

Focusing beyond the word: polarity/TAM focus from a typological perspective

Category: oral

Typological work on focus has mainly concentrated on constructions in which focus is associated with a syntactic constituent (Drubig & Shaffar 2001). However, certain semantic values are often expressed by non-phrasal means, but are nevertheless focusable. Our purpose is to describe the formal strategies languages employ for focusing elements below the phrasal/word level. We will concentrate on polarity focus and the focus on tense/aspect/modality, which are in many languages encoded in an identical or similar manner. The relevant category will be referred to as P-TAM focus.

There are two parameters along which strategies of encoding of P-TAM focus can vary. First, we distinguish between the ‘general’ and ‘local’ strategy. In the former, P-TAM focus is marked by the same formal means as elsewhere in the language, i.e. (i) pitch accent (Hebrew, English), (ii) focus particles or affixes (some Daghestanian languages, Tundra Yukaghir), (iii) syntactic position (Greek, Serbian), or (iv) a dedicated syntactic construction (clefting in Tsakhur, Irish Gaelic). The local strategy is specialised on the encoding of P-TAM focus, and is not used for the focusing of syntactic constituents. All the local strategies of which we are aware seem to share one common feature: they are based on the formal separation of the lexical content of the verb and P-TAM elements, and the focusing of the latter. The principal way of achieving this is to mark the element carrying the lexical content as topic and the one denoting P-TAM as focus. The sub-strategies are: (i) predicate doubling (the use of a non-finite and finite verbal form as in Russian and Hungarian, or the use of two finite verbal forms as in Swedish and Even); (ii) excorporation of incorporated elements of the predicate (postposed preverbs in Hungarian, free nominals in Cayuga and Amharic); (iii) introduction of an auxiliary (*do* support in English, copula + verbal noun in Kolyma Yukaghir, negative auxiliary in Even), and (iv) introduction of a focused particle (e.g. German *schon*, Latin *iam*). Irrespective of the means employed, the locus of the formal marking of P-TAM focus is invariably the finite predicate.

Second, the encoding strategies vary with respect to the extent to which the focus scope is specified. In the family of constructions instantiating the local strategy, the focus on the polarity and/or TAM features is unambiguous by definition. In contrast, in the general strategy the narrow scope on P-TAM is fully specified only in a restricted class of cases in which pitch accent shifts from its default position to P-TAM morphemes (Artstein 2004). In all other cases, a certain degree of scopal underspecification is observable: the focus on the verb is ambiguous between (i) P-TAM and narrow verb focus (Standard European type); (ii) P-TAM, narrow verb focus, and broad predicate focus (Bengali); (iii) P-TAM, narrow verb focus, broad predicate focus, and sentence focus (Tundra Yukaghir). So formally underspecified P-TAM focus must at least coincide with narrow verb focus.

These results indicate that there is an intimate connection between P-TAM features and the main predicate, perhaps mediated through the notion of finiteness (Nikolaeva 2007). The paper will discuss various ways of implementing this idea.