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*Proceedings of the Fifth Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society* (1979), pp. 362-372

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FOCUS OF CONTRAST ASPECTS IN MAKUA:  
SYNTACTIC AND SEMANTIC EVIDENCE

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### 1.0. Introduction

Makua, a Bantu language spoken in Tanzania and Mozambique, exhibits a dichotomy in the tense/aspect system such that one set of aspect markers signals focus while a second set does not.<sup>1</sup> In this paper, the nature of Makua aspectual focus is defined and its syntactic and semantic parameters outlined. The data, which comes from the Imithupi dialect of Makua spoken in Tanzania, is based on texts as well as native speaker elicitation.

The first section of the paper explores the nature of Makua focus. It is argued that the focus aspects mark verbs in sentences which serve to pick out some individual or individuals from a set and assert that such an individual is believed to be the correct choice by the speaker. This type of focus is nearly identical to Chafe's (1976) definition of focus of contrast.

The second section of the paper establishes how, in addition to aspectual morphology, Makua marks focus. Two correlates, post-verbal position and tone, are shown to be relevant.

In the third section, some semantic and pragmatic properties of Makua contrastive focus are explored. As has been pointed out by Chafe (1976), there has been a tendency to confuse focus of contrast with new information in a sentence. It is demonstrated that the focused information may be either new or given information in Makua and, in addition, that there are no restrictions on focusing definite and indefinite nouns.

### 2.0. A working definition of Makua focus.

We begin the discussion of the nature of Makua focus of contrast by comparing sentences which exhibit focus of contrast aspect with those that do not. In (1a) below is a sentence which is marked with focus aspect, in this case, the perfective which is signalled by the suffix *-ile*. The meaning of such a sentence is that 'Sepete forged a spear' (with emphatic stress on 'spear') and not a hoe, for example, or any other forgeable item. I have used cleft sentences in translation only because they are easier to read than the more accurate English translations with emphatic stress. In (1b), the perfective aspect is absent. All other variables, grammatical relations, word order, and tense, are held constant. In this second example, no contrast is intended. (1b) is a simple statement that something happened, that 'Sepete forged a spear.'

- (1) a. hín-sepété aa - han - ílé nivaka  
 Sepete SP/T-forge-perf spear  
 'It's a spear that Sepete forged'

- b. hín-sepété áhó - hán - á níváka  
 Sepete SP/T-forge-A spear  
 'Sepete forged a spear'

We can conclude that the examples in (1) are not equivalent and that the difference resides in the status of the object noun nívaka 'a spear.' In (1a) it is contrastive and in (1b) it is not. The tonal change on the nouns in focus, while important, is not sufficient to account for the focus. I will return to the tonal phenomena later in the paper.

Similar pairs of sentences can be cited in the present tense, a near past tense, and the future tense, although in the interest of brevity, these examples have not been included here. What is important is that the focus phenomenon is not restricted to the past tense. A further limitation on the data in this paper must also be cited. Only affirmative main clauses are discussed since, although crucial to the whole picture of focus, negatives and interrogatives present additional complications.

Support for the claim that the difference between sentences like (1a) and (1b) lies in the contrastive nature of (1a) comes from the addition of contrastive statements like those in (2). (2a) is a statement which may be tacked on to (1a). It contrasts nívaka 'a spear' with ihipa 'a hoe' and it is acceptable. Contrasting the subject as in (2b) is not, as is indicated by the  $\cancel{\phi}$  (for contrast) with a slash through it. Contrasting the verb as in (2c) or both the verb and object as in (2d) is likewise unacceptable.

