

Optional but not free: Licensing FocusP in East Asian languages

GLOW in Asia The 2nd Workshop for Young Scholars

Tommy Tsz-Ming Lee (City University of Hong Kong)

✉ tszmllee@cityu.edu.hk

Mar 13-15, 2026 at Nanzan University

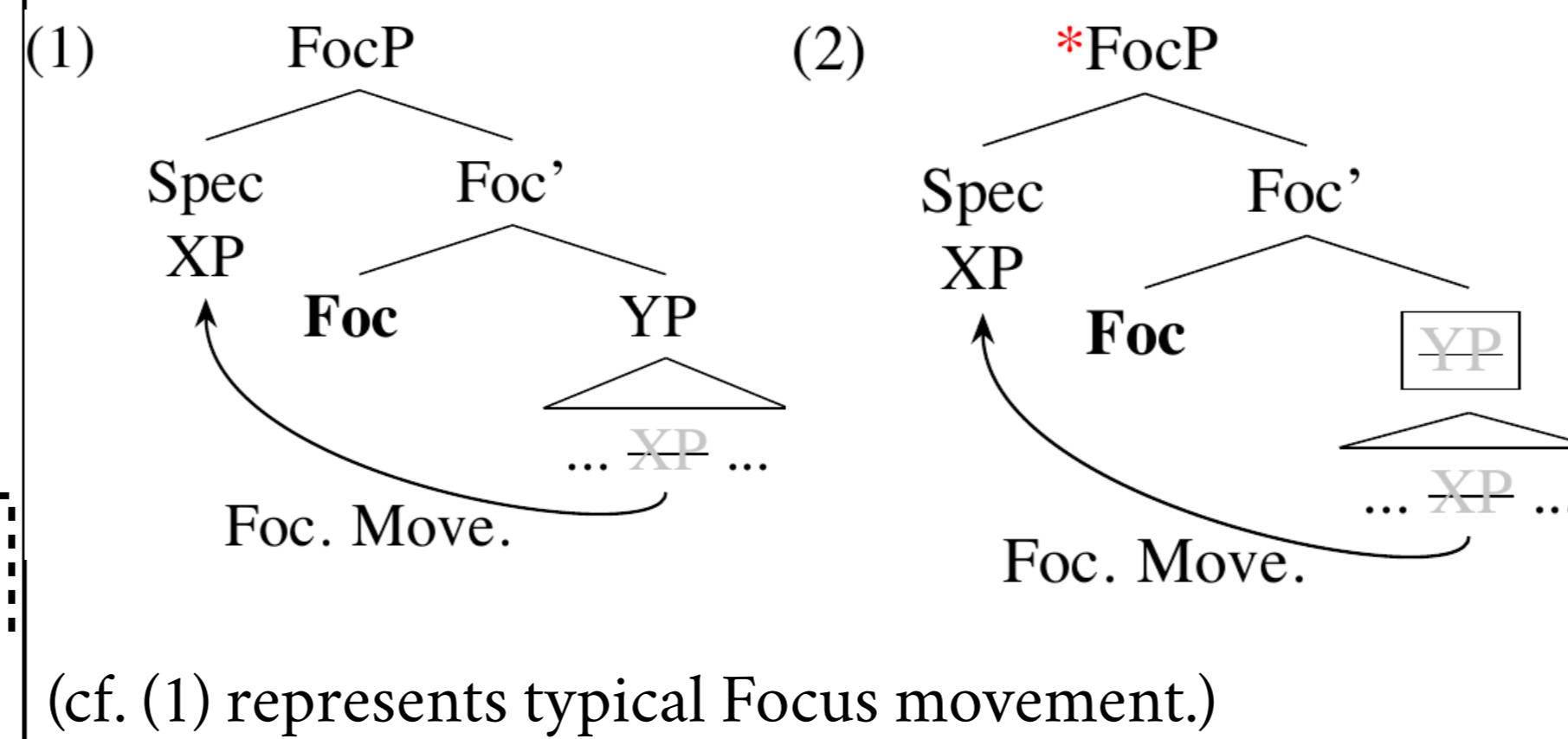
1.1. FocusP licensing

- In cartography literature, **FocusP** is assumed to be optional (Rizzi 1997, *et seq.*).
- I argue that FocusP in **Cantonese, Mandarin, and Uyghur** must be additionally licensed.

