

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

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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.

Blake's comments drew attention to what seemed to be semantic overtones to the focus or verbal construction types.

For Blake, it seemed that "in any given sentence the voice of the verb depends upon the relative importance of the various elements, the most important or 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 object 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 case of the action; the an passive, when a place or anything regarded as a place stands as subject."¹⁰

Thus, it was first Blake who gave primacy to their semantic overtones, and a recent article by Hidalgo encapsulates what has been taken as a common assumption in the description of Tagalog ever since Blake published those first articles at the turn of the century. Like Blake's explanation, Hidalgo's conception of the notion of focus is such that "a constituent is brought into sharp perspective so that the attention of the listener is drawn closer to that constituent which is presumably in the speaker's mind. This element, which is in sharp perspective, or which is in focus, we call topic."¹¹

However, grammatical focus is not such that a sentence constituent is brought into some kind of sharp perspective so that the attention of the listener is drawn closer to that constituent, presumably foremost in the speaker's mind. A particular focus construction type does not mean that the particular focused topic is exclusively the focus or center of attention, although it may be related to the opposition of given versus new information, as hinted at by Buenaventura-Naylor.¹²

Here it might be beneficial to reconsider some of the possible notions fringing on the grammatical status of topic and focus. 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) verbal forms which are the result of a particular focus affix 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 pos-

sible, 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 specificity. 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.¹³ Lastly, the uses of focus and topic to underline center of attention and/or emphasis is in the last a purely cognitive performance paraphrase for what is essentially a grammatical phenomenon. Unless some empirical evidence is forthcoming, it is best to consider what has been termed focus simply a grammatical device. A parallel may be drawn here between English voice and its active and passive manifestations. There have been arguments for the semantic, stylistic, and emotional overtones of voice in English, but none of them entirely convincing. In fact, there would appear to be only frail empirical evidence for the hierarchy of priorities among the active, passive, negative, and passive negative. Recall here the rather strong debates, resulting confusion, and final disowning by some of Miller's project studying time lag as an indicator of priority of sentence types in the earlier version of generative transformational grammar.¹⁴

While it was Blake who may have contributed unwittingly to the center of attention characterization of focus, it may have been Bloomfield who helped to fix the number of verbal construction types by form alone. It is difficult to assess how the apparent readiness to equate specific affixes with specific focus types arose. Curiously enough, in an early article Blake had entertained the very notion that different case relations were shown in several ways by the four construction types in Tagalog. Having made mention of the four, marking them by their affix forms, Blake proceeded to mark some of the case-like relationships (using Latin-like cases) which might obtain between members of the sentence. Blake realized that the formal mechanics (the number of affixes - active, in, i, an - and the particles ang, nang, and sa) were indeed limited, but the number of real case-like relationships was not so limited nor were they exactly correspondent to the small number of four which formal properties later led him and others to provide fixed categories for.¹⁵

Extrapolating from Blake, suppose one does set about establishing and maintaining a set number of verbal construction types on the basis of the argument from formal properties. While the number of verbal

types may be held to a constant of four, there is nevertheless obvious overlap in the respective uses of the case-marking particles, *ang*, *nang*, and *sa*, and their respective pronominal (*ako*, *ko*, *akin*) sets. It is in this light not entirely unreasonable to expect some overlap between the various construction types themselves. Multiple overlap on the surface level is a phenomenon that Philippine languages exhibit in other areas, and even the idea of overlap in case representation is not a novel one. Blake and Bloomfield's early definitions were deliberately broad enough to accommodate some of the different case representations. Notably, some pedagogical texts like Larson and Aspillera point up the fact of incomplete paradigms and overlapping case representations. For example, Larson mentions overlap between the usage of *i-* as goal-, as instrument-, and as beneficiary-focus (this is apparently true, according to Larson, for the derived *mai-* affixed verbs as well).¹⁶ Aspillera's pedagogical treatment lists constructional possibilities for a sample of some 436 verbs, and the list is specific as to which are possible and which are not.¹⁷ Schachter also devotes 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 and a locative-focus type.¹⁸

Incidentally, one notes that in early analyses, Blake and Bloomfield recognized several construction types, but at first termed these **passive** verbal constructions, with an implicit dichotomy between actives and passives and a simpler grouping thereof. For example, Bloomfield wrote 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")¹⁹ and christened these classes by the names **active**, **direct passive**, **instrumental passive**, and **local passive**.²⁰

This simpler dichotomy is somewhat maintained in Constantino's treatment of the syntax of a number of Philippine languages. Thus, for Constantino, "in an active sentence, the predicate verb is an active verb. An active verb is one which co-occurs with an actor subject ...; if the verb has an affix, it is an active suffix. A passive sentence is a verbal (definite) sentence in which the predicate verb is a passive verb. A passive verb co-occurs with a non-actor subject and has a passive actor complement in addition to the complements that occur with the active verb"²¹

