THE UTILITY OF FOCUS

Joseph F. Kess

University of Victoria, B.C.

The modern history of linguistic description for Tagalog verbs begins when Blake published some of his first articles in the Journal of the American Oriental Society at the turn of the century.[1] Subsequent descriptions have indeed been most effective in their treatment of certain aspects of the Tagalog verbal structure, and yet have, at the same time, fallen short about other aspects of the verbal constructions.

One of these aspects is the question of focus and its utility other than as a descriptive device of surface structures in Tagalog. A second consideration is the question of just how utilitarian the notion of focus is. And thirdly, if one makes use of this format, just which features of the language lie submerged or incompletely treated because of the limitiations inherent in the frame of reference provided by the focus concept as applied.

Interestingly enough, many contemporary discussions, like treatments before them, often place such important matters for consideration toward the end of the discussion. It usually appears thus, if in fact it does appear, as a kind of appendix of apparently important, but as yet unhandled, questions. The question is simply left as one of a general nature on the "constraints on focus participation."

The fact is that a merely surface structure consideration of focus is not sufficient for a complete understanding of Tagalog verbal constructions, but represents only a partial approach to the problem. At least one other bipartite kind of approach may be used, the two levels of which together may provide a more complete picture of the language than has been the case. The resultant description if not one in which a unique theory will be necessarily able to map one kind of information onto another level of information; but there are no constraints other than those of a purely methodological nature that would make such a task necessary.

The upshot of the argument is that the present interpretation of verbal constructions by focus (and congruent notions like topic, focus – type and so forth) accounts for only certain superficial features upon which verbal constructions are based. It answers questions about and provides convenient structural categories for verbal affixes in the interpretation and analysis of sentences.

Here it might be beneficial to reconsider some of the possible notions fringing on the grammatical notions of topic and focus. First of all, focus is not such that a constituent is brought into some kind of sharp perspective so that the attention of the listener is drawn closer to that constituent which is presumably in the speaker's mind.

A particular focus construction type does not necessarily mean that the particular focused topic is exclusively the focus or center of attention. This must be obvious for at least several reasons. First, if this were the case, it would be impossible to make certain nominal phrases the center of attention for the simple reason that the particular verb in question does not admit (for reasons not too well defined) forms which make use of a particular focus construction type. Secondly, complements are rarely mentioned when verbal constructions are nominalized by position and case-marking particles indicating their function in sentences. If the notion of focus of attention is followed to its logical extremes, then a given sentence might have two, or perhaps more, foci of attention. Grammatically, this is obviously possible, but in any real sense, how must one then concentrate on several foci of attention. There is no longer any uniqueness attached to the item in focus. Thirdly, if it is information content that focus is concerned with in a topic–comment relationship in a Tagalog sentence, it is the comment which provides information about the topic and makes for greater specifity. Conjecturing further, the attention given, if it is given in this fashion, would understandably gravitate toward the predicate, since this is where the greatest information is given content-wise.[2]

Lastly, the uses of focus and topic to underline center of attention and/or emphasis is in the last a purely performance paraphrase for what is essentially a grammatical phenomenon. Unless some empirical evidence is forthcoming, it is best to continue consideration of what has been termed focus as simpl y a grammatical device.

The discussion has been especially germane to issues where equivalency or non-equivalency is of extreme importance. If the structure of Tagalog, and other Philippine languages, presents such semantic (that is, focus of attention) problems unique to the syntax of Tagalog, consider for a moment the corresponding problems which should be expected to arise in lexicography and translation. In such circles, as well as in descriptive linguistic circles, it has been long debated whether to consider the choice of focused sentence types as being based on semantic and/or emotional and/or psychological criteria in the mind of the speaker, or to consider them as merely exhibiting different structural relations between other members of the sentence. Scripture translations, among others, have been the subject of such concern, and in effect, have usually leaned toward the former interpretation.[3]

But perhaps a third consideration has been insufficiently mentioned and made use of, one that may by inherent in the speaker's approach. Namely, not all focus construction types equate on a one-to-one semantic basis, with all phrasal members accounted for as either focused or non-focused. Moreover, there will be in such cases (as well as in cases where they do equate) statistical frequencies of usage. Such usage variables will appear in normal speech as a matter of course, and more importantly, appear in the speech of children as reflections of adult speech. This matter of frequency does not necessarily correlate with center of attention notions, but is a simple mathematical fact of language.

