Focus and minimality

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Only the cat is holding a flag

Crain, Philip, Drozd, Roeper, and Matsuoka (1992); Crain, Ni, and Conway (1994):

(1) a. Only the cat is holding a flag.
   Adults: false; children: true for many 3–6 year olds;

b. The cat is only holding a flag.
   Adults: true; children: true
Subsequent work has shown the same effect in child Mandarin (Yang, 2002; Zhou and Crain, 2009, 2010; Notley, Zhou, Crain, and Thornton, 2009).

(2) **Zhīyǒu** māo xiānsheng chī-le húluóbo.

\[
\text{ONLY cat mister eat-PRF carrot} \\
\]

a. ✓ Only [Mr. Cat]$_F$ ate the carrot.

b. * Mr. Cat only ate [the carrot]$_F$.

...but most children 4;5–4;10 have the (b) interpretation.
In both English and Mandarin, pre-subject only cannot associate with the VP or VP-internal material.

- I investigate the nature of this restriction in (adult) Mandarin Chinese and Vietnamese.
- I argue that Mandarin zhǐ(yǒu) (and shì) and Vietnamese chi are all uniformly sentential modifiers.
  - Sentential focus particles must be as low as possible while being interpretable, within their phase.
  - This requirement is a strict syntactic constraint.
  - This constraint forms a new argument for cyclic structure-building by phase (Chomsky, 2000, 2001).
Background
Operators such as *only*, *even*, and *also* are “focus-sensitive,” as their interpretation depends on the placement of focus elsewhere in the utterance.

(3)  
  a. David will **only** wear a bow tie when TEACHING.  
  b. David will **only** wear a BOW TIE when teaching.

based on Beaver and Clark (2008)
Focus triggers the computation of **alternatives** which vary in the focused position and focus-sensitive operators quantify over these alternatives (Rooth, 1985, 1992).

The semantics of focus requires that the focused constituent—the “associate”—be c-commanded by the operator (Jackendoff, 1972; Tancredi, 1990; Aoun and Li, 1993; Erlewine, 2014).

(4)  
* DAVID will **only** wear a bow tie when teaching.
  Intended: ‘Only [David]$_F$ will wear a bow tie when teaching.’

I will refer to this as **the c-command requirement**.
(5) **Two types of focus particles in English:**

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a.</td>
<td>The cat is <strong>only</strong> holding ([\text{a flag}]_\text{F}).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b.</td>
<td>The cat is holding <strong>only</strong> ([\text{a flag}]_\text{F}).</td>
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If presubject **only** is unambiguously a constituent **only**, this naturally explains the unavailability of VP association:

(6) **consituent only**

<p>| | |</p>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a.</td>
<td><strong>Only</strong> ([\text{the cat}]_\text{F}) is holding a flag.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b.</td>
<td>* <strong>Only</strong> the cat] is holding ([\text{a flag}]_\text{F}).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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violates the c-command requirement!
Zhou and Crain (2009, 2010) propose that adult English and Mandarin
presubject are necessarily constituent constituents; there is no presubject
sentential.

If the latter structure were available, the c-command requirement alone
would predict that only can associate with any constituent in the
sentence, contrary to fact (for adults). But children begin by analyzing all
only as sentential modifiers.
(I do not make a claim regarding the status of English presubject only.)
Mandarin Chinese
In Mandarin, I will look at two focus-sensitive operators: zhǐ 只 and shì 是.

(7) zhǐ 只:
   • semantics of *only* (Tsai, 2004); glossed here as ONLY
   • In some positions, appears as zhǐyou 只有.

(8) shì 是:
   • “focus marker” (Teng, 1979, a.o.): indicates narrow/contrastive focus, often translated as a cleft—see Erlewine (2015b) for its semantics;
   • glossed here as SHI;
   • homophonous/homographous with the copular verb

I argue that zhǐ/zhǐyou 只 and shì are always *sentential particles*, not constituent-adjoined.
ONLY appears in some positions as zhǐyǒu instead of zhǐ, most notably in pre-subject position. We might imagine that zhǐyǒu is a constituent ONLY, unlike zhǐ which is a sentential ONLY. But if that is the case, zhǐyǒu is very restricted:

(9) Zhǐyǒu is not constituent-marking:
   a. * Zhāngsān hē zhǐyǒu [hóngjiǔ]F.
      Zhangsan drinks ZHIYOU wine
      Intended: ‘Zhangsan drinks only [wine]F.’
      Zhangsan to ZHIYOU Lisi throw-PERF ball
      Intended: ‘Zhangsan threw a ball at only [Lisi]F.’
Instead, I analyze zhǐyǒu as an allomorph of zhǐ.

