

THE FOCUS SYSTEM IN PHILIPPINE LANGUAGES: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Focus: The language student's lament

Any Westerner who has studied a Philippine language stands in awe of its complex verb system. How does one ever learn to correctly attach affixes to a verb? One Tagalog language student writes:

If you are buying something, use *bumibili*; if you are buying a specific object, use *binibili*; if you are buying something at a specific place, use *binibilhan*; if you are buying something for a specific person, use *ibinibili*. On the other hand, if your idea is being able to buy something, it becomes *nakakabili*, but if you are causing someone else to buy something, you need to use *nag-papabili* ... If the object IS specific, use *nabibili* if you are able to buy it; and *ipinabili* if you are causing someone else to buy it (John Spears, letter to author, n.d.).

Only when a student can correctly use verbal affixes will he be able to generate grammatically correct sentences appropriate to the speech situation.

1.2 Focus: The unique element in Philippine languages

The morphology and syntax of Philippine languages are among the most complex in the world. Except for some genetically related languages in Formosa, northern Borneo, and northern Sulawesi (Celebes), no other languages are known which exhibit grammatical systems like those of Philippine languages (Reid 1981: 223).

It is the so-called focus system that makes the grammar of Philippine languages uniquely complex. The term *focus* refers to the phenomenon whereby an affix on a verb (the focus affix) establishes a special relationship between the verb and one of the noun phrases in the sentence. This special noun phrase is said to be 'in focus'; it is the 'focused item' or 'focus complement' of the sentence. The focused item is marked either by a special particle, if it is a noun phrase, or by a certain set of pronouns occurring in place of a noun phrase. The particle that marks the focused item is called a 'focus marker' to distinguish it as a special kind of 'nominal marker' or particle used to mark a noun phrase. (See the appendix for a complete list of Tagalog nominal markers and pronouns.) The focus affix on the verb determines the semantic role of the focused item (whether the focused item is the agent, object, instrument, or location of the action described by the verb). Commonly, the focus of a sentence is described by the semantic role of the focused item, for example, agent focus, object focus, or instrument focus. The other nonfocused nominal constituents in a sentence are also marked with particles (*ng* and *sa* in Tagalog).

Linguists have vigorously debated the significance of focus in Philippine languages. Some have said that the function of focus is to highlight the focus complement. Others have said that by

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putting an item in focus, the speaker is emphasizing that item in the same way that intonation and word order are used to emphasize an item in English. Many papers have been based on the theory that the focus affix of a verb determines a predictable relationship between the nominal constituents in a sentence, their grammatical relationships with each other, and their semantic (case) roles. Focus has been described as the means of signaling whether an item is definite or nondefinite (i.e., known or not known by the hearer). A related idea is that focus serves to keep track of the flow of old and new information in a discourse. Yet another view is that focus is merely a grammatical feature that has no bearing on highlighting functions, underlying semantic roles, or case relationships.

Why has so much energy been invested in determining the nature and purpose of focus? I think the main reason is that the focus system is central to the grammar of Philippine languages. Its accurate analysis has crucial implications in several areas: (1) in understanding the unique complexities of Philippine languages; (2) in assessing the validity of proposed language universals such as the notion of subject and case roles; (3) in developing effective pedagogical methods of teaching Philippine languages to non-Filipinos; and (4) in translating the Bible and other materials into Philippine languages.

(Illustrative examples in this paper are taken primarily from Tagalog, the basis of the national language of the Philippines. Tagalog is considered representative of other Philippine languages. In order to use a consistent method for marking sentence constituents, I have borrowed, with some alterations, the marking system of the Tagalog course currently being taught at the Overseas Missionary Fellowship Language Center in Batangas City. This system is explained in the appendix.)

2. VIEWS OF FOCUS AND HOW THEY HAVE EVOLVED

The history of modern Philippine linguistics began at the turn of the century with the work of Leonard Bloomfield and Frank R. Blake, both of whom wrote primarily about Tagalog. Since then, views of focus have evolved dramatically, often reflecting newer insights provided by theoretical breakthroughs. This section outlines some of these historical views of focus.

2.1 Focus indicates voice and case

Neither Blake nor Bloomfield used the term *focus*, but both recognized that distinct sentence types are associated with different focus affixes. Because these early linguists were heavily influenced by traditional European grammar, they interpreted these various construction types as being analogous to the active and passive voices of English. Implicit in their analyses is the notion of a dichotomy between the active and passive voices. The active voice, as in English, was considered the more normal, or 'unmarked' (Lyons 1970:16-17).

Blake was the first to suggest that there is a relationship between the semantic roles and the choice of focus in a particular sentence.

In any given sentence the voice of the verb depends upon the relative importance of the various elements, the most important or most 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 towards the agent is made the subject; the *i* passive when the subject is the object of an action away from the agent, or the instrument or cause of the action; the *an* passive, when a place or anything regarded as a place stands as subject (1916:411).

The active/passive dichotomy proposed by Blake may be the reason why many Tagalog language courses have traditionally taught the agent focus first, drilling students in this focus with a number of different verb stems. The danger in this approach, however, is that a student whose initial studies concentrate exclusively on agent-focus sentences may treat agent focus as if it were the primary (unmarked) form, while, in fact, agent-focus constructions are statistically a minority (Blake 1960:187; Bloomfield 1917:153-54). To think of agent focus as equivalent to the active voice of English is to misinterpret the function of focus and will result in a tendency to misuse (by overusing) this focus.

2.2 Focus indicates case but not voice

2.2.1 Focus dictates the grammatical relationships of a sentence

Early studies described how the nominal markers indicate the grammatical function of sentence constituents. Blake characterized the focused item as the ‘subject’ of a Tagalog sentence. He touched on the notion of definiteness in passing (see sec. 2.7. for further discussion), but did not attempt to explain the significance of definiteness as it relates to focus. The subject stands in the nominative case and is practically always definite, at least in form. All subjects must be preceded by the definite article *ang* except personal names, personal pronouns, demonstrative pronouns, or nouns modified by preceding demonstrative adjectives (1925:127).

