

FOCUS, TOPIC, AND CASE IN THE PHILIPPINE VERBAL PARADIGM

JOSEPH F. KESS

The one salient feature which sets Philippine languages off from other languages and which has consequently received a great deal of attention in linguistic descriptions has been the verb morphology and the relationship of the affixed verb to other parts of the sentence. The relationship of the affixed verb to the grammatical subject, or topic, of the sentence is an area which has been elaborated on by most descriptions of Philippine languages and an area which has labelled and re-labelled. The relationship between the sentence constructions so produced have been variously termed *voice*, active and passive (with three or more passive construction types being indicated), or *focus* construction types. The affixed verbs themselves have been referred to as having been marked by *focus-affixes*, and the relationship of the focus-affixed verb to the *subject* or *topic* complement has been taken to constitute a case relationship. In fact, it has been suggested that the case relationship is one indicated by these focus or case-marking affixes on the verb, such that the affixed verb indicates whether the topic is agent or actor, object or goal, location or referent, or instrument of the action indicated by the semantic content of the verb. Some descriptions, it might be added, have elaborated the basic set of four into more, including, for example, a beneficiary focus construction, an aptative construction, and so forth.

Furthermore, this basic schema has been suggested as implying a relationship between sentence types with the various sentential complements in one sentence construction able to be realigned with another sentence construction merely by a change in the focus- or case-marking affixes on the verb and a shift in the sentential complements with the

now-to-be focused sentential nominal complement moved to the topic position and marked by the topic-marking particle *ang*. For a more complete treatment of this type of description in the history of Philippine studies, see Constantino (1971) and McKaughan (1971), and for an appraisal of the manner of description, see Kess (1967, 1972, 1975, and 1976).

Certainly one typical illustration of this point of view and the way in which focus has been taken to operate by some can be seen in the following excerpt from Thomas' (1958) discussion of Mansaka sentence structure. "One of the most striking and important features of Mansaka and many other Malayo-Polynesian languages is the ability to put in the limelight a noun in any of the major sentence spots. The whole sentence polarizes toward that noun. This feature we are calling 'focus'. The form of the verb indicates which of the noun spots is being focused, and the noun occupying the spot is marked by" the topic-marking particle. The implication clearly is that the topic is far from just another surface structure noun phrase. It bears a special relationship to the verb. Moreover, one expects that any substantive phrase can become the topic of a sentence, according to shift in focus affix markers in the verb and the case-marking particles.

Some, like McKaughan (1958), instead chose to stress the syntactic aspects of the verb-topic relationship. Nevertheless, the relationship was singularly unique in some respect, and this state of affairs was noted in numerous Philippine languages and was taken as the cornerstone to ensuing descriptions of many Philippine languages. As a result, the description of many Philippine languages are easy to translate one to the other, perhaps as much a result of the fact of the relatively close relationships of the languages involved as well as the relatively close parallelism in the format of the description of the languages concerned. For example, note McKaughan's classic and highly influential description of Maranao. McKaughan (1958:18) notes that "The case-marking particles indicate the syntactic relations between any substantive phrase and the verb. The ... syntactic relations between the topic (always introduced by the particle *so*) and the verb are marked by verb inflection ...". One could simply replace the Maranao particle with the appropriate Tagalog particle and the statement could stand largely unamended in terms of the way in which such descriptions have been worded and elaborated.

The notion of focus in the description of Tagalog, and of Philippine languages in general, has been an interesting linguistic tradition. In fact, one must certainly agree with Constantino's (1971:118) observation that "the history of Philippine linguistics is largely the history of

the study of the major Philippine languages, especially Tagalog". The earliest descriptions were largely of Tagalog and many subsequent theoretical formulations in linguistics in one form or another were applied to Tagalog by reason of its status as one of the major languages of the Philippines as well as its status as one of the more accessible ones. By and large, my concern in this article has been with the past history and future treatment of the notions of topic, focus, and case in the Tagalog verbal paradigm, but by analogy many of the considerations can be extended to similar problems in other languages of the same verbal paradigm typology. This interplay has been a characteristic of past discussions, and there is little reason to discontinue this tradition - it is the nature of other traditions that are argued for or against in the following pages.