A similar approach is seen in the more recent Schachter and Otnes reference grammar which notes that "while many of the transitive verbs that occur in basic sentences are actor-focus, an equal or greater number of such verbs select as topic something other than the performer

of the action. Any verb that does not focus upon the actor may be called a GOAL-FOCUS verb."²²

Linguists have not always agreed on the number of focus-types in Tagalog, and the argument as to how many focus types there really are has characterized more modern approaches. Some notion of the disagreement may be derived from even casually comparing Blake, Bloomfield, Wolfenden, Larson, and Bowen.²³ Perhaps one reason for the difference of opinion is a result of the attempt to make the framework more realistic without ever really breaking from it. For example, Bloomfield's four voice-modes are extended to five by Wolfenden. According to Wolfenden, Tagalog "voice-mode affixes specify subjective, objective, locative, implicative, and aptative relations" between the topic phrase and the predicating verb.²⁴ Unlike previous descriptions, Wolfenden's aptative voice "shows the topic to be able to undergo the action named by the verb stem", and mixes two previously identical focal relationships. Both actor and object complement may appear as topic of the same affix type.²⁵

Bowen, in an analysis for pedagogical purposes, outlines six focal categories: actor-focus, goal-focus, locative-focus, benefactive-focus, instrumental-focus, and causative-focus.²⁶ Topics of these constructions are taken to correspond to and convert with different complements in the actor-focus sentence, which is implied to be the reference point for analysis of other focal construction types.

Some comment may be made on an assumption which has been taken by some as being implied by the semantic center-of-attention notion in the interpretation of the nature of focus. This is the assumption that verbal constructions will have sentence-focus convertibility. In other words, if it is true that a given focus construction in an actor-focus sentence selects the actor of the sentence as the grammatical (and in this interpretation, the center of attention) topic, then it follows, or so it has been assumed by some, that other sentential complements can be placed in focus by the appropriate shift in topic- and case-marking particles as well as a shift in focus affix.

However, the fact is that free focus convertibility does not exist in this fashion for all verbal predicates for several reasons. First of all, verbs obviously differ in their potential to be inflected for various affixes which have been equated with focus types. Secondly, the relationship between an affix and a particular focus type is not invariant. Thirdly, in some cases where a verb is inflected for a given set of affixes, the semantic and/or case relationships between sentential components in a sentence of one focus type are not equivalent in their functions with sentential complements of another type.

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. 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 in normal sentence usage.

Some have on this basis suggested that the case-marking voices for which a verb is inflected may be employed to provide a framework for the classification of verbal types as well as verbal case functions. This point of view is implicit in Kerr's discussion of the **case constellation** of verbs (at least as far as classification according to verbal type goes), and explicitly stated in Kess' suggestion of the manner of presentation of syntactic features of Tagalog verbs. Kerr's suggestion was that the case-marking voices (a possibility of four) for which a verb is inflected may be grouped together and named the **case constellation** of the verb. This could have served as the basis of a verbal classificatory scheme, in which, according to Kerr, "the classification of a particular verb may be determined by setting up for it a limited transformation battery."²⁷

So also with Kess' treatment in which Tagalog verbs are examined for co-occurrence with a battery of primary affixes. Here verbs are found to differ in their capacity for focus affix potential, and as a result, are marked individually for such features. Resultant verbal constructions are also marked for co-occurrence with sentential complements in the various resulting sentential types.²⁸ A more interesting question is in fact contained therein. Is there any compelling reason why certain focus constructions appear more frequently than others. Secondly, is there any compelling reason why a single construction type or set of construction types (if the previous interpretation of focus is correct) appear for a given verbal root, and why 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 sometimes explain the intricacies of the Tagalog verbal scheme, but at the same time, there seems to be no simple and directly observable basis for their use and appearance other than pure statistical frequency appearance. In fact, recent studies in the acquisition of focus show that the process proceeds at a different pace for the several construction types.²⁹ 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, and if a semantically-oriented answer is not forthcoming for the above questions, then one may be left with an answer of the same qualitative order.