Bloomfield called the verb the “predicate” (1942:196) and used “goal” to refer to ‘the oblique expression which corresponds to the subject of a passive’ (1942:197).

Later linguists such as Howard McKaughan (1958) and Elmer Wolfenden (1961) concentrated on describing focus as a purely grammatical system. They did not associate focus with such functions as highlighting or emphasis.

Also McKaughan recognized that the active/passive dichotomy implied by Bloomfield’s characterization was not accurate. He therefore described the focused item as “topic” because he felt that the term subject should be reserved for the semantic agent whether or not the agent is in focus (1973:206).

2.2.2 Focus is the grammatical means of marking underlying case relationships

In his 1958 study, McKaughan describes how the focus affix, along with the nominal markers (*ang*, *ng*, and *sa* in Tagalog), signals the underlying case relationships in a sentence.

The case-marking particles indicate the syntactic relations between any substantive phrase and the verb. The syntactic relations between the topic (always introduced by the particle *so* [*ang* in Tagalog]) and the verb are marked by verb inflection ... The following syntactic relations between the topic and the verb are marked by verb inflection: (1) *subjective* indicating that the topic is the originator of the action; (2) *objective* indicating that the topic is the goal of the action; (3) *referential* indicating that the topic is the beneficiary or location of the action; and (4) *instrumental* indicating that the topic is the means used to bring about the action (1958:18).

McKaughan’s influential Maranao study paved the way for similar studies, such as those by Wolfenden (1961), Miller (1964), Kerr (1965), and Llamzon (1966). This understanding of focus implies a one-to-one correspondence between a focus affix and the semantic role of its focused item.

2.2.3 Focus affixes are the basis for verb classification

A resulting idea from McKaughan's work is that focus affixes alone provide a basis for classifying verbs. Building on this idea, Miller (1964) and Kerr (1965) classified the verbs in Mamanwa and Cotabato Manobo, respectively. In his study of Tagalog, Liamzon (1976) discovered that not all verb stems can occur with a particular affix. For example, only 305 out of the 397 verbs he examined could take the *-um-* affix, and only 51 could occur with *mang-*. Liamzon could not explain why certain verbs can take only certain affixes, nor could he predict which affix a particular verb stem would take for a particular focus construction.

Some Philippine language students have been encouraged to memorize groups of verb stems that pattern similarly in the affixes they take. A student of Tagalog may, for example, memorize lists of verbs such as *mag-* verbs versus *-um-* verbs, *i-* object verbs versus *in-*object verbs, and *makipag-*verbs. The danger in this approach, however, is that the student has no real understanding of either the semantic differences signaled by affixes or the influence of semantic differences inherent in the verb stems themselves. The resulting verb classes appear to be *ad hoc* and can only be mastered through rote memorization.

2.3 Focus indicates emphasis

Blake's association of the focused item with emphasis had an impact on the thinking of various linguists. As late as the 1960s, linguists such as Bowen (1965) and Griño (1969) interpreted the function of focus as that of emphasizing a nominal just as intonation and word order are used for emphasis in English. Bowen writes:

English more typically emphasizes an item or places it foremost before the listener's attention by intonational emphasis. Thus we may say 'He is waiting for the bus' or 'He is waiting for the bus.' The emphasis on *bus* in the second example would be achieved by placing the equivalent Tagalog form in focus, as the topic of the sentence ... (1965:182).

2.4 Focus highlights a noun

Various linguists have described the nature of focus as a singling out of the focused item. One common interpretation is that focus is a means of drawing attention to one noun phrase in the sentence. Thomas exemplifies this view in his 1958 discussion of Mansaka sentence structure.

One of the most striking features of Mansaka and many other Malayo-Polynesian languages, is the ability to put in the limelight a noun in any of the major sentence spots. The whole sentence polarizes toward that noun. This feature we are calling 'focus'. The form of the verb indicates which of the noun spots is being focused, and the noun occupying the spot is marked by ... [the topic-marking particle, i.e., *ang* in Tagalog] (1958:339).

Kenneth Pike calls this polarizing phenomenon the "focus activity".

[There is] a focus activity relation of the predicate, [in which] there is a relationship that exists between the predicate and the one marked substantive [focused item] component of a clause that serves as the focus complement (1963:217).

Jannette Forster expressed a similar view in her 1964 description of Dibabawon, describing the focus system as the "orientation of attention toward one of the grammatical roles" (1964:28).

Hidalgo combined this notion of the focused item as the center of attention of the sentence with the concept of topic or the grammatical subject of the sentence.

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 (1970:27).

2.5 Focus is merely a grammatical feature

Joseph F. Kess represents a unique view among Philippine linguists. He argues that focus cannot be considered to be anything but a grammatical feature because it has yet to be shown convincingly that focus is related to case relationships, emphasis, or highlighting.

2.5.1 Focus does not indicate case

Kess emphasizes that, in order to understand how sentences are generated in Philippine languages, it is not sufficient to analyze focus only according to its surface structure (1972:184). He acknowledges that in many instances there is a correlation between a verbal affix, its resulting construction type, and the underlying case relationships of sentence constituents. But this correlation is not perfect; it exhibits multiple overlaps and ambiguities. Kess concludes that (1) the focus system is not a means of expressing underlying case relationships in a sentence; and (2) it is, therefore, not valid to classify focus affixes according to the case relationships they reflect in their corresponding constructions.

He presents three observations:

- (1) The same affix can signal different case relationships if used with different verb stems, or sometimes even with the same stem (1979:232).
- (2) More than one affix can signal the same case relationship (1975:356).
- (3) Nominal markers (e.g., Tagalog *ng* and *sa*) used with nonfocused items are ambiguous in signaling underlying semantic roles (1976:179; 1979:218).

Kess's first observation can be illustrated as follows. In each of the examples (5) through (7), the verb is inflected with the same affix, *i-*. Yet the focused item in each example has a distinct case relationship with the verb that reflects a distinct semantic role unlike that in the other two examples. Thus the focus affix *i-* cannot be said to unambiguously signal a particular case relationship with the focused item.

