

A corpus approach to the position of even

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Abstract

The present study provides evidence regarding the positional variation of the English focalizer even. Starting from an inspection of a sample collected from the British National Corpus, we present a usage-based analysis of the differences between the “prefocusing” and “intrafocusing” positions of even, with the specific aim of accounting for the alternation between one and the other. The results of this study show two principal findings. The first is that there are interesting regularities in these two positions of even with respect to the element it focuses on, which can be explained in terms of morphology. The second is a new, more user-friendly classification of positions of even and other focalizers, which can be used for the better understanding and pedagogy of these units.

Keywords: focalizers, position, corpus, language teaching

1. Introduction

Focalizers such as *even*, *also*, *just* or *only* can be defined as units which can draw the attention of the listener or of the reader towards almost any element in the sentence, and which have a very varied positional potential (*cf.* Quirk *et al.* 1985: 566-612, Huddleston, Pullum 2002: 586-595; Downing, Locke 2006:506). Numerous authors have described their morphosyntactic behaviour (*e.g.*, Taglicht 1984; Bayer 1999), their semantic contents, as well as the pragmatic implicatures that they trigger in discourse (*e.g.*, König 1991; Nevalainen 1991). In addition, another recurrent point of interest in this field has been the study of their positional variability. The latter has been studied for a variety of focalizers, including *also* (*e.g.*, Fjelkestam-Nilsson 1980; 1983; Gast 2006), and *only* (*e.g.*, Kenyon 1951; Nevalainen 1980; 1987; Rissanen 1980; Cairncross 1997). However, the different positions that these occupy with respect to the focused element and the factors that intervene in the selection of one position rather than another has not been satisfactorily completed.

In the face of these problems, we have considered it necessary to contribute to the description of the positional behaviour of focalizers. To this end, we have attempted to explain how the great positional potential of focalizers can be explained, and which parameters are pertinent in the selection of each position. In the present study these questions will be narrowed down to the following specific research questions: what might explain the difference between the “prefocusing position” and the “intrafocusing position” of *even*? Can these two positions be considered as alternatives? If so, what factors intervene in the selection of one rather than the other? In this study, we will examine focusing positions of *even* in both the verb phrase (VP) and in the prepositional phrase (PP). Also, we will attempt to show that, although *even* maintains its role as a focalizer in both kinds of phrases, there are clear differences regarding the frequency with which each position appears in these two types of phrases, and in relation to the restrictions that govern them.

2. *The word even and its positions*

The word *even* can have several uses in English: it can be an adjective, as in ‘Always lay the rug on a flat and *even* surface.’ (EX0 667)¹; a verb, normally collocating with the particle *out* in examples such as ‘The electricity user has to be persuaded to *even out* his use of electricity.’ (KRW 67); or a focalizer in examples like ‘They laughed, unexpectedly, *even* [Mary].’ (HRA 4109), in which *even* functions as an additive unit that highlights the element it binds with (in square brackets). It also marks a somehow surprising or unexpected element – at least from the subjective point of view of the speaker. For the purposes of the present study, only cases of this third type will be taken into account and the conclusions drawn will apply solely to cases of this type.

The different positions that *even* can occupy in the sentence and the position it can take in relation to the elements it focuses on form a complex and versatile system. For this reason, prior to the corpus analysis presented below we will give an all-round view on the positional potential of this unit. We distinguish three main groups according to the distribution of *even* with the focused element: i) prefocusing, ii) intrafocusing, and iii) postfocusing. A prefocusing position refers to cases in which the focalizer appears immediately before the focused constituent, as in ‘At Milton Keynes *even* [the ducks] were peeking.’ (K1S 1914). Intrafocusing positions comprise cases in which the focalizer appears somewhere among the constituting components of the focused element, as in ‘You’re so pretty you [don’t *even* have to try].’ (G07 945), in which *even* precedes the main verb but follows the auxiliary *do* and the negative particle *not*. Finally, postfocusing positions refer to cases in which the focalizer is placed immediately after the focused constituent, as may be seen in ‘A few treat them like confessionals, [therapy] *even*.’ (CD6 1667).

In addition, for the sake of presenting a more complete description of the positional behaviour of focalizers, we also distinguish between continuous and discontinuous focus structures². Continuous structures accommodate cases of pre-, intra-, and postfocusing, like the ones just seen, in which both the focalizer and the focused unit appear immediately next to each other. By contrast, discontinuous structures normally include cases of prefocusing in which there is no juxtaposition of the two elements, and *even* and *also* are separated from the focused constituent by elements that do not belong to the focus structure, as in ‘She might *even*, he suggested, as they went to the stairs, [benefit from a quiet winter with her sister].’ (ADS 601), where *even* appears separated from the rest of the VP and the complementation it focuses on.

