

Bite one's thumb and turn one's nose: A minimal pair of focus assignment in *Romeo and Juliet*

MANFRED KRIFKA (LEIBNIZ-ZAS)

1 A natural experiment

There are various types of linguistic evidence, in particular observing of how people talk, write, or sign in their regular communicative behavior, and observing how they do this in carefully designed experiments. The latter has the advantage that one can cleverly construct the experimental situation so that one's research question can be answered with a minimal amount of effort. It has the disadvantage, however, that the experiment often asks people to do something quite unnatural, especially in experiments that ask for their linguistic judgments.

But every once in a while, there occurs what one could call a “natural experiment”: A situation that happens to be as if a clever experimenter had constructed it so that it bears on a particular research question. In this short paper I will discuss such a serendipitous situation, one that even can be checked across dozens of languages. It occurs in Shakespeare's “*Romeo and Juliet*”, and it speaks to the way how focus in human languages is realized.¹

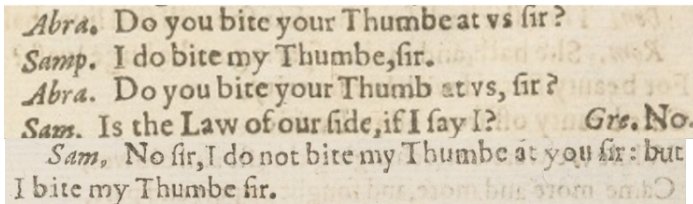
The natural experiment can be found in Act 1, Scene 1, lines 54 to 61, where the servants of the house of Capulet, Sampson and Gregory, get into an argument with the servants of the house of Montague, Abraham and Balthasar. The former discuss how they should deal with the approaching Montague servants. There is a strict order in Verona not to start one of these notorious fights, and so it is important that the other side can be blamed with any incriminating actions.

¹This topic will hopefully remind Katharina of her time at the CRC (SFB) 632, “Information structure: The linguistic means for structuring utterances, sentences and texts” that ran from 2003 to 2015. I hope that this is an appropriate birthday gift for her.

- (1)
- 1 SAMPSON** Let us take the law of our sides; let them begin.
- 2 GREGORY** I will frown as I pass by, and let them take it as they list
- 3 SAMPSON** Nay, as they dare. I will bite my thumb at them; which is a disgrace to them, if they bear it.
- 4** *Enter ABRAHAM and BALTHASAR*
- 5 ABRAHAM** Do you bite your thumb at us, sir?
- 6 SAMPSON** I do bite my thumb, sir.
- 7 ABRAHAM** Do you bite your thumb at us, sir?
- 8 SAMPSON** [Aside to GREGORY] Is the law of our side, if I say ay?
- 9 GREGORY** No.
- 10 SAMPSON** No, sir, I do not bite my thumb at you, sir, but I bite my thumb, sir.

This is how the central passage is rendered in the Bodleian First Folio.²

(2)



Sampson wants to insult the Montague servants by biting his thumb in order to provoke them to some aggressive action. What did this gesture mean? The site myshakespeare.com explains it as follows³: “To bite your thumb at someone was to flick your thumb from behind your upper teeth. It was an obscene gesture similar to giving someone the finger”. According to the Folger Shakespeare Library⁴, the gesture is still known in Sicily but was foreign to Elizabethan English, which explains why Shakespeare felt the pressure to explain it explicitly in Line 3: “which is a disgrace to them”. The gesture might have added some exotic Italian color to the action. Also, being foreign to England, it might have had the advantage that it did not provoke censorship by the London authorities.

Now, there is an important semantic difference between the two-argument, or transitive, structure ‘x bites x’s thumb’ and the three-argument, or ditransitive,

²<https://firstfolio.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/>

³<https://myshakespeare.com/romeo-and-juliet/act-1-scene-1-popup-note-index-item-bite-my-thumb-them>

⁴<https://www.folger.edu/blogs/shakespeare-and-beyond/excerpt-how-to-behave-badly-in-elizabethan-england-by-ruth-goodman/>

tive, structure 'x bites x's thumb at y'. The first is an innocent, even childish act; the second one was considered an insult. In Line 5, Abraham activates the insulting interpretation; in Line 6, Sampson activates the innocent interpretation, and in Line 10, Sampson juxtaposes the two readings against each other. Notice that the insulting meaning truth-conditionally entails the innocent meaning: Whenever x insults y by biting x's thumb, x also bites x's thumb (but not necessarily vice versa).

2 Prosodic differentiation in English

Lines 5/6, and Line 10, present two instances of an interesting minimal pair between the transitive and ditransitive use of to bite one's thumb. But I want to focus on the even more interesting minimal pair presented by lines 5 and 7:

- (3) **5 ABRAHAM** Do you bite your thumb at us, sir?
 7 ABRAHAM Do you bite your thumb at us, sir?