Such classifications seem headed in the right theoretical direction, yet lack one important ingredient. Verbal types continue to be classified on the basis of formal properties alone, and semantic characterizations are given to such categories after their inception upon purely formal grounds. One might instead suggest that a similar type of classification be used, but one which couples formal properties and semantic equivalencies in terms of case relationships from the outset. The categories will not be as neat as before, but will ultimately provide more satisfying coverage. One must remember that information in terms of formal properties is not all that needs to be recorded. For such verbs which do take a given affix, the focus as defined in a semantic case-marking sense of what the role of the topic vis-a-vis the verb is not always invariant. To complete the informational set, one must then further ensure that information has been provided as to what focus type of relationship this particular affix is marking with this particular verb. As Buenaventura-Naylor has recently pointed out, "in the final analysis, the lexical content of the verb is the key factor; the verb stem determines which focus affixes may co-occur with it, the verb stem and its affix together determine the function and the semantic features of the topic as well as the number of obligatory participant roles of a focus construction."³⁰

The question is now how these groups shall be listed in the description. A method of verb stem classification along these lines is to indicate such an affix index for verbs and then the underlying case relationship of the topic to the verb which are shown by the index. This approach can make use of the suggestion of a complex symbol analysis of the syntactic features of formatives, since a method of description formulated to account for the fact that some aspect of linguistic structure are cross-classificationally rather than hierarchically arranged is exactly what is needed in this case. Such a system of representation would mean that verbal classification would be automatically built into lexicon representations of specific items. This would on the one hand provide for a built-in classification of verbal stems, and yet allow for any instantaneous classification of verbs on the basis of desired features, affix-wise, case-wise, or both.

In conclusion, description of verbal types in Tagalog may be greatly enhanced by dropping some previous connotations of focus and merely

considering the verbal affixes as surface properties. One must include another level, the semantic level of case relationships, and ask then, after having marked verbs for the appropriate affixes with which they may occur, which of the case-marking functions the resultant verbal construction in question is in fact marking with the topic. Here one could continue to entertain a notion of **semantic focus**, but it is only possible on this second level representing the underlying case relationship of the topic to the affixed verbal construction.

N O T E S

1. This is a somewhat revised and expanded version of a paper presented at the XVIII Annual Conference of the International Linguistic Association, Arequipa, Peru, March, 1973. This work has been assisted by a Canada Council Fellowship Award #W73 0201.
2. There are three marking particle sets in Tagalog, which may be labelled the ang, nang, and sa sets. The particle ang marks the topic; the particles nang and sa introduce syntactic complements other than that of topic and correspond to the case-marking particles of other Philippine languages.
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5. H.B. Kerr, 'The Case-Marking and Classifying Function of Cotabato Manobo Voice Affixes', *Oceanic Linguistics* 4.15-48 (1965).
6. *Ibid.*, 17.
7. P. Schachter and F.T. Otones, *Tagalog Reference Grammar*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972.
8. F.R. Blake, 'Expression of Case by the Verb in Tagalog', *JAOS* 27.193-99 (1906); F.R. Blake, 'The Tagalog Verb', *JAOS* 36.396-414 (1916).

9. Bloomfield, *Tagalog Texts with Grammatical Analysis*, University of Illinois Studies in Language and Literature, Vol.III, No.3, 1917.
10. Blake, 'The Tagalog Verb', 411.
11. A.C. Hidalgo, 'Focus in Philippine Languages', *Philippine Journal of Linguistics* 1.27 (1970).
12. P. Buenaventura-Naylor, 'On Contextual Aspects of Topicalization', Paper presented at the First International Conference on Austronesian Languages, Jan., 1974, Honolulu, Hawaii.
13. Contrast the Japanese, where typically the verb and 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', *JAOS* 91.6 (1971).
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15. Blake, 'Expression of Case by the Verb in Tagalog', 183-85.
16. D.N. Larson, *Tagalog for Missionaries*, Manila, 1962.
17. P.S. Aspillera, *Lessons in Basic Tagalog*, Manila, 1956.
18. P. Schachter, 'Structural Ambiguity in Tagalog', *Language Learning* 11.135-45 (1961).
19. Bloomfield, op. cit., p. 153-154.
20. Ibid., p. 154.
21. E. Constantino, 'The Sentence Patterns of Twenty-Six Philippine Languages', *Lingua* 15.71-124 (1965).
22. Schachter and Otones, op. cit., p. 70.
23. F.R. Blake, *A Grammar of the Tagalog Language*, American Oriental Series, Vol. 1, New Haven, 1925; Bloomfield, op. cit.; E. Wolfenden, *A Restatement of Tagalog Grammar*, Manila, 1961; Larson, op. cit.;

- J.D. Bowen et al., *Beginning Tagalog*, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1965.
24. Wolfenden, op. cit., p. 13.
25. Ibid., p. 15.
26. Bowen, op. cit.
27. Kerr, op. cit., 5.
28. J.F. Kess, *Syntactic Features of Tagalog Verbs*, Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Hawaii, 1967.
29. G.R. Tucker, 'Focus Acquisition by Filipino Children', *Philippine Journal of Psychology*, in press.
30. Buenaventura-Naylor, *Topic, Focus, and Emphasis in the Tagalog Verbal Clause*, Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Michigan, 1973.