- (5) Itago mo ang bola
keep you-2 ball-1
'Keep the ball'

Affix: *i-* Focused item: *bola*
Semantic role of focused item: object

- (6) Ibili mo siya ng bola
Buy you-2 s/he-1 ball-2
'Buy her/him a ball'

Affix: *i-* Focused item: *siya*
Semantic role of focused item: beneficiary

- (7) Ipunas mo ang trapo
wipe you-2 rag-1
'Use the rag to wipe it'

Affix: *i-* Focused item: *trapo*
Semantic role of focused item: instrument

Kess's second observation—that is, that more than one focus affix can signal the same case relationship—is illustrated in examples (8) through (10). For example, both of the Tagalog affixes *mag-* and *-um-* can inflect a simple transitive verb, signaling the same case relationships for sentence constituents and unambiguously signaling the focused item as agent (i.e. conscious initiator of action).

- (8) Nagbigay si Ted ng kendi sa bata
gave Ted-1 candy-2 child-3
'Juan gave some candy to a/the child'

Affix: *mag-* (inflected for past tense)
Focused item: *Ted* Role of focused item: agent

- (9) Bumili si Ted ng bigas sa tindahan
Bought Ted-1 rice-2 store-3
'Ted bought some rice at a/the store'

Affix: *-um-* (inflected for past tense)
Focused item: *Ted* Role of focused item: agent

- (10) Nangisda si Ted sa ilog
fished Ted-1 river-3
'Ted fished in the river'

Affix: *mang-* (inflected for past tense)
Focused item: *Ted* Role of focused item: agent

Kess's third observation, namely, that some nominal-marking particles can signal more than one semantic role, is illustrated in examples (11) through (17). The Tagalog nominal markers *ng* and *sa* are particularly ambiguous because one cannot predict from one construction type to the next what case relationship will be marked. There are instances, such as in examples (11) and (12), where *ng* and *sa* both mark a noun functioning as object of the sentence.

- (11) Naghihintay si Ted ng bus
waited Ted-1 bus-2
'Ted waited for a bus'

Marker of *bus*: *ng* Semantic role: object

- (12) Naghihintay si Ted sa bus
waited Ted-1 bus-3
'Ted waited for a/the bus'

Marker of *bus*: *sa* Semantic role: object

As shown in sentences such as (13) through (17), the particles *ng* and *sa* do not predictably signal any particular semantic role.

- (13) Nagbukas si Ted ng pinto
opened Ted-1 door-2
'Ted opened a door'

Marker: *ng* Item marked: *pinto* Role: object

- (14) Binuksan ni Ted ang pinto ng susi
opened Ted-2 door-1 key-2
'Ted opened the door with a key'

Marker: *ng* Item marked: *susi* Role: instrument

- (15) Binili ng babae ang sapatos
bought woman-2 shoes-1
'A/the woman bought the shoes'

Marker: *ng* Item marked: *babae* Role: agent

- (16) Maghintay ka sa bus
wait you-1 bus-3
'Wait for a/the bus'

Marker: *sa* Item marked: *bus* Role: object

- (17) Maglaba ka sa labas
laundry you-1 outside-3
'Do the laundry outside'

Marker: *sa* Item marked: *labas* Role: location

Kess's theoretical base is that of Fillmore (see sec. 2.6.) and others who have pointed out that underlying case relationships may or may not be clearly signaled by a particular set of grammatical features. Kess sees the focus system as operating within a system that is not dependent upon underlying case relationships, although there may at times be a connection between the two.

It seems abundantly clear that focus constructions as such and the underlying semantically defined case relationships of verbs to nominal complements may touch upon two separate worlds of linguistic fact, the one being an entirely grammatical surface structure phenomenon and the other being an underlying semantic network of universal case relations. (1975:358-59)

In fact, Kess is so adamant about the impossibility of establishing a case relationship between an affixed verb and its focused item based on semantic overtones that he advocates dropping the term focus altogether.

The point is that description of verbal types in Tagalog may be greatly enhanced by dropping the notion of focus as such and merely considering the voice-marking affixes of verbs as surface properties which may or may not correspond to anything meaningful (1972:189).

2.5.2 Focus is unrelated to emphasis, highlighting, or any other psychological consideration

Kess maintains that, in order to prove that focus is emphasis or highlighting, one must show that a change of focus does not result in any difference in meaning except that of emphasis or highlighting. He points out that intonation and word order are used in nonverbal constructions in Tagalog to indicate emphasis or highlighting (1979:221). For example:

- (18) May pera ako 'I have some money'
 (19) Also ay may pera 'I am one who has some money'
 (20) Ako ang may pera 'I am the one who has some money'

Kess concludes that it is therefore invalid to associate focus with any highlighting function in the absence of proof that a speaker's motivation in changing focus is psychological alone; that is, the speaker desires only to draw attention to an item.

2.5.3 Kess's method of verb classification

Having recognized the complexities involved in understanding how Philippine languages operate, Kess goes on to advocate a two- part system of cross-classification of verbs. He calls this system a "bipartite foundation" (1972:189). In this system, a verb is first classified according to the focus affixes with which it can occur (since not all verbs can occur with all focus affixes). Kess calls this array of the affixes a particular verb may take the 'focus index' of that verb (1976). Then verbs are classified according to the case relationships that result when particular affixes are used. Kess borrows Kerr's term for these sets of case relationships, calling them the "case constellations" of affixes (1976:181).

2.6 Focus is determined by semantic considerations

The point of this section is that the forms that express case relationships are different from the underlying case relationships themselves. As early as 1930, Blake suggested that there is a difference between underlying case relationships, determined by semantic (case) roles, and the expression of such relationships in the actual surface grammar of a language. Blake implied that case is an underlying, universal set of grammatical concepts; that is, the semantic roles of noun phrases in a sentence determine basic case relationships that are universal to all languages.

Fillmore refined this germinal idea in 1968:

The sentence in its basic structure consists of a verb and one or more noun phrases, each associated with the verb in a particular case relationship ... The term *case* [can be used] to identify the underlying syntactic-semantic relationship, and the term *case form* to mean the expression of a case relationship in a particular language—whether through affixation, suppletion, use of clitic particles, or constraints on word order. (1968:21)

This principle implies that there is not necessarily a one-to-one correspondence between a focus affix and the semantic relationships indicated by this affix in all environments, or between nominal markers and the semantic roles of the noun phrases they mark. In view of this ambiguity, how does one explain why in Tagalog one verb occurs with *mag-* in agent focus, and another verb occurs with *-um-*, also in agent focus? Or how can one predict when the *i-* affix will indicate instrument focus, beneficiary focus, or object focus?

