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Focus Structures in Copala Triqui

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Focus Structures in Copala Triqui

An honors thesis presented to the
Department of Linguistics,
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and
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Research Advisor: Lauren Clemens, PhD.

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Abstract:

The purpose of this research is to identify the techniques used by speakers of Copala Triqui to focus one or more constituents in a sentence. Copala Triqui is a native Mexican language originating in the region that is now San Juan Copala, Mexico. In this experiment, we tested for five types of focus: broad focus, subject focus, object focus, contrastive subject focus, and contrastive object focus. We captured these patterns by having speakers answer Triqui questions that elicited the appropriate type of focus. We found that some focused sentences allow for deviations in word order from non-focused or broad-focused ones. Other focused sentences made use of the focus marker, 'ma'an,' and its reduced form, 'man.' In revealing the techniques used by Triqui speakers to focus constituents, this research allows us to gain a better understanding of the countless nuances of the Triqui language.

Acknowledgements:

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It is also necessary to thank my consultant speaker, Mónica DeJesus-Ramirez. Mónica is fluent in three languages, is attending university in a non-native language, and is involved in and leads several groups on campus. Yet she still made time this semester to meet with me and many other students to discuss her native language, answering every question, repeating the same sentences endlessly, and even providing voice recordings. Her patience and kindness made this project fun and exciting.

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	2
Acknowledgements.....	3
Introduction to Triqui.....	4
Focus.....	8
Experiment Methodology.....	10
Results.....	14
Going Forward.....	19
Conclusion.....	19
Bibliography.....	21

1. Introduction to Triqui

The Triqui language is native to Mexico and pre-dates Spanish colonization. There are three distinct dialects of the language, all spoken in different areas of Mexico and Mesoamerica. This research is conducted in Triqui de San Juan Copala or Copala Triqui which is spoken mainly in and around San Juan Copala in western Oaxaca. (Hollenbach)

Over the past several hundred years, Triqui speakers have interacted increasingly with speakers of Spanish, as well as with speakers of other Mixtec languages indigenous to the state of Oaxaca (Hollenbach). Any language naturally undergoes changes as time passes, causing younger members of the Triqui community to speak with slight variations from their elders. These changes have undoubtedly been influenced by contact with other languages. Interaction with Spanish has also led to the borrowing of many Spanish words. In fact, most new words that must be added to the language are identical or very similar to those used in Spanish.

Aside from these borrowed words, however, Triqui de San Juan Copala is a unique and complete language. Although it lacks an original writing system, it has a distinct grammar and vocabulary, as well as a rather complex tonal system. There are five level tones which have been labeled, by linguists, 1 – 5 from lowest to highest. Additionally, tone can be realized in a single word as rising from 1 to 3 or falling from 3 to either 2 or 1. These tones are very strict with very little variation among speakers. They influence both the lexical morphology and the syntax, meaning a change in tone is likely to change a word's meaning or role.

As mentioned above, Copala Triqui is not, historically a written language. Native speakers do not read or write in the language, but, instead, use Spanish for all written communication.

a.

Symbol	IPA
p	[p]
t	[t]
c	[k]
q	[k]
'	[ʔ]
b	[b]
d	[d]
d	[ð]
g	[g]
c	[g]
g	[ɣ]
tz	[ts]
ch	[tʃ]
chr	[tʃ̥]
s	[s]
x	[ʃ]
xr	[ʃ̥]
s	[z]
x	[ʒ]
r	[ʒ]
r	[r]
r	[r]
m	[m]
n	[n]
n	[ŋ]
l	[l]
y	[j]
i	[j]
u	[w]
v	[v]
v	[β]

h	syllable break
j	[h]
n	nasalization of preceding vowel

(Barbara Hollenbach 2009)

Triqui uses a very common five vowel system:

b.

i		u
e		o
	a	

(Barbara Hollenbach 2009)

All vowels can be lengthened by repeating the symbol, and nasalized by adding an ‘n’ directly following.

While complex in nature, the transcription of tone is relatively simple. Any syllable with tone 4 or 5 is marked with an acute accent above the corresponding vowel. Low tones 1 and 2 are marked with an underline below the vowel. This means that when reading, it is often impossible to differentiate between tones 4 and 5 or tones 1 and 2.