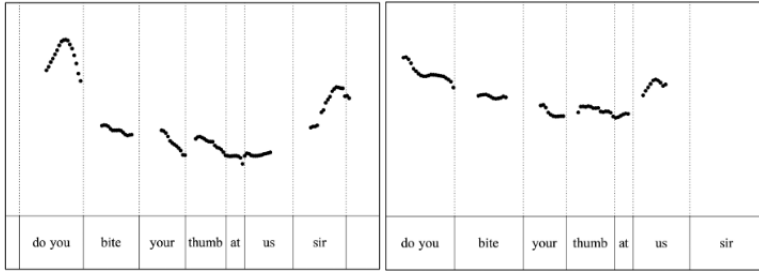
But is this a minimal pair at all? The two lines are string-identical! Yet a casual listening to several performances of the play, as made available by Youtube, reveals that actors produce the two lines regularly with different intonation patterns. They are generally consistent with the following focus assignment and accent structure:⁵

- (4) **5 ABRAHAM** [DO you bite your THUMB at us]_F, SIR?
 7 ABRAHAM Do you bite your thumb [at US]_F, sir?

For example, in the performance of the scene in the 1936 Hollywood production by American director George Cukor we have the following prosody. (The last world sir in Line 7 was deaccented and did not leave any F0 trace in PRAAT, which may be due to the quality of the sound.)

⁵Cf. Emporia State University, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=juSn_IAnwNc, New York SA, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1bIgRoIcMRU>, The King's Academy, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FkrIcmXvv18>, and in particular the collection https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9D_4A7yYzc.

(5) Pitch track of Line 5 and Line 7, 100 Hz to 400 Hz, logarithmic



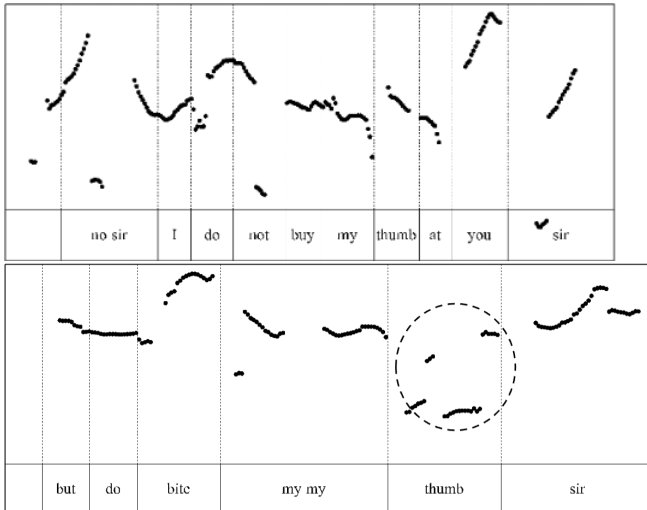
Line 5

Line 7

Clearly, the prosody on *at us* in Line 5 is level, but rising in Line 7. This is consistent with narrow focus on *at us* in Line 7 and broad focus in Line 5, where the pronominal DP *at us* is deaccented (cf. Féry 2017).

Let us look at the second instance of the other minimal pair in Line 10, which are assertions that correspond to the questions in Line 5 and Line 7.

(6) Line 10



The second clause is not very clear, as there is laughter in the background about the joke of Sampson. But accent on *thumb* is clearly falling in the first clause and rising in the second. This is consistent with the following focus structure, with narrow focus on *at you* in the first case, and broad focus on *bite my thumb*.

(7) I do not bite my thumb [at YOU]_F, sir, but do [bite my THUMB]_F sir.

Lines 5 and 7. But the use of the particle *doch* in Line 10 can be seen as allowing for a focus position of *meinen Daumen*, cf. Diesing (1992) for the position of discourse particles relative to focus in German.

- (10) **5 ABRAHAM** Beißt ihr euren Daumen gegen uns, Herr?
 6 SAMPSON Ich beiße meinen Daumen.
 7 ABRAHAM Beißt ihr euren Daumen gegen uns, Herr?
 ...
 10 SAMPSON *laut* Nein, Herr, ich beisse meinen Daumen
 nicht gegen euch Herr. Aber ich beisse doch
 meinen Daumen, Herr.

The translation of Heinrich Voß⁹ of 1818 is the first one that renders Line 5 and Line 7 in slightly different ways:

- (11) **5 ABRAHAM** Beißt ihr euren Daum gegen uns, Herr?
 6 SAMSON Ich beiße den Daum, Herr.
 7 ABRAHAM Beißt ihr den Daum gegen uns, Herr?

In Line 5 the object is given as possessive, *euren Daum*, and in Lines 6 and 7 as definite, *den Daum*. This definite nominal is more readily prosodically integrated with the verb, hence it allows more easily for a focus on *gegen uns* ‘against you’ (cf. Jacobs 1993).