In order to answer these kinds of questions, many linguists have examined the meaning components of focus affixes and verb stems. According to a semantically oriented analysis, verbs occur only with certain affixes because of the inherent meaning of the verb stem. The meaning of the verbal affix, along with that of the stem, is a reliable index of the case relationships in a sentence.

Schachter and Otnes (1972) analyze the meaning components of verbal affixes as a means of differentiating between affixes that can express the same case relationship. For example, both the *mag-* and *-um-* affixes signal an agentive case relationship with the focused item (see examples (8) through (10)). According to Schachter and Otnes, *mag-* “is frequently found in major AF [actor- or agent-focus] verbs connoting deliberate action and/or action involving movement of an object external to the actor” (1972:289). In contrast, the *-um-* affix “is frequently found in verbs denoting causal action and/or action not involving movement of an object external to the actor” (1972:292).

Lee Ballard (1974) suggests in his analysis of Inibaloi that focus affixes have a semantic function on the sentence level. Building on this, Hartmut Wiens, in his analysis of Limos Kalinga, sees the meaning of the verbal affix itself as primary in determining the attitude of the speaker and finer shades of meaning communicated through the choice of a particular focus.

The correlation between underlying structure and focus affixes on the surface structure derives from the way in which the speaker wants the action of the verb and its effect on the non-predicate complement to be viewed ... it is possible to abstract a fairly consistent semantic function for all the focus affixes. (1979:21)

Limos Kalinga exhibits an even more dramatic overlap of multiple affixes for a single focus type than Tagalog does. As a result, Limos Kalinga is a better language for exploring the contrastive semantic features of focus affixes. Wiens divides Limos Kalinga verbs into three

classes: (1) patient-oriented verbs; (2) verbs that express conveyance from one place to another; and (3) verbs that add to a range or goal, or remove from a range or source.

According to Paz Buenaventura Naylor, the meaning of the verb stem is more influential than the meaning of the focus affix in determining which focus and which semantic roles must be expressed in the sentence.

In the final analysis, all the matters related to focus thus far considered point to the lexical content of the verb as ultimately the determining factor; the verb stem determines what focus affixes may co-occur with it; the verb stem and the focus affix together, in turn, determine the function and the semantic features of the topic as well as the number of obligatory participant roles of a focus construction. (1973:136)

One ambiguity that is cleared up by considering the meanings of both the verb stem and the focused item is that the semantic role of a focused item used in a particular context is unambiguous even if the affix is one that indicates multiple focuses. In sentence (21), for example, the focused item is necessarily an object, since the other semantic roles signaled by *i-* (instrument and beneficiary) do not make sense in light of the meaning of the stem, *tago* 'hide/keep'. By the same reasoning, sentence (22) is necessarily in beneficiary focus since a person is not normally payment for something (instrument focus) or the item purchased (object focus).

- (21) Itago mo ang bola
keep you-2 ball-1
'You keep the ball'

Focus affix: *i-*
Focused item: *bola* (object focus)

- (22) Ibili mo siya ng kendi
buy you-2 him/her-2 candy-2
'Buy him/her some candy'

Focus affix: *i-*
Focused item: *siya* (beneficiary focus)

Anne West works from a similar view in her analysis of Amganad Ifugao. There is a match between the lexical meaning of a verb and the range of focus affixation and corresponding roles of the topic that the verb can take. (1973:99)

Her analysis of the contrast between the *mun-* and *-um-* affixes in Ifugao, similar to that of Schachter and Otones in Tagalog, is that the contrastive feature in Ifugao is whether the action is durative or not. She also analyzes Ifugao verbs into nine classes on the basis of whether their meanings are (1) action, (2) process, (3) action-process, (4) travel, (5) description, (6) sensation, (7) state, (8) experience, or (9) experience-perception.

Teresita Ramos (1974), in analyzing Tagalog sentences, recognizes the verb to be central. She modifies Fillmore's case grammar approach by borrowing principles of deep structure and 'base rules' from Chomskian transformational grammar. She analyzes verb stems according to fifteen categories, based on such meaning components as whether there is an inherent agent involved in the action (as with transitive verbs) or not (as with verbs of ambience, e.g., 'to rain').

In her display of these categories of verb stems, their semantic features are shown in a plus/minus format, for example, [+ agent] for a transitive verb.

Teresita Rafael (1978) also views the meaning of a given verb stem as critical in determining which focus affix that verb will normally take. For example, the verb stem *mahal* 'to love' is almost always used in object focus since it is a verb whose meaning lends itself normally to that focus.

- (23) minamahal ng babae ang bata
 loves woman-2 child-1
 'The woman loves the child'

Focus affix: *-in-*

Focused item: *bata* Role of focused item: object

Almost never would the agent focus of this construction be seen.

- (24) nagmamahal ang babae sa bata
 loves woman-1 child-3
 'The woman loves a/the child'

Focus affix: *mag-*

Focused item: *babae* Role of focused item: agent

Rafael, however, does not consider the meanings of the verb stem and the verbal affix sufficient to determine which focus is used in certain situations. The example she uses is that of how to choose between the agentive focus and the patient/goal focus when both agent and patient are definite (i.e., known by the hearer). For example, since both Rosa and Maria are definite in examples (25) and (26), which focus should be used?

- (25) Dumalaw si Rosa kay Maria
 visited Rosa-1 Maria-3
 'Rosa visited Maria'

Focus affix: *-um-*

Focused item: *Rosa* Role of focused item: agent

- (26) Dinalaw ni Rosa si Maria
 visited Rosa-2 Maria-1
 'Rosa visited Maria'

Focus affix: *-in-*

Focused item: *Maria* Role of focused item: object

To explain which focus is chosen, Rafael appeals to a psychological component, similar in spirit to that of earlier linguists who thought that focus is used for highlighting.

