Focus as a grammatical relation: Evidence from Africa

Cristin Kalinowski Jeff Good
University at Buffalo University at Buffalo
cmk1@buffalo.edu jcgood@buffalo.edu

Current research into the typology of the encoding of grammatical relations recognizes the importance of both relational roles and referential properties of arguments (Bickel 2011). Relational roles, in this context, refer to those deriving from the semantic relationship between the verb and its arguments, of the sort often discussed under the rubric of thematic roles. Referential properties, on the other hand, refer to concepts such as animacy, specificity, and definiteness, which are also known to influence the encoding of grammatical relations. While relational roles have seen the bulk of the attention devoted to modeling notions such as subject and object, further research is needed with respect to the range of referential properties relevant to understanding the nature of grammatical relations.

Bickel's recent survey suggests that information structure should be considered as a potentially important referential property, for instance in Mayan languages (Bickel 2011:431), where the choice of focus constructions depends on whether the focused element is the subject of a transitive verb versus the single argument of an intransitive verb or a transitive object (i.e., the constructions show ergative alignment). In languages of Africa, the significance of information structure for understanding the morphosyntactic properties of clauses has long been clear (Hyman & Watters 1984), yet this is an area that remains understudied from the perspective of grammatical relations. Focus-sensitive grammatical relations in these languages, in particular, often superficially resemble strategies associated with the encoding of thematic relations in other languages with respect to their formal properties—involving, for instance, rigid patterns of word order, special types of case marking, or verbal argument agreement. This can cause their differences from grammatical relations more closely connected to thematic roles to be underappreciated.

A recently conducted typological survey of over 130 African languages suggests that focus is, in fact, one of the primary properties that needs to be considered in coming to an understanding of grammatical relations in languages of the continent and indicates that it should be set alongside better studied properties such as thematic roles and animacy when considering grammatical relations typology more generally. This paper reports on the results of the survey of most relevance to this issue.

It is not always the case that focus marking in African languages takes on patterns that make it comparable to more canonical types of grammatical relations. The morphosyntactic coding of focus in some languages in the survey, for instance, merely involves flagging an element as being in focus regardless of its syntactic function, in much the same way that definiteness can be encoded with a determiner modifying a noun whatever its syntactic role. This is seen in example (1) from Soninke. The focus marker *ya* immediately follows whichever constituent is in focus, including possessors, objects, verb phrases, and temporal adverbs.

(1) Soninke [snk] (Mande, Western Mande: Mali)

  a. *Umaru **ya** renme n da lemine ke katu daaru*
    Umar **FOC** son NM PRED child NM hit yesterday
    "It's Umar whose son hit the child yesterday."

b. *Umaru renme n da lemine ke **ya** katu daaru*
Umar son NM PRED child NM **FOC** hit yesterday
"It's the child that Umar's son hit yesterday."

c. *Umaru renme n da lemine ke katu **ya** daaru.*
Umar son NM PRED child NM hit **FOC** yesterday
"It's hitting the child that Umar's son did yesterday."

d. *Umaru renme n da lemine ke katu daaru **ya***
Umar son NM PRED child NM hit yesterday **FOC**
"It's yesterday that Umar's son hit the child." (Diagana 1987:62)

While such straightforward constructions are not uncommon in African languages, of primary interest here are those languages in the survey where the coding of information structure more closely resembles what is associated with canonical grammatical relations. In particular, there are constructions in which the morphosyntactic encoding of information structure is heavily grammaticalized, making use of structures which are more generally associated with the encoding of thematic roles in other parts of the world. Examples of these include: rigid word order a focus coding mechanism, focus-sensitive case-marking patterns, special morphological forms of nouns that are case-like but do not encode usual case functions, and patterns of verbal morphology resembling those associated with voice alternations. These are exemplified below.

The data in (2) and (3) illustrates the use of cognate object constructions as a strategy of encoding verb focus in a language where focus is strongly associated with immediate postverbal position. While the inflected verb acts as the syntactic head of the clause, the lexical semantic properties of the verb are focused via the presence of a verbal copy element occurring in postverbal position, which is morphosyntactically encoded as an object, as seen in (2a) and (3a). A comparison of these sentences to those in (2b) and (3b) reveals that a cognate object is encoded in exactly the same way as a focused object in these languages. In Vute, both the cognate object and the focused object are followed by an object focus marker. In Ejagham, both occur with a noun class prefix, and a verbal suffix indicates that a constituent is in focus. This is in contrast to (3c), in which the focus is on the truth value of the clause (verum focus) rather than a constituent. In this case, a verb focus marker is used rather than a constituent focus marker. In these constructions, the cognate object fulfills the grammatical role of object, but its use is motivated by information structural considerations rather than, for instance, considerations connected to thematic relations.

(2) Vute [vut] (Niger-Congo, Bantoid: Cameroon)

a. *ŋgé tɨ se-ko se ʔá*
she PST1 IPFV.wash-IPFV.CONT washing OBJ.FOC
"She was WASHING them (not ironing them)." (Thwing & Watters 1987:112)

b. *yáyà tɨ se-ko júk ʔá*
yaya PST1 wash-IPFV:CONT clothes OBJ.FOC
"Yaya was washing CLOTHES." (Thwing & Watters 1987:111)

(3) Ejagham [etu] (Niger-Congo, Bantoid: Nigeria)

    a. *a-nam-ɛ́ˊ   o-năm*
       3:PFV-buy-CFOC 14-buy
       "He BOUGHT them."

    b. *a-kpaŋ-ɛ́ˊ   bi-yu*
       3:PFV-hoe-CFOC 8-yam
       "He hoed YAMS." (Watters 2010:365)

    c. *oga a-nâm   bi-yu a*
       Oga 3:PFV:VFOC-buy 8-yam Q
       "Did Oga buy yams? (Is it the case that Oga bought yams?)" (Watters 2010:366)

In other languages, the information-structural status of arguments determines the selection of case markers or nominal forms. In Gimira, in (4), the focused object occurs unexpectedly in an oblique case. In (4b), 'man' occurs with an oblique suffix, whereas in (4a), 'bananas' occurs with no suffix, as the accusative case marker is not obligatory. In this construction, both the appearance of a case marker and its form (oblique rather than accusative) is determined by the focus structure of the phrase.

