

The puzzle of misleading focus clitic position and prosody

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Recent work on the prosody of focus like Rooth (1992, 1996), Selkirk (2004) and Truckenbrodt (1995, 1999) leads us to expect that the focused argument of a focus-related morpheme should be made prominent either phonologically, by having the same focus prosody as other focus constructions; or morphologically, by adjacency of the focusing morpheme and its argument. For example, in English, sentential accent marks all types of focus, including focus on the italicized argument of ‘also’ in (1c):

(1)

(a) Where are you going to eat dinner on Friday?

We are going to *an Italian restaurant* for dinner on Friday.

(b) We are going to an *Italian* restaurant, not a *Thai* restaurant.

(c) We are also going to an Italian restaurant on *Saturday* night.

However, analogous focus particles in Chitumbuka, a Bantu language spoken in Malawi, do not conform to this proposal, as the position of the particle and/or prosody do not always highlight the focused argument.

The association-with-focus verbal enclitic, *-so* ‘also; again’ illustrates the problem. It attaches only to verbs and is followed by a phonological phrase boundary. Notice, the verb is not always the argument of this clitic even though it is always the host, as shown in (2b). Further, boundary narrowing is consistently triggered by the clitic, not by its argument – the constituent in focus. This leads to ambiguity about what is in focus, as shown in (4b), where the verb, the verb phrase or the object could be the argument of *-so*.

(2)

(a) (n-khu-limilíra ma-púuno).

I-TAM-weed 6- tomatoes

‘I am weeding tomatoes.’

(b) (Ku-limiliráa-so) (ngóomá)?

You/TAM-weed-also maize

‘Are you also weeding the maize?’

(3) ([β]-áana) ([β]a-ku-séka péerá)? (Yáaye) ([β]a-kw-imbáa-so).

2-child 2-TAM-laugh only

No 2-TAM-sing-also

‘Do the children laugh only?’

‘No, they also sing.’

(4)

(a) (ngáanga) (yi-ku-vwíra msambízi).

9/doctor 9-TAM-help teacher

‘The doctor is helping a teacher.’

(b) (ngáanga) (yi-ku-vwiráa-so) (msambízi).

9/ doctor 9-TAM-help-also teacher

‘The doctor is also helping a teacher.’

(5) ([β]a-mbwéngu) ([β]a-ku-lyáa-so) (ma-gwáfya m-ma-kúuni).

2-monkey 2-TAM-eat-again 6- guavas in- 6-trees

‘The monkeys are eating again the guavas in the trees.’

To sum up the description of the data, focus-related enclitics attach only to the verb – most plausibly because it is the head of the VP – even though this is not the position that would fall out from either syntax or discourse function. Prosodically, they are systematically followed by a phonological phrase break, even if they themselves are not in focus.

Work by Rooth (1992) on focus-related morphemes has argued that focus particles like these should be morphologically and phonologically uninteresting. The focused argument of these morphemes should be made prominent either phonologically, by having the same focus prosody as other focus constructions, like Q/A pairs and in situ contrastive focus; or morphologically, by adjacency of the focusing morpheme and its argument. The proposal that all focus constructions – including focus-related morphemes – should have the same prosody is at least implicit in phonological theories of focus prosody, like Selkirk (1984, 1995, 2004) and Truckenbrodt (1995, 1999), as well as in syntactic and semantic work on focus like Reinhart (1995), Samek-Lodovici (2005) and Szendrői (2003), which generally assumes the STRESS-FOCUS constraint in (6):

(6) STRESS-FOCUS (Samek-Lodovici 2005: 697):

For any XP_f and YP in the focus domain of XP_f , XP_f is prosodically more prominent than YP .

The Chitumbuka data raises problems for these proposals, as the focus argument of enclitics is not always made prominent by either phonology or morphology.¹ In particular, data like (4b) shows that *-so* is cliticized to the verb even if the entire VP or only the complement is focused. As a result, this particle does not make its focused argument morphologically prominent. A further problem is that the phonological phrasing found with focus-related morphemes does not always match the phonological phrasing found in other focus constructions, as work like Rooth (1992, 1996) and Truckenbrodt (1995, 1999) predicts. Phonological rephrasing is the most consistent cue to focus on answers to *Wh*-questions that fall within the VP: the focused constituent is always followed by a Phonological Phrase

¹ Work in ZAS project P7 demonstrates that, in fact, numerous Bantu languages violate the STRESS-FOCUS constraint (6). See, e.g., Downing (2003), Downing et al. (2005) and Zerbán (2006).

break. In contrast, it is the focus-related morphemes themselves which trigger phonological rephrasing. Their focused arguments are not consistently highlighted by any special prosody. This, then, is the puzzle. The proposal that either phonology or morphology should consistently highlight the argument of a focusing morpheme is a logical one. Surely discourse prominent information should be made unambiguously salient by the grammar. Why should we find languages like Chitumbuka, with focus particles that make non-focused information morphologically and prosodically salient?

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