

A Focus Marker in Cayuga

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**A Focus Marker in Cayuga\***  
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## O. Introduction

A feature of the Northern Iroquoian languages is their especially rich inventory of particles. This paper is concerned with one particle in the Cayuga language which has a widespread distribution and performs a broad range of apparently unrelated functions. The particle *ne:*' is commonly translated as 'it is/that is', 'this' or 'that'. In other instances it is translated as predominant stress, or is simply omitted in the translation. The particle can occur in almost any syntactic or semantic environment, but it is not obligatory in any context. The various functions that have been suggested for the particle in the literature include indication of declarative mood and assertion, marking of emphasis, focus or contrast, and expression of predicative and deictic force.<sup>1</sup>

I will argue that the particle *ne:*' can be described successfully if its distribution is considered from a wider perspective, taking into account discourse structure and variation in scope. Its analysis as a focus marker can account for the variety of apparently unrelated functions. The discussion is based on a detailed study (Keusen 1994) of the particle's distribution in spoken language using a database of five Cayuga texts, including three narratives (Foster 1980, Sasse 1993b, Sasse and Doxtador ms.), one procedural text (Mithun and Henry 1980) and a children's version of a ceremonial text (Keusen 1994).

## 1. Distribution

The particle *ne:*' occurs in diverse syntactic and semantic environments. It varies in the types of elements it modifies, and in most cases it is accompanied by other particles that determine the scope of the cluster and thus indirectly the scope of *ne:*'. For the purpose of this paper, I distinguish two types of scope: (a) over a word, and (b) over an entire utterance.<sup>2</sup> Given the polysynthetic nature of Cayuga, which requires pronominal prefixes on verbs, in many cases scope over a single word means scope over an entire clause. The particle's variation in scope largely correlates with its position in an utterance. When *ne:*' modifies a word, it typically occurs in medial position in the utterance as in (1); when it modifies an utterance as a whole, it occupies the initial position, as shown in (2).

- (1) *ne' she ne:' teshakokahné: tē' ho'tē' tē' ho'tē' niyakyeha'*  
 and.then Comp that.is he.watched.her what kind what kind she.do  
 ... and in reality he was watching her – what she was doing.

- (2) *ne:' ki' kyē:'*  
 that.is Decl Emph

*aha:tkē:h ake' tho:kyēh aha'ahthraniyqta:kō' aha:ktā:' tē' t:wa:t*  
 he.got.up Evid that he.basket.hang he.examine what be.in  
 That one got up, took the basket down and examined what was in.

In example (1) *ne:'* modifies the verb form *teshakokahné*: 'he watched her', while in (2) the initial particle cluster *ne: ki' kyé:* has scope over the entire utterance.

## 2. Analysis as a focus marker

Various scholars have considered the marking of focus, emphasis, or contrast as a possible function of the Cayuga particle *ne:'* and its Northern Iroquoian cognates. Sasse (1988, 1993a) considers focus marking to be the basic function of *ne:'*, and Bonvillain (1988) lists focus as one meaning among others for the cognate Mohawk particle. Woodbury (1980) makes a similar point in stating that the corresponding Onondaga element marks contrast, and Michelson's (1985) description of the Oneida form of the particle as an emphatic element provides further support for the interpretation of *ne:'* as focus marker.

When modifying a word, *ne:'* marks it as the focus of the utterance, in many cases contrasting it with a previously mentioned alternative. In example (1) above, *ne:'* modifies the verb form *teshakokahné*: 'he watched her', which is contrasted with the information 'he was pretending to be asleep' in the immediately preceding discourse. In the English translation, the contrastive and therefore focal status of the information *teshakokahné*: 'he watched her' is indicated by the introductory phrase 'and in reality ...'. The utterance in (3) below gives a similar example. Here, *ne:'* occurs as part of a magic spell, modifying the word *ohta' kehshá:* 'the low spots'. The introducing cleft construction in the English translation ('it is the low spots...') indicates the focused status of the concept.

- (3) *ahé' aké' ohta' kehshá: ne: tshq: neka:tá:koht*  
 he.said Evid low.spots that.is only I.will.pass  
 So he said: It is the low spots only that I will pass.

The 'low spots' are contrasted with 'the high spots', which are mentioned in the immediately preceding discourse presented in (4).

- (4) *a:ké' aké' ké:s hé'tkéhshá: neka:tá:koht*  
 she.said Evid usually up I.will.pass  
 She used to always say: It is the high spot that I will pass.

*ne: aké' tho:kyéh a:yé' ahatshahn'k thréhs hé'tkéh niyo:wé'*  
 that.is Evid that it.seems he.got.scared too high far  
 But it seems he got scared, it is too high.