I would say choice is dictated not by definiteness but by some psychological orientation of the speaker (and perhaps also the hearer) toward the event of visiting, the person visited, and the person visiting. (1978:38)

Thus, although many linguists incorporate the significance of semantic considerations into their analyses, they still disagree as to exactly what are the factors influencing the choice of focus in various situations.

2.7 Focus signals the flow of old and new information

Normally, for meaningful communication to occur, a sentence must contain some information not previously known by the hearer. Chafe calls this previously unknown information “new information” (1970:210). But a sentence cannot be composed completely of new information since effective communication necessitates some redundancy. Every sentence, therefore, contains some reference to information shared by both speaker and hearer. Chafe calls this shared information ‘old information’. Halliday refers to the distinction between old and new information as between “given” and “new” (1967:200, 1970:162), and Chomsky uses the terms “presupposition” and “focus” (1971:199).

One function of focus identified by some linguists is that focus signals the flow of old and new information. A speaker puts an item in focus because he assumes that the focused item is known by the hearer. Various linguists have attempted to describe both the process by which focus reflects new and old information and the constraints that information flow puts on noun phrases that can or cannot be focused.

Naylor (1974, 1975), building upon concepts discussed by Chafe (1970) and Halliday (1967), suggests that there is a formal relationship between focus and information flow. As it is in English, the verb in Tagalog is always new information. Accordingly, the lexical content of the verb stem is new, as is the semantic relation, dictated by the verbal affix, of the focused item to the meaning of the verb stem. The focused item itself is old information for three reasons: (1) its function (semantic role) has already been specified in the verb; (2) it is always definite (i.e., known by the hearer); and (3) it can be deleted from the sentence without loss of information.

By analyzing the range of acceptable answers to four sample questions and two statements, Naylor (1975:53-54) draws four conclusions, which are paraphrased as follows:

- (1) Information flow limits (but does not always make exclusive) the possible range of focuses that can be used in a clause.
- (2) The meaning signaled by the focus construction of the response must correspond to the meaning signaled by the focus construction of the previous utterance; that is, there is logical agreement between an utterance and its response. Thus the answers in examples (28) through (31) to the sample question (27) are unacceptable because there is no logical concord between the semantic components of the verbal affixes in the statements and that of the verbal affix in the question.

(27) Question: Ano ang kinain mo?
 what ate you-2
 ‘What did you eat?’

Focus affix: *-in-* Focused item: *ano* Semantic role: object

Unacceptable answers (no logical agreement between affixes):

Acceptable answers

- (33) Kinain.
ate
'(It) was eaten'
- Affix: *-in-* (Focused item implied) Role: object
- (34) Itinapon ni Ted.
discarded Ted-2
'Ted threw (it) away'
- Affix: *-in-* (Focused item implied) Role: object

Unacceptable answers

- (35) Kinanan ko ang pinggan.
ate I-2 plate-1
'I ate (it) on the plate'
- Affix: *-an* Focused item: *pinggan* Role: location
- (36) Ikinain ko ang tinidor.
ate I-2 fork-1
'I ate (it) with the fork'
- Affix: *i-* Focused item: *tinidor* Role: instrument
- (37) Kumain ako.
ate I-1
'I ate'
- Affix: *-um-* Focused item: *ako* Role: agent

Lou Hohulin and Austin Hale (1977) incorporate the notion of old and new information flow into their description of Keley-i relational grammar, but they refine the concept of old information by differentiating between items that are “definite” and those that are “specific” (1977:233).

An item is definite if it is known by both speaker and hearer. An item may be definite because (1) it has already been introduced by previous communication, or (2) it is common to the experience or environment shared by the speaker and hearer. An item is specific if it refers to a specific item, that is, a definite item of an indefinite set, whether known or not. Thus, in examples (38) and (39), ‘Ted’s book’ is definite because it is known by both speaker and hearer. ‘The largest book’ is specific because it refers to a particular item, even though that item may not yet be known by the speaker or hearer.

- (38) Bilhin mo ang libro ni Ted.
buy you-2 book-1 Ted

‘Buy Ted’s book’

Affix: *-in* Focused item: *libro ni Ted* (definite)

- (39) Bilhin mo ang pinakamalaking libro.
 buy you-2 largest book-1
 ‘Buy the largest book’

Affix: *-in* Focused item: *pinakamalaking libro* (specific)

Thus, Hohulin and Hale write, “One of the most important factors involved in noun phrase candidacy for focus assignment is either *definite or specific reference*” (1977:233). The focused item in Keley-i is thus “the noun phrase which is singled out to be marked as definitely or specifically referential” (1977:232).

Definiteness is not a universal requirement for the focused item in Philippine languages. Even in Tagalog, more than one definite item may appear in a sentence. Sarah Bell (1978) shows that in Cebuano, unlike Tagalog, definite items can appear in simple agent-focus sentences. Another difference from Tagalog is that Cebuano can have an indefinite focused item. For example:

- (40) Usa ka ambungang magtiáyon miábot sa Manila.
 One handsome couple arrived Manila
 ‘A handsome couple arrived in Manila’

Bell concludes that definiteness is still crucially related to focus, but with the reservation that the relationship needs to be explored further in other Philippine languages before solid conclusions can be reached.

Cebuano permits certain indefinite subjects in verbal clauses; Tagalog does not. Tagalog prohibits definite final objects in simple active verbal sentences; Cebuano does not. These two differences may be consequences of a difference in the role of definiteness in influencing subject selection in the two languages ... [which may] be reflected in other languages. (1978:7)

2.8 McFarland's constraint rule

Curtis McFarland uses the concept of definiteness in formulating a rule describing the constraints as to whether an item can be in focus or not. He calls this rule the ‘constraint rule’, which he expresses as follows:

In general, an object complement with definite reference cannot occur in immediate construction with an unrelativized verb (1978:139).

This rule means that in simple transitive agent-focus sentences the object complement—that is, the noun phrase marked by a *ng* particle and having the semantic role of object/patient—can never be definite.