- (2) a. ...k<sup>h'</sup>áá - han - ílé ihipa  
 neg/SP/T-forge-perf  
 '...he didn't forge a hoe'  
 $\cancel{\phi}$  b. ...k<sup>h'</sup>áá - han - ílé hím-mpúhíya  
 neg/SP/T-forge-perf Mpuhiya  
 '...Mpuhiya didn't forge (one)'  
 $\cancel{\phi}$  c. ...ahó - thum - a  
 SP/T-buy-A  
 'he bought (one)'  
 $\cancel{\phi}$  d. ...ahó-hán-á imáta  
 SP/T-cultivate-A field  
 'he cultivated a field'

The examples in (2) suggest that indeed the only item that is contrasted in (1a) is the object noun. Significantly, (1b) without contrastive aspect cannot be appropriately followed by any of the contrastive statements in (2), presumably because no focus is intended.

Having established that examples like (1a) are contrastive in a way that sentences like (1b) are not, we turn to the business of defining the nature of the focus. Definitions of such notions are often slippery, but Chafe's (1976) definition of focus of contrast provides a partially testable hypothesis. His definition has three parts: 1) part of the contrastive sentence is background knowledge,

that awareness shared by both speaker and hearer, 2) a set of possible candidates for focus, and 3) the assertion of the speaker's belief of which candidate is his choice. I now take up each of these factors in turn and discuss whether it may be tested and how the Makua data behave with respect to these tests.

### 2.1. Background knowledge.

Background information, the first of the factors in the definition of contrastive focus, is intended by Chafe to cover that knowledge shared by the speaker and hearer. Implicit in Chafe's definition is the claim that what is not focused in a contrastive sentence constitutes the background. Kuno (1975) suggests that information is old, i.e. background, if it is recoverable with a high degree of predictability from the preceding discourse context. He suggests that a wh- word question can be used to establish a context in which all but the wh-word serves as background knowledge for the answer. As has been pointed out by Chafe, however, contrastive focus sentences may differ in function from answers to wh-word questions. If this is the case, then the use of wh- questions as tests for background knowledge would not be indicative of the role of a sentence like (1a) when it is not used as an answer. However, if a speaker should wish to answer a question in Makua without implying that all other candidates are impossible in the answer, then he resorts to a non-focus aspect in the answer. This strategy assures that an answer to a wh-question when in focus aspect is contrastive so that we can, in Makua at least, use wh- questions as a test for background information. In a sentence like (1a), both the subject and verb would be background knowledge according to Chafe's definition, since they are not in focus. To establish that this is indeed the case, we can use a question like (3a) 'what did Sepete forge?' below which introduces both Sepete and the action into the discourse. (1a) is an appropriate answer to (3a). But questions which do not introduce the verb or subject such as (3b) 'what did Sepete do?' or (3c) 'who was forging?' cannot have (1a) as an answer.

- (3) a. hín-sepété aa - han - ílé - ni  
 Sepete SP/T-forge-perf-what  
 'what did Sepete forge?'  
 b. hín-sepété aa - pang - ílé - ni  
 Sepete SP/T - do - perf-what  
 'what did Sepete do?'  
 c. apání aa - han - ílé nivaka  
 who SP/T-forge-perf  
 'who forged a spear?'

The fact that a sentence like (1a) can only be used appropriately in a context where the non-focused information is known suggests that the non-focused information in Makua must be background knowledge.

## 2.2 Set of candidates.

We now turn to the second factor, the set of candidates. That there must be a set does not seem debatable since everything belongs to some set. Thus the claim that there must be a set of candidates for focus does not seem testable. Nevertheless, two points should be made about the notion of set of possible candidates.

First, what is important is how the set may be defined. To begin with, there is a trivial constraint, the selectional restrictions of the verb. Thus, uhana 'to forge,' for example, limits the set of candidates to things that can be forged. More interesting are grammatical constraints such as the demonstratives. When a noun appears in focus with both a demonstrative prefix and suffix, the contrast can only be with another item of the same kind. Thus in (4a) below, nmanivakanna 'this spear' can only be contrasted with another spear and not with a hoe. To contrast 'this spear' with 'this hoe' the suffix form of the demonstrative must be used alone. This is illustrated in (4b).