The earliest linguistic works on Tagalog, not including the work of the Spanish grammarians of several centuries past who recorded their observations on Tagalog after the Spanish conquest of the Philippines, date from the turn of the century with the work of Frank R. Blake and Leonard Bloomfield. Obviously, Bloomfield's name is familiar enough to most linguists, regardless of generation or intellectual inclinations. Blake's is not, and in some ways this is unfortunate, for Blake published articles on Tagalog and Philippine studies in general from the turn of the century until only several decades ago. Blake's use of familiar terminology in the description of the particular verbal construction network that characterises Tagalog and other languages of the area make Tagalog seem less exotic and its grammatical features not quite as dramatically different from other languages of familiar acquaintance. Thirdly, Blake's notion of the relationship between specific verbal affixes and construction types and the underlying case relationships of items in the sentence was often both more tolerant and more accurate than his contemporaries'.

It is true, however, that Blake was somewhat ambiguous in his treatment of the concept of case relationships and their expression in the surface structure of sentences. On the one hand, in an early article on the expression of case by the verb in Tagalog, Blake gives the impression that the "case-indicating function of the verb is developed to a high degree" in Philippine languages (Blake, 1906:183). Although Blake noticed the overlap between some forms and their corresponding verbal construction types, as for example, the fact that for him "the locative and ablative are expressed by the *an* passive" (Blake, 1960:185) and the triple overlap in the use of the *i-* construction (1906:188), this article leaves in general a somewhat different impression. The impression is that case relationships are expressed in the verbal inflections employed

in the verbal construction. Secondly, that the noun complement which appears as subject (*topic* is the more common term in current linguistic parlance for Philippine studies) appears as such because of its having been singled out for emphasis or as a focus of attention on the part of the speaker, thus underlining for the listener that nominal complement in the sentence which might be considered uppermost in the mind of the speaker.

Thirdly, one is enticed to the unwarranted conclusion that any given verb may be inflected for the various case relationships and the corresponding syntactic construction types by merely employing the appropriate verbal inflections and then re-arranging the nominal complements of the sentence to correspond with the particular verbal construction. There is a fourth implication, but one which is not overtly stated. This is that the verbal affixes in question only and always represent a single case relationship of the verb to the subject (*topic*) and a single syntactic construction type.

Here it may be best to let Blake speak for himself on the expression of case by Tagalog verbs.

"In Tagalog in a verbal sentence, that adjunct of the verb which is of most importance in the eyes of the speaker or writer is made the subject of the sentence, and the rest of the sentence is conformed to the character of this subject, the other adjuncts of the verb, which for the time being are of minor importance, having their case relations expressed by means of inflection. The verb might thus be said to express the case with emphasis; the various inflected forms, without emphasis. The sentence 'he looked for the book with the light in the room,' may be expressed in four different ways according as the agent, the object, the instrument, or the place, are specially emphasized.

If the idea is 'he, and no one else, was the one that did the looking,' the active of the verb would be used with the agent as subject, e.g., *siyá ang hungmánap nang libro nitó-ng ilaw sa silid.*

If the book is uppermost in the mind of the speaker or writer, the book, the object of the action, is made the subject of the *in* passive, e.g., *ang libro ay hinánap niyá nitó-ng ilaw sa silid.*

If the idea is that 'this light, and no other' was used, the light, the instrument of the search, stands as the subject of the *i* passive, e.g., *itó-ng ilaw ay ihinánap niyá nang libro sa silid.*

If the idea is that 'the room and no other place' is where the search was made, the room is made the subject of the *an* passive, e.g., *ang silid ay hinanápan niyá nang libro nitó-ng ilaw."*

One notes in passing Blake's use of *hungmanap* instead of *humanap*. Where Bloomfield used a single speaker for his 1917 work, Blake instead relied heavily on the work of the earlier Spanish grammarians, checking