- (41) Kumakain *ng daga* ang pusa. (Indefinite or generic)
 eating rat-2 cat-1

‘The cats eating *a rat*’ or ‘Cats cat rats’

- (42) Kumakain ng *isang daga* ang pusa. (Indefinite)
 eating one rat-2 the cat-1
 ‘The cat is eating a rat’

In sentences like examples (43) through (46), however, where the verbs are relativized, the object complements can be definite. But it is the context of a conversation that determines whether the object is, in fact, unambiguously definite.

- (43) Ito ang pusang kumain ng *dagang iyan*. (Definite)
 ‘This is the cat that ate that rat’
- (44) ang lalaking nagbigay ng *pera* sa babae (Definite/ Indefinite)
 ‘the man who gave *some/the money* to a/the woman’
- (45) ang babaeng binigyan niya ng *pera* (Definite/Indefinite)
 the woman to whom he gave *some/the money*’
- (46) ang pagbili niya ng damit (Definite/Indefinite)
 ‘his/her buying of *some/the clothes*’

McFarland notes that in a construction with a relativized verb an object can be made unambiguously indefinite by adding a number as an adjective.

- (47) Ito ang pusang kumain ng *isang daga*. (Indefinite)
 This the cat ate one rat-2
 ‘This is the cat that ate a rat’

McFarland also notes some patterns in the definiteness of nonfocused items marked by the *sa* particle. One generalization he makes is that *sa* can replace *ng* to mark an item as unambiguously definite.

- (48) Ito ang pusang kumain sa *daga*. (Definite)
 ‘This is the cat that ate the rat’

Another of his generalizations is that items marked by *sa* can be either unambiguously or unambiguously definite.

- (60) Kinakain ng aso ang karne
 ‘The meat is being eaten by a/the dog.’ or
 ‘A/The dog is eating the meat’

Focus affix: *-in-*

Focused item/grammatical subject: *karne* (object)

But the association of focus with active and passive voice was eventually abandoned. Linguists saw that the behavior of voice in European languages only appears to be similar to that of focus, and that, in fact, the true function of change in voice in European languages is not equivalent to change in focus in Philippine languages.

The active voice in English (a representative of Indo-European languages) is considered unmarked; that is, it is the normal voice used to describe an action. Turner and Rommetveit (1968) discovered that the English passive places emphasis on the object of the action, taking emphasis away from the agent.

In Tagalog, however, selecting a non-agent focus for a sentence (a ‘passive’ focus according to Bloomfield) does not mean that the object is being emphasized or highlighted. For example, object focus is used as the unmarked form of a sentence if the object is definite and is the only constituent in the sentence besides the agent (Naylor 1975:46). Thus, as in example (60), the object focus is the normal, unmarked focus even though ‘dog’ may be definite (i.e., ‘the dog’).

As discussed in section 2.1, any dichotomy between agent focus and other focuses is to be avoided in pedagogical methods and materials. Teaching the notion of markedness as it relates to non-agent focuses may greatly reduce the tendency of Western students of Philippine languages to favor one focus over another simply because the former is the first focus type they learned. A pilot program in which several focuses are introduced simultaneously as they are used in their unmarked form with one verb stem has met with success.¹

2.9.2 Focus indicates case but not voice

Focus was first associated with case because a focus affix indicates the semantic role of the focused item. At the turn of the century, the difference between the grammatical expression of case relationships and the case relationships themselves (determined by semantic roles) had not yet been explored (see 2.5.1).

But focus is not equivalent to case. Naylor (1975:18) distinguishes between an instrument construction (see example (61)), having a nonobligatory nominal in instrument case, and an instrument-focus construction (see example (62)), where the nominal in instrument case is in focus. The semantic role of *susi* ‘key’ in both sentences is instrument, even though the focuses of the sentences are different.

¹ A course with which I am familiar and which takes this approach is the conversational Tagalog course currently being taught at the OMF Language Center in Batangas City in the Philippines. Further information may be obtained by writing to: Director, OMF Language Center, Batangas City 4201, Philippines

- (61) Binuksan ni Ted ang pinto ng susi
 opened Ted-2 door-1 key-2
 ‘Ted opened the door with a/the key’

Affix: *-an* (object focus)

Focused item: pinto

Role or case of *susi*: instrument

- (62) Ipinangbukas ni Ted ng pinto ang susi
 opened Ted-2 door-2 key-1
 ‘Ted opened a/the door with the key’

Affix: *ipang-* (instrument focus)

Focused item: *susi*

Role or case of *susi*: instrument

On the basis of evidence such as that in examples (61) and (62) and that provided by such linguists as Kess (see sec. 2.5.), one clearly cannot assume that the focus system in Philippine languages is equivalent to the case system of European languages.

Yet early linguists can hardly be blamed for assuming that focus functions in the same way as case, or for equating focus with emphasis. Naylor suggests that most of the confusion regarding focus exists because the focus system functions in at least two other, independent systems (1975:17). Influenced by the work of Halliday (1967, 1970), Naylor observes that, when focus identifies the focused item of a sentence or is involved in highlighting, it functions as part of that system in terms of which the clause is organized as a message. Halliday calls this system ‘theme’, which is present in every language because every language needs “to provide for making links with itself and with features of the situation in which it is used” (1970:143). Theme involves the information flow already present in a discourse since it provides links from what has been said to what is being said.

But when focus identifies the case relationships in a sentence, it is functioning in the system that expresses process and participants. Halliday calls this system ‘transitivity’, which is the general system characterizing clause types. Trying to describe focus as one system when, in fact, it operates in at least two independent systems has led to erroneous associations such as that between focus and case.

Students of Philippine languages should be encouraged to observe the interplay of focus and case roles as this will help them, as listeners and speakers, to become more aware of how to determine who is doing what to whom, and of when and why various nominals can be deleted from a sentence with no loss of information regarding case roles. At the same time, students, especially those who have studied the grammar of European case systems, should be warned that the focus system is NOT a Filipino version of European case.