- (4) a. aa - han - ílé nná-níváka-nna,  $\left. \begin{array}{l} k^h i\text{-hiwéná} \text{ nné-níváka-nné} \\ \text{neg-be} \quad \text{dem-spear-dem} \\ \phi k^h i\text{-hiwéná} \text{ ílé-híp-éle} \\ \text{neg-be} \quad \text{dem-hoe-dem} \end{array} \right\}$   
 SP/T-forge-perf dem-spear-dem,  $\left. \begin{array}{l} \text{'it's this spear he forged,} \\ \text{'it's not that spear'} \end{array} \right\}$   
 b. aa - han - ílé nivaka-nna, k<sup>h</sup>i-hiwéná ihíp-éla  
 SP/T-forge - perf spear-dem, neg-be hoe-dem  
 'it's this spear he forged, it's not this hoe'

In general, however, the set of candidates for focus is constrained by the context and not by the grammar. The set may under these circumstances be assumed or made explicit. Thus someone may ask a question like (5a) 'who left the dance early, Sepete or Mpuhiya?' where the set consists of just two individuals. A question like (5b) 'who left the dance first?', on the other hand, relies on a common knowledge about who was at the dance.

- (5) a. aa-tham-ílé ukomání waakúva hín-sepéte, hím-mpúhiya  
 SP/T-leave-perf dance early Sepete Mpuhiya  
 'was it Sepete or Mpuhiya who left the dance early?'  
 b. apání aa - tham - ílé ukomání waakúva  
 who SP/T-leave-perf dance early  
 'who left the dance early?'

(6) below, is an appropriate answer to both (5a) and (5b), (5a) because it chooses one of the two and (5b) because the question asks for an answer in the singular.

- (6) aa - tham - ílé hín-Sepéte  
 SP/T-leave-perf Sepete  
 'it' Sepete who left'

Thus, the set of candidates may be as wide as the semantics of the verb or as narrow as a noun flanked by demonstratives. More often than not, however, it is the discourse context which determines the focusable items.

The second point to be made about the set of candidates is that contrastive focus serves to restrict the set. One (or more) individuals is selected out of the set of possible candidates and the remainder of the set is implied not to be candidates. In a pair of examples like (5a) and (6), for instance, the set of 'Sepete' and 'Mpuhiya' is restricted to just 'Sepete.'

The notion "set of candidates" while not empirically testable, is crucial to the definition of contrastive focus. We have seen that the set may be defined in several ways and that the contrastive focus sentence serves to restrict the set.

### 2.3. The assertion of choice.

The third factor in Chafe's definition, and the most important one, is the assertion by the speaker that he believes the focused item to be the correct choice. The question here is whether the assertion of speaker belief is really part of the grammar of Makua focus (i.e. conventionally implied) or merely an implication of the meaning (i.e. conventionally implied). Scepticism about tests for distinguishing conventional vs. conversational implicature is merited as Sadock (1978) has pointed out. Nonetheless, results of cancelability and reinforceability tests do suggest that the assertion of belief is part of the grammar and is, in other words, conventionally implied.

First of all, a speaker cannot cancel his belief. This is illustrated in (7) below which is judged to be contradictory.

- (7) \*hín-sepéte aa-han-ílé nivaka, nanso k<sup>h</sup>a-ki-naámíni  
 Sepete SP/T-forged-perf spear but neg-I-A/believe  
 'it's a spear that Sepete forged, but I don't believe (it)'

If some part of the meaning is not cancelable the argument is supposed to go, the part of meaning in question is part of the grammar. Still, a speaker is generally held to be responsible for the information that he gives, so that to deny belief may simply be infelicitous and the cancelability test in this case might be rendered invalid.

