

Focus projection in Ntɛʔkepmxcin (Thompson River Salish) [WCCFL 26]

1. Introduction: This paper presents new data on felicitous and illicit question and answer sequences in Ntɛʔkepmxcin (Thompson River Salish), in order to illustrate the marking of focus and focus projection. Although Salish languages are stress languages (i.e. Thompson & Thompson 1992), I will show that the stress-focus correspondence manifested in stress languages like English, German or Hungarian (Selkirk 1995, Féry & Samek-Lodovici 2006, Szendroi 2003, etc.) is not relevant for Ntɛʔkepmxcin.

This is because the Nuclear Stress Rule assigns default stress rightmost in Ntɛʔkepmxcin, like in English (Cinque 1993). However, focused elements consistently appear at the left periphery (Kroeger 1999 on clefts and bare clefts). (1) shows an answer to a CP focus question, ‘What happened?’; Ntɛʔkepmxcin is a predicate initial language, with a default VSO order. In (2), the focused object is predicated (a ‘bare cleft’), even though matrix VSO order would result in main stress on the object. Thus, stress is not what drives focus marking in Ntɛʔkepmxcin. Instead, the predicate position at the left periphery is relevant for focus marking. To this end, I present experimental phonetic data indicating that predicated focus constituents do not bear additional stress as compared to in situ VSO constituents.

2. Deriving the problem: In English, main stress falls on the right. Focus is indicated by a pitch accent on the focus constituent. Because stress is rightmost, stress on the object (also rightmost in the syntax) can indicate focus on the object, the VP, or the CP; that is, focus projects from the deepest/rightmost constituent in the clause, typically the object DP (Selkirk 1995, Cinque 1993). In Hungarian, main stress falls on the left. Focus in turn is marked by movement to the left periphery; this has been conceived of as either syntactically-driven movement to a Focus projection (i.e. Bródy 1995), or as phonologically-driven movement, since the left periphery is where main stress is assigned (Szendroi 2003). In both cases, there is a correspondence between stress and focus: rightward in English, leftward in Hungarian.

Ntɛʔkepmxcin looks superficially like Hungarian, since focus elements also appear at the left edge. However, since nuclear stress is rightmost, this focus strategy cannot be phonologically driven: stress and focus push for opposite edges. I present experimentally collected phonetic data on amplitude, duration and pitch of focused constituents to show that they do not receive additional stress. Furthermore, again unlike Hungarian, focus constituents are not moved to the left edge, but generated there as predicates (recall that Ntɛʔkepmxcin is a predicate initial language) (Davis et al. 2004). Thus, since matrix order is VSO, questions with narrow verb, VP or CP focus can be answered with matrix VSO order (3, 4); focus projects from the predicate. However, in order to focus arguments, they must be predicated. Focused subject or object NPs surface as matrix left edge predicates, or “bare clefts” (2). Elements, like DPs or demonstratives, which cannot be a bare predicate, surface with an overt copula *čé*, or cleft, when focused (Kroeger 1999); (5) illustrates a focused subject DP, and (6) a focused demonstrative.

3. Conclusion: Previously, the use of pitch accents to mark focus in stress languages has been considered a universal (Vaissiere 1995). However, this paper illustrates that the relation between predication and focus is what is key in Ntɛʔkepmxcin, and not the stress-focus relationship (see also Lindström & Remijsen 2005 on Kuot, Riialand and Robert 2001 on Wolof). A theory which allows language specific variation for this “Basic Focus Rule” (such as Selkirk 1995) is thus preferred over stress-driven optimality accounts (i.e. Féry & Samek-Lodovici 2006).

- (1) A: *What happened?*
 B: [wʔex xeʔ čax-t-Ø-es † n-sxaywi e SWUX^wT.]_{FOC}
 PROG dem clean-tr-3o-3s det 1sg.poss-husband det snow.
 “[My husband was cleaning up the SNOW]_{FOC}.”
- (2) A: *What is Patricia wearing?*
 B: [ʔescéq^w xeʔ tk nʔpíceʔ] _{FOC} e s-ʔes-ʔúm-s-t-s.
 red dem det shirt COMP nom-STAT-wear.
 “She’s wearing [a red SHIRT]_{FOC}.” (lit. “What she is wearing is [a red SHIRT]_{FOC}.”)
- (3) A: *What happened? / What did Flora do yesterday?*
 B: [[q^wíc-m] _(FOC) ek^wu xeʔe e Flóra.] _(FOC)
 launder EVID dem det Flora
 “[Flora [washed her CLOTHES] _(FOC)]_(FOC).”
- (4) A: *Did he LOOK at the book?*
 B: [ʔ^wey-t-Ø-es] _{FOC} ʔəm xeʔ neʔe.
 burn-tr-3o-3TS PERF dem there
 “He [BURNED]_{FOC} it.”
- (5) A: *Who ate some bread this morning?*
 B: [čé xeʔ ek^wu e Pátricia] _{FOC} k †aʔxáns te seplíl † snwénwen.
 COP dem EVID det Patricia COMP eat obl bread det morning
 “[PATRICIA]_{FOC} ate some bread this morning.”
 (literally “Who ate some bread this morning was [PATRICIA]_{FOC}.”)
- (6) A: [pointing at flowers] *Is this a book?*
 B: [pointing at a book] [čé m xʔe] _{FOC} e spáq^w.
 COP EMPH dem COMP book
 “THAT’s a book.” (literally “A book is THAT.”)

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