2.9.3 Focus indicates emphasis

Linguists still debate about exactly how emphasis is expressed in Philippine languages. It is generally agreed, however, that focus is not equivalent to emphasis, although a change of focus can be one of the components involved in emphasizing an item. This may explain the confusion of the two in the past. Pike concludes that, while there is a sense in which the hearer's attention is directed toward the focused item, this attention is not the same as that elicited when a speaker singles out an item for emphasis. The major contrastive component between emphasis and focus is that of emotion. Most often, an item is emphasized if it is in focus, and it carries an overlay of

emotion. In other words, focus alone is not a sufficient condition for an item to be regarded as emphasized. Pike says:

Focus is not emphasis. Focus reports the observer's attention to one of several relations—without the essential emotional overtones—between a predicate and some other part of a clause; the focus-complement substantive topic [i.e. focused item] is viewed only in reference to that relationship, not as in focus of itself. (1963:219)

The term *emphasis* is often used loosely by nonlinguists. Learning to indicate emphasis—special significance coupled with emotional overtones—in a new language comes at a relatively advanced point in language learning. To avoid confusion, the function of focus should not be described to students as emphasis. Instead, emphasis should be reserved for treatment later when the student is more advanced.

2.9.4 Focus highlights a noun

Focus does not function to highlight a noun. Naylor (1975:17) illustrates this by showing that the only difference between sentences (63) and (64) is that of a nondefinite versus definite object, signaled by the change in focus.

- (63) Nagbukas si Ted ng *pinto*.
 'Ted opened a door' (Indefinite object)
- (64) Binuksan ni Ted ang *pinto*.
 'Ted opened *the door*' (Definite object)

In sentences (63) and (64), focus functions to distinguish a definite object from an indefinite one. In fact, Naylor says that “to express a definite goal in a verbal clause, there is no choice but to use the goal-focus [object focus] construction” (1975:17).

It may be that a highlighting function is fulfilled by a coreferential construction—a construction in which two reference refer to the same noun—where the second referent is a verbal noun. In the coreferential construction in example (65) the implication is that ‘she’ and no one else bought rice.

- (65) siya ang bumili ng bigas
 s/he-1 bought rice-2
 'She was the one who bought some/the rice'

Note, however, that the coreferential structure does not, by itself, indicate emphasis. In fact, a construction, such as in example (65), is the only acceptable answer (unmarked) with logical concord to a question such as:

- (66) Sino ang bumili ng bigas?
 who-1 bought rice-2
 'Who is the one who bought some/the rice?'

2.9.5 Focus is merely a grammatical feature

Many of Kess's criticisms of previous analyses are valid and must be addressed, but few linguists agree that the focus system is merely a grammatical feature. Some of his notions, such as those of 'case constellation' and 'focus potential', have been used as a first step in later analyses.

For example, Helen Miller (1973) and Jeanne Miller (1973) use some of Kess's ideas as a starting point for their analysis of Mamanwa. As Kess recommends, Millers first classifies verb stems on the basis of the verb stems' occurrence with the possible affixes (Kess's focus potential). Mamanwa inflected verbs, then, fall into one of five predicate classes, which are identified as (1) direction, (2) action process, (3) conveyance, (4) acquisition, and (5) experiencer. Each of these predicate classes is associated with a case frame (Kess's case constellation), which determines the semantic role to be associated with a specific nominal in the clause.

Videa de Guzman (1978) also uses the notion of focus potential as a component of her analysis of the syntactic derivation of Tagalog verbs. She begins with identifying the inflectional features and the corresponding affixes verb stem types take. Then, in an effort to clarify the difference between categories of inflection and derivational processes, she goes on to show how various kinds of verb stems can be derived.

2.9.6 Focus is determined by semantic considerations

The notion of focus as it relates to semantic considerations has produced probably its most beneficial results in the development of pedagogical tools to help non-Filipino students of Philippine languages. A student must have a mental system for classifying verbs and for remembering verbal affixes associated with various verbs.

Tagalog has one of the most well-developed sets of higher affixes among all Philippine languages. Associating a particular affix or combination of affixes with a particular meaning is very helpful in remembering classes of verbs, even if there are multiple meanings associated with an affix as it is used either singly or in combination with other affixes.

For example, the *mag-* affix in Tagalog can be associated with different meanings in different verb environments as well as in combination with another affix. One meaning associated with *mag-*, in contrast to *-um-*, with such roots as *alis* or *tayo* is that of transitivity.

- (67) Umalis ang lalaki
'The man left' (Intransitive)
- (68) Nag-alis ang lalaki ng silya
'The man removed a chair' (Transitive)
- (69) Tumatayo ang karpentero
'The carpenter is standing up' (Intransitive)
- (70) Nagtatayo ang karpentero ng bahay
'The carpenter is building a house' (Transitive)

Yet another meaning associated with the contrast between *-um-* and *nag-* is that of normal action versus intensified or repeated action, with the *mag-* form also involving reduplication of the first syllable of the verb stem.

- (71) Sumisigaw ang bata
'The child is shouting'

- (72) Nagsisisigaw ang bata
‘The child is screaming its head off’

Mag-, in contrast with *-um-*, which signals one-way action, can also be used in combination with an *-an* suffix to indicate reciprocal action.

- (73) Tumulong si Ted kay Bob
‘Ted helped Bob’
- (74) Nagtulungan sina Ted at Bob
‘Ted and Bob helped each other’

No one can dispute that the focus system reflects semantic considerations in the use of affixes with certain verb stems, but such considerations alone cannot explain all the complexities involved in focus change. Semantic considerations, however, do offer helpful insights into the differences between the patterns of inflection of verb classes. Recognizing the sets of meanings associated with various affixes and making associations between those meanings and the inherent meanings of verb stems can be very helpful to students of Philippine languages.

2.9.7 Focus signals the flow of old and new information

The notion of focus as the means by which the flow of old and new information is signaled has been a significant insight into the relationship between focus and discourse level considerations. The study of discourse grammar and discourse features is relatively new in linguistics. As a result, the concept of old and new information and how this information is controlled in a particular language is still in its embryonic stages of analysis.

Up to this point, the study of focus as it relates to old and new information presents sound evidence that focus is the primary means by which information flow is controlled in a discourse. However, one ambiguity is noted here which, if true, negates the claim Bell (1978) makes, namely, that Tagalog does not permit an indefinite focused item in a verbal clause. The counterexample offered here is that of the focused item made ambiguously indefinite by a number modifying the noun.