A couple arguments for this position:

- The choice of zhǐyǒu vs zhǐ is determined by the presence or absence of an adjacent functional head.

  (10) ...{√zhǐ, ?? zhǐyǒu} zài jiālǐ...
       ONLY at home

  (11) ...{?zhǐ, √zhǐyǒu} zúotiān...
       ONLY yesterday
• In pre-subject position, only generally must be realized as zhǐyǒu. However, when the only is preceded by negation, it is realized as bù-zhǐ ‘NEG-ONLY,’ and the extra yǒu is not necessary and in fact impossible.

(12) \{*zhī, ✓zhǐyǒu\} [Zhāngsān]₉ lái-le.
     ONLY             Zhangsan   come-PERF
     ‘Only [Zhangsan]₉ came.’

     NEG-ONLY           Zhangsan   come-PERF
     ‘Not only [Zhangsan]₉ came.’
(14) **Contextual allomorphy of zhǐ vs zhǐyǒu:**

\[
\begin{align*}
zhǐ & \quad \text{if linearly adjacent to a verb, preposition, or functional morpheme;} \\
\text{ONLY } \leftrightarrow \text{zhǐyǒu} & \quad \text{otherwise}
\end{align*}
\]

(15) **Allomorphy can be sensitive to adjacent syntactic category:**

a. *Lively* is an adjective:
   *more lively, ✓ livelier

b. *Slowly* is an adverb:
   ✓ more slowly, *slowlier

(16) ...but only within the same syntactic domain:

\[
\begin{align*}
\{^*\text{Zhǐ, ✓ Zhǐyǒu}\}_[\text{DP} [\text{dài yǎnjìng}]_F \text{ de rén}] & \quad \text{lái-le.}
\end{align*}
\]

ONLY wear glasses DE person come-PERF

‘Only people who [wear glasses]_F came.’
Zhǐ and shì are sentential focus particles

(17) Zhǐ and shì cannot be postverbal:
Zhāngsān √zhǐ/shì [vP hē *zhǐ/shì [hóngjiǔ]F].
Zhangsan ONLY/SHI drinks *ONLY/SHI wine
‘Zhangsan only drinks [wine]F.’

(18) Zhǐ and shì cannot be inside PPs:
Zhangsan ONLY/SHI to *ONLY/SHI Lisi throw-PERF ball
‘Zhangsan (only) threw a ball at [Lisi]F.’
Zhǐ and shì are sentential focus particles

English sentential *only* can associate with multiple foci, but constituent *only* cannot:

(19)  
   a. ✓ I *only* saw [the children]F ask [the adults]F to be quiet.  
   b. * I saw *only* [the children]F ask [the adults]F to be quiet.  

Mandarin zhǐ and shì can associate with multiple foci:

(20) Multiple focus with shì (Cheng, 2008):  
    SHI son ask adult not noisy NEG SHI adult ask son not noisy  
    ‘The son asked the adult not to make noise, not the other way around.’

Zhǐ(yǒu) and shì have the distribution of a sentential focus particle, not a constituent particle.
The position of zhǐ/shì

(21) **A simplex clause:**

Zhāngsān
Zhangsan

zài jiālǐ
at home

chī shālā.
eat salad

(zhǐ
ONLY)

Zhǐyǒu
ONLY

([Zhangsan]_F or entire proposition focus)

[eat]_F or [salad]_F

(22) **Generalization (first):**

Sentential focus particles must be in **the lowest position possible**
while taking their associate in their scope.
Zhǐ/shì can also associate down from a higher clause, long-distance.

