

Information Structure in Kiswahili

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Abstract

In communication, whether spoken or written, information is packaged in such a way that participants are able to identify with the structure of the information being passed. There are grammatical markers of information which are used to package *new information* and *old information* in discourse. Information could be marked through left dislocation, right dislocation, in the morpheme, words, phrases and clauses. This paper interrogates how topic and focus are marked in Kiswahili grammatical constructions guided by the Information Structure Theory proposed by Lambrecht, K. (1994).

Key words: Kiswahili, Information structure, focus, topic, marking, information

I. Introduction

This paper investigates on how topic and focus are marked in the subject, verb, object or any other word category. Information structure helps in the interrogation of topic and focus by identifying the specific syntactic category in the marking of topic and focus.

Kiswahili is an agglutinating language that gives prominence to the verb and the noun in a sentence. The noun whose function in a sentence is that of the subject is inflected as a morph in the verb i.e

1. Kitabu ki-me-nunu-liw-a
 Book it-has-been-bought

The relationship between the verb and the noun and other word categories contribute to the identification of topic and focus in the phrase, clause and in the sentence. This is as a result of word order in these syntactic categories.

Word-order in Kiswahili is flexible with various word categories appearing at the beginning, middle or at the end of a sentence. This is more eminent in spoken language. For example:

- 2 a) Juma ameijengea nyumba paa. (Juma has built a house roof.)
 b) Nyumba, Juma ameijengea paa. (The house Juma has bilt a roof.)
 c) Paa, Juma ameijengea nyumba. (The roof, Juma has built for a house.)
 d) Ameijengea nyumba paa, Juma. (He has built for a house roof, Juma)

Word order in Kiswahili contributes to a large extent on the identification of topic and focus. In Kiswahili intonation is also key in the identification of topic and focus. This is the rising and falling of voice during sound word, phrase and clause articulation. Intonation is used in mood differentiation in interrogative, imperative and declarative sentences. For example in

3. a. Anakula. (Declarative)
- b. Anakula! (imperative)
- c. Anakula? (interrogative)

The information structure theory is a tool of analysis in the marking of topic and focus in sentences and in discourse.

Topic and focus are concepts used in the identification of new and old information in the sentence, and in other syntactic categories like the morph, words, phrases, and clauses. For them to carry meaning stress has to be placed on them. Stress on the syntactic categories, also help in the marking of topic and focus.

II. Information Structure Theory

Lambrecht (1994:6) explains information structure as that component of sentence grammar in which propositions as conceptual representations of states of affairs are paired with lexicogrammatical structures in accordance with the mental states of interlocutors who use and interpret these structures as units of information in given discourse contexts. The information structure of a sentence is the formal expression of the pragmatic structuring of a proposition in a discourse. A proposition which has undergone pragmatic structuring is called a pragmatically structured proposition. The most important categories of information structure are:

- a) Presupposition and assertion; which have to do with the structuring of propositions into portions which a speaker assumes an addressee already knows or does not yet know,
- b) Identifiability and activation; which have to do with speakers assumptions about the statuses of the mental representations of discourse referents in the addressees mind at the time of an utterance,
- c) Topic and focus; which is the speaker's assessment of the relative predictability vs unpredictability of the relations between propositions and their elements in given discourse situations.

Information structure is manifested in aspects of sentence grammar in which propositions as conceptual representations of states of affairs are paired with lexico- grammatical structures in accordance with the mental states of interlocutors who use and interpret these structures as units of information in a given discourse context.

Information structure is manifested in aspects of prosody, special grammatical markers, in the form of syntactic constituents, position and ordering of constituents in the structure, in the form of complex grammatical constructions in certain choices between related lexical items. Information structure intervenes at all meaning-bearing levels of grammatical system. Its analysis is centered on the comparison of semantically equivalent but formally and practically divergent sentence pairs such as

- Active vs passive.
- Canonical vs topicalized

- Canonical vs clefted or dislocated
- Subject-accented vs predicate – accented sentences, etc

These sentence pairs are referred to as allosentences (Danes: 1966) because they allow for the understanding of differences in the information structure of sentences.