So he said: It is the low spots only that I will pass.

In a number of instances, *ne:'* co-occurs with scalar particles like *tshq:* 'only' or *hni* 'also'. Elements of this kind have themselves been referred to as focus markers in the literature (e.g., König 1991). The assumption, however, that scalar particles are focus markers is controversial. For example, both Dryer (1994) and Vallduví (1992) argue that the English particle *only* interacts with focus structure but does not mark focus itself. Whether one considers scalar elements to be actual focus particles or to correlate with focus structure through pragmatics, the co-occurrence of *ne:'* with these elements illustrates its involvement in focus marking.<sup>3</sup> In (3) above, *ne:'* is followed by the particle *tshq:* 'only', and both elements modify the

word *ohta'kehshá:* 'the low spots'. Example (5) shows a similar case with the particle *hni* 'also'.

- (5) *hoyeti'qhné:* *hne:* *haya'tahá* *ne:* *hni* *hakyen'athá* *hni* *ké:s*  
 he.knew Assert he.paint Assert also he.actor also usually  
 He was good at whatever he was doing, he was a painter and he was also a performer.

Here, *ne:* is followed by *hni* and both particles modify the following content word *hakyen'athá* 'actor/performer'.

With scope over a single word, the focus function of *ne:* is well documented by the previous examples. Next, I will apply the focus interpretation to the cases where *ne:* modifies entire utterances. In his taxonomy of focus types, Lambrecht (1987, in press) discusses cases of entire utterances being focused under the term SENTENCE FOCUS. In sentence focus constructions, no part is presupposed or accessible from the previous discourse, and participants are represented by lexical NPs rather than by pronouns. Utterances of this kind consist entirely of new information, and thus there is no division into non-focus (TOPIC, OPEN PROPOSITION, etc.) and focus. Some of the utterances introduced by *ne:* seem to fit these criteria. For instance, (6) is a presentational sentence that introduces the spatial setting and the main participants of a narrative.

- (6) *ne:* *ake' ne:kyé skanqhsá:t she' nhq: kae'trq' hqwayatré:'ah*  
 that.is Evid this house Comp place they.lived be.granny.and.grandchild  
 There was this house, where a grandmother lived with her small grandson.

The majority of the utterances introduced by *ne:*, however, cannot be classified as sentence focus constructions. In (2) above, for example, the participant is represented by a pronominal prefix and is clearly accessible from the previous discourse. This implies a sentence-internal structure of focus and non-focus. Similar examples are given in (7) and (8).

- (7) *ne:* *ki' kyé: aweht'aké' hota'áh*  
 that.is Decl Emph pretending he.sleep  
 That's what it was, he was pretending to be asleep.

*ne' she' ne: teshakokahné: te' ho'té' te' ho'té' niyákyeha'*  
 and.then Comp that.is he.watched.her what kind what kind she.do  
 and in reality he was watching her – what she was doing.

- (8) *ne:* *ake' tho:kyéh a:yé' ahatshahn'k thréhs he'tkéh niyo:wé'*  
 that.is Evid that it.seems he.got.scared too high far  
 But it seems he got scared, it is too high.

Since the majority of *ne:*-initial utterances do not allow an interpretation as sentence focus, these examples seem to contradict the particle's general analysis as a focus marker. In the next section, however, I will show how the particle's function as discourse marker is related to focus marking.

### 3. Discourse functions

Like many other particles in Iroquoian, *ne:* performs functions not only on the sentence level but also on the level of discourse. Mithun (1984) describes the properties of Iroquoian discourse particles as follows:

... the particles seem ... to have less salience to the speakers. If a speaker slows down for clarity or dictation ... the particles tend to disappear. ... Speakers are almost uniformly at a loss to translate them. ... they tend to cluster around specific statements which speakers would like to hedge ... They tend to occur in very long strings, particularly ... around elements of high communicative value to the discourse. They allow the speaker to regulate the flow of information so as to be most easily understood by the hearer. If too many short, highly important units of information were to occur in rapid succession, a hearer might not be able to take them in all at once with their proper force. Strings of particles permit the speaker to arrange important information such that it arrives in proper intervals. In addition, ... proper rhythm can affect the hearer's willingness to listen. (Mithun 1984: 329)

Given functions like marking elements of high communicative value, regulating the flow of information, and influencing the hearer's willingness to listen, it becomes clear that the primary function of discourse markers is not to EXPRESS the content of communication, but to provide ways of successfully TRANSMITTING it. A further kind of discourse function is that of CLASSIFYING the content of an utterance according to categories such as high communicative value.