To remedy this problem one can use as a test, a construction which implies that the speaker may not have reason to believe what he is reporting rather than asserting his disbelief as in (7). Thus, if the speaker signals that he either may or may not believe what he is reporting we can avoid an outright denial of belief. There is in Makua a construction employing a near past tense and a complementizer which means 'I have heard that X' and which implies that the speaker

is skeptical about the truth of the complement. We find that a focus sentence cannot be embedded under this construction as illustrated in (8a).

- (8)\*a. ki - heéwá eti aa - góng - íle múútuka-áyá hín-sepéte  
 SP-T/hear that SP/T wreck-perf car-poss Sepete  
 'I have heard that it's Sepete who wrecked his car'
- b. kahéewá wiirá aa-góng-íle múútuka-áyá hín-sepéte  
 SP/T/hear that SP-wreck-perf car poss Sepete  
 'I heard (and I have reason to believe that it's true)  
 that it's Sepete who wrecked his car'
- c. ki-heéwá eti hín-sepéte ahaa- góng - á múútuka-áya  
 SP/T-hear that Sepete SP/T/O-wreck-A car - poss  
 'I have heard that Sepete wrecked his car'
- d. kahéewá wiirá hín-sepéte ahaagóng-á muutuka-áya  
 SP/T/hear that Sepete SP/T/O-wreck-a car-his  
 'I heard that Sepete wrecked his car'

Significantly, a far past tense and a different complementizer implying that the complement sentence is believed by the speaker does allow embedding of focused sentences as (8b) shows. Non-focus sentences (8c) and (8d) are embeddable under either of the complementizers. We can conclude then, that in a focus sentence, belief cannot be either canceled or suspended.

The cancelability test alone does not show that the belief of the speaker is being asserted, only that the speaker must believe what he says. Evidence that the focus sentences do assert the belief of the speaker comes from reinforcing the notion of belief by putting 'I believe' in front of a contrastive sentence. In (9a) below we find that a native speaker judges the sentence with 'I believe' to be redundant and clumsy. The native speaker says that "you are telling the hearer that's what you believe, why say it twice?". Importantly, as illustrated in (9b), a non-focus sentence can be preceded by 'I believe' and such a sentence is not judged to be redundant.

- (9)\*a. ki-náámíni wiirá hín-sepéte aa - gong - íle muutuk-aáyo  
 SP-A/believe that Sepete SP/T-wreck-perf car-poss  
 'I believe that it's his car that Sepete wrecked'
- b. ki-náámíni wiirá hín-sepéte ahaa- góng - á muutukaáyo  
 SP-A/believe that Sepete SP/T/OP -wreck-A car-poss  
 'I believe that Sepete wrecked his car'

We can conclude, I think, that there is a difference in the status of speaker belief in (9a) and (9b). Taken together, the evidence that belief cannot be suspended or denied in a focus sentence (although it can be in a non-focus sentence) and the fact that asserting belief is judged to be redundant in focus sentences (but not in non-focus sentences) suggests that the belief of the speaker about his choice of candidate is an assertion and properly part of the grammar of Makua focus.

## 3. Syntactic and tonal correlates of contrastive focus.

We now turn to the syntactic properties of contrastive focus. In addition to the aspectual morphology signalling focus, syntactic position and tone work together to mark which item or items are in focus. So far, the examples have included only NP's in focus. It should be mentioned that in focus aspect, adverbs, adjectives, and a subset of complement clauses can also be focused. Again, I will restrict the data here to just nouns in the interest of clarity. Verbs cannot be focused in affirmative main clauses with focus aspect, although there is no a priori reason why a verb cannot be contrasted (he forged a spear rather than repaired it, for example). This is a peculiarity of Makua focus and requires more explanation than I have time for here.

With respect to the syntactic position of focus in focus aspectual sentences, (1a) and (6), we find in two of the contrastive examples discussed so far, that the focused item was in postverbal position. In (1a) this item was an object and in (6) the item was a subject. In fact, there is a definite link between postverbal position and focus so that in order to be focused an item must be in postverbal position. Furthermore, when the verb is marked with one of the focus aspects, something must be in focus. These two properties, the requirement of focus and its postverbal position, work together so that in a simple SV affirmative sentence, the word order must be VS. This is illustrated in (10).