(23)  **Zhǐ (and shì) can associate long-distance:**

a. ✓ Lǐsì zhǐ shūo [CP Zhāngsān hē [chéa]_f].
   Lisi ONLY say Zhangsan drink tea
   ‘Lisi only said that Zhangsan drinks [tea]_f.’ only > say

b. ✓ Lǐsì shūo [CP Zhāngsān zhǐ hē [chéa]_f].
   Lisi say Zhangsan ONLY drink tea
   ‘Lisi said that Zhangsan only drinks [tea]_f.’ say > only
The position of zhǐ/shì

For long-distance association, shì/zhǐ must be at the vP edge: (cf 23a)

(24)  
Only Lisi say Zhangsan drink tea

Only yesterday say-PAST Zhangsan drink tea
(ungrammatical with the intended association)

(25) **Generalization (revised):**
Sentential focus particles must be in the lowest position possible while taking their associate in their scope, *within a given clause* (CP).
Finally, evidence from verbs with nonfinite embeddings shows that domain over which the ‘as low as possible’ condition holds must be smaller than CP.

(26)  **Zhǐ before and after the control verb xiǎng ‘want’:**

a.  ✓ Zhāngsān zhǐ  \( [v_P \text{xiǎng} [v_P \text{chī} [shūcài]_F]] \).
   Zhangsan only want eat vegetables.
   ‘Zhangsan only wants to eat [vegetables]\(_F\).’  only > want

b.  ✓ Zhāngsān \([v_P \text{xiǎng zhǐ} [v_P \text{chī} [shūcài]_F]]\).
   Zhangsan want only eat vegetables.
   ‘Zhangsan wants to only eat [vegetables]\(_F\).’  want > only

Both are possible because they are lowest **within their respective phases.**
The position of *zhǐ/shì*

(27) **Generalization (final):**
Sentential focus particles must be in the lowest position possible while taking their associate in their scope, *relative to a particular phase*.

This behavior parallels the behavior of German, as described by Jacobs (1983, 1986) and Büring and Hartmann (2001), although their characterization has been controversial (see e.g. Reis, 2005). (See Appendix.)
Vietnamese
(Erlewine, to appear)
In Vietnamese, I will look at two only words: **chỉ** and **mỗi**.

(28) Hole (2013) argues:

a. **chỉ** is a sentential **only**;  
    (glossed here as ONLY\textsubscript{sent})

b. **mỗi** is a constituent **only**.  
    (glossed here as ONLY\textsubscript{cons})

(29) Nam **(chỉ)** mua **(mỗi)** [cuốn sách]\textsubscript{F}.  
Nam ONLY\textsubscript{sent} buy ONLY\textsubscript{cons} CL book  
‘Nam bought only [the book]\textsubscript{F}.’
(30) * Chì vs mỗi associating into a preverbal PP:

a. Tôi **chì** [PP ở [trường]F học tiếng anh].
   I ONLY_{sent} at school study English

   I at ONLY_{sent} school study English

c. Tôi [PP ở **mỗi** [trường]F học tiếng anh.
   I at ONLY_{const} school study English
   ‘I only study English at [school]F.’  

(a = c)
Chỉ is a sentential focus particle

With preverbal foci, chỉ, mỗi, or both can occur, but only in chỉ-mỗi order.

(31) Stacking the two onlys on the subject:

   ONLYcons Nam bought CL book
   ‘Only [Nam]F bought the book.’

b. ✓ Chỉ [Nam]F...
   ONLYsent Nam

c. ✓ Chỉ mỗi [Nam]F...
   ONLYsent ONLYcons Nam

d. * Mỗi chỉ [Nam]F...
   ONLYcons ONLYsent Nam
Chỉ is a sentential focus particle

This is what is predicted by Hole and Löbel’s (2013) analysis of chỉ as sentential ONLY and mêi as constituent ONLY: the sentential modifier is necessarily linearly outside of the constituent ONLY.

(32) The structure of (31c):

\[
\text{[TP } \text{Chỉ}\text{ [TP } \text{DP mêi}\text{ [DP } \text{Nam}_F\text{ ] mua cuốn sách]}\text{]}
\]

ONLY$_{sent}$ ONLY$_{cons}$ Nam buy CL book
Here I use sentences with a temporal adjunct.

(33) Hôm qua Nam mua cuốn sách (thôi).

