



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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