The place of Information Structure in Grammar

This is credited to the proponents of Prague School (1966) who distinguish three levels of components of grammar.

- (i) The level of grammatical structure of sentences,
- (ii) The level of the semantic structure of sentences,
- (iii) The level of the organization of utterance which makes it possible to understand how the semantic and the grammatical structures function in the very act of communication for example at the moment they are called upon to convey some extra linguistic reality reflected by thought and are to appear in an adequate kind of perspective (Danes: 1966).

Information structure analysis is concerned with the organization of the sentence within a discourse. It focuses on the interaction of sentences and their contexts. It addresses the fundamental question of why there are so many kinds of sentence structures.

III. Topic, Focus and Information

Crystal (1980:408) explains that the topic of a sentence is what is being talked about. Topic is used to describe the information structure or pragmatic structure of a clause and how it adheres with other clauses. For example:

4. a. **Mgeni** anabisha mlangoni. (The visitor is knocking at the door.)
b. Ndiye yule **mgeni** anayebisha mlangoni. (There the visitor who is knocking at the door.)

Focus is a term used by some linguistics in a two part analysis of sentences which distinguishes between the information assumed by speakers and that which is at the centre of their communicative interest e.g

5. Ni Juma aliyefika kwa chai.

Focus

(It is **Juma** who came for tea.)

Focus is a grammatical category that determines which part of the sentence contributes to new, non-derivable or contrastive information.

Information is a term used by several linguists as a basis for a theoretical account of the structure of messages. It is postulated that speech can be seen as displaying an information structure, encoding the relative salience of the elements in a message, with formally identifiable units of information. Intonation provides the main signal for such units.

Information structure therefore is the way in which information is formally packaged within a sentence.

IV. Marked Topic Constructions in Kiswahili

In Kiswahili the identification of topic could be realized through the following ways:

a) Y-movement (contrastive topicalization)

Y-movement is used when a referent is contrasted with another referent of roughly the same semantic class. The first referent creates certain expectations which the Y-moved referent then counters. For example:

6. a. 'Nenda kwao' (wewe nenda kwao)
"Go to her home"
- b. "Kwao siwezi kwenda maanake sina mazowea hayo"
"Her home I cannot go because I am not used to"

In the second sentence, topic is marked by the pronominal **kwao** by fronting it at the beginning of the sentence. The topic marker at the beginning of the sentence refers to a referent known by the two participants in the conversation. This refers to the place owned by the person to be visited.

Kiswahili is an SVO language. The predicate, mainly the verb could be moved to appear at the beginning of the sentence to mark the topic. For example

7. "Rashidi kawa mtundu sana siku hizi" Bi. Mashavu alianza mazungumzo. "**Nd'o** mwanamume, lazima awe mtundu". Majaliwa alisema.
(*"Rashidi has become very naughty these days."* B.i Mashavu started the conversation. *"That is a man, he must be naughty."* Majaliwa responded.)

The words **mtundu sana siku hizi** is equated with 'ndo mwanamume which is fronted at the beginning of the sentence to mark the topic through a verb phrase /predicate. Another example is topicalization by fronting the object (direct). For instance,

8. Nilimwona ali pale. **Maria** sikumuona
(I saw Ali there. Maria I never saw.)

When we move the object as a topic at the beginning a sentence, we mark it with stress. In instances where the subject remains at the clause-initial position it is also stressed to make it the topic of that construction.

The indirect object could also be fronted to mark the topic of the sentence. For example:

9. Tulimnunulia maria nyumba. **Amina** hatukumnunulia kitu.
We bought Maria a house. To Amina we bought nothing.

An important property of Y-movement clauses is that they fall under a single intonation contour. In this way they contrast with L-dislocation where the fronted constituent is separated from the rest of the clause by a pause. For example:

10. Na leo, baada ya siku nyingi, Rashidi alimwona tena yule mpishi anashughulika kuwagawia chakula.
(And today, after many days, Rashidi saw again that cook struggling to serve them food.)