A FocusP must be licensed by an overt complement.

➔ While (1) is licit, (2) is not.

1.2. Illustrations and empirical domains



- ➔ (2) is supported by the ban on:
- Right Dislocation of Focus**
 - Sluicing** (Ross 1969)
 - Pseudogapping** (Jayaseelan 1990)
 - All involve Move+Delete in their derivation.

2. Correlations across 3 domains: (i) *Focus RD; (ii) *Sluicing; (iii) *Pseudogapping

- *Focus RD:** In [C, M, U], RD must not target focus elements (OK if Topics/Defocus elements).
 - Assuming a bi-clausal structure of RD, (3a) has the structure in (3c).

(3) (a) Focus particles/associates; (b) Stress

- a.* Δ Maai-zo ni-bun syu zaa3 [F **zinghai ngo**]. [C]
 buy-PERF this-CL book SFP only 1SG
 ‘Only me bought this book.’ (Lee 2023, p.467)
- b.* Δ Almi-lar-ni kältür-di [F **TÜRKİZAT**]. [U]
 apple-PL-ACC bring-PAST Türkizat
 ‘Türkizat brought the apples.’ (Çetinkaya 2023, p.35)
- c. [S1 *pro* V O], [S2 S ~~TP S V Ø~~]

- *Sluicing:** sluicing-like constructions must not be derived via Focus Move+TP ellipsis, i.e., must involve a base generation structure.

(4) Evidence #1: Unrecoverability ([M], Li and Wei 2014, p.297)

- a. Biye-luxing kuai dao le, danshi wo bu zhidao [xingqi-ji (***biye-luxing kuai dao le**)]
 graduation-trip soon reach LE but I not know weekday-which
 ‘The graduation trip is almost around the corner, but I don’t know which day of the week.’

(5) Evidence #2: *Case-matching ([U], Bai 2023, p.174)

- a. Ayxan-Ø bir kino-**ni** kör-di-Ø,
 Ayxan-NOM one movie-ACC watch-PST-3SG
 ‘Ayxan watched a certain movie,’
- b. lekin män-Ø [nemä kino(***-ni**)-liq]-i-ni bil-mä-y-män.
 but 1SG-NOM what movie-ACC-COMP-3SG.POSS-ACC know-NEG-NPST-1SG
 ‘but I don’t know what movie.’

- *Pseudogapping:** PG-like constructions must not be derived via Focus movement + VP ellipsis.

(6) Evidence #1: Non-linguistic antecedent ([M], Tang 2001, modified)

- Zhangsan yinggai ø san ge pingguo. Lisi yinggai ø si ge.
 Zhangsan three CL apple Lisi four CL
 ‘Zhangsan should [bought, ate] three apples, and Lisi should four.’

(7) Evidence #2: *Adjunct-inclusive reading ([C])

- a. Mary hasn’t [**secretly**] dated Bill, but Sue has [~~secretly dated~~] John, #though not **secretly**.
- b. Ming hoji [**jatcigwo** paau] 10km, Fan dou hoji [~~paau~~] 5km. Daan jiu **tauhaa**.
 Ming can in.one.go run 10km Fan also can run 5km but need rest
 ‘Ming can run 10km in one go, and Fan can 5km, but she needs a rest.’

4. Mirror images in Japanese, Korean, and Mongolian

• **OK Focus RD:** In [J, K, Mon.], focus elements can be RD-ed.

(8) (a) Focus particles/associates; (b) Stress

a. Taroo-ga Δ yom-ana-katta-yo, **LGB-sika**.
 Taroo-NOM read-NEG-PST-SFP LGB-only
 ‘Taroo read Δ_i, only LGB_i.’ ([J], Takita 2011, p.4)

b. Baatar Δ jav-san **SORGOOLI-d**.
 Baatar go-PST school-dat
 ‘Baatar went to SCHOOL.’ ([Mon.], Lee 2023, p.465)

• **OK Pseudogapping:** Move+Delete is possible.

(11) Adjunct-inclusive reading is possible ([J], Tanaka and Hayashi 2018, p.5)

John-wa NYU-ni-WA han-tosi ryugaku su-ru-ga,
 John-TOP NYU-DAT-TOP half-year study.abroad do-PRES-but
MIT-ni-WA [~~han-tosi ryugaku~~] si-na-i.
 MIT-DAT-TOP do-NEG-PRES
 ‘John will go to NYU to study for half a year, but he won’t to MIT.’

• **OK Sluicing:** At least some cases must be derived via Move+Delete.

(9) Connectivity effect #1: island sensitivity ([J], Takahashi 1994, p.280)

a. Mary-ga [[NP [CP John-ga **nanika-o** katta to]-no uwasa]-o kiita sooda.
 Mary-NOM John-NOM sth-ACC bought that-GEN rumor-ACC heard I.heard
 ‘I heard Mary heard the rumor that John bought something.’

b.?? Boku-wa [CP **nani-o** ka] siritai naa.
 I-TOP what-ACC Q want.to.know SFP
 ‘I want to know what.’

(10) Connectivity effect #2: Case matching([Mon.], Bai 2023, p.140)

a. Batu-Ø nige **xümün-dü** ene nom-i ög-be,
 Batu-NOM one person-DAT this book-ACC give-PST
 ‘Batu gave this book to a person,’

b. gebečü bi-Ø [**xen-dü** bol-χu]-yi ni mede-xü ügei.
 but I-NOM who-DAT COP-INF-ACC PPC know-INF not
 ‘but I don’t know to whom.’

5.1. Empirical generalizations

• (2) represents a constraint on contrastive fragment formation.

(13) The licensing of FocusP in East Asian languages
 A FocusP must be licensed by an overt complement in

- * ... [FocusP Spec [FOC {YP...}]]
- Cantonese, Mandarin and Uyghur
- but not Japanese, Korean, and Mongolian

| | Focus RD | Sluicing | Pseudogapping |
|-----------|----------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Cantonese | *(Lee 2023) | In progress | In progress |
| Mandarin | *(Chiang 2017) | *(Li and Wei 2023, 2025) | *(Liu and Lee, in progress) |
| Uyghur | *(Çetinkaya 2023) | *(Bai 2023) | |
| Japanese | OK(Takita 2011; Abe 2019b) | OK(Takahashi 1994) | OK(Tanaka and Hayashi 2018) |
| Korean | OK(Ko 2016) | OK(J.-B. Kim 2013) | OK(J.-S. Kim 1997) |
| Mongolian | (Lee 2023) | OK(Bai 2023) | |

5.2. Speculation: Phasal ellipsis?

- It is unclear why (2) holds in some languages.
- The fact that the complement of FocusP cannot be elided might be attributable to a constraint on ellipsis.
- Lee & Pan (2024) proposes that **Chinese ellipsis privileges phases only**.
 - CP, vP, DP can be elided, whereas
 - TP, VP cannot.
- Combined with a contextual approach to phasehood (Boskovic 2014), it is possible that FocusP, when appears, replaces the FinP or vP to be the highest projection in a domain.
 - Its complement becomes a complement of a phase, rather than a phase, hence *ellipsis.

Selected references: Abe, Jun. 2019. “Focus Licensing at the Left Periphery in Japanese Right Dislocation.” *Syntax* 22 (1): 1–23. • Bai, Xue. An Exploration of Multiple Sluicing from a Cross-linguistic Perspective. Ph.D. Diss. Tohoku University. • Hiraiwa, Ken, and Shinichiro Ishihara. 2012. “Syntactic Metamorphosis: Clefts, Sluicing, and In-Situ Focus in Japanese.” *Syntax* 15(2). • Lee, Tommy Tsz-Ming. 2023. *Last but not least: a comparative perspective on right dislocation in Alasha Mongolian*. JEAL.