In its function as discourse marker, the particle *ne:* introduces a specific group of utterances. In the three narrative texts of the database, sentences starting with *ne:* are found to express events (in about one third of the cases) as well as non-events (in about two thirds). Tomlin (1985: 90) suggests a distinction between PIVOTAL INFORMATION, 'which describe[s] the most important events in the narrative', and FOREGROUND INFORMATION, 'which describe[s] successive events in the narrative'. A classification of all utterances in the three narratives shows that the *ne:*-initial events express pivotal information. They describe moments of highest tension, express the climax of a story, and contain key information for the understanding of the text. Example (9) is the punchline of an anecdote that is part of a narrative.

- (9) *ne:* *ake' ke:s ne:* *ke:s to:s ne'* *kaehnyq'áh*  
 Assert Evid usually Assert usually certainly Ref they(f).are.white  
 And the white women really,

*akonahráhk akyakotíhe:ht ake' ke:s akonikqhahtq' trq:*  
 it.scared.them they.shouted Evid usually they.mind.lost  
 they got frightened, they screamed, they all fainted.

In the previous context, the speaker told about how her grandfather used to pretend to scalp somebody using red ink to imitate blood. The description of the effect on the white women in the audience is the highlight of the anecdote. The utterance closes the episode and the speaker continues the narrative, turning to a new discourse topic. A similar example is given in (10).

- (10) *ne:’ di’ ha’gyá’ kahsegwáa’ ne’ thagá:wí negyénhwá’*  
 so I.arrived.there the.pitchfork he.has.given.me this  
 Well, when I got to my uncle’s

*ne’ tshé nigá:’ hakhnahsgwanihahdá:ní: ‘ahátqahthó’ né’ hakhnó’ zé*  
 who (the.one) he.lent.me.some.domestic.animals he.saw.it my.uncle  
 and he saw the old pitchfork I’d gotten from the guy who’d loaned

*tshé nigahsegwáo’ déh ‘ahé’ ne:’ ni:’ do:gés ‘agetsy’ qtanqwá:kdé’*  
 what what.kind.of.fork.it.is he.said me really it.makes.me.hungry.for.fish  
 me the horses, he said, “That fork really makes me hungry for fish!”

*ne:’ nigahsegwáo’ déh .*  
 this what.kind.of.fork.it.is

Here, *ne:’* again introduces the last sentence of an anecdote. The utterance contains the punchline – a pun with the word *kahsegwáa’* ‘pitchfork’.<sup>4</sup> The utterance in (11) below is pivotal in that it presents key information and describes one of the moments of highest tension.

- (11) *ne:’ aké’ tho:kyéh a:yé’ ahatsahní’k threhs he’ tkéh niyo:wé’*  
 that.is Evid that it.seems he.got.scared too high far  
 But it seems he got scared, it is too high.

*ahé’ aké’ ohta’kehshá:’ ne:’ tsha: neka:tá:koht*  
 he.said Evid feet.Locative that.is only I.will.pass  
 So he said: It is the low spots only that I will pass.

The example is part of a ghost story in which a boy spies on his grandmother and later tries to do what he saw her doing. However, instead of using the same magic spell as she did (‘It is the high spot that I will pass’), he gets scared and changes it. The result is that he is dragged through the woods instead of flying high above the trees.

Within the category of non-events, *ne:’* frequently introduces SETTINGS and BACKGROUND information. Grimes (1975: 51) defines settings as ‘where, when, and under what circumstances actions take place’, and he characterizes background information as explanations and comments about what happens. *Ne:’* does not modify just any kind of setting or background information, however. As was the case with events, the particle introduces a specific set of utterances within the categories of setting and background. In example (6) above, *ne:’* occurs at the beginning of a presentational sentence that introduces the spatial setting and the main participants of a narrative. The utterance in (12) is a similar example. It is the first sentence in a narrative introducing the spatial setting as well as the discourse topic.

- (12) *ne:’ gi’ gaditshené’ shá:’ áh ‘agwanahsgwaédá’ gé:s*  
 they.are.tame.ones we.had.some.domestic.animals formerly

*tshé (nhá:weh) :gwé’ drá:’*  
 what (place) (=where) we.were.living  
 Well, we used to have some domestic animals at home.

Example (13) starts a new episode within a narrative. It provides the habitual background to the events described in the following.

- (13) *ne:’ he’hne:’ akahshá:’s tho:kyé hne:’ tshikatatrihoqnyanihnhé’s ké:s*  
 Assert also I.remember that Assert I.learn usually  
 Also I remember that one: when I used to go to school

*tho katakqhthá’ shé nhq: hé’trá’*  
 there I.pass Comp place he.lived  
 I used to pass there where he lived.