The phrase 'Na leo' is punctuated by a comma while fronting it at the beginning of the sentence. This phrase takes us back to some time in the past when Rashidi had last seen the cook serving food to some workers. From such examples the topic can be marked by fronting it as a verb, object and as a subject of that sentence.

b) Left dislocation

This is a device used to mark topical referents, mostly definite and anaphoric ones, that have been out of the focus of attention for a while and are being brought back into the discourse (Givon 2001: 265). For instance, in this example:

11. King'ora kimela. Ni saa moja na nusu asubuhi. Watu wamekasirika an mamia yao wameuzonga **mlango wa chuma** unaowazuia wasiingie ndani ya bandari ya mji wa Unguja.

Kelele, matusi na malalamiko; vijana, watu wazima na hata watoto, wote wakiwa wamevaa nguo chafu zilizoraruka, zingine zikiwa zimepoteza rangi yake ya awali kwa kupakua na kwa kutiwa viraka vya rangi mbali mbali.

Nyuma ya **mlango wa chuma** amesimama mhindi mmoja na...

(The alarm sounds. It is seven thirty in the morning. People are annoyed and hundreds are pushing the metal door which prevents them from entering the harbor of Unguja town.

Noise, abuse and complains: young people, adults and even children, all wearing dirty clothes which are worn out, others have lost their original colour because of unpacking loads and for been patched with patches of different colours.

Behind **the metal gate** stands one Indian man ...)

In this narration, L-dislocation is typically a chain-initial device. The noun phrase **mlango wa chuma** has been introduced in the first paragraph for the first time. In the second paragraph, the narration takes a different story line and speaks about other referents. In the third paragraph the noun **mlango wa chuma** is re-introduced as a left dislocation of the topic so that it is given more prominence and a discussion raised about it. The L-dislocation of the NP topicalises it from a state of not being used again in later paragraphs. This makes it to take the role of new information in the narration. The referents in Left dislocation do not change their status while being brought back in the discourse in case they loose meaning. For example:

12. Leo asubuhi niliwaona Ali na Hassani. Yeye ni mgonjwa sana
(Today in the morning I saw Ali and Hassan. He is very sick.)

From this example, the referent **yeye** does not clearly indicate which of the characters, Ali and Hassan, is referring to. Therefore, change of lexical item brings ambiguity in the construction. Other ways of Left dislocation in Kiswahili include:

(i) *Use of morphs to represent referents e.g*

13. Nilinunua nguo jana. **Inapendeza** mno.
(I bought a dress yesterday. It is very appealing.)

(ii) *Use of adjectives which put emphasis on the topic.*

14. Nyumba **enyewe** ilikuwa ya kupanga...
(The house itself was rented...)

(iii) *Object L-dislocation*

15. A: Umesikia kutoka kwa kamau? (Have you heard from Kamau?)

B: **Kamau!** Yeye ni mgonjwa sans siku hizi. (Kamau! He is very sick nowadays.)

To conclude we realize that, L-dislocation typically involves three syntactic characteristics:

- a) A separate intonation contour for the dislocated NP,
- b) Neutralization of the ease-marking of the topic NP, and
- c) An anaphoric pronoun resumption of the topic NP within the clause (Givon 2001:266)

c) Right dislocation

Lambrecht 1994:199 explains about what most linguists claim concerning the place of a topic in a sentence. Followers of the Prague school of linguistics claim that the topic always appear at the initial position in a sentence which is a universal feature in most languages. The topic in traditional grammar is equated to the subject of the sentence. For example:

16. **Watoto** wameenda shule.
 Kiima/mada predicate
 (**Children** have gone to school.)
 Subject/topic

Therefore we could say that the topic in this sentence is **watoto**. It's not common in Kiswahili to move the topic of a sentence at the sentence initial position especially in written communication. This is however common in verbal communication where the speaker is at liberty to mark the topic initially in order to raise the appearance of the referent which has not been mentioned in the discourse and would like to bring it to the attention of the listener. For instance;

17. Nina miadi na **mtu**, kuna mambo muhimu tunataka kuzungumza.
 I have an appointment with **someone**; there are important things we are (discussing.)

