The Structure of Disfluency Repairs

Normal everyday speech contains disfluencies, the um's and uh's which signal difficulty or error on the part of speakers. While disfluent speech seems to be a natural case of language performance, language competence also plays an intimate role in shaping disfluency and its repair. Beginning with Levelt (1983, 1989), I argue that the form of disfluency repair follows from two grammatical sources: right node raising and contrastive focus. Levelt noted that even disfluent utterances have acceptability judgments. He proposed a well-formedness rule for disfluency repair in which an original utterance O and a repair R, $<O \text{ uh } R>$, is well formed iff there is a continuation C such that $<O \text{ C or R}>$ is well formed. This rule raises several questions: How is C recovered for a sentence? and How are errors and repairs connected to one another? Answering the first, I propose that the recovery of C is related to the structure of right node raising (Postal 1974). Under this analysis, a disfluent utterance is well formed iff it has the structure $<O \text{ ti or R ti C i}>$ where C is moved out of both conjuncts as indicated by traces, ti. This analysis also addresses the second question: errors and repairs are connected through the contrastive focus requirement of right node raising (Hartmann 2000). By marking the error and repair as focus alternatives, contrastive focus provides a semantics for replacing errors with repairs. This analysis also sheds light on the mechanisms for disfluency processing. Ferreira Lau & Bailey (2004) proposed that comprehension recovers from disfluencies by Overlay, a mechanism which matches near-identical syntactic structures as best it can during reanalysis. This analysis captures the near-identical requirement of Overlay through right node raising, leaving only the error and repair to be resolved. This approach both updates Levelt's disfluency well-formedness rule and links disfluency processing mechanisms to the structure of disfluencies themselves.