Today, Triqui de San Juan Copala is spoken by approximately 30,000 people (Ethnologue: Languages of the World, Nineteenth edition) and can be found all over Mexico and the United States. Beginning in 1989, Triqui speakers began moving to the Capital District of New York State. Today the region is home to over 600 Triquis – one of the largest groups outside of Mexico. The Triquis were originally drawn to this area due to its proximity to other cities,

amenable job market, and education opportunities. As more Triquis settle in the area, their friends and family members come to join them. Thus, the Triqui community in the Capital Region is steadily growing and the population is finding its footholds in the area. (New York State Office for New Americans)

2. Focus

a) Defining Focus

Focus is the variations in speech that allow a speaker to increase the importance of one or more constituents in a sentence, commonly used to highlight new or contrastive information. In an essay, *Focus and Intonation*, Daniel Büring describes focus as, “[...] the term used to describe effects of prosody on meaning and vice versa.” Büring goes on to define prosody as “[...] not just intonation, but also additional aspects of phonetic realization such as pauses, lengthening of segments, perhaps loudness and spectral tilt; intonation in particular, and perhaps prosody in general roughly corresponds to the colloquial term ‘inflection’”. (Büring)

Cross-linguistically, focus is marked in two ways: changes in prosody and changes in word order. Changes in prosody includes changes in pitch, sound length, and volume; what we might call intonation. Changes in word order are very limited in many languages and very flexible in others. As a consultant, Mónica provided Triqui sentences almost exclusively with Subject-Verb-Object word order. Yet we know from asking her questions and from other Triqui sources that it is possible to use different orders and still have grammatical, unproblematic, and common sentences. Below we will see how Copala Triqui treats this matter when it comes to focus.

b) Focus in English

Focus in English relies heavily on prosody. We can change the focus of the sentence, 'Mary took the dog to the park' by changing its prosody. If we say 'MARY took the dog to the park' we pronounce the word 'Mary' louder and more forcefully. This puts focus on the word. Since Mary is the subject of the sentence, this is an example of subject focus. Yet, if we say 'Mary took the DOG to the park' we put the same affects as before on the word 'dog', which is the object of this sentence. This is an example of object focus.

While very limited, English employ a small amount of word order shift when focusing sentences. Starting with the same sentence as above, we can then say, 'It was the DOG that Mary took to the park.' This construction requires some extra words to create what is called a cleft to keep the sentence grammatical. While some languages simply allow constituents to be moved to any position in a sentence, it would be ungrammatical in English to say 'DOG Mary took to park.' The cleft construction is possible and is used frequently. However, it is almost always seen in a position of contrastive or corrective focus; it serves to contradict a previous statement or belief.

c) Focus in Triqui

To learn about focus structures in Triqui, we set up an experiment to naturally elicit five basic types of focus:

Broad Focus (BF) keeps emphasis on the entire sentence.

Subject Focus (SF) emphasizes the subject.

Object Focus (OF) emphasizes the object.

Contrastive Subject Focus (CS) emphasizes the correct subject as opposed to an incorrect one.

Contrastive Object Focus (CO) emphasizes the correct object as opposed to an incorrect one.

3. Experiment Methodology

This experiment is concerned with forms of focus in basic, transitive Triqui sentences. To learn how speakers of Copala Triqui demonstrate focus or stress on part of a sentence, we set up a simple exercise to elicit such sentences from Triqui speakers. The exercise consisted of ten sentences, all with transitive verbs. Each sentence had one of five predetermined subjects so that the elicited sentences would maintain a certain degree of predictability. All of the verbs were disyllabic with mostly sonorant sounds. They were all active verbs whose meanings could be easily discerned from a simple drawing.

a) Setup

After confirming our sentences with our main consultant, Mónica, we had her prerecord, in Triqui, an introduction to the exercise and then a number of questions about each sentence. In fact, the Triqui speakers never heard the sentences we came up with. Instead, they were asked the questions mentioned above in hopes that they would answer with the intended sentences,

focusing, if necessary on a specific aspect. In this way, we elicited focused sentences as naturally as we could.

We obtained illustrations of all the characters: a girl, a boy, a man, a woman, and an old woman. We then obtained two more illustrations of each character. In each picture, the characters were performing different actions. The pictures depicted the following sentences:

The boy kicked the ball yesterday.

The man watched TV yesterday.

The man shot the leopard yesterday.

The man dug a hole yesterday.

The woman filled the cup yesterday.

The woman cut the tomato yesterday.

The girl carried the baby yesterday.