3. *Corpus and data selection*

For the present analysis of *even* we consulted the *British National Corpus* (BNC)³. We chose this corpus for two main reasons. First, it is one of the most representative benchmarks of contemporary British English, since it contains a great variety of textual genres – in general terms, spoken and written material from academic, journalistic, political and colloquial contexts. This data profile fits the purpose of this study to describe *even* in most registers and text-types in British English. Secondly, the BNC is a synchronic corpus, which incorporates contemporary texts belonging to the 20th century. This updated data profile also suits our aim of studying the description of *even* in its current usage.

Applications available to access data contained in the BNC have evolved and diversified greatly over the years, e.g., BYU-BNC⁴, XAIRA⁵, BNCweb⁶, etc. They allow easy retrieval of examples; however, the presentation of the instances they provide and the tools they offer for their management vary. The interface chosen for the distributional study presented here was the BNC online service tool, and the methodology followed in gathering the sample of the focalizer *even* was as follows (cf. Cairncross 1997): first, a random sample of 1,000 sentences containing *even* was selected using the simple-search query provided by this online application. Secondly, this sample was manually disambiguated solely for cases of *even* functioning as a focalizer. Finally, from the resulting sample, all cases that did not fit the “*even* + verb phrase (VP)” pattern or the “*even* + prepositional phrase (PP)” pattern were discarded, since the intrafocusing position – which is the object of our study – can only occur with these two structures. With complex noun phrases (NPs) and adjectives phrases (AdjPs), for example, *even* may appear as prefocalizer or postfocalizer, but on no account as intrafocalizer (hence the agrammaticality of (2) and (4) as against (1) and (3)):

- Complex NP:
 - (1) *Even* [the original factory chimney] was designed as an Egyptian obelisk. (*Even* + determiner + noun + noun) (B0A 1460)
 - (2) *The [original *even* factory chimney] was designed as an Egyptian obelisk.
- Complex AdjP:
 - (3) The success is *even* [more remarkable]. (*Even* + intensifier + adjective) (CBE 895)
 - (4) *The success is [more *even* remarkable].

As is only natural, therefore, only VPs and PPs are of interest as regards pre- and intrafocusing. Altogether, our search returns 159 hits for *even* in VPs, and 153 hits for *even* in PPs.

4. Prefocusing versus intrafocusing in VPs

According to the corpus sample collected, when *even* focuses on a simple VP, that is, a VP exclusively comprising a lexical verb (inflected or not), its position is almost always prefocusing:

	<i>Prefocusing</i>		<i>Example</i>
<i>simple VP</i>	56	99.4%	(5) Mrs Anne <i>even</i> [worked] in the morning before going into hospital. (K51 128)
<i>complex VP</i>	1	0.6%	(6) To say that is not at all the same thing as saying that the centralised repository has to be --; or <i>even</i> [should be] (CPA 50)
<i>Totals</i>	57	100%	

Table 1. VP prefocusing

Most interestingly, when *even* scopes over a complex VP, i.e., comprising a lexical main verb and one or more semi- or auxiliary verbs, the selected position is always intrafocusing⁷:

	<i>Intrafocusing</i>		<i>Example</i>
<i>simple VP</i>	0	0%	-
<i>complex VP</i>	102	100%	(7) The silent majority now support Mr Thompson's plans and believe they [could <i>even</i> speed]. (K54 151)
<i>Totals</i>	102	100%	

Table 2. VP intrafocusing

Even adopts an intrafocusing position within the VP when it follows the first auxiliary verb, or operator, and precedes the main verb and other parts of the auxiliary system, as in (8) and (9). Where the VP includes the negative particle *not*, *even* follows both the first auxiliary and this particle, as in (10):

- (8) He [might *even* sob]. That would be good. (ASS 511)
- (9) The government went public with major plans before they [had *even* been finalized]. (HY7 1008)
- (10) Why do some spend years and years caring for parents they [may not *even* like]? (ARJ 450)

As regards pre- and intrafocusing alternation within the VP, corpus data shows that when the constituent focalized by *even* is a complex VP, it almost always appears in an intrafocusing position and prefocusing is not an option. These results are reflected in the following contingency table, which contrasts pre- vs. intrafocusing positions, on the one hand, and complex vs. simple VPs. A Fisher-Yates exact test⁸ was applied to the results.