- (75) Dumating ang isang mag-asawa sa Maynila
‘A/the couple arrived in Manila’ (Indefinite or definite)
- (76) Kumakain ang dalawang babae
‘The two/Two women are eating’ (Indefinite or definite)

Definiteness has not been shown to be a necessary and sufficient condition for an item to be focused. But the relationship of focus to the flow of old and new information in a discourse is clearly significant, and promises to be a fruitful area of exploration.

2.9.8 McFarland's constraint rule

McFarland's rule is a clear, but limited, statement of the constraints on focus when an object is definite. Other studies like that of Naylor (1975) and Barlaan (1986) discuss the larger issue touched upon by McFarland, which is, What determines whether an item will be focused, especially if there is more than one definite noun complement involved?

The constraint rule is a good first rule to help students grapple with the constraints on focus imposed by definiteness. However, the concept of definiteness must be carefully defined since a nondefinite item is not necessarily unrelated to anything definite. For example, one can have an object complement that is modified by a relativized verbal clause, which serves to identify the object of the main independent clause as an indefinite member of a definite set. So, for example, the *mangga* 'mango' in sentence (77) is an indefinite member of a definite set. Although it is not specifically known to the hearer or speaker, it has specifications placed on it by the modifying relative clause.

- (77) Bumili ka ng isang manggang hindi pa nabubulok.
 buy you-I one mango not yet rotting
 'Buy one mango that has not yet gone bad'
- (78) Gusto ko ng isa sa mga pinakamaganda.
 Want I one (pl) most beautiful
 'I want one of the most beautiful'

3. SUMMARY

3.1 With regard to language universals

The evolution of our understanding of focus in Philippine languages is an excellent illustration of the interdependence between typologizing specific languages and developing universal linguistic theories. Philippine languages have presented unique exceptions to previously unchallenged definitions of such concepts as subject, emphasis, and topicalization. The unique way in which focus signals case relationships has provided evidence from live languages for the proposed universal underlying case relationships that are independent of whatever surface structure system is used to signal those relationships.

A complete understanding of the focus system, however, will depend on further study of discourse-level considerations such as the interplay of information and theme control. An avenue that looks promising is the pursuing of the notion that the focus system intersects a multitude of other systems that are present in all languages (see Naylor 1975; Barlaan 1986). Naylor has attempted, for example, by proposing that distinctly different underlying universal systems are at work, to characterize more accurately the difference between the focus system and emphasis. Barlaan addresses related controversial issues such as: Given two definite nominal complements, which nominal should be put in focus? He also examines other considerations that remove the restraints – such as those imposed by McFarland's constraint rule – on an item to be focused.

No doubt further research on the focus system of Philippine languages will clarify remaining ambiguities in how universal concepts are expressed in particular languages. Refuting our understanding of the focus system will depend upon, and undoubtedly stimulate, as it already has, a refinement of proposed language universals.

3.2 With regard to pedagogy

For the serious student of a Philippine language, any insight gained from linguistic analysis is welcome if it aids his understanding of the target-language grammar. The suggestions derived from this paper may be summarized as follows:

- (1) The focus system is NOT equivalent to any one feature of European grammar. Teaching focus as a Filipino version of a European-type case system, emphasis, or voice (active versus passive) will lead to erroneous usage.
- (2) The notion of markedness can be very helpful in enabling a student to recognize an acceptable answer (i.e., one having logical concord) to a posed question. Very early in his training, a student should develop facility with a number of different focus affixes so that he does not form an unnatural bias towards one focus type and fail to use the others simply because of familiarity with the one. The correct use of focus necessarily involves awareness of preceding discourse, logical concord, and the overall speech situation.
- (3) The notion of old and new information can help a student recognize why certain constituents can be deleted from an utterance with no loss of information and no confusion as to case roles. Very rarely in normal conversation does a Filipino include all possible participant roles in a sentence. Students should be encouraged to recognize patterns of constituent deletion and the way such patterns relate to the notion of old information. Practicing deletion of non-obligatory constituents will help the student avoid speaking bookish sentences. He can then hope to achieve more effectively the goal of naturalness in his use of the target language.
- (4) Students should be encouraged to relate both the lexical content of verb stems and the semantic differences signaled by different affixes to the sets of affixes allowed by various verbs. Classification of verbs on a semantic basis is not completely unambiguous, but recognition of existing patterns of verb stems and the affixes individual verb stems take is still a mnemonic advantage in contrast to purely rote memorization.
- (5) Far more educational to a student than studying grammar and doing linguistic research, however, is the activity of listening to many native speakers in NATURAL settings (i.e., outside the language school context). In doing this, he can note how affixes are used and the speech situations surrounding the utterances he hears.

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APPENDIX TAGALOG NOMINAL MARKING SYSTEM

Nominals in example sentences are marked as follows:

- 1 = Class 1
- 2 = Class 2
- 3 = Class 3

Each noun phrase or pronoun is marked for its class, which is determined by its nominal marker if it is a noun phrase, or by its form if it is a pronoun. These classes correspond in a given construction to certain case roles. For example, an item marked class 1 is always the focused item. Thus, in an agent-focus sentence, the class 1 item is the semantic agent. Also in a simple transitive agent-focus sentence, the item marked class 2 is the semantic object/patient/goal. Class 3 items have various oblique roles such as time or location.

MARKERS OF NOUN PHRASES

	Class 1	Class 2	Class 3
Common noun	ang	ng	sa
Proper nouns	si	ni	kay

PRONOUNS

	Class 1	Class 2	Class 3
Singular			
1 st person	ako	ko	(sa) akin
2 nd person	ikaw/ka	mo	(sa) iyo
3 rd person	siya	niya	(sa) kaniya
1 st + 2 nd person	tayo	natin	(sa) atin
Plural			
1 st person	kami	naming	(sa) amin
2 nd person	kayo	ninyo	(sa) inyo
3 rd person	silá	nila	(sa) kanila
1 st + 2 nd person	tayo	natin	(sa) atin