- (10)\*a. hín-sepéte aa-soócyé-éle  
 Sepete SP/T-be a little tired-perf
- b. aa-soócyé-éle hín-sepéte  
 SP/T-be a little tired-perf Sepete  
 'it's Sepete that was a little tired'
- c. hín-sepéte ahó-sóocyá-a  
 Sepete SP/T-be a little tired-A  
 'Sepete was a little tired'
- d. ahó-sóocyá-a hín-sepéte  
 SP/T-be a little tired-A Sepete  
 'Sepete was a little tired (and others may have been too)'

(10a) is judged to be unacceptable because it is incomplete; there is no focus. (10b), where the subject follows the verb is all right, and the subject is in focus. (10c), by way of contrast, shows that a subject may precede an intransitive verb in a non-focus aspect. (10d) shows that VS word order is also all right in non-focus aspect, so that it is not possible to impute a rule of subject postposing with the function of focus. Likewise, SOV word order may appear in non-focus aspect while it may not in focus aspect unless there is another focusable element following the verb. Compare (11a) below with SOV word order in non-focus aspect with (11b) in focus aspect. (11b) is not acceptable in Makua as a sentence. Nothing is in focus and the verb is marked for focus.

- (11) a. *hín-sepéte níváka-ńne ahó-hán-a*  
 sepete spear-dem SP/T-forge-A  
 Sepete did forge that spear'  
 \*b. *hín-sepéte níváka-ńne aa-han-íle*  
 Sepete spear-dem SP/T-forge-perf

Syntactic processes constrained by similar factors are left dislocation (which moves a noun to preverbal position), object deletion, and passive agent deletion just in case they move out a focused item and have the verb final in an affirmative main clause.

We now turn to the role of tone marking in focus sentences. If you are a tone watcher you probably noted that the object noun in (1a) had lo tone while the non-focused noun in (1b) did not. And if you were very astute you noted that in (6), on the other hand, the focused noun did not have lo tone. All nouns in Makua that are not in focus or are in citation form have at least one hi tone. Thus, lo tone represents a deviation from the norm. Lo toned nouns are also permitted in other constructions, possessives, for example, but the meaning signalled by such a noun is not focus of contrast so that it cannot be claimed that lo tone marks solely focus. Rather, the tonal phenomena coincide with focus in some instances.<sup>2</sup> Some nouns, such as the subject noun in an example like (6), do not ever have lo tone. A principled delineation of which nouns can have lo tones when in focus is hard to give. For instance, proper names with honorific prefixes like *hín* or *hín-Sepete* do not have lo tone in focus, while the same name without the prefix may have lo tone in focus. In any case, tone can help in certain cases to distinguish which item is in focus. To illustrate how tonal alternations may coincide with focus, I have used a sentence with two objects. In (12a) 'It's a school that he bought chairs for,' the noun *isuule* 'school' has lo tone and it is in focus. In (12b) 'It's chairs that he bought for the school,' *ihice* 'chairs' is in focus and it has lo tone. In (12c) 'It's chairs for a school that he bought,' both nouns are in focus and both have lo tone. Yes, you can have multifocus sentences. Hi tone on both nouns in (12d) renders the sentence incomplete (i.e. without focus).

- (12) a. *aa-thum-éńle isuule ihíce*  
 SP/T-buy-app/perf school chairs  
 ' or a school that he bought chairs'  
 b. *aa-thum-éńle isuúle ihice*  
 SP/T-buy-app/perf school chairs  
 'it's chairs he bought for a school'  
 c. *aa-thum-éńle isuule ihice*  
 SP/T-buy-app/perf school chairs'  
 'it's chairs for a school that he bought'  
 \*d. *aa-thum-éńle isuúle ihíce*  
 SP/T-buy-app/perf school c

The tonal phenomena are somewhat more complicated than I have indicated here but I think that the data are sufficient to indicate

that while focus is signalled by the verbal morphology, it interacts with tone and syntactic position as well.

