

Why is focus not enough?

Elicitation- and corpus-based analysis of epistemic ‘focus’ marking in Upper Napo Kichwa

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This talk focuses on the paradigm of epistemic markers in Upper Napo Kichwa (Quechuan, Ecuador) which also play a role in focus marking. I demonstrate that, although the markers have distributional properties that could be accounted for in terms of focus, an accurate analysis of their function in discourse also requires considering their epistemic semantics. The Upper Napo Kichwa data provide a fitting illustration of the observation made by Matic & Wedgwood (2013: 219): research that only aims to (dis)confirm pre-established categories can obscure our understanding of focus through ‘inappropriate conceptions of categorisation and scientific generalisations’. In this talk, I show that elicitation-based and corpus-based research on focus in the same language can deliver conflicting results. I argue that for the sake of descriptive accuracy both types of data need to be considered.

The epistemic paradigm in Upper Napo Kichwa includes cognates of evidential markers attested in other Quechuan varieties, which have traditionally been described as evidentials (e.g. Weber 1986; Floyd 1997; Faller 2002) and/or focus markers (e.g. Muysken 1995; Sánchez 2010; 2015). The work presented here is based on a 13-hour corpus of the language, with data from ca. 40 speakers, including both naturalistic and elicited discourse. The latter consists of retelling of ‘Pear Stories’ (Chafe 1980), tasks from the ‘Questionnaire on Information Structure’ (Skopeteas et al. 2006) adapted to the local context, and other tasks designed specifically to document and analyse the ‘evidential’ system of the language.

The corpus reveals that cognates of evidentials attested in Upper Napo Kichwa are epistemic rather than evidential, as they encode meanings related to ‘epistemic authority’ (Heritage & Raymond 2005; Stivers et al. 2011) and not ‘source of evidence’ (e.g. Aikhenvald 2004). Moreover, the paradigm of epistemic enclitics that bear an association with focus is bigger than such paradigms described for other varieties. Most descriptions of Quechuan languages only mention cognates of three evidential markers =*mi* (direct), =*chá* (inferential/conjectural) and =*shi* (reportative). In Upper Napo Kichwa, the paradigm consists of eight markers: =*mi*, =*ma*, =*mari*, =*tá*, =*chu*, =*cha*, and =*ta*. For the sake of space, this talk focuses on the most frequent one, =*mi*.

Although semantically distinct, Upper Napo epistemic markers resemble the evidential markers in related varieties in terms of morphosyntactic properties. They are free enclitics, attaching to phrasal heads and always occurring word-finally. Their position in the clause is conditioned by the topic-focus articulation of the proposition. Like in Peruvian Quechua varieties (cf. Sánchez 2010: 62-4), the Upper Napo Kichwa epistemic markers trigger predicate focus interpretation when they occur on non non-verbal predicates or on tensed verbs. Consider:

(1)

Q: Ima-ra ra-w-ngui?
what-ACC do-PROG-2

a. Lumu-ra miku-w-ni / miku-w-ni=**mi**
manioc-ACC eat-PROG-1 / eat-PROG-1=**MI**

c. #Lumu-ra=**mi** miku-w-ni
manioc-ACC=**MI** eat-PROG-1

Q: ‘What are you doing?’

A: ‘I’m eating manioc.’ [elicited]

The question in (1) elicits a broad focus of the corresponding answer. The answering utterance can be constructed with or without =*mi* attaching to the verb, as in (1a). The occurrence of the enclitic on the argument, shown in (1b), is not felicitous in this context, since the scope of =*mi* on the NPs is narrow. The reverse situation obtains in (2), where the question elicits argument focus:

(2)

Q: Ima-ra miku-w-ngui?
what-ACC eat-PROG-2

a. Lumu-ra / Lumu-ra=**mi** (miku-w-ni)
manioc-ACC / manioc-ACC=**MI** eat-PROG-1

c. #Lumu-ra miku-w-ni=**mi**
manioc-ACC eat-PROG-1=**MI**

Q: ‘What are you eating?’

A: ‘I’m eating manioc.’ [elicited]

Since the action of eating corresponds to background, rather than focus, (2c) is not felicitous.

The examples above, treated in isolation, could lead to analysing =*mi* as a focus marker with scope depending on its host. However, such an analysis is called into question both by the non-obligatoriness of the marker on focal constituents, shown in (1a) and (2a), and by its frequency. In 11 hours of naturalistic discourse (1537 turns), the marker only occurred in about 6% of turns (n=92). Surprisingly, in the data based on QUIS (Skopeteas et al. 2006), designed to elicit data on Information Structure, =*mi* only occurs in 0.7% of utterances (n=7). Such low frequencies suggest that the marker’s use is not conditioned exclusively by the topic-focus articulation. While the marker’s position in the clause is determined by information-structural factors, they are not sufficient to predict whether the marker will occur or not.

I part from this observation to develop a detailed analysis of how =*mi* is used in Upper Napo Kichwa, and how it interacts with focus. I show that the speakers’ decisions to use the marker are based on factors related to both epistemic authority and the speaker’s expectation of what the hearer does or does not know. This relates to frequent use of the marker in contrastive focus contexts, where the speaker corrects the hearer’s mistaken assumption:

(3)

mana ñuka ushi=chu, ñuka warmi=**mi** /#warmi
NEG 1SG daughter=Q/NEG 1SG woman=**MI** /#woman

‘She’s not my daughter, she’s my wife.’ [el_28112014_05]

Context: A man comes to a party with a much younger woman. Somebody assumes she is his daughter and asks about her name.

In such contexts, as shown above, it is infelicitous to use an unmarked proposition, which could lead to the analysis of =*mi* as a contrastive/corrective focus marker. However, as we have already seen in (1) and (2), this would not be accurate. I argue that speakers’ assumptions regarding the current state and likely development of Common Ground are crucial to the distribution of the marker. While the position of =*mi* is conditioned by topic-focus articulation, its use depends on how authoritative speakers choose to be in urging the addressee to accept a proposition as part of Common Ground.

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