The referent **mtu** does not explain who exactly has an appointment with the speaker. In the discourse the **mtu** is named as Faraji a friend of the speaker (Rashid). Right dislocation is used in the sentence to raise suspense for the reader.

The semantic role of **mtu** as a NP is that of lexical referent moved to the right. Instead of using a pronominal in place of NP, a common noun – **mtu** - is used to mark a proper noun given later in the discourse.

Lambrecht (1994:203) explains that right dislocation in a sentence is guided by grammatical rules that allow a speaker to use the Principle of Separation of Reference and Role in a specific speech situation. For example

18. Lazima watatutambua wale!
 (They will know who we are!)

The Principle of Separation of Reference and Role is a grammatical principle which explains that a lexical pronominal equated to a topic can be marked at different positions in a sentence.

Givon (2001:268) categorizes the syntactic feature that characterises R-dislocation as anaphoric pronoun, intonation break and neutralized case marking. For example

19. Kule anakofanya kazi, Nairobi.
 (There where he works, Nairobi.)
 ... anaruka majini. **Yeye** hogelea upesi...
 (... jumping into the water. S/he swims fast)

d. Dative shifting

Syntactically, Kiswahili has intransitive, transitive and distransitive verbs. Distransitive verbs carry direct object and indirect object, that is;

V IO DO

20. ... alimpikia mgeni chakula . (S/he cooked the visitor food)

V IO DO

The two objects are structurally NPs. Direct objects are more topical than indirect objects. The cross-linguistic common denominator of promotion to direct object is word order. The more topical DO most commonly precedes the less topical IO. But in standard Kiswahili the object can appear in either position. For instance;

21. a Alimuuzia Malenye shamba. (S/he sold Malenye shamba.)

b. Alimuuzia shamba Malenye. (S/he sold shamba Malenye.)

From the above examples, the object that precedes is marked as the topic of the sentence.

The verb in Kiswahili has a rich system of pronominal agreement and therefore it is easier to code the relative topicality of the direct and indirect objects by the presence or absence of verb-bound pronouns. This definite or more topical direct or indirect objects require pronominal agreement in the verb. For example;

22. a. Alimuuzia **Malenye** shamba. (S/he sold Malenye shamba.)

b. Aliuza **shamba** kwa Malenye. (S/he sold shamba to Malenye)

Alternatively the object that marks the topic in a sentence precedes the one that is given less topical prominence:

23. a. Mtengenezeeni **nafasi** huyu mwenzenu. (Create space for your friend)

b. Mtengenezeeni **huyu mwenzenu** nafasi. (Create for your friend space)

The rather uniform placement of more topical objects before the less topical one supports the validity of the cognitively-based principle of word order. The more important referent is placed first.

V. Marked-Focus Constructions in Kiswahili

Focus articulations of sentences can be divided into a number of distinct types which correspond to different kinds of pragmatically structured propositions. These focus types are used in different communicative situations and are manifested across languages in distinct formal categories, (Lambrecht, 1994:221). The focus in Kiswahili constructions could be marked through various ways including:

a. Focus Negation

In negative clauses, when we negate the verb phrase, the entire verb phrase is under the scope of negation (Van Valin and La Polla, 1997: 219 and Payne, 1985: 198). For example in Kiswahili:

24. a. Amina alichelewa kufika mkutanoni. (Amina got late for the meeting.)

b. Amina **hakuchelewa** kufika mkutanoni. (Amina didn't get late late for the meeting.)

