

RECONSIDERING THE NOTION OF *Focus* IN THE DESCRIPTION OF TAGALOG¹

Joseph F. Kess

Focus as a syntactic device has seen considerable use in the modern description of Tagalog and other Philippine languages. Such treatments have been relatively effective in their handling of certain aspects of Tagalog verbal structure, but at the same time have overlooked certain other important underlying considerations. Some of these are the question of focus affixes and their utility other than merely as a descriptive device of verbal morphology in Tagalog. Secondly, there is the question of just how meaningful the notion of focus is at all. Thirdly, there remains the question of just which features of the language lie submerged because of the limitations inherent in the frame of reference provided by the focus concept as applied thus far in the history of the linguistic description of Tagalog.

The fact is that a merely surface consideration of focus is not sufficient for a complete understanding of Tagalog verbal constructions, but represents only a partial approach to the problem. A bipartite approach must be used, the two levels of which together may provide a more complete picture of the language than has been the case. The direction of the argument is that the present interpretation of verbal constructions by focus accounts for only certain superficial features of the verb morphology. It provides convenient structural categories for verbal affixes, but cannot a priori predict what the semantic relationship of the affixed verb to the topic of the sentence will be. Nor, as a matter of fact, if such semantic relationships are reduced to a smaller and simpler number of possible case-like relationships between the affixed verb and the sentential topic, can one predict a priori what that case-like relationship will be from the affix exhibited by the verb.

A more satisfying alternative to this kind of treatment is to mark

verbs on a bipartite foundation of first verbal affix type and then notions of case function. In an accurate system of verb description, with correspondent verbal classification, it seems that the only way that this can be accomplished is with a system that cross-classifies its verbs both as to which verbal affixes they occur with (previously called *focus*), as well as which particular case relationships (to be designated as *focus*) these verbal affixes happen to mark with the sentence topic.

While verbal predicates in Tagalog do differ in the surface manifestations of structural arrangements which do occur, the sentence construction types cannot be said to be invariably signalled by the so-called *focus* affixes in the verbal construction. Moreover, such *focus* affixes cannot be described as invariably denoting the case-marking relationship between the sentence constituent in the topic position and the verbal predicate. Verb stems differ in respect to which verb stems occur with which verbal affixes. Secondly, such affixes may differ in respect to which case functions actually exist between the verbal predicate and the topic. Thirdly, verbal predicates so constructed may also differ in the other case relationships which they admit in the entire sentence structure.

If one is not to overlook such important considerations, the incompleteness of this approach can be compensated for by marking verb stems for the verbal affixes they may occur with, and in turn the resultant verbal predicates for the particular case-like function of the topic complement in the sentence. Here, if the term *focus* is to be retained for this latter feature, it is not very different from case grammar notions presented in recent arguments for the analysis of language, and such verbal predicate-topic relationships are easily translated into simple case relationships.

At this juncture it may be in order to quickly survey the earlier history of Tagalog description for some insights as to the origin of the particular descriptive philosophy so often employed in Tagalog. Tagalog, like a good many other Philippine languages, exhibits a set of unique structural arrangements in its paradigm of verbal construction types. This phenomenon has variously been termed *voice*, *case*, and *focus*, with the latter term becoming common in recent years. Descriptions employing the concept of *focus* emphasize its case-like function, claiming that the *dramatis personae* roles of the focused complement, or topic, are marked in the verb by certain *focus*-marking affixes, which are taken to indicate whether the topic plays the role of actor, object, beneficiary, instrument, or location.

Basically, the notion of *focus* and *focus*-types as they have been

used in Tagalog and related languages may be explained as follows. The major simple sentence type in Tagalog usually consists of at least a focused complement and a predicate. If the predicate is a verb, as it most often is, the focused complement is the topic of the predicate and is differentiated from non-focused complements in that it is introduced by the particle *ang* or contains a member of a pronominal or demonstrative substitute set associated with *ang*.² The predicate may also be a locative phrase or an adjective, in which case the topic is still introduced by *ang* or is an *ang* phrase substitute.