Besides settings and background information, introductory phrases and closing remarks frequently show the particle *ne:’* in initial position. These two types of utterances are alike in that they are not directly part of a story but comment on the text-telling itself. Examples are given in (14) and (15).

- (14) *ne:’ kye:’ ne:kyé ne’ he’ska:thro:wí*  
 Assert Empf this Ref I.will tell.you  
 This is what I will tell you.

- (15) *Tót’iq: ní:yq: ne:’ ahi:’ aeswatá:déh*  
 that so.much that I.thought you.would.hear  
 And that is about as much as I thought you would like to hear.

I suggest that not only events but also non-events can have pivotal status. Settings and background information that provide the set-up for a narrative typically introduce the time frame and location, as well as the participants of the story. Also, they can consist entirely of new information, as in the case of presentational utterances. Furthermore, *ne:’*-initial discourse units are found to express changes of the subject or discourse topic (cf. Michelson (1981) on Oneida). Finally, introductory and closing remarks have special status in that they comment on the text-telling itself.

#### 4. Discourse focus

Traditionally, the notion of focus is applied to the domain of the sentence. Some definitions describe focus as the ‘center of communicative interest’ (Crystal 1985: 123) or as the ‘information center of a sentence’ (‘Informationszentrum des Satzes’, Bussmann 1983:144). For an analysis of the particle *ne:’* as focus marker, it is necessary to broaden the idea of focus, applying it to the domain of discourse. The concept which I will call ‘discourse focus’ differs from the traditional focus notion primarily in its domain of application. Just as words can be the center of communicative interest within a sentence, so UTTERANCES can be the center of communicative interest within the DISCOURSE. Criteria for discourse focus are concepts such as importance and unexpectedness of information. In this sense, the notion of discourse focus is closely linked to the Prague School notion of RHEMATICITY. Adapting Firbas’s (1964: 272) description of theme and rheme, discourse focus falls on the utterances with the highest degree of communicative

dynamism within the discourse. The indication of discourse focus classifies the content of an utterance as important, noteworthy and/or unexpected.

A further concept that is related to discourse focus is Mithun's (1987: 304) idea of NEWSWORTHINESS. She states: 'An element may be newsworthy because it represents significant new information, because it introduces a new topic, or because it points out a significant contrast'. Mithun applies the idea of newsworthiness to elements of the utterance. Adapting it to the level of discourse, one can say that an UTTERANCE may be newsworthy because it represents significant new information, because it introduces a new topic, or because it points out a significant contrast. As shown above, this is the kind of information expressed by *ne:*'-initial utterances.

Discourse focus has to be distinguished from the notion of sentence focus as described by Lambrecht (1987, in press). In both cases, an entire utterance is focused. Sentence focus, however, refers to the internal information structure of the utterance, i.e. there is no division of focus and non-focus. Discourse focus, on the other hand, refers to the status of an utterance in comparison to other utterances in the discourse. It can fall on sentences with any internal structure. However, an utterance with sentence focus is most likely to carry discourse focus as well, since it expresses entirely new information. Nevertheless, the notions of sentence focus and discourse focus are distinct, and characterize an utterance from different perspectives.

## 5. Conclusion

The particle *ne:*' modifies single words as well as entire utterances. The modified elements are alike in that they have pivotal status in the context of their occurrence. When *ne:*' modifies a single word, this word receives focus within the utterance. When *ne:*' modifies an entire utterance, the utterance as a whole receives focus in the larger discourse. Thus, a particle that appears to perform a set of unrelated functions and to occur randomly in almost any syntactic environment can be described successfully if its distribution is considered from a wider perspective, taking into account discourse structure and variation in scope. The analysis of the particle *ne:*' as a marker of focus shows that its uses are less random and contradictory than an initial picture suggests.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> The following scholars have provided some description of the Cayuga particle *ne:*' or its cognates in other Northern Iroquoian languages: Bonvillian (1985,



1988), Foster (1989), Lounsbury (1953), Michelson (1985), Mithun (1986), Sasse (1988, 1993), and Woodbury (1980).

<sup>2</sup> The question of the particle's scope and its interaction with scope-determining particles is more complex than can be discussed here. For details on this issue see Keusen (1994).

<sup>3</sup> The co-occurrence of a 'pure' focus marker like *ne:* and scalar elements like *tshoA:* 'only' or *hni* 'also' can be considered evidence against the focus function of the scalar particles, since both modify the same element.

<sup>4</sup> The incorporated noun root *-hsekwa-* can mean both 'fork' and 'spear' and also occurs in the word for fishspear (cf. Foster (1980: 149)).

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