	<i>Prefocusing</i>		<i>Intrafocusing</i>		<i>Totals</i>
<i>complex VP</i>	1	0.6%	102	100%	102
<i>simple VP</i>	56	99.4%	0	0%	57
<i>Totals</i>	57	100%	102	100%	159

Table 3. VP pre- vs. intrafocusing

As can be seen, intrafocusing and prefocusing are used differently in the two types of VP. Specifically, intrafocusing (column two), clearly outnumbers prefocusing (column one). Moreover, the Fisher-Yates exact test outputs a *p*-value of < 0.001. The results are therefore statistically significant. As regards the one case of prefocusing in a complex VP found in the sample (see example 6 above), the position of the focalizer does not make a marked difference in the propositional meaning in the original example. By placing *even* in a prefocusing position, however, the speaker seeks to give greater importance to the modal meaning of the auxiliary, which in this case expresses “necessity”, as opposed to “obligation” (expressed by *has to*).

5. Prefocusing versus intrafocusing in the PP

Most studies on intrafocusing have dealt with this use of the focalizer only in cases in which the focused constituent consists of a complex VP of the type seen above. As will be seen, however marginal, intrafocusing also pertains to PPs. One recent exception to this general trend is Bouma *et al.* (2007), who provide insights into focalizers inside PPs in English (referring exclusively to *only*), German and Dutch.

When *even* appears in an intrafocusing position within the PP, it appears immediately after the preposition, which functions as a relator of the phrase, and precedes the axis⁹. In the following corpus examples, *even* appears as an intrafocalizer inside a PP headed by some of the most frequent prepositions in the BNC¹⁰:

- *To* + *even* + NP:

(11) On the more technical side the assembler has support for 80286 and 80386 processors whose extended instructions give rise [to *even* higher performance software]. (HAC 8873)

- *With* + *even* + NP:

(12) Though the panther's coat looks totally black, in certain lights it can be seen to be patterned [with *even* darker spots]. (CK2 348)

The reason for claiming that such examples are actually cases of PP intrafocusing, and not necessarily of NP prefocusing, is that the focalizer may change position without rendering the sentence non-grammatical and without originating a radical shift in meaning in the original example. The examples above, repeated below as (13), and (14), respectively, can illustrate this choice:

(13) The assembler has support for 80286 and 80386 processors whose extended instructions give rise [to *even* higher performance software] / *even* [to higher performance software].

(14) Though the panther's coat looks totally black, in certain lights it can be seen to be patterned [with *even* darker spots] / *even* [with darker spots].

There is a clear divergence in the restrictions operating on the selection of prefocusing vs. intrafocusing in PPs. Whereas in the case of VPs intrafocusing relates to phrase complexity, in the case of PPs the selection of either position is not related to greater unit complexity, but, rather, to the formal realization of the NP functioning as the axis within the PP. The alternation observed between prefocusing "foc + prep" and intrafocusing "prep + foc" may relate to the personal choice of the speaker or be morphologically motivated. As regards the former, the speaker chooses an intrafocusing configuration to keep *even* closer to the focused element, thus emphasizing the unexpectedness of the special nature of this matter in comparison to others that could have appeared in its place. For example:

(15) If we hyperventilate [for *even* brief periods] we increase the intensity of the initial symptoms. (EB1 396)

(16) People [in *even* the simplest forms of developed economy] required goods and services which they could not provide for themselves. (H7Y 568)

In addition, morphological features are at play. The tendency observed in the BNC is that PP intrafocusing is much more common when the node contains a comparative or superlative AdjP, as in the following examples:

(17) [Of *even* greater importance] is the need to restore the link between earnings and pensions. (A5S 23)

(18) The contextualizing [of *even* the simplest / smallest poem] has no obvious point to end at. (A1A 1273)

As appears from Table 4, the frequency of prefocusing in the PP is clearly higher than intrafocusing:

	<i>Prefocusing</i>		<i>Intrafocusing</i>		<i>Totals</i>
<i>PP with -er</i>	3	2%	5	71.4%	8
<i>PP without -er</i>	143	98%	2	28.5%	145
<i>Totals</i>	146	100%	7	100%	153

Table 4. PP pre-, vs. intrafocusing

The Fisher-Yates exact test yields a $p < 0.001$, showing that the relationship established between these two variables is statistically significant.

