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The interaction of prosody and syntax in Samoan focus marking



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Abstract

This paper presents the first study of prosodic and syntactic focus marking in Samoan, an Austronesian VSO language. It is shown that while Samoan appears to use syntax to mark focus, focus marking in Samoan actually fits well within the generalisation that focus must be maximally prosodically prominent. Seven native speakers were recorded answering questions about pictures depicting simple events. The questions were designed to elicit agent or object focus, and question-under-discussion (QUD) focus or contrastive focus. Results showed different speakers had different focus-marking strategies. Two consistently used a cleft construction to front the focused constituent. Two speakers fronted focused agents, but not objects. The final three used basic verb-agent-object ordering in all focus conditions. Prosody was analysed within the Autosegmental Metrical framework. The initial phonological phrase was always the most prominent. Therefore, when the focus was fronted, it was maximally prominent, making Samoan a language with prosodically motivated syntactic movement, like Spanish and Hungarian. In the verb-agent-object sentences, the verb and agent were in the initial phrase. Speakers raised the accent on the object in object focus, and lowered it in agent focus; although they did not do this consistently. There was no prosodic marking of focus on the agent. This is interestingly opposite the asymmetry between focus marking on the subject and object in English and Romance languages, with the same prosodic motivation.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, as this special issue attests, there has been a rise in interest in the relationship between prosody, syntax and information structure. In particular, while focus marking is evidently a fundamental function of prosodic prominence in languages like English, it is becoming clear that this is true of many languages, provided that prosodic prominence is construed sufficiently broadly (e.g. Büring, 2009). This paper presents the result of a production experiment, which is the first major study of focus-marking in Samoan. I show that while Samoan at first appears to primarily use syntactic means to mark focus, it actually fits well within the generalisation that focus must be maximally prosodically prominent, adding to our knowledge of how widespread this generalisation is across languages (Truckenbrodt, 1995; Büring, 2009). The study also shows some interesting interactions between prosody and syntax related to focus, suggesting an intriguing and complex relationship between the three which could be relevant for studies of other languages (cf. Yu, 2009).

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Samoan is a Polynesian language, part of the Austronesian language family (Mosel and Hovdhaugen, 1992:4). There are around 200,000 speakers in Samoa, and a further 160,000 worldwide (Lewis et al., 2013), including a large population in New Zealand. There has been very little research on either prosody or focus-marking in Polynesian languages, nor indeed on prosody in Austronesian languages more generally. Therefore this is a valuable contribution to our knowledge of this large but under-studied language family.

Below, section 1.1 sets out my definition of focus, and summarises how prosody and syntax can mark focus across languages. Section 1.2 gives relevant background on Samoan, including previous research on prosody and focus marking in Samoan and related languages. Section 2 explains the aims and methodology for the experiment, while sections 3–5 set out the results. Section 3 looks at how the syntactic construction used varied by focus condition. Section 4 analyses the overall prosodic structure of Samoan, and discusses how this relates to focus marking. Section 5 looks at how focus affects prosody in the basic verb-agent-object constructions. Finally, section 6 discusses implications of the findings for the relationship between prosody, syntax and information structure in Samoan.

1.1. Focus, prosody and syntax

Focus is a key part of information structure. During a discourse, speakers build a 'common ground' of propositions relevant to the context they believe to be established with the other speaker(s) (Stalnaker, 1978; Clark, 1996). To facilitate this, each utterance has an 'information structure', i.e. each argument, predicate, etc. is marked as to how it refers back to, alters and/or updates the common ground. There is much varied and often contradictory use of information structure terminology (e.g. see Kruijff-Korbayová and Steedman, 2003). For the purposes of this article, I simply outline the model I am assuming, and define the two types of focus to be investigated here.

Following Rooth (1992), I take focus marking of an element to introduce a presupposition of alternatives to the focus, compatible with the context (or able to be accommodated). For instance in the following English example (focus is marked with the subscript [_F]):

- (1) Q. What's your daughter doing at University?
 - A. She's doing [Chemistry $_E$].

The focus-marking on *Chemistry* in (1) implies a contrast which is compatible with the context (the question), i.e. it implicitly excludes the other subjects which the daughter could be doing at University. There is disagreement about whether focus-marking always implies alternatives. Some argue, contra Rooth, that the answer to a *wh*-type question can simply be an 'information' focus, as opposed to a 'contrastive' focus, which involves alternatives (e.g. Rooth, 1992; Steedman, 2000; Krifka, 2008 versus Lambrecht, 1994; Kiss, 1998); for example, if the question were "Isn't your daughter doing English at University?", there is a contrast between *English* and *Chemistry*, whereas in the example above this is not necessarily the case. I have argued that there is no categorical distinction between 'information' and 'contrastive' focus in English, though there may be pragmatic differences (Calhoun, 2009, 2010). In some languages it has been claimed that there are syntactic differences in how these are expressed (e.g. Kiss, 1998; Drubig and Schaffar, 2001; Benincà and Poletto, 2004; Neeleman et al., 2009). In this study, I simply operationalised focus in terms of two question types which are standardly held to invoke focus in the response: 'QUD (question-under-discussion) focus', where the focus is the answer to a question explicit or implicit in the preceding discourse (after Roberts, 1998), in this case an immediately preceding *who*- or *what*-type question which does not imply a contrast; and 'contrastive focus', i.e. where the answer to the question is the focus, but the question does imply a contrast (such as "Isn't your daughter..."). It was then a research question whether these were realized differently in Samoan.

Information structure involves an orthogonal dimension, which is sometimes conflated with focus marking. Following Steedman (2000, 2014) and Calhoun (2010), I take information structure to operate in two dimensions; focus-marking operates within a division into theme and rheme (see also Halliday, 1968; Vallduví and Vilkuna, 1998). This can be seen in the following example:

(2) Q. What are your kids doing at University?

A. (([Katie $_F$]'s doing) ([Chemistry $_F$])), ((and [Paul $_F$]'s doing) ([Law $_F$])). theme rheme rheme

Katie, Chemistry, Paul and Law are all foci, in that they contrast with alternatives available in the context. However, they have different functions: Katie and Paul are thematic foci. The theme, or topic, is "a part of the meaning of an utterance that the speaker claims some participant in the conversation supposes... already is in common ground" (Steedman, 2014:10). In a response to a wh-type question, the theme is the part contained in the question, in this case what the kids are doing. Chemistry and Law are rhematic foci. The rheme, or comment, is "a part of the meaning of an utterance with which the

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