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From discourse to grammar in Tamang: topic, focus, intensifiers and subordination

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1 Introduction

Although the general classification of Tibeto-Burman languages remains uncertain, the Tamang language of Nepal belongs clearly in the broad group which Robert Shafer (Shafer 1955) called the "Bodish Section" of the "Bodic division" of Tibeto-Burman, of which Tibetan is the best known member. The Bodish section consists of two main branches, the Bodish Branch, containing classical Tibetan and all the so-called "Tibetan dialects", which share the innovation of *bdun* for 'seven', and the "Tamang Branch", earlier named "Gurung Branch" by Shafer on account of the fact that the Gurungs, being soldiers in the British army, were the most visible members of this group. For the earlier scholars, the Tamang branch consisted of Tamang (also called "Murmi"), Gurung and Thakali (also called "Thaksya"), to which have been more recently added Manangke, Nar-Phu and the Seke dialects (from the group of villages known as Panchgaon, the 'five villages' in Nepal), plus Chantyal, which is in a very bad state of repair. All of these have dialectal variants or sub-dialects. All languages of the Tamang Branch share a four-tone tonal system resulting from a recent two-way tonal split of what can be reconstructed as an earlier two-tone system, not shared by Tibetan in any of its dialects. If not reconstructible to Proto-Tibeto-Burman, as I believe it is not (but this remains an open question), this proto two-tone system is a common innovation of the Tamang Branch.

Except for the northernmost members of the group, the Seke and Manang dialects, which underwent some recent Tibetan influence on their grammar, languages of the Tamang branch have a very plain verbal morphology, exhibiting none of the developments of auxiliaries indicating evidentiality and orientation *vis-à-vis* the speaker, which are general in Tibetan dialects. In the languages of the Tamang branch, verb roots are invariable. In main clauses, they carry tense-aspect and mood suffixes, in subordinate clauses they carry a marker indicating the relationship of the subordinate clause to the main clause. The way verbal morphology starts to complexify, in this group, is not a matter of combining main verbs with auxiliaries, as in the Bodish branch, but rather of adding to the subordinate verb phrase what Matisoff (1973) has called "unrestricted particles" — that is particles that mark both noun and verb phrases. In Tamang proper, exemplified here by its Eastern dialect as spoken in the

village of Risiangku, we can observe the use of morphemes which are basically discourse particles on all kinds of grammatical structures, and their progressive grammaticization as they become obligatory on some kinds of subordinate clauses.

2 Descriptive and analytic framework

The proper use of discourse particles in a foreign language is among the most difficult things to master. Along with tones, it is one of those aspects of grammar which leads the traditional grammarian to advise the learner to get hold of a native speaker and imitate him; always good advice in any case!

Since a quarter of a century, much progress has been made in the analysis of information structure. There remains nevertheless some imprecision and incompleteness, and all definitions are open to criticism as Dryer remarks (Dryer 1996). Here we have elected to use the definitions proposed by Lambrecht for topic and focus (Lambrecht 1994), and the framework he provides for the analysis of different types of referents in view of their potential selection as topics, and for the classification of different focus structures. Lambrecht calls "topic" "a matter of standing interest or concern" about which relevant information is added in the sentence. "The topic of a sentence is the thing which the proposition expressed by the sentence IS ABOUT," (author's emphasis) (Lambrecht 1994:118). The focus, in many ways, is the complement of the topic, but not necessarily so. A sentence always has a focus, but not necessarily an expressed topic, for instance in answer to the question "What is going on?" where the whole sentence is the focus. Lambrecht's definition of focus is thus independent of that of topic: "The focus of the proposition expressed by a sentence in a given utterance context is seen as the element of information whereby the presupposition and the assertion DIFFER from each other," (Lambrecht 1994:207). This new information is not necessarily a new *denotatum*, but can be a new relation between a *denotatum* and the proposition (Lambrecht 1994:217). The third notion we use, "intensifiers", borrowed and extended from König (König 1997), refers to particular kinds of focus markers: words like "even, only, also, self (non-reflexive)".

3 Information structure in the Tamang simple sentence

Tamang has two topic markers, -mi/-m for simple topics, and ⁴ca/-ca for contrastive topics; one focus marker -ka/¹ka; and several intensifiers -i/-e/-ja 'also, even', -n/-nun 'self (non-reflexive), really', ⁴ce 'only'. These markers are used to express the information structure of the sentence without changing its grammatical structure: case marking and word order can remain unchanged. In the following examples¹ the adverb 'now' is in the same position in the sentence, while the place of the topic marker shifts.