The translation by Wilhelm Otto Benda¹⁰ of 1825 indicates focus typographically by spacing the letters, which was a common highlighting device at the time. It translates *bite one's thumb* as *ein Schnippchen schlagen*, which actually does not denote a gesture but rather ‘getting the upper hand over someone’.

- (12) **5 ABRAHAM** Schlagt ihr uns ein Schnippchen, Herr?
 6 SIMSON Ich schlage ein Schnippchen.
 7 ABRAHAM Schlagt ihr u n s ein Schnippchen?

Ernst Orlepp¹¹ in 1839 translates Lines 5/7 in the same way but offers a new translation of the gesture, *ihr reckt die Hände vor uns über die Ohren empor, mein Herr?* ‘you stretch your hands above the ears in front of us, sir’. It also uses spacing to highlight *vor uns* in Line 10. Friedrich Bodenstedt in 1868 translates the gesture as *Schneidet Ihr uns ein Gesicht, Herr?* ‘do you make a face at us, sir’, but does not vary between Line 5 and 7.

⁹<https://archive.org/details/shakspearesromeo00shak/page/77/mode/1up>.

Heinrich Voß was the son of Johann Heinrich Voß, the translator of Homer's Iliad and Odyssey

¹⁰<https://books.google.com/books?id=7mY0AAAAAYAAJ&pg=PA1>

¹¹https://books.google.de/books?id=o7AXAAAAAYAAJ&pg=PA59&redir_esc=y/#v=onepage&q&f=false

The last translation I would like to discuss is by Erich Fried, well-known for his love lyrics. It was first published in 1974. Fried does not only find an excellent translation for the obscure gesture – *eine Nase drehen* ‘turn a nose’, a childish mocking gesture which is outdated but still known in the German-speaking world. He also translates Lines 5/7 differently:

- (13) **5 ABRAHAM** Dreht Ihr uns eine Nase, Herr?
 6 SAMPSON Ich drehe eine Nase.
 7 ABRAHAM Dreht Ihr eine Nase uns, Herr?
 ...
 10 SAMPSON Nein, Herr. Ich drehe die Nase nicht Euch,
 Herr. Aber ich drehe eine Nase.

In Line 7, the pronoun *uns* ‘to us’ is right-dislocated into a clause-final focus position, followed by the vocative phrase *Herr*. Clearly, *uns* has to be stressed, and its position facilitates that. Such right dislocations for the purpose of focu-sation are unusual in modern German but are reported from somewhat earlier stages, cf. Bies (1996). We find a similar clause-final position of *nicht Euch* in Line 10, where the negation particle *nicht* is in a position to focus the object *Euch* (cf. Jacobs 1982). This focu-sation is supported by the change of *eine Nase* to the definite *die Nase*, which results in scrambling of this expression. As a result, *nicht Euch* ends up in a clause-final position allowing for narrow focus (cf. Krifka 1998).

4 Translation into other languages

We have seen that some German translations capture the different information structure of Lines 5 and 7. Let us have a look at some translations in other languages.

Dag Haug provided me with three Norwegian translations that also have different versions of the gesture (beyond the Shakespearean *bite seg i tommen* ‘bite oneself in the thumb’ we find *smelle fingrom* ‘beat the finger’ and *rekke tunge* ‘stick out the tongue’). The translations generally do not show variations between Line 5 and Line 7, but the following one by Andre Bjerke (1970) uses italics as a typographic highlighting device.

- (14) **5 ABRAHAM** Min herre, rekker De tunge til oss?
 6 SAMSON Jeg rekker tunge, min herre.
 7 ABRAHAM Min herre, rekker De tunge *til oss?*

The Dutch translation of 1897 by L. A. J. Burgersdijk applies the same strategy that we saw with Erich Fried: the narrow focus of Line 7 is marked by placing the adversative argument, here the PP *tegen ons* ‘against us’, in a final

tion, there is no narrow focus on 'to us' in the first sentence of Line 10 either, contrary to the structure proposed in (7) but consistent with the structure in (8).

Closer to home where *Romeo and Juliet* actually takes place, we find that the following Italian translation by Goffredo Raponi (thanks to Carlotta Viti for assistance):

- (18) **5 ABRAMO** Per noi ti mordi il pollice, compare?
 6 SANSONE Io sì, mi mordo il pollice.
 7 ABRAMO Ti sto chiedendo s'è verso di noi
 che te lo mordi. Rispondimi a tono.
 ...
 10 SANSONE No, compare. Se mi mordo il pollice,
 non è per voi. Però mi mordo il pollice.