A more interesting question may in fact be the following: Is there any compelling reason why certain focus constructions appear more frequently while others do not? Secondly, is there any compelling reason why a certain single construction of set of constructions (if the previous interpretation of focus is correct) appear for a given verbal root, and yet others do not? There seems no point in completely denying the existence of connections between verb forms and underlying interpretations of semantic relationships which may indeed explain the intricacies of the Tagalog verbal scheme, but at the same time, there seems to be no directly observable basis for their use and appearance other than pure statistical frequency appearance. In fact, recent studies in the study of acquisition of focus show that the process proceeds at a different pace for the several construction types.[4] One plausible reason for this being so is that such findings simply indicate the relative strength and exposure of children to the particular construction classes, either by virtue of the class as a whole or by

virtue of their exposure to common verbs which may show thus-and-so properties focus-wise. Both alternatives have an element of statistical frequency about them.

The point is that verbal constructions bear the focus-names they do, perhaps more for the reason that they were the early names given such constructions than for reasons of the semantic overtones which can be expected to always and uniquely characterize the case-like relationship between the verb and the phrase marked by ang (or si), the subject-marking particles) in Tagalog. Early analysts soon noted that there were various voice-like affixes which often co-occurred with a rearrangement of the nominal phrases in the sentence, together with a shift in the case-marking particles which accompany such nominal phrases.[5]

Since the lexical content of the phrases and its relationship to the verbal predicate were such that often, but by no means always, the relationship between what was called topic (earlier 'subject')[6] could be characterised in a semi-semantic sense, terminology such as actor - or subject-focus, goal - or object-focus, locative-focus, and so forth, came into being. Here linguists have not agreed on the number of focus-types in Tagalog. Some notion of the disagreement may be derived from even casually comparing Blake, Bloomfield, Wolfenden, Larson, and Bowen.[7]

Tracing the history of the usage of the focus terms, one finds that in early analyses, Blake and Bloomfield recognized several formally distinct construction types, but were pressed to describe the nature of their conditioning. Many of these construction types were at first simply termed passive verbal constructions. It was Blake who first gave primacy to their semantic overtones, saying that "in any given sentence the voice of the verb depends upon the relative importance of the various elements, the most important or most emphatic idea being made the subject of the sentence. If this is the agent of the action expressed by the verb, the active voice is used; if it is any other element of the sentence, then one of the three passives is employed. In general, the in passive is used when the subject is of an action...is made the subject; the i passive when the subject is the object of an action away from the agent...or the instrument or cause of the action; the an passive, when a place or anything regarded as a place stands as subject."[8]

And it was Bloomfield, who only a short time later wrote similarly of what he termed transient predicates ("transient words fall into four classes according to the four relations which a subject may bear to them when they are used as predicate.")[9] and christened these classes by the names active, direct passive, instrumental passive, and local passive.[10] Only some minor alterations have been seen since in the terms used. Of course, the argument as to how many focus types there really are, what they imply, and so forth, have characterized more modern approaches.

Still, earlier as well as later analysts did note that the same surface relationship might be ambiguously interpreted. For example, Schachter devoted part of an article to a discussion of several types of ambiguity in Tagalog, at least one of which is dependent upon the case-crossing functions of the -an construction as both a goal-focus type and a locative-focus type.[11] In a contrary fashion, semantic overlap is occasionally found between grammatically different constructional types.

Early definitions were deliberately broad enough to accommodate some of the different case representations, and still were not sufficiently broad to cover all satisfactorily. Notably, pedagogical texts like Larson, Bowen, and Aspillera have been more careful of noting the fact of both incomplete paradigms and overlapping case representations.[12] For example, Larson mentions overlap between the usage of i- as goal, as instrument, and as beneficiary (apparently also true for mai- verbs).[13]

Secondly, simply because a given focus type appears with a given verb is no guarantee that other focus-types may alternate with it in a manner which takes non-topic phrases of, say, an actor-focus (or any other sentence) and re-aligns them according to the desired focus type sentence. This happens in fewer cases than one imagines. Some have suggested that the case-marking voices for which a verb is inflected may be grouped together and named the case constellation of the verb. These also feel that such a point of view could have been employed to describe a kind of verb classificatory system.[14] For Tagalog, pedagogical treatments often accomplish this by example rather than by device For example, Aspillera lists constructional possibilities for a sample of some 436 verbs, and the list is specific as to which are possible and which are not.[15]

In fact, focus does not provide a reasonable taxonomic classification on the basis of which stems co-occur with which affixes. A more satisfying alternative to this kind of classification is to mark verbs on a bipartite foundation of first verbal construction (previously called focus type) and then notions of case function. Focus thus must be either reconsidered or the term simply dropped in order to avoid confusion with other such interpretations.