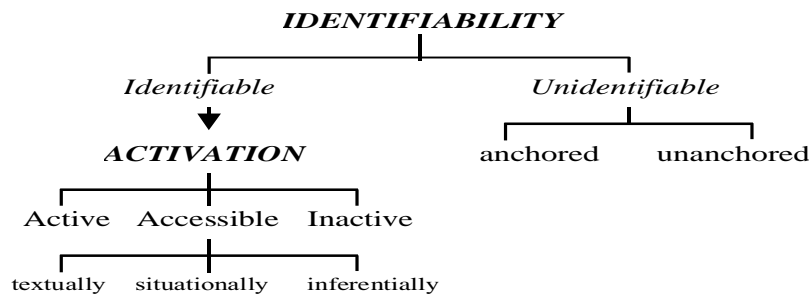
¹ The transcription follows the recommendations of the IPA, except that /c/ is used instead of IPA /ts/ and tones are transcribed by numbers from 1 to 4 from highest to lowest. Loan words from Nepali are in italics.

- (1) ³mi-la ⁴tamo-m ³rap-si ³cin-ci
 person-GEN now-TOP play-having finish-PFV
 Her's [i.e. her tape-recorder] has now stopped playing.
- (2) ¹ŋa-ta-m ¹tamo ²aru-la ²p^ha: ¹to:-ci
 I-DAT-TOP now aunt-GEN repay need-PFV
 Now I have to repay my aunt's [loan].

The focus marker can occur on any element of the clause including the verb, without change in the syntactic structure, and its domain can be any element or the whole sentence.

3.1 Topic and topicalization in simple sentences

Lambrecht proposes an analysis of the cognitive states of referents in discourse in order to predict the likelihood of a given referent's being picked as topic in a sentence. We will follow the broad lines of that classification to characterize the different kinds of topics in Tamang. The main distinction to be made according to Lambrecht is the degree of identifiability of the referent for the hearer. Second is the degree of 'activation' of the referent in the consciousness of both speaker and hearer at the time of speech.



After Lambrecht (1994:109)

The most likely candidate for topic is along the left branch of the tree, an identifiable, "active"² referent; the least likely, along the right branch, an unidentifiable unanchored referent (that is one which cannot even be put in relation with a known element of the situation). With this definition, the topic referent can be a proposition as well as a cognitive entity corresponding to an NP (Dryer 1996:483).

² Remembering that "active" here means "in the foreground of the speech participants consciousness (i.e. "activated"), not active vs passive.

3.1.1 Active referent as topic

The most common expression of an active topic in Tamang, whether in conversation or in running text, is zero: previously known elements are absent from the sentence (or pronominalized by zero), as the agent and patient of sentence (3).

- (3) ²khaĩ ⁴por-ci ?
 where bring-PFV
 Where did [she] take [them] ?

If present, an active topic is most commonly rejected after the verb, with lowered intonation, as an afterthought. Several active topics can occur in this position, with no particle attached.

- (4) ²khaĩ ⁴por-ci, *kanchi*-se ⁴me
 where bring-PERF Kanchi-ERG cow
 Where did she take them, Kanchi, the cows?

3.1.2 Accessible referent as topic

A topic which is accessible but not active (present in the slightly more distant context) is activated by being mentioned with the topic marker -m(i). This is the case in (5) for the demonstrative ¹oca summing up what was said before (textually accessible), and for the pronoun ¹ŋa referring to the speaker (situationally accessible)³.

- (5) ¹oca-m ¹ŋa-i-mi *tha:* ³are, *mai*
 that-TOP I-ERG-TOP knowledge is not Mai
 That, as far as I am concerned, I don't know, Mai.

3.1.3 "Re-activated" active topic

If an active topic has to be mentioned in its proper grammatical place in the sentence, it is marked with the topic marker -m(i). This structure occurs in story telling where the cohesion of discourse is ensured by the formal repetition of the topic from one sentence to the next (6).

- (6) ⁴kle ⁴kik *ra:ni* ⁴kik ¹mu-pa ²cim
 king one queen one be-Past EVID
 ¹oca ⁴kle-then *ra:ni*-mi ¹phjukpo-¹phjukpo ¹mu-pa ²cim
 that king-and queen-TOP rich-rich be-Past EVID
 [Once upon a time] there was a king and a queen. That king and queen were extremely rich.

