Expressing Information Structure in Laali Syntax

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This communication is concerned with the expression of information structure in Laali[1] syntax. In recent years, this issue has been carried out cross-linguistically by a good deal of authors (God 2008, Jeménez 2010, Zimmerann and Féry 20210, Šimik and Wierzba 2014, Kroeger 2017, Song 2017, Szendroi 2017, Jenneke 2022,) to show how the topic is striking and topical to a large extent. Accordingly, Kroeger (2017:1) opines that

> When we study information structure we are looking at choices that the speaker makes
> in deciding how to express the message, or propositional content, he wishes to convey.
> These choices, which affect both grammatical and phonological structure, reflect the
> speaker's estimate about the hearer's current mental states (knowledge, awareness, etc.).

Indeed, information structure is about how the speaker models or processes the information for making it accessible or graspable to the addressee. The grasp of the message is made possible by both the sentential structure and the supra segments that go along with it. Put otherwise, information structure is not the only concern of syntax because the message-sender cannot solely emphasize the underlying grammatical relationship of words in a sentence in order to convey his message. S/he rather needs many other linguistic facets including prosody, context and word movement so as to attract the sendee's attention on what is considered as the essential of his message i.e. the part of the message that s/he estimates is new to his/her addressee. Jeménez (Op. cit. 1) avers that the two major concepts of information structure are Topic (given/known information) and Focus (new/unknown information). My main aim in this communication is of course to show elements/phrases that can be counted as topical or focal in Laali sentences. As such, the work addresses the following questions: (1) How is the information structured in Laali? (2) What are the linguistic clues that indicate Topic and Focus in it? The paper is going to be organized as follows: section looks at an overview on the information structure. Section 2 looks at the way information structure operates in Laali. The following is a sample of how examples will look like (knowing that other examples and their interpretations will be provided during the presentation).

1- **Mé** né-lya **nyama**. (LF)
me I eat meat
I eat meat.

1a- **Nyama** mé né-lya ~~nyama~~.
meat   me I eat meat
Meat, I eat.

1b- **Nyama** ba-lya ~~nyama~~ kwa mé
meat   Pass-eat meat by me
Meat is eaten by me.

1c- MÉ né-lya **nyama**.
me meat   I eat
It is I who eat meat

1d- Mùùnto wo-lya **nyama** MÉ.
Person RP eat meat   me
It is I who eat meat.

1e- Mé **nyama** né-lya ~~nyama~~.
me meat I eat meat
It is meat that I will eat.

All structures in (1) have the same underlying meaning i.e., '*olya nyama*' (*eat meat*). However, each of them implies a contextual interpretation depending on what sounds as given/known (topic) or new/unknown (focus) information to the addressee. In (1) for example, the pronoun **Mé** (I/me) is the topic as it is assumed to be known by both the sender and the addressee. The remaining part *né-lya* **nyama** (I eat meat) is the newsworthy information. Yet, within the latter,

the NP **nyama** is viewed as the newsworthy element or focus. So in (1), the emphasis is put on the NP **nyama** which sounds as new information to the sendee. Also, although (1c) structurally looks like (1), it expresses a meaning different from the latter. In fact, in (1c) the focused element is *MÉ* (I/me) because it is intonationally used for contrasting or contradicting, i.e., it is *MÉ* (I/me) but not somebody else. Consequently, the NP **nyama** in (1c) is part of knowledge shared by both the addresser and the addressee. As such, it is the topic. Equally, in (1d), the focus is on the pronoun *MÉ* (me/I) as it pinpoints *MÉ* (I/me) and not someone else as the new information to the addressee. However, in (1e), it is ***nyama*** (meat) that is focused, meaning that what the speaker needs to convey as new information has to do with nothing else than ***nyama*** (meat). What emerges is that Laali demarcates from the classic hypothesis which considers focus to be fulfilled by the preverbal elements like subjects and topic by post verbal elements like objects/complements. In addition, one Laali sentence can be subject to more than one interpretation based on prosodic features.

Consequently, the linear order of words (syntax) is not the only clue for expressing information structure in Laali. Both pragmatics-syntax and phonology-syntax interfaces also matter for Laali information structure expression. I will have the occasion to explain all this complexity during the presentation.

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