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Chì} & \quad \text{(ONLY}_{\text{sent}}) \\
\text{(ONLY}_{\text{sent}}) & \quad \text{chì} \\
& \quad \text{Nam} \\
& \quad \text{bought CL book (PRT)} \\
& \quad \begin{array}{c}
\text{[bought book]}_F \text{ or} \\
\text{[bought]}_F \text{ or} \\
\text{[book]}_F
\end{array} \\
& \quad \begin{array}{c}
\text{Nam}_F \\
\text{[yesterday]}_F \text{ or entire proposition focus}
\end{array}
\end{align*}
\]
The position of *chì*

*Chì* can associate long-distance, into a lower clause, but when it does, it must be in immediately preverbal position:

\[(34)\] (*Chì) Tôi 

\[\text{ONLY}_\text{sent} I \quad \text{ONLY}_\text{sent} \text{say that} \quad \text{Nam like} \quad \text{Ngan} \quad (\text{PRT})\]

‘I *only* said Nam likes [Ngan]\(_F\).’

\[(35)\] Tôi nói 

\[\text{ONLY}_\text{sent} \text{say that} \quad \text{ONLY}_\text{sent} \text{Nam like} \quad \text{Ngan} \quad (\text{PRT})\]

‘I said Nam *only* likes [Ngan]\(_F\).’
The position of chỉ

Chị can be above or below the negator không, which is formally a verb embedding a v/VP (or a reduced clause) (Trinh, 2005).

(36) Tôi chỉ [vP không [vP đọc cuốn sách [này]F.  
I ONLY_sent NEG read CL book this
‘I only didn’t read [this]F book.’ ⇒ I read all other books.

(37) Tôi [vP không chỉ [vP đọc cuốn sách [này]F.
I NEG ONLY_sent read CL book this
‘I didn’t only read [this]F book.’ ⇒ I read (some) other books too.

The “as low as possible” requirement is again relative to each phase.
Vietnamese shows us a case where we can clearly distinguish between sentential and constituent ONLYS, and we see that ONLY\textsubscript{sent} follows the generalization in (27), repeated:

\begin{equation}
(38) \quad \textbf{Generalization: (} \text{=}27\text{)}
\end{equation}

Sentential focus particles must be in the lowest position possible while taking their associate in their scope, relative to a particular phase.
A semantically-sensitive hypothesis
We might imagine that *shì/zhǐ/chì* must be as low as possible (within a particular domain) *unless it being in a higher position introduces a truth-conditional difference*.

Similar semantically-sensitive constraints have been proposed previously:

(39) **Scope Economy (Fox, 2000, p. 3):**
Scope-shifting operations cannot be semantically vacuous.

The “as low as possible” behavior is not semantically-sensitive in this way.
(40) **Subject quantifier baseline:**

Měi-ge kèrén dōu zhǐ \([v_P \ hē \ [chá]_F]\).

Every-CL guest all ONLY drink tea

✓ ‘Every guest is such that they only drink [tea]_F.’

* ‘Tea is the only thing that every guest drinks.’

Zhǐ in (40) is in the lowest possible position to take its focus associate in its scope.

What if zhǐ moves in front of the subject but keeps associating with “tea”?
A semantically-sensitive hypothesis

(41)  * Zhǐ cannot be higher, even if it would lead to a different reading:

\[ \text{Zhǐ(yǒu) měi-ge kèrén dōu hē [chá]F.} \]

\text{ONLY every-CL guest all drink tea}

Intended: ‘Only [tea]F is such that every guest drinks it.’

This reading can of course be expressed, but it requires fronting the associate:

(42)  Fronting can be used to force zhǐ to scope higher, above every:

\[ \text{✓ Zhǐ(yǒu) [chá]F měi-ge kèrén dōu hē [chá]F.} \]

\text{ONLY tea every guest all drink}

‘Only [tea]F is such that every guest drinks it.’

only > every
The argument against this purely semantic hypothesis also applies to Vietnamese:

(43) *Chỉ* can’t be higher, even if it changes the meaning:

   who also ONLY buy CL book
   ‘Everyone only$_{sent}$ bought [the book]$_F$.’ √∀ > only, *only > ∀