³ Although these two arguments could also be considered as "active", following Lambrecht's examples p. 110, in which case we are in the construction described below in (3.1.3). This may be acceptable for ¹oca, but I don't believe it is right for the first person pronoun, in the sense that the speaker was not under discussion in the preceding conversation.

3.1.4 Contrastive or selective topic

A contrastive topic is marked with the tonal particle ⁴ca, sometimes reduced to -ca, possibly a loan word from Nep. *cahĩ*. The contrastive topic marker is often found in balanced sentences, like (7), where two topics are opposed.

- (7) ²sipai ⁴ca ⁴ŋachʰa ⁴ŋachʰa, ²oca ³caca ¹licʰa ¹licʰa
 soldier TOP ahead ahead that small behind behind
 The soldiers were far in front, and the boy far behind.

Clauses too can be topicalized in this way:

- (8) ¹si-pa ⁴ca ¹ŋa-i *patta* ³are
 die-Ner TOP I-ERG knowledge is not
 That she had died, I did not know.

3.2 Focus and focalisation in the simple sentence

Lambrecht distinguishes three types of focus structures: argument-, predicate- and sentence-focus. In Tamang, predicate and sentence focus are not always easily distinguishable and can be grouped under the concept of broad focus, opposed to narrow, argument focus.

Plain focus⁴, whether narrow or broad, is left unmarked in Tamang. Given the propensity of Tamang to delete all known arguments from the spoken sentence, the focal element is frequently the only constituent present.

- (9) ¹pin-ci
 give-PFV
 [I/he/you] gave [it] [to me/you/him]

Strong focus, whether narrow or broad, is marked by the particle -ka.

3.2.1 Strong focus on an argument

- (10) ²ai-la ⁴mar-ka ⁴ni:nun ²cun-o ³pi-pa ¹ŋa-i-mi
 you-GEN gold-FOC two-INT sell-IMP say-IPFV I-ERG-TOP
 It is your gold [earrings] that I said to sell both of (I did).

Example (10) is uttered as a reprimand to the trickster boy of the story who has sold as slaves the two soldiers who were accompanying him, instead of his two earrings, as instructed by the soldiers. He mutters (11) in reply.

- (11) ¹ŋa-i-e-n ⁴mar-ka ³pi-pa na ¹osem, ⁴ni:nun
 I-ERG-also-INT gold-FOC say-IPFV uh then both
 Me too, it is my golds which I say, uh, then, both.

⁴ Plain focus is to be distinguished from what Dryer (1996) calls 'simple focus', which is a strong focus marked by intonation only (rather than e.g. a cleft construction in English). Plain focus is the minimal level of focus that justifies an utterance.

3.2.2 (Strong) broad focus

A strong focus on the predicate (12) is sometimes easy to contrast (semantically) with a sentence focus (13), but not always.

- (12) ¹the-la ¹mriŋ-ka ²cim
 he- GEN wife- FOC EVID
 That's his WIFE.
- (13) ²ai -la ¹mriŋ ²cim-ka
 you- GEN wife EVID- FOC
 You have a wife (already) [so why should I go out with you?].

Note that the constituent which carries the marker -ka, in case of broad focus, is not necessarily directly contrasted to another possible item. -ka often indicates that the assertion is globally contrary to expectancy, or to the wish of the speaker or the hearer.

- (14) ¹ŋa-i-ia ¹nipa-ka, ¹apa
 I-ERG-also go-FOC father
 I want to go too, Daddy
- (15) ¹the-m ¹licha-m ⁴jaŋ-ta-n ¹jaŋ-pa-ka
 it-TOP later-TOP us-DAT-INT find-IPFV-FOC
 Those [riches], later, we will get them back (for sure/don't worry).
- (16) e, ¹ŋa-i-mi ³a-³pa-lai-ka
 eh I-ERG-TOP not-bring-IRR-FOC
 Eh, me, I did not bring [it/any].

The focus marker which semantically applies to the whole predicate can be affixed to the object of the verb as in (17) or to its subject in case of sentence focus (18).

- (17) ²ai-se-mi ¹ŋa-la ¹tho-ri ¹cha:mo-ka ³pa-ci
 you-ERG-TOP I-GEN top-LOC cowife-FOC bring-PFV
 You brought home a CO-WIFE on me (of all things you could have done).
- (18) ²nam-ka ¹kha-pa-ri ⁴mai-ci
 rain-TOP come-Ner-LOC try-PFV
 It's going to rain (contrary to expectation)!