#### 4. Semantic and pragmatic correlates.

We take up the question of semantic and pragmatic properties of focus by looking first at the question of definiteness. As (1a) illustrates, an indefinite noun can be focused. In (6) there was an example of a definite noun. Other kinds of definite nouns, i.e. demonstratives as in (4), possessives as in (8) and pronouns as in (13) below are amenable to focus.

- (13) kaa-nenév-íle mii  
 SP/T-be fat-perf I  
 'it's I who was fat'

A second parameter, this one pragmatic, is that of new vs. old information. It is often claimed that focus is tied to new information. But the restricted definition of focus used here does not seem to restrict a priori the focused item to new information. As a test of new information, we can use indefinites since they can be old information only under very special circumstances. In an example like (1a) I think it is safe to say that the hearer is not aware of any particular spear and hence the focused item is new.

To test for old information, we use a noun suffixed (but not prefixed) by the distal demonstrative as in (14).

- (14) aa-han-íle nivaka-ńne  
 SP/T-forged-perf spear-dem  
 'it's that spear (that we were talking about) that he made'

A noun so-marked in Makua may be used to refer to a noun previously mentioned in the discourse. Previous reference is presumably old information so that the acceptability of focus for these nouns shows that old information can be focused as easily as new information.

## 5.0. Conclusion

### 5.1. Implications

This concludes the brief look at the function of focus aspects in Makua. In the remaining time I would like to comment on the implications of the Makua data.

First, Makua focus aspect along with the tonal and syntactic correlates should be added to the list of devices languages can use for contrastive focus along with English stress and Navaho particles for example. As bizarre as focus aspect might seem at first, Makua appears to fit into a larger system in Bantu. As noted by Givon (1975), Zulu, Bemba, and Rwanda exhibit certain particles in the aspectual morphology which indicate which constituent, whether a verb or something following it, is emphasized. While the nature of

this emphasis is not strictly parallel to the Makua focus of contrast, it is important to note that on a comparative basis the tenses and aspects in which these markers appear coincide with Makua focus aspects. Recently, Hyman (personal communication) has cited the case of Aghem, a Cameroonian language which also has focus aspect.

Secondly, Makua provides valuable data illustrating the intimate connection between what is essentially a discourse function and the syntax of a language. How should the constraints on word order and deletion phenomena be formalized? Should they be part of the syntax at all? A much more detailed exposition of the syntax of focus needs to be given before such questions can be answered, of course, but the Makua data seems fertile ground for such research.

Finally, the data provides some confirmation for Hopper and Thompson's recent work on the discourse basis of transitivity. Regardless of whether their correlations should be ascribed to transitivity, the Makua data do support their claim that the perfective aspect is particularly amenable to focus. Indeed, the Makua perfective, along with a couple of other aspects seems to have grammaticalized a particular kind of focus, contrastive focus.

## 5.2. Summary

The data in this paper has illustrated how Makua, a Bantu language, marks contrastive focus. First, a definition of contrastive focus was outlined. Tests were developed and it was concluded that in Makua, 1) what is not contrasted is background knowledge, 2) that focus restricts a set of possible candidates and 3) that a focus sentence functions to assert speaker belief about the choice of items in the set. Secondly, it was illustrated that focus is signalled by the aspectual morphology of the verb and that focus position is tied to postverbal position as well. Finally, it was demonstrated that the contrastive items may be either new or old information.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Particular thanks go to the language consultant, John Wembah Rashid. In addition, I would like to thank Prof. Charles W. Kisseberth and Prof. Alice Davison for comments on this paper. Any errors that remain are, of course, my own.
2. The tone lowering in examples like (1a) appears to be optional but, is, more often than not, used to mark the item in focus.

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