The scope of the negated assertion narrows down to exclude everything except the optional constituent. For example:

25. Amina alichelewa kufika mkutanoni. (Amina got late for the meeting.)

a. **Si** mkutanoni Amina alichelewa kufika. (Its not for the meeting that Amina got late.)

b. **Si** Amina aliyechelewa kufika mkutanoni. (Its not Amina who got late for the meeting.)

c. **Si** kuchelewa kufika mkutanoni ... (It not getting late for the meeting ...)

In Kiswahili, on narrowing down we get constructions marked by negation *-si-* at the beginning of the sentence.

Stress in negation is used to mark the focus in a sentence. The referent which is being negated is stressed more than other referents in the construction. Consider:

26. Mie sikwenda huko pwani kucheza. (I didn't go to the beach to play.)
- a. MIE sikwenda huko pwani kucheza. (Mtu mwingine ndiye alienda.)
I didn't go to the beach to play. (Someone else did.)
 - b. Mie SIKWENDA huko pwani kucheza. (Nilifanya kitu kingine.)
I DIDN'T GO to the beach to play. (I did something else.)
 - c. Mie sikwenda HUO PWANI kucheza. (Nilienda mahala pengine.)
I didn't go to the BEACH to play. (I went elsewhere.)
 - d. Mie sikwenda huko pwani KUCHEZA. (Nilikedna kufanya mambo mengine.)
I didn't go to the beach to PLAY. (I did somthng else at the beach.)

These constructions have optional constituents and a contrastive interpretation of any other element in the clause is considered odd.

b. Focus and Yes/No- questions.

Narrowing of scope and attraction of focus occurs in yes/no questions. When the clause has only obligatory arguments, the scope of yes/no questions is wide open and can certainly take the entire VP or the entire cause. For instance,

27. A: Kwa hivyo unaihakikishia mahakama kwamba mshatkiwa ndiye aliyeanzisha fujo hiyo.

(So you are assuring the court that the accused is the one who started the commotion.)

B: Ndiyo. (Yes)

A: Askari alimuua mhalifu? (Did the policeman kill the criminal?)

B: La. (No.)

Once an optional constituent is present, it attracts the focus of the yes/no question without contrast:

28. Askari alimuua kwa hiari? (au ilikuwa ni ajali?)

(Did the policeman kill him knowingly? (or it was by mistake?))

When an optional constituent is present, contrastive stress-focus is more naturally placed on it instead of having it on the obligatory constituent:

29. Hamisi alipika SAMAKI. (au kuku?)

(Did Hamisi prepare FISH? (or chicken?))

In a case when a clause with no optional constituents is questioned, contrastive focus may apply to any constituent:

30. a. HAMISI alipika samaki? (au ni mtu mwingine?)

b. Hamisi ALIPIKA samaki? (au alifanya kitendo kingine?)

c. Hamisi alipika SAMAKI? (au alipika kuku?)

From the above examples, we conclude that, when a yes/no question is applied to a clause with an optional constituent, focus is revealed in two ways:

- i. By narrowing the focus of assertion or question to the optional constituent, or
- ii. By confining the contrastive focus to the focus of assertion.

c. Focus and wh-constructions.

Wh-questions often share the syntactic characteristics of cleft or stress-focus constructions, including the attendant REL-clause structure, (Givon: 2001:237). In Kiswahili interrogatives like who, when, which, what, and how are used. For instance:

31. Nani alizichoma karatasi? (Who burnt the papers?)

This question evokes the assumption that the addressee can identify the particular 'karatasi'/ papers that the addresser has in mind but also the addressee has in mind that the papers had been burnt. The first presupposition is evoked by the NP construction, the second by the sentence construction as a whole. The assertion expressed by the addressee is that the addressed will tell who the individual is.