In (17) the husband did not bring a second wife instead of a cow, in a substitution parallel to (10). Rather, the speaker underlines the nastiness of the whole action of bringing in a second wife.

3.2.3 Intensifiers

Several intensifiers are used for special focus. The meaning and use of -i/-e/-ja 'also, even', and ⁴ce 'only' are clear enough; that of -n/-nun 'self (non-reflexive), really' is more subtle.

Although -n and -nun are variants in a number of contexts, they are distinct in others. When they are not morphophonemic variants of each other (conditioned by the phonological context) -nun seems to indicate the unique identification of the referent, while -n indicates rather the plenitude of the quality attributed to the referent.

- (19) ²li:-mi ²se:-ci ⁴kle-nun, ³ko-ri ...
 face-TOP know-PFV king-INT body-LOC ...
 The face, she recognized — it was the king all right, but on the body ...
- (20) *pap* *dharma* ⁴kle-ta-n
 sin merit king-DAT-INT
 Sin or merit, it accrues fully to the king !

-nun is used on numbers: ³mun ⁴kik-nun |night one-INT| 'the whole night', ⁴ni:-nun |two-INT| 'both'; while -n is often used on scalar quantifiers: ²ot-te-n |this-amount-INT| 'that's all! (i. e. my story is finished)', ³la:na-n |much-INT| 'much (really much)', ³mokko-n |all-INT| 'all (without exception)', ³sjo:-ri-n |morning-in-INT| 'early in the morning'. -n is often used to strengthen the marker -i/-e/-ja on NP's (see ex. 11, -en 'also' <-e-n).

4 The use of topic and focus markers in the construction of complex sentences

The same markers which indicate information structure in simple sentences are found in complex sentences, where they help to shift the basic descriptive reading of subordinating suffixes towards a logical reading. Their use is optional with time and manner clauses, but with conditionals it has become obligatory. We will first look at the basic meanings of the subordinating suffixes.

4.1 Basic subordination patterns

The relationships between clauses in Tamang are indicated by a set of suffixes affixed to the verbal root of the subordinate clause. The most important are the following:

- ma temporal simultaneity
 - si temporal succession
 - na manner or aim
 - sa- condition
- (21) ¹licha ²kola *gothe-ri* ¹ni-ma ¹apa ⁴tim-ri ¹kha-cim
 later child stable-LOC go-while father house-LOC arrive-PFV
 Then, while the child was going to the stables, the father arrived at the house.
- (22) ³mokkon *dikki-ri* ⁴por-si ²to-ci
 all mill-LOC carry-after mill-PFV
 I took it all to the mill and milled it.
- (23) ²mren-na ¹ca-ci
 satiate-MANNER eat-PFV
 He ate his full.

These basic meanings can vary pragmatically. Thus an anteriority marker can indicate manner (24) or cause (25), and a simultaneity marker can express a condition (26).

- (24) ¹sja-si ¹sja-si ¹kha-ci
 dance-ing dance-ing come-PFV
 She came dancing all the way.

- (25) ²kola ¹si-si *pir* ¹ta-pa-ro
 child die-having pain happen-INF-RS
 He says he is sad because his child died.
- (26) ¹p^hut-si-n ²ci ¹to:-pa, ³a-¹p^hut-ma ¹si-pa
 blow-ing-INT stay must-IPFV NEG-blow-when die-IPFV
¹p^hut-ma ²luŋ-pa
 blow-when burn-IPFV
 You have to keep blowing, if (when) you don't blow on it, it (the fire) dies, if /when you blow on it, it burns.

4.2 Topic on subordinate clauses

4.2.1 Simultaneity clause with topic marker

Added to the suffix *-ma*, which indicates simultaneity in time, the topic marker *-m(i)* explicitly sets the clause as background (27, 28), facilitating a causal reading.

- (27) ³a-¹kh^a-ma-m, ⁴mai ¹ni-ci
 neg-come-when-TOP search go-PFV
 As he did not arrive, they went to look for him.
- (28) ¹ca-ma-m ²itt^hepa-n ²p^ho ³plo-pa
 eat-when-TOP this much-INT belly boil-IPFV
 When I eat, my belly gurgles so much.