(4) Gimira [bcq] (Afro-Asiatic, North Omotic: Ethiopia)

    a. *yi1si3   muz3 go1-tu-e3*
       3M.SBJ bananas buy-3M-FIN
       "He bought bananas." (Breeze 1990:47)

    b. *nas4(y)i5   č'ad4ba1ne3*
       man.3M.OBL bite.3REFL.JUS
       "Let me bite THAT MAN." (Breeze 1990:43)

The examples in (5) from Khoekhoe show that when the object is narrowly focused, both the object and the subject occur in oblique case (5a). This contrasts with (5b), where the focused subject occurs in nominative case, the default case for subjects in the language. The subject occurs in nominative case in all instances except when there is narrow focus on the object. In order to determine whether the subject occurs in nominative or oblique case, therefore, the information-structural status of the object must be taken into account. This is another case of a kind of coding strategy (case marking) more usually associated with thematic relations being determined by focus structure.

(5) Khoekhoe [naq] (Central Khoisan, Khoe: Namibia)

    a. *tarasa   b ge aoba   ra   mû*
       woman.3F.SG.OBL he IND man.3M.SG.OBL PROG see
       "The man is seeing THE/A WOMAN." (Haacke 2006:117)

    b. *aob   ge tarasa   ra   mû*
       man.3M.SG.NOM IND woman.3F.SG.OBL PROG see
       "THE/A MAN is seeing the/a woman." (Haacke 2006:114)

In Aghem, the morphological form of the object noun is determined by its information-structural status. The examples in (6) illustrate the different forms of the object in question. In (6a), the sentence has a typical topic-comment structure in which the entire verb phrase is in focus. The object, which is part of this focused predicate, occurs in what is referred to as the A-form, indicated by a prefixing noun class morpheme. This contrasts with (6b), in which the subject is narrowly focused. In this case, it is the subject which occurs in the A-form, and the object instead occurs in the B-form, indicated by a suffixing noun class morpheme. The B-form of the object also occurs in (6c), where the focused element is the auxiliary verb. In Aghem, then, as in the Khoekhoe examples in (5), nominal morphology is dependent on information structure. However, unlike the Khoekhoe constructions, the different morphological forms of the object are not also associated with thematic relations in Aghem.

(6)   Aghem [agq] (Niger-Congo, Bantoid: Cameroon)

    a. *fíl   á   mɔ̀   zí kíbé*
       friends SBJ PST2 eat fufu.A
       "The friends ate fufu." (Watters 1979:146)

    b. *à   mɔ̀ zí á-fín bέ'kɔ́*
       EXPL PST2 eat friends fufu.B
       "THE FRIENDS ate the fufu." (Watters 1979:146)

    c. *fíl   á máà   bέ'kí zí*
       friends SBJ PST1.FOC fufu.B eat
       "The friends did too eat fufu." (Watters 1979:150)

A third type of focus-encoding strategy involves different morphological forms of the verb used to indicate focus properties of other elements in the clause. This is illustrated by examples (7) and (8) from Makhuwa. There are two verbal paradigms in certain tenses which indicate the information-structural status of the following element. The so-called conjoint form is used when the following element is focused. This element can be a noun, as in (7b), or even an adverb, as in (8b) (with the consequence that adverbs in Makhuwa are formally conflated with objects in this construction). The so-called disjoint form is used when the following element is not specifically focused, as in (7a) and (8a). This sort of verbal encoding seems broadly similar to valency-changing morphology, such as passive morphemes, though it is conditioned by differential patterns in information structure rather than thematic role assignment.

(7)   Makhuwa [vmw] (Niger-Congo, Narrow Bantu: Mozambique)

    a. *nthíyáná o-hoó-cá   nráma*
       1.woman 1SBJ-PERF.DJ-eat 3.rice
       "The woman ate rice."

    b. *nthíyáná o-c-aalé   nramá*
       1.woman 1SBJ-eat-PERF.CJ 3.rice
       "The woman ate RICE." (van der Wal 2011:1735)

(8) a. *moo-rúpá   saláama?*
        2PL.PERF.DJ-sleep peaceful
        "Did you sleep well?"

    b. *mu-rup-alé   saláám' elélo?*
        2PL-sleep-PERF.CJ peaceful today
        "Did you sleep WELL today?" (van der Wal 2009:246)

    While the specifics of these focus encoding strategies differ, their formal properties resemble constructions otherwise associated with relational roles of the sort connected to thematic relations. This is despite the fact that a property like focus is more in line with referential properties than relational ones. The description of such constructions is not new here. However, they are typically discussed purely in terms of topic and focus encoding (see, for example, van der Wal 2009), rather than being seen as parallel to grammatical relations in other languages. The present survey, however, suggests that we may be dealing with an under-recognized class of grammatical relations driven by information-structure considerations, rather than better understood notions such as thematic roles or animacy.

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