In some instances assumption is not a presupposition evoked by the grammatical structure of information questions but by the felicity condition on the use of questions in general. For instance;

32. "Lo! Nani wale?" Rashid alimuuliza... ("Lo! Who are those?" Rashid asked.

The presupposition carried by *Nani wale?* Refers to individuals in the discourse who are identifiable by the addressee and that they have a certain identity. The speaker's desire is to know the identity of those being referred to.

Form such an example and other related constructions, the only constituents that qualifies as the focus domain is the question word. For example:

33.

- a. **Nani** wale? (Who are those?)
- b. Uwongo **gani?** (What lies?)
- c. Utaondoka saa **ngapi?** (What time are you leaving?)
- d. Mlikula **nini?** (What did you eat?) etc.

d. Predicate Focus Structure.

Its function in a sentence is to comment on a given topic conversation. For example:

34. Swali: Gari lako limefanya nini? (What happened to your car?)

Jibu: Gari langu/limeharibika. (My car broke down.)

From the sentence: 'My car broke down', we have:

Presupposition: the speaker's car is the topic for comment.

Assertion: X = the car broke down,

Focus: broke down,

Focu domain: VP

From another example:

35. Salum alimwambia Rashidi, "Leo Chaani kweupe."

"Kuna nini?" Rashidi aliuliza.

"Kuna Beni mbili, taarabu na Maumbwa." Alijibu Salum.

(Salum told Rashid, "Today there is life at Chaani.")

"What is there?" asked Rashidi.

"There are two bands, taarabu and Maumbwa." Salum responded.)

From the sentence, 'Kuna Beni mbili, taarabu na Maumbwa', we get the following information structure:

Sentence: Kuna Beni mbili, taarabu na Maumbwa.

| | |
|-----------------|--|
| Presupposition: | There is a place known as Chaani. |
| Assertion: | X = Kuna Beni mbili, taarabu na Maumbwa. |
| Focus: | Kuna Beni mbili, taarabu na Maumbwa. |
| Focus domain: | VP |

e. Argument Focus Structure.

The argument focus has the function of identifying a referent. This term applies in principle to any sentence in which focus is an argument rather than a predicate or an entire proposition. For example:

36. “Nani tapeleka yeye hospitali?” Yule Mzungu aliuliza.
 “Gari ya kampuni si ipo?” Wote waliopo pale walisema kwa umoja wao.

(“Who will take him to hospital?” asked the Whiteman.

“The company car isn’t there?” all those who were there responded in unison.)

Schematically:

| | |
|-----------------|---|
| Sentence: | Gari ya kampuni si ipo? |
| Presupposition: | There were means which the workers believed were there and which could be used to take the patient to the hospital. |
| Assertion: | X = gari la kampuni. |
| Focus: | Gari la kampuni |
| Focus domain: | NP |

The term ‘argument’ in argument focus is used to mean any non-predicating expression in a proposition. It includes terms expressing place, time and manner.

f. Sentence-focus structure

In sentence focus construction structures, no pragmatic presupposition is formally evoked except for some of the non-distinctive presuppositional features. For example:

37. Swali: Kulitokea nini? (What happened?)
 Jibu: Gari langu limeharibika. (My car broke down.)

The answer to the above question is the focus of the sentence. There is no presupposition in the sentence. Thus:

| | |
|-----------------|---------------------------------|
| Sentence: | Gari langu limeharibika. |
| Presupposition: | _____ |
| Assertion: | X = the owner’s car broke down. |
| Focus: | Gari langu limeharibika. |
| Focus domain: | Gari langu limeharibika. |

From this example we find out that, the assertion and the focus are the same. The focus is in both the argument and the predicate.

Conclusion

Information structure is not primarily concerned with the interpretation of word and sentences in given conversational contexts, but rather with the discourse circumstances under which the given pieces of propositional information are expressed. This means that there are no sentences without information structure. This paper has therefore given an explanation on how focus and topic are marked in Kiswahili sentences or constructions.

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