If an accurate system of verb description is desired, with correspondent verbal classification, it seems that the only way this can be accomplished is with a system that cross-classifies its verbs both as to which verbal affixes they occur with (previously confusingly called focus), as well as which particular case relationships these verbal affixes happen to mark. This will point up a multiple overlap on the surface level, but this is a phenomenon linguists have long adjusted to. In fact, it is also a notion that Philippine languages exhibit with abundant profusion in other areas. Take, for example, the multiple overlap of the two case-marking particles, nang and sa, in Tagalog.

The point is that description of verbal types in Tagalog may be greatly enhanced by dropping the notion of focus as such and merely considering the voice-marking affixes of verbs as surface properties which may or may not correspond to anything meaningful. Nothing more can be made of that fact. If something more can be made of it, it will depend upon empirical considerations.

One must proceed to the next level and then ask, after having marked all verbs for the construction in which they may occur, which of the case-marking functions which are possible with that particular verbal construction the particular construction in question is in fact marking. There one could keep a notion of "semantic focus," if one wished. But it is only possible on the second-level, where given affixed verbal constructions are designated as to which case-like relationship verbs are in fact portraying with the topic. Here, if the notion of focus is maintained, it is not very different from some case grammar notions presented in Fillmorian arguments for the analysis of language, and focus-topic relationships are easily translated into a simple case relationship description.

1. F. R. Blake, "Expression of Case by the Verb in Tagalog," J.A.O.S. 27. 183-89 (1906)
_____, "The Tagalog Verb," J.A.O.S. 36. 396-414 (1916).

2. Contrast the Japanese, where typically the verb, and the most information, comes at the end of sentences. A similar case has been pointed out for Chinese as well. See C. Y. Cheng, "Toward a Theory of Subject Structure in Language with Application to Late Archaic Chinese" J.A.O.S. 91. 6 (1971).

3. In particular, see G. Henry Waterman, "Problems of Syntax in the Translation of the Scriptures in Philippine Dialects," The Bible Translator, XI (1960). 162-72.

4. G. R. Tucker, "Focus Acquisition by Filipino Children," Philippine Journal of Psychology, in press.

5. F. R. Blake, "Expression of Case by the Verb in Tagalog."
_____, "The Tagalog Verb."
L. Bloomfield, Tagalog Texts with Grammatical Analysis, University of Illinois Studies in Language and Literature, Vol. III, No. 3, 1917, pp. 153-154.

6. For example, see Howard P. McKaughan, The Inflection and Syntax of Maranao Verbs (Manila, 1958), p. 18 and passim .

7. F. R. Blake, A Grammar of the Tagalog Language, American Oriental Series, Vol. 1, New Haven, 1925.
Bloomfield, Tagalog Texts...
E. Wolfenden, A Restatement of Tagalog Grammar, Manila, 1961.
D. Larson, Tagalog for Missionaries, Manila, 1962.
J. D. Bowen et al, Beginning Tagalog, Los Angeles, 1965.

8. Blake, "The Tagalog Verb," 411.

9. Bloomfield, Tagalog Texts with Grammatical Analysis, p. 1530154 .

10. <u>Ibid</u>., p. 154.

11. P. Schachter, "Structural Ambiguity in Tagalog," <u>Language Learning 11</u>, 135-45.

12. Larson, <u>Tagalog for Missionaries</u>, Manila, 1962.
    Bowen, <u>Beginning Tagalog</u>.
    P. S. Aspillera, <u>Lessons in Basic Tagalog</u>, Manila, 1956.

13. Larson, <u>Tagalog for Missionaries</u>.

14. Harland B. Kerr, "The Case-marking and Classifying Function of Cotabato Manobo Voice Affixes," <u>Oceanic Linguistics</u>, IV, Nos. 1 & 2 (1965), 15-48.

15. Aspillera, <u>Lessons in Basic Tagalog</u>.