   ONLY$_{sent}$ who also buy CL book
   Int: ‘Only [the book]$_F$ is s.t. i everyone bought it;’ only > ∀

c. ✓ Chì (mỗi) [cuốn sách]$_F$ ai cũng (mỗi) mua ___.
   ONLY$_{sent}$ (ONLY$_{cons}$) CL book who also (PRT) buy
   ‘Only [the book]$_F$ is s.t. i everyone bought it;’ only > ∀
The “as low as possible” behavior cannot be the result of a semantically-sensitive condition à la Scope Economy (39). There must be syntactic constraints, not just semantic interface requirements, governing the position of sentential modifiers (cf Ernst 2002).
Proposal
The requirement to take the associate in its scope in (27) follows from the semantics of focus (Rooth, 1985). **However, the requirement to be as low as possible, within a particular domain, is not explained by the semantics alone.**

The “as low as possible” requirement is due to the **syntax** of sentential-modifier placement.
I propose that this behavior reflects a general principle governing local derivational choices. (See Erlewine 2015a for alternatives.) A famous example of this form is Merge over Move. See (44) from Chomsky (2000):

(44) Based on Chomsky (2000, p. 104):

a. There is likely ___ to be [a proof] discovered ___.

b. * There is likely [a proof] to be ___ discovered ___.

Roughly: if the expletive there is going to be used, it must be Merged in as soon as it can, blocking movement of the subject.
At the same time, Merge over Move does not hold over the entire structure:

(45) Based on Chomsky (2000, p. 103):
There is a possibility \([_{\text{CP}} \text{ that } [\text{a proof} \text{ will be } \_ \_ \_ \text{ discovered } \_ \_ \_]].\)

Chomsky proposes that, while building the embedded CP, we do not yet “know” that the expletive *there* will be chosen for use in the matrix clause. These “chunks” of structure-building are called *phases*, traditionally CP and vP (here simply VP).
These same architectural assumptions allow us to straightforwardly model the “as low as possible” behavior here:

(46) **Adjoin As Soon As Possible:**

Adjuncts should be adjoined as soon as they will be interpretable.

...or, in top-down/left-to-right structure-building, *Adjoin As Late As Possible.*
Derivation of a VP phase with object focus:

a. \( \text{LA}_1 = \{ \text{buy}, [\text{DP CL book}]_F \} \)

b. \( [\text{VP buy DP}] \)

Derivation of the CP phase, following (47):

a. \( \text{LA}_2 = \{ \text{C, T, VP (47), ONLY}_{\text{sent}}, [\text{DP Nam}] \} \)

b. i. Adjoin \( \text{ONLY}_{\text{sent}} \) to VP \( [\text{VP ONLY}_{\text{sent}} \text{ VP}] \)

ii. Merge T and (i) \( [\text{T} [\text{VP ONLY}_{\text{sent}} \text{ VP}]] \)

iii. Merge subject with (ii) \( [\text{TP DP} [\text{T} [\text{VP ONLY}_{\text{sent}} \text{ VP}]]]] \)

iv. Merge C with (iii) \( [\text{CP C} [\text{TP DP} [\text{T} [\text{VP ONLY}_{\text{sent}} \text{ VP}]]]]]] \)

\( \Rightarrow “\text{Nam ONLY bought [CL book]}_F” \) (33)
Subject focus

(49) **Derivation of a VP phase with no focus:**
    a. \( \text{LA}_1 = \{ \text{buy, [DP CL book]} \} \)
    b. \( [\text{VP buy DP}] \)

(50) **Derivation of the CP phase with subject focus:**
    a. \( \text{LA}_2 = \{ C, T, \text{VP (49), ONLY}_{\text{sent}}, [\text{DP Nam}]_F \} \)
    b.  
        i. Merge T and VP  
        \[ [T \text{VP}] \]
        ii. Merge subject with (i)  
        \[ [\text{TP DP [T VP]}] \]
        iii. Adjoin \( \text{ONLY}_{\text{sent}} \) to TP (ii)  
        \[ [\text{TP ONLY}_{\text{sent}} [\text{TP DP [T VP]}]] \]
        iv. Merge C with (iii)  
        \[ [\text{CP C [TP ONLY}_{\text{sent}} [\text{TP DP [T VP]}]]] \]
        \( \Rightarrow \) “ONLY \[\text{[Nam]}_F \text{bought CL book}” (33)"
“Competition” within each phase

The higher and lower adjunction positions in (48/50) “block” each other, because ONLY is introduced in the same phase in these derivations.