The alternation between prefocusing and intrafocusing in examples such as (17) and also (18) might wrongly lead us to conclude that *even* functions here as an intensifier¹¹, which would explain the movement of *even* from a prefocusing position to an intrafocusing one. However, there seems to be at least three reasons for not claiming that *even* is an intensifier in these cases. Firstly, *even* can co-occur with other intensifiers without this causing the example to be deviant, as in ‘The baby isn’t *even* very big.’ (FU 1096), which clearly signals that it is not *even* but *very* that is intensifying the adjective *big* as regards the notion of “scale”. Cases like these, therefore, indicate that *even* keeps its function as a unit marking the focused element as an unexpected component in a specific state of affairs. Secondly, when *even* appears before a non-comparative adjective as in ‘He is *even* clever’ it can never function as an intensifier but, again, as a focalizer. Finally, another criterion for challenging the intensifier role of *even* in cases of “*even* + comparative adj” is the very possibility of prefocusing without bringing about a change in meaning. For example, it is possible to alternate between ‘*even* of greater importance’ vs. ‘of *even* greater importance’, but no such possibility exists for intensifiers: ‘in *much* greater detail’ vs. ‘**much* in greater detail’.

6. Conclusions

Focusing on the position of linguistic units, one might be tempted to assume that this is a more or less random phenomenon beyond any easy parameterisation, especially if the units concerned are focalizers, which, as sketched out in the *Introduction*, display a large distributional potential with respect to sentence structure and the item in focus. In this article, however, we have tried to show that some positional restrictions exist and can be described. In the case of VPs and PPs, corpus methodology has felicitously led us to conclude that much of the prefocusing and intrafocusing distinction relates strictly to morphological factors. In addition, from the perspective of language teaching and pedagogy, corpus methodology has also proved to be overtly useful for pointing out numerical regularities and for uncovering otherwise hidden relationships between the focalizer and the focused element. Ultimately corpus methodology provides the ESL teacher with clear contrasts which s/he can exploit in order to help his/her students reach a better understanding of the positional selection of focalizers.

Although the data sample used in the present study was small and assertions made should accordingly be taken as tentative, we hope we managed to bring home two major points. First, our study has provided a more accurate description of the complex relationships that occur between the auxiliary system and the focalizer *even* in intrafocusing position within the verb phrase. In this sense, we have noted that the

choice between prefocusing and intrafocusing correlates with the formal structure of the verb phrase. Specifically, when the verb phrase contains one or more auxiliary verbs the focalizer almost always occupies an intrafocusing position. By contrast, if the verb phrase is a lexical verb, in the vast majority of cases the focalizer takes a prefocusing position. Second, although PPs have not received much attention in the relevant literature, we have minimally demonstrated that they can be the site for prefocusing and, to a minor extent, prefocusing. The major factors at play here are stylistic reasons and, most importantly, morphological constraints.

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BNC. The British National Corpus, version 3 (BNC XML Edition). 2007. Distributed by Oxford University Computing Services on behalf of the BNC Consortium. URL: <http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/>.

¹ Henceforth metadata entries will be shown in parentheses for each BNC example mentioned.

² The concept "focus structure" will be used in this study to refer to the group formed by a focuser such as *even* and a focused element such as *you*, as in *I don't believe anyone; not even you* (H8F 1773).

³ Data cited herein have been retrieved from the British National Corpus Online service, managed by Oxford University Computing Services on behalf of the BNC Consortium. All rights in the texts cited are reserved.

⁴ <http://corpus.byu.edu/bnc/x.asp>

⁵ <http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/tools/index.xml>

⁶ <http://www.bncweb.info/>

⁷ If decontextualized, scope over a VP can be ambiguous among three readings: one in which the focused element is only the VP, another in which the focused element is part, or the whole verbal complementation or, finally, one in which both the verbal element and its complementation are focused. For the purposes of the present article, no discussion will be raised in this regard but all preverbal cases will be considered to take scope over the VP only (*i.e.*, auxiliary element + main verb).

⁸ This test shows whether the observed count rates and raw frequencies in the table are statistically significant. The reason why this test was chosen is that some of the cells in the table contain values lower than 5, in which case it is usually assumed that other tests such as chi-square are not accurate.

⁹ The structure of the PP will be considered here to have two basic constituents: the relator, realized by a preposition such as *with*, *to* or *from*, and the axis, realized by an NP, as in *to London*.

¹⁰ As in the case of VPs (see note six), ambiguity may arise in the case of a PP. Again, here pre- and intrafocusing of the PP will be customized to include the structure of this phrase only (*i.e.*, relator + axis).

¹¹ The term "intensifier" is used here in the same sense as in Quirk *et al.* (1985:589). These authors define intensifiers as units that indicate "a point on an abstractly conceived intensity scale" and argue that there is a connection between them and the semantic notion of degree. Furthermore, Cacchiani (2009:240) points out that intensification is also a pragmatic strategy for reinforcement, aggravation or mitigation of discourse in the case of intensifiers expressing emotions (*absolutely*, *really*) and taboo intensifiers (*bloody*, *damn*).

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