Licensing of Information Structure in Kenyang

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Abstract

Studies have shown that communication is a transfer of information and its optimization relative to the temporary needs of interlocutors (Krifka, 2008:15). However, it has been noted that the manner in which humans encode and decode information in discourse may account for language variation with respect to word order, prosody, morphology and referent interpretation. The choice of the marked or otherwise linearialized patterns in conversation is constrained by different thematic motivations, in particular, the need to highlight how emphasis, alternatives, parallels, contrast, delimitations, among others are formally translated in communication, and the mechanisms adopted to mark each. The paper investigates how Kenyang (a Niger-Congo language spoken in Mamfe, South West region of Cameroon) formally licenses focus, a canon of information structure. It shows that Kenyang uses different strategies including intonation, dislocation and specialised discourse affixes and gapping to convey a variety of information structure configurations. The affixes **chi, ke** and **te,** for example are used to mark emphasis, contrastive focus and identification focus in Kenyang. Sentence (1) illustrates the unmarked word order in Kenyang while sentence (2) exemplifies contrastive focus through the affix **ke**:

(1) Eta   a   kwu   ekati
    Eta 3sg.Perf   buy   book
    "Eta has bought a book"

(2) **Chi**   Eta   **ke**   á   kwú-ú ekáti
    Cleft   Eta   Con.Foc   3sg.Perf   buy-Fv book
    "It is Eta that bought a book"

In addition to affixation, contrast in sentence (2) is amplified through a rise in intonation of the clause that immediately follows the focus particle **ke**. Identification focus is derived through the affix **te** as in (3)

(3) Eta a   **te**   ne
    Eta 3sg..Imperf   Ident. Foc   this
    « This is Eta »

Kenyang can allow multiple focus elements in a sentence with each encoding a distinct pragma-semantics as shown in (4):

(4) **echi**   **ndjere** mmen **nkwo**   **ke**   sê   yáng-aá   nyé
    even   only   goat   too/also   Foc   1pl.Imperf   want-Fv   eat
    Besong   ă   che   besé
    Besong   3sg.Imperf   give   us
    "Even providing us with a goat in addition only, Besong will do so/ If it were to provide us even with a goat only in addition/too, Besong will do so"

We explore the properties of the clause types that display the various strategies adopted to mark focus in the language prosodically, morphologically and syntactically. We also investigate how the nature of the interface between the prosody, morphology and syntax enhances as well as delimits the scope of focus interpretation by Kenyang speakers. Further, we show how a single Kenyang clause can host more than one focus particle and the effects of such in the interpretation of single focus, double or multiple foci in the language. The discussion is descriptive and based on data collected through introspection and questionnaires.