This “blocking” of higher positions by lower positions will only apply within the same phase. The introduction of ONLY in a higher phase is not blocked by a lower phase ONLY.

This accounts for the possibility of optionality in ONLY placement in examples with clausal embeddings and embedded foci:

(51) Matrix and embedded positions for chỉ, given embedded focus, repeated from (34–35):
   a.  [CP₁ Tôi chỉ [VP₁ nói [CP₂ là Nam [VP₂ thích [Ngân]₇.]
       I ONLY_sent say that Nam like Ngân
       'I only said Nam likes [Ngân]₇.'
   b.  [CP₁ Tôi [VP₁ nói [CP₂ là Nam chỉ [VP₂ thích [Ngân]₇.]
       I say that Nam ONLY_sent like Ngân
       'I said Nam only likes [Ngân]₇.'
Conclusion
Today I discussed the distribution and syntax of (exhaustive) focus particles in Mandarin Chinese and Vietnamese.

- I argue that Mandarin zhǐ(yǒu) and shì and Vietnamese chỉ are always **sentential focus particles**, adjoining to the clausal spine, and not constituent focus particles.
  - This is tricky to see in Mandarin, but particularly clear in Vietnamese, where there is a separate, constituent only: mői.
- This requires a new explanation for the inability of presubject particles to associate with or into the VP.

  **Sentential focus particles must adjoin as low as possible in their phase**, while associating with their intended associate.
  - The fact that this “blocking”/“competition” behavior is only observed within each phase is a new type of evidence for phase-based, cyclic conception of structure-building (Chomsky, 2000, 2001).
Back to the acquisition of focus particle behavior in Mandarin Chinese (Yang, 2002; Zhou and Crain, 2009, 2010; Notley et al., 2009):

- Recall the proposal that (preverbal) zhǐyǒu is a constituent *only* in the adult grammar of Mandarin, which children misparse as a sentential modifier.

- **This cannot be the difference between child and adult Mandarin.**

- Instead, such children are not yet aware of or not correctly utilizing the “as low as possible” constraint to identify the correct focus associate, at least in comprehension.
Thank you! Questions?

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The Closeness constraint debate

In some cases, it is hard to distinguish between a focus-sensitive operator being an adverb or constituent-marking.

(52) **Two hypotheses for German focus operators:**

(Büring and Hartmann, 2001)

Ich habe nur [einen ROMAN]$_F$ gelesen.
I have ONLY a novel read

a. *Nur* as adverb:
   Ich habe [VP *nur* [VP [DP einen Roman]$_F$ gelesen]]

b. *Nur* as constituent-marking:
   Ich habe [VP [DP *nur* [DP einen Roman]$_F$] gelesen]
Jacobs (1983, 1986); Büring and Hartmann (2001): German focus particles are always adverbs.

(53)  * [PP mit [nur [DP Hans]_F]]
      with   ONLY      Hans

(54)  * [DP der Bruder [nur [DP des Grafen]_F]]
      the brother   ONLY      the-GEN count-GEN
In many (but not all) cases, focus operators must be *adjacent* to their associate:

(55)  
\[ \begin{align*} 
\text{a. } & \quad \checkmark \text{ Gestern hat Rufus } \text{sogar} \text{ dem } [\text{mädchen}]_F \text{ Blumen geschenkt.} \\
& \quad \text{yesterday has Rufus } \text{EVEN} \text{ the.DAT girl } \text{flowers given} \\
\text{b. } & \quad \ast \text{ Gestern hat } \text{sogar} \text{ Rufus dem } [\text{mädchen}]_F \text{ Blumen geschenkt.} \\
& \quad \text{yesterday has } \text{EVEN} \text{ Rufus the.DAT girl } \text{flowers given}
\end{align*} \]

(56) **Closeness (informal):**

(Büring and Hartmann 2001; following Jacobs 1983, 1986) Focus particles are as close to the focus as possible.
However, the Closeness constraint has been criticized as “spurious” and “more than doubtful” (Reis, 2005).

The behavior of Mandarin Chinese and Vietnamese presented here shows that Closeness-type behavior is attested in other, unrelated languages.