Lines 5 and 7 are clearly distinguished: Line 7 use a cleft construction *è verso di noi* 'it is to us', which is consistent with the assumption that it is in focus; it also is more embellished than *per noi* in Line 5. Interestingly, the sentence is introduced by *ti sto chiedendo* 'I am asking you', which might be due to the fact that Italian has no syntactic marking of questions, and the prosodic question marking may conflict with the cleft construction. The first assertion in Line 10 is compatible with the analysis of narrow focus in (7), but expresses this quite differently; it is literally 'if I bite my thumb, it is not for you'.

Let us consider a Slavic language. I thank Hana Filip for looking up the following Czech translations, one by Josef Václav Sládek from 1900, the other by Jiří Josek from 1985. Only the latter one distinguishes between Line 5 and Line 7.

- (19) **5 ABRAHAM** To jste si odplivl před náma, pane?
 be.2SG REFL spit in.front us mister
 6 SAMSON Odplivl jsem si.
 spit be.1SG REFL
 7 ABRAHAM Odplivl jste si před náma, pane?
 spit.PST be.2SG REFL in.front us mister
 ...
 10 SAMSON Ne, pane. Neodplivl jsem si před váma,
 no mister NEG.spit.PST be.1SG REFL in.front you
 pane nýbrž odplivl jsem si, pane?
 mister but spit.PST be.1SG REFL mister

The main verb *odplivl* 'spitted' is fronted in Line 7. Hana Filip reports the impression that this puts the finite verb in focus. One possibility is that this marks verum focus. This is not the focus proposed in (7), which would be on *před náma* 'in front of us'. Verum focus might also be the case in the second

- (22) **5 ABR.** Quý-ông nhổ vào chúng-tôi đây phải-không?
 the-gentleman spit at us there right
- 6 SAM.** Vâng, đúng là tôi nhổ nước-bọt đây, thưa quý-ông.
 yes correct that I spit saliva there my gentleman
- 7 ABR.** Quý-ông nhổ nước-bọt vào chúng-tôi phải-không?
 the-gentleman spit saliva at us right
- ...
- 10 SAM.** Không, tôi không nhổ vào quý-ông.
 no I not spit at the-gentleman
 Nhưng đúng là tôi nhổ đây.
 but correct that I spit there

One language that should be particularly interesting to consider is Turkish because of its explicit focus marking in questions (cf. Kamali and Krifka 2020). In this language, polar questions are marked by a clitic *-mI* that exhibits vowel harmony; it occurs in a sentence-final position or is attached to subconstituents of the question that are in focus. Thanks to my colleague Beste Kamali, who provided me with two translations.

- (23) **5 ABR.** Başparmağını bize mi ısırıyorsun efendi?
 thumb.your.ACC to.us Q bite.2SG master
- 6 SAM.** Isırıyorum başparmağımı efendi.
 bite.1SG thumb.my.ACC master
- 7 ABR.** Başparmağını bize mi ısırıyorsun efendi?
- (24) **5 ABR.** Hey bana baksana! Başparmağını bize mi ısırıyorsun?
 hey to.me look thumb.your.ACC to.us Q bite.2SG
- 6 SAM.** Evet, başparmağımı ısırıyorum.
 yes thumb.my.ACC bite.1SG
- 7 ABR.** Peki, bize mi ısırıyorsun başparmağını?
 alright to.us Q bite.2SG thumb.your
- ...
- 10 SAM.** Hayır, size ısırmiyorum başparmağımı.
 no to.you bite.NEG.1SG thumb.my
 Ama başparmağımı da ısırıyorum.
 but thumb.my.ACC too bite.2SG

We find focus marking by the polar question particle *mI* on *bize* ‘to us’ in both Line 5 and Line 7. This corresponds to the narrow-focus analysis proposed in (7) for Line 7, but seems to be at odds with the assumption of broad focus marking for Line 5. However, focus marking on an argument can also project to larger constituents, as shown in Kamali (2015). Hence, focus marking on *bize*

is also compatible with broad focus marking. But notice that the translator in (24) extraposes *başparmağımı* ‘my thumb’ in Line 7, which is possible as it is a ‘given’ constituent at this point. By this move, the direct object *başparmağımı* cannot be part of the focus anymore, different from Line 5. This is consistent with the idea that focus in Line 7 is more narrow than in Line 5.

Line 10 in (24) also supports an analysis of different foci. In the first sentence, *başparmağımı* is again extraposed, hence focus is restricted, most plausibly to ‘to you’. This contrasts with the second sentence, where *başparmağımı* is not extraposed, even though it is given. This makes it possible to integrate it into the focus domain. This can be seen as supporting analysis (8).

5 Conclusion

When asking for the relevance of *Romeo and Juliet* for linguistics, people would probably come up with Romeo’s line “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose / By any other name would smell as sweet”, which reveals, perhaps surprisingly, an anti-iconic view of language. This small article points out that there are other linguistic gems in this masterpiece. It would be worthwhile to hunt for other translations of this little passage, and perhaps for similar close variants in other literary texts.

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