic conflict in the discourse. In Hebrew, the same meaning is achieved through a stressed affirmation particle *ken* ‘yes’, seen in (2).

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| (1) German (Gutzmann et al. 2020): | (2) Hebrew: |
| <i>Peter HAT den Hund getreten.</i> | <i>hu KEN ba’at ba-kelev.</i> |
| P. has the dog kicked | he yes kicked at.the-dog |
| ‘Peter DID kick the dog.’ | ‘He DID kick the dog.’ |

Höhle attributes the meaning contribution of the accent in question to an operator akin to ‘it is true that’. This operator is a component in many analyses of verum focus (e.g., Romero & Han 2004, Lohnstein & Stommel 2005, Zimmermann & Hole 2008, Bill & Koev 2021), with some variation in technical details of how focus is involved. Other accounts reduce the verum component and derive the same meaning through focus alternatives (Richter 1993, Wilder 2013, Goodhue & Wagner 2018), while Gutzmann et al. (2020) call to separate verum focus from focus alternatives based on languages where the two are realized by different particles, including Tsimshianic and Chadic. Overt verum operators are attested in many other languages, and do not categorically draw focus (e.g., English *indeed*, French *voire*, Hebrew *betax* ‘sure’). That verum focus constructions are comparable to overt verum operators can be observed in that both can be used in answers to positive polar questions, as in (3-4).

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| (3) A: <i>Did you buy yogurt?</i> (Goodhue 2022) | (4) A: <i>Did you buy yogurt?</i> |
| B: <i>I DID buy yogurt.</i> | B: <i>I Indeed bought yogurt.</i> |

Data. Verum focus constructions that employ affirmative particles are a rather common phenomenon, also attested with Spanish *sí* and Yiddish *yo*. ‘yes’ particles occupy the position of negation and therefore canonically modify elements from the verbal system, where they are indistinguishable in their semantic and pragmatic outcome from English and German stressed auxiliaries. In Hebrew, constituent negation is available and, consequently, stressed *ken* may modify tenseness constituents, including attributive adjectives (5a) and infinitive verbs (5b). In these positions, stressed *ken* reveals that it is not a verum operator, but rather a vehicle for focus.

- (5) Hebrew (attested examples):
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| (a) <i>ze ha-of ha-KEN metubal.</i> | ≠ <i>ze KEN ha-of ha-metubal.</i> |
| this DET-chicken DET-yes seasoned | ‘this IS the seasoned chicken |
| ‘This is the SEASONED chicken. | |
| (b) <i>ani roca KEN lalexet.</i> | ≠ <i>and KEN roca lalexet.</i> |
| I want yes go.INF | ‘I DO want to go.’ |
| ‘I want to go, though.’ | |

Since verum operators target the truth value of a proposition, a verum analysis of *ken* in (5) would give it a sentence-level scope regardless of its surface position. It is therefore unexpected that these sentences are distinct from their sentence-*ken* counterparts, in which *ken* can be replaced with an opening ‘it IS true that’, without affecting the sentence’s meaning or presupposition. It can be shown that the sentences in (5) introduce different presuppositions than their ‘it is true that’ paraphrases, as follows:

