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Nur Du allein: Some thoughts on initial focus particles in German

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1. Introduction

There seems to be considerable support for the claim that focus particles in the *Mittelfeld* behave like adverbs and are adjoined to the main spine of the tree. In pursuit of a general theory, sentence-initial focus particles also have been analyzed this way (e.g. Jacobs 1986). Under this ‘adverbial’ analysis, (1) has the bracketing in (2a) rather than the one we might expect in (2b).

- (1) Nur/sogar/auch die Steuerberaterin war demonstrieren.
only/even/also the tax accountant was protesting
‘Only/even/also the tax accountant went to the protest rally.’
- (2) a. [Nur/sogar/auch [[die Steuerberaterin] war demonstrieren]]
b. [[Nur/sogar/auch [die Steuerberaterin]] war demonstrieren]

The adverbial analysis raises skepticism because it violates the V2 constraint. In its defense, Buring & Hartmann (2001) argue that there is incontrovertible evidence for the particle appearing as an adverb in first position, even if this means that in these sentences the tensed verb is relegated to third position. However, Meyer & Sauerland (2009) take issue with Buring and Hartmann’s argumentation and, moreover, provide what seems to be independent factual evidence *against* the adverbial theory. In what follows, I argue that Meyer & Sauerland’s data can be given an independent explanation and thus do not provide a conclusive argument against the adverbial theory, which I argue remains supported. This still leaves the question of what to do with V2, which will, except for a sketch of a possible line of future inquiry, remain unsolved here.

2. Buring and Hartmann’s scope argument from initial *nur*

Buring & Hartmann (2001) note that in (3) *seinen* can be interpreted as a variable bound by *jeder*, indicating that the DP *ein Bild von seinen KINDERN* is reconstructed under

jeder.¹ Is the *nur* reconstructed along with it? They argue that, crucially, it is not; according to them, an example like (4) is read as in (5a), not as in (5b).

- (3) Nur ein Bild von seinen Kindern hatte jeder Vater.
 only a picture of his children had every Vater
- (4) Nur Michelle.ACC liebt jeder.
 only Michelle.ACC loves everyone.NOM
- (5) a. Only Michelle is such that everyone loves her. linear scope
 b. Everyone loves Michelle and nobody else. inverse scope

The judgment seems crisp. If someone in the domain of *jeder* loves somebody other than Michelle, (4) remains true. This would seem to prove that *nur* does not have the reconstructed reading in (5b), providing crucial support for the adverbial theory.

But, Meyer & Sauerland (2009) argue, the likes of (4) do not show the absence of an inverse scope reading of *nur* (cf. Reinhart 1976, Abusch 1994). They note that the scenarios that make (5b) true (sole love for Michelle) also happen to make (5a) true. Since there is no picture a subject could be presented with in which (5b) would be true but (5a) would not, we cannot really know whether (5b) is an available interpretation of (4) or not. They further observe that an inverse scope reading would be shown to exist if a scenario that made the inverse scope reading true failed to so for the linear scope reading. And while (4) does not have this property, they present four examples which seem to have it and thus offer counterevidence to the adverbial theory. In what follows I revisit these examples and argue that, for a variety of reasons, they may not involve reconstruction after all. I also note a piece of positive evidence for obligatory wide scope.

3. The zoo example: pragmatic set-up

In the first example we are asked to consider the following situation (Meyer & Sauerland 2001, 236):

¹Another example they use to show that the phrase in initial position (without the *nur*) reconstructs is (i).

- (i) Nur die Hoffnung, dass wir je wieder gewinnen,
 only the hope that we ever again win
 hat niemand/*jemand t behalten
 has nobody/*somebody t kept
 ‘The only thing that nobody kept was the hope that we’ll ever win again.’

The NPI *je* is apparently licensed by the negative quantifier *niemand*. But for that to be the case, the DP and the complement clause it contains, which houses the NPI, presumably have to be interpreted in reconstructed position under *niemand*.

“Anna, Peter and Max are visiting the Berlin Zoo. Anna raves about the little penguin, Peter loves some weird reptile, and Max adores a certain lion. But of course,

([6]) Auch Knut mag jeder.
also Knut.ACC likes everyone.NOM

(Remember that Knut is the famous little polar bear from the Berlin Zoo.)”²

They observe that in the given scenario (6) is judged true. This is taken as evidence that *auch* has narrow scope with respect to *jeder*, in other words, that (6) is interpreted as in (7b) rather than (7a). This is unexpected on the adverbial theory.

- (7) a. Also Knut is such that everyone loves him. linear scope
b. Everyone is such that they also love Knut. inverse scope

Clearly, (6) can be uttered truthfully in the situation given. But does this really show that *also* takes inverse scope below *jeder*? The speaker’s enumeration of what animal each child likes invites the inference on the part of the addressee that the kids all like the zoo. This inference can then serve as the alternative to the prejacent of the *linear* scope interpretation of *auch* in (6); pragmatically, the assertion that they all like the polar bear then just serves to further strengthen the already implied claim that the zoo trip is fun. Note also that the set-up can be followed in English by (7a). Register differences aside, the conversational effect is very similar to the one we get for (6).

- (8) Anna, Peter and Max are visiting the Berlin Zoo. Anna raves about the little penguin, Peter loves some weird reptile, and Max adores a certain lion. And Knut, too, everyone loved.

(6) then might not show that *auch* reconstructs. My reasoning also suggests that, without the specific pragmatic set-up, what looks like the inverse scope reading should not be available. And, in fact, (9) can only mean that in addition to a universally loved or admired person (Ruth? Beyoncé?), Michelle is also universally loved. It cannot be read as saying that everyone loves Michelle in addition to some other, possibly different person.

(9) Auch Michelle liebt jeder.
also Michelle.ACC loves everyone.NOM

4. *Nur* and stressed *keiner*: correcting utterance

A second piece of evidence Meyer & Sauerland use to argue for the existence of inverse scope readings of sentence initial focus particles comes from sentences like (10), where instead of *jeder* (‘everyone’) we find *keiner* (‘no one’) (cf. also Reis 2005). They note

²The original number of the example is (7).

that these examples provide another instance where the scenarios that make the inverse scope reading in (11b) true do not also make the linear scope reading in (11a) true. If the sentence can thus be true under circumstances that make (11b) but not (11a) true this constitutes proof of an inverse scope reading. This, they claim, is indeed the case.

(10) Nur Michelle liebt keiner.
 only Michelle.ACC loves nobody.NOM

(11) a. Only Michelle is such that nobody loves her. linear scope
 b. Nobody is such that he loves only Michelle. inverse scope

They note in passing, however, that prosodic factors come into play. Normally, focus particles need a focus, realized by stress, in their c-command domain. With stress and focus just on *Michelle* the sentence seems to only have the linear scope reading. Only when the sentence is pronounced with additional and heavy stress on *keiner* and a ‘bridge-intonation’ (e.g. Frey 1993) do we find the inverse scope reading. To utter (10) with the stress pattern just described out of the blue seems strange.

(12) A: Jeder liebt nur MICHELLE.
 Everyone loves only Michelle
 B: Das stimmt nicht. Nur MICHELLE liebt KEINER!
 ‘That’s false.’ only Michelle loves no one

Like *jeder* in (12A), *keiner* in (12B) takes scope over *nur*. But the wide scope of *keiner*, I’d like to suggest, results from its being used ‘metalinguistically’, to correct a previous utterance, and hence provides no indication that *nur Michelle* reconstructs.

5. *Nur Brahms, nur Reis: nur takes scope within the initial constituent*

Finally, Meyer & Sauerland (2009) discuss two more sentences where the quantifier under *nur* is not universal and where, as a consequence, the inverse scope reading does not entail the linear scope reading. They argue that these examples also support their claim that initial focus particles can take non-linear, reconstructed scope:

(13) Nur Brahms liebt genau jeder Dritte.³
 only Brahms.ACC loves exactly every third.NOM

(14) Nur Reis essen die meisten Menschen.
 only rice.ACC eat the most people.NOM

(13) is said to have both readings in (15), and (14) both readings in (16).

³Meyer & Sauerland’s version of the example does not contain *genau* but, as far as I can see, adding it makes the point they make easier to appreciate.

- (15) a. Only Brahms is such that exactly a third of the people love him. 1. scope
 b. Exactly a third of the people only love Brahms. inverse scope
- (16) a. Only rice is such that most people eat it. linear scope
 b. Most people only eat rice. inverse scope

As Meyer & Sauerland point out, the scenarios that make the inverse scope reading of (13) true are again not also scenarios in which the linear scope reading is also true; exactly a third of the people only liking Brahms and no other composer is not a special case of only Brahms being liked by exactly a third of the people: the former can actually be true when Brahms is liked by everyone (e.g. 1/3 only like Brahms, 2/3 like Brahms and Beethoven) but the latter cannot be true when 100 percent like Brahms.⁴

I think two observations are worth making here. First, though it has not been noted in the literature, I think here too there is a prosodic difference that correlates with the two different interpretations. When pronounced with stress only on *Brahms* and *Reis* and with a falling contour at the end of the sentence, the linear scope reading seems prominent. For the other reading, we seem to want primary stress elsewhere, in particular on *Dritte* in the Brahms example and *meisten* in the rice example, with reduced stress on *Brahms* and *Reis*, as in an instance of second occurrence focus (see above). Unlike the *keiner* example, these examples, however, do not require a correcting context.

The second observation is this. While Meyer & Sauerland (2009) take the non-linear scope reading of these examples to be instances of reconstruction, I think the comparison with cases where the focus particle takes scope just within the moved constituent may be more apt. Such readings have been observed for e.g. (17) and (18) (cf. Buring & Hartmann 2001, Reis 2005).

- (17) Nur Spanisch sprechen fiel uns leicht.
 only Spanish.ACC speak fell us.DAT easy
 ‘Only to speak Spanish was easy for us.’ sentential scope
 ‘To speak only Spanish was easy for us.’ ‘local’ scope
- (18) a. Nur [AP mit Eiern belegt]_i schmeckt es nicht t_i
 only with eggs topped tastes it not
 b. Nur [VP mit Eiern belegen]_i will ich es nicht t_i
 only with eggs top want I it not

In English the ambiguity in (18) is resolved by negative inversion (e.g. Liberman 1974):

⁴The argument for (14), which is not spelled out in Meyer & Sauerland (2009), is presumably analogous. The scenarios where the majority of people consume nothing but rice should not all also be scenarios where only rice is such that it is consumed by a majority of people. That, however, is harder to see. If more than 50% only consume rice, there cannot be any other food but rice that more than 50% eat. This means that rice is the only food eaten by a majority, and there is no scenario where (16b) is true but where (16a) is not. (14) thus would seem to pattern with the *jeder* example in (4) in terms of entailment relations and would not seem relevant to the point Meyer & Sauerland are trying to make.

- (19) a. Only topped with eggs does it not taste good. linear scope
 b. Only topped with eggs, it does not taste good. 'constituent' scope

What I am proposing then is that the supposed inverse scope readings of (13) and (14) are readings where *nur* takes 'constituent' scope within the constituent in sentence-initial position and where they are interpreted the way (20b) and (21b) are, respectively:

- (20) a. Only Brahms do exactly a third of the people like.
 b. Only Brahms, a third of the people like (that).
 (21) a. Only rice do most people eat/is eaten by most people.
 b. Only rice, most people eat (that).

When do such 'constituent' scope readings make sense? When *only Brahms* is understood, for instance, as 'a concert program consisting of only Brahms' and *only rice* is read, for example, as 'a meal/diet consisting of nothing but rice'. Note that when we have a pronoun (*das*), as in (22), that is the only reading we get. The neuter pronoun *das* presumably refers not to Brahms or Reis, both masculine in gender, but to the implicit entity. Conversely, we only find the sentential scope reading when we have an NPI (*je*), as in (23); for it to be licensed it needs to be c-commanded by *nur*.

- (22) a. Nur Brahms, das liebt genau jeder Dritte. 'constituent'
 only Brahms.ACC that loves genau every third.NOM
 b. Nur Reis, das essen die meisten Menschen.
 only rice.ACC that eat the most people.NOM
 'Only rice, most people eat that.'
 (23) a. Nur Brahms wird je jeder Dritte lieben. 'linear'
 only Brahms.ACC will ever every third love
 b. Nur Reis werden je die meisten Menschen essen
 only rice.ACC will ever the most people.ACC eat

Finally, we also expect to only find the sentential scope reading when the verb does not permit the implicit insertion of 'program' or 'meal'. This seems to be the case:

- (24) a. Nur Brahms erkannte genau jeder Dritte auf der Straße.
 only Brahms recognized exactly every third on the street
 'Only Brahms did exactly every third person recognize on the street'.
 b. Nur Reis lagern die meisten Menschen.
 only rice store the most people
 'Only rice do most people store.'

6. Conclusion

In sum, when *nur* does not take wide scope as in the Brahms and rice examples, it takes ‘constituent’ scope within the topicalized phrase as in (25c) (with perhaps additional silent material in the topicalized phrase), rather than reconstructed scope as in (25b).

- | | | | |
|------|----|--------------------|---------------------|
| (25) | a. | [Nur [[X][QP Y]]] | linear scope |
| | b. | [QP] [[nur X] Y] | inverse scope |
| | c. | [[Nur [X]] [QP Y]] | ‘constituent’ scope |

This together with the observation about the pragmatic set-up of the initial *auch* example in (6) and the independent account of the non-linear scope reading of the *keiner* example in (10) means that the adverbial theory is still viable. What’s more, the *auch* example in (9), where we find that even by Meyer & Sauerland’s criterion *auch* does not reconstruct, independently shows that initial *auch* here takes linear, sentential scope.

What about V2 in such examples? One possibility is that the focus particle is part of the topicalized constituent when that constituent moves to initial position, in accordance with V2, but it subsequently and string-vacuously, perhaps at LF, moves to an adverbial position. I hope this possibility can be explored in future work.

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