Though the focused complement is marked by the particle *ang* or one of its substitutes, its *dramatis personae* roles have been taken to be marked in the verb by certain affixes. These voice-marking affixes, which also mark tense, thus have been said to indicate whether the topic plays the role of actor, object, beneficiary or instrument, or location. Stems inflectable by such affixes are identified as verbs while other stems are nouns or descriptives. Verbal constructions, in turn, have been identified as focus constructions of one or another type by the various voice affixes in the verb. While the particular relationship of the topic to the verb has been said to exhibit overtones of a case-like nature, the relationship of the verb to non-topic complements has also been spoken of as a case relationship. In this sense, the particles which introduce the non-topic verbal complements have been occasionally called case-marking particles, while the particle which marks the topic is usually termed the topic-marking particle. Thus the case-like relationship of the topic to the verb, or the *dramatis personae* roles of the topic complement, have been taken to be explicitly marked in the verb, while those of the non-topic complement are marked by contrasting particles or contrasting pronominal sets.

This format of analysis has carried through ever since Blake and Bloomfield first proposed it for Tagalog and finds countless descriptive parallels in the discussion of many other Philippine languages. Taking but three examples of the many possible ones, one cannot help but note the similarity in description. For example, McKaughan, in an analysis of Maranao, outlines similar relationships which, he says, intersect. He remarks that "verbal affixes thus mark grammatical relations between verb and topic which intersect the relations marked by the particles used with other than topic substantives."³ These relationships for Maranao are actor, direct object, indirect object, and instrument.

Miller records a similar syntactic structure for Mamanwa. For Miller, "the term FOCUS as applied to Mamanwa refers to the significant

relationship which exists in a verbal clause between the action of its predicate and its actor, namely, Subject Focus; or between an action and its goal, namely, Object Focus; or between an action and the one on whose behalf the action is performed or the location of the action, namely, Referent Focus; or between an action and some other person or thing involved in the action, namely, Accessory Focus."⁴

Kerr's discussion of the verbal system of Cotabato Manobo lists "four distinctive types of relationship which the topic may contract with the verb, actor, object, instrument, or referent."⁵ Kerr notes that for Cotabato Manobo "the particular case-like relationship obtaining between the topic and the verb is indicated by the morphemic shape of the voice affix, not by any morphemic feature of the topic nominal expression itself."⁶

In summary, then, linguists have spoken of the distinctive nature of the Philippine verbal paradigm as being characterized by special voice-marking affixes. They have also called attention to the fact that, according to the focus type of the verb (as determined by the verbal affix), a particular sentence complement shall bear a special relationship to the verbal predicate. This complement is the focused nominal expression and has been termed the 'topic' of the sentence. It has also been said that the topic may contract at least four distinctive types of relationship with the verb, namely, actor, object or goal, instrument or accessory, and locative referent. These three - McKaughan, Miller, and Kerr - are only three examples of many descriptions which have made use of a similar framework, and one concludes that symmetry, compactness, and straightforward one to one relationships exist between verb affixes and case relationships in sentence structure. There are, of course, exceptions to this observation, as for example, the recent semantically-oriented treatment by Schachter and Otnes.⁷

It may be that Blake and Bloomfield's early studies set the precedent for the crystallization of verbal predicates in Tagalog into the four major focus types. The introduction of their descriptions, and further, Bloomfield's proffering of terminology for the four types, may have set a precedent for a good deal of grammatical thought in ensuing descriptions. In point of fact, 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.⁸ Blake was followed and then paralleled by Bloomfield⁹ in Tagalog investigation, but one can easily imagine the authoritative influence exerted by the latter in certain quarters. Their particular orientations towards language, and specifically Tagalog, fused into a curious amalgam of mentalism and mechanism.