In (29) the presence of the topic marker prepares the dramatic effect expressed in the main clause. Compare with the unemotional reporting in (30).

- (29) ³kuŋ-te-ri ³to:-ka-ma-m ¹apa ¹sjoŋ-se ⁴lap ⁴por-ci-ro
 middle-about-LOC reach-DIR-when-TOP father river-ERG ADV carry-PFV-RS
 But as he was reaching the middle, the father was carried off by the river.
- (30) ¹sjoŋ ³kuŋ-ri ³to:-ka-ma ¹sjoŋ-se ⁴lap ⁴por-ci
 river middle-LOC reach-DIR-when river-ERG ADV carry-PFV
 As he was reaching the middle (of the river), the river carried him off.

(29) is said when first telling the story, (30) is used shortly after (29), in a factual description summing up the situation of the mother and her two children, when the father, who was helping them cross, disappears, leaving the mother on one side of the river and the children on the other.

4.2.2 Sequential clause with topic marker

The most common extension of the reading of the sequence marker *-si* is causal, as in (25) above. Adding the topic marker *-mi*⁵ allows a concessive reading as in (31).

⁵ In Western Tamang, the *-m* post-suffix seems to have become stuck onto the sequential marker, yielding an unanalysable marker *-cim*. See Everitt (1973) and Taylor (1973). Western Tamang *-cim*, cognate to Eastern Tamang *-si*, a subordinate clause marker, should not be confused with Eastern Tamang *-cim/*²*cim*, translated

4.5 Conditionals

The conditional marker *-sa-* cannot be used nowadays without a following suffix, which is either the topic *-m(i)*, the strong focus *-ka*, or the intensifier *-i* (sometimes reinforced to *-i-nun*). The discourse particles, which are still used for stylistic effects on other subordinate clauses, have thus been grammaticized on conditional subordinates.

4.5.1 Topic

The adjunction to *-sa-* of the topic marker yields a plain conditional, corresponding to the now well accepted idea that 'conditionals are topics' (Haiman 1978).

- (35) ²nam ¹k^ha-sa-m ¹ŋa ³a ¹k^ha
 rain come-if-TOP I NEG come
 If it rains, I won't come.

The verb of the main clause can be in the indicative mood as in (35). It can also be in the conditional, expressing greater doubt as to the certainty of the event.

- (36) ¹iampu-ri ¹mar ¹ni-pa ³mi ¹mu-sam,
 Kathm.-LOC down go-Ner man be-if
¹ŋa-m ³cakir ¹ca-pa-r' ¹ni-sai
 I-TOP salary eat-Ner-LOC go-COND
 If there were someone going down to Kathmandu, I would go [with him] to earn a salary.

4.5.2 Focus

The use of a focus marker on a conditional clause is less readily understandable. In Tamang, it is used to underline the fact that the condition is not fulfilled, at least as yet, and that the speaker wishes it were.

- (37) ²ai ¹ni-sa-ka ⁴por-sai
 you go-if-FOC take along-COND
 If only you would come, I would take you along. (in the most common reading = I would marry you)

It is thus most often used with a past main clause as a counterfactual marker.

- (38) *t^haa* ¹mu-sa-ka ⁴pa-si ¹k^ha-sai
 knowledge be-if-FOC bring-ing come- COND
 If only I had known, I would have brought some.

4.5.3 Intensifiers

The intensifier *-i* added to the conditional marker *-sa-*, emphasizes the condition (39) and in most cases yields a concessive reading 'even if' (40). In that meaning it is often strengthened by a second intensifier *-nun*.

- (39) ²chjai ¹ta-sa-i , ²ai-se ²pha: ¹to:-pa ³ahin
 debt occur-if-INT you-ERG pay must-IPFV isn't it?
 And if ever he gets into debt, you will have to pay it, right?
- (40) ¹the ³a-¹khā-sai(-nun) ¹ŋa ¹ni-la
 he not-come-if+INT(-INT) I go-FUT
 Even if he won't come, I will go.

Conclusion

In the present situation of Tamang, we find the same particles used in different grammatical roles, with meanings that can be rather transparently derived from some basic meaning. Are they the same particles synchronically, and is the present state stable? The obligatoriness of these particles on conditional sentences tends to suggest that grammaticization has occurred or is occurring there, and that in their use on subordinate clauses, these particles are slowly losing the information structure value which we can construe as their original value, in favor of a more grammatical value, where they blend with the subordination suffixes.

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