The woman washed the plate yesterday.

The girl read the book yesterday.

The woman picked flowers yesterday.

These pictures were randomized and put into a slideshow. At the beginning of the slideshow we put the introductory pictures and had our consultant, Mónica, record introductions for each one. For example, with the picture of the boy, Mónica said, "This is the boy, he wears a blue shirt." The introductions served to help ensure that speakers participating in the experiment all use the same words for the subjects, eliminating irrelevant variables. Every time the boy was shown, he was in the blue shirt. The other characters kept their outfits and appearances as well, to minimize confusion.

b) Running the Experiment

Each picture was shown five different times throughout the experiment. With each picture, the speaker would be asked one of five questions to elicit one of the five types of focused responses. By the end of the experiment, the speaker had answered all five types of questions about both pictures of all five characters. For the pictures of the woman chopping the tomatoes, the following questions were asked:

What happened yesterday? To elicit Broad Focus.

Who cut the tomato yesterday? To elicit Subject Focus.

What did the woman cut yesterday? To elicit Object Focus.

Did the man cut the tomato yesterday? To introduce an incorrect subject, eliciting Contrastive Subject Focus.

Did the woman cut the onion yesterday? To introduce an incorrect object, eliciting Contrastive Object Focus.

The questions were asked in random order, mixed in with the other pictures and questions in the experiment. This was done so that each response was given as a unique response. If all the questions about the girl, or all of the Object Focus questions were asked back to back, the answers might be given more as part of a list than as individual sentences. This would likely influence the word order or prosody and therefore was avoided.

Questions were asked in Triqui, again with Mónica's recordings, so as not to influence the answers with any patterns or expectations from English or Spanish. These languages have their

own rules for prosody and word order. A Triqui sentence given in response to a question in a different language would likely take on these nuances from the language asking the question.

Additionally, answering a question in Triqui that has been asked in another language would require the speaker to translate in their head before responding. No matter how fluent a speaker is in each language, this translation would be an extra step that is not being tested in this experiment, making it an unwanted variable. The necessity to translate could easily cause confusion about the question and uncertainty in the answer provided. So, to keep answers simple and natural, the entire experiment was conducted in Triqui.

The questions were kept in the past tense so that we could count on the word 'yesterday' being at the end of every elicited sentence. This was done in an attempt not to miss any information from the important words in the sentences. It is common for speakers of any language to lower their tone, volume, and enunciation at the end of a sentence, but doing so in this experiment could skew the perceived result if the last word were one of importance. By having the last word of each sentence be 'yesterday,' we allowed all of these potential problems to fall on an insignificant word.

The experiment was set up to observe five types of focus: broad focus, subject focus, object focus, contrastive subject focus, and contrastive object focus. Thus for each picture, the speaker was asked five questions. For example, the picture of a woman cutting a tomato would raise the following questions:

The Triqui speakers were instructed to respond naturally, in hopes that they would utter the correct sentence, adding focus or stress where necessary. All of the responses were recorded

and later examined using Praat, a computer software designed to analyze phonetics. This software allowed us single out portions of recordings, splice one recording into two or more individual recordings, and even to get visuals of pitch and intensity of sound waves. While the visuals were helpful, it proved to be even more valuable to simply listen to each recording closely and repeatedly.

4. Results

To discuss the results, we can use the responses to the questions in conjunction with the picture of the boy catching the ball. This picture was intended to elicit the sentence, 'The boy caught the ball yesterday' with various forms of focus, depending on the accompanying question.

When asked to translate the above sentence into Triqui, Mónica provided the following:

a) Translation

Xnii ta'aj rumii quii.

Boy caught ball yesterday

The boy caught the ball yesterday.

When we asked the question, 'What happened yesterday?' to elicit Broad Focus, it was not surprising that the response was indistinguishable from the translated sentence.

b) Broad Focus

Xnii ta'aj rumii quii.

Boy caught ball yesterday

The boy caught the ball yesterday.

The question, 'Who caught the ball yesterday?' was intended to elicit Subject Focus. In response to this question, Mónica said,

c) Subject Focus

Man xnii ta'aj rumii quii.

FOC. Boy caught ball yesterday

The boy caught the ball yesterday.

Alt: The BOY caught the ball yesterday.

In this example, Mónica added the focus marker, 'man,' to the beginning of the sentence. This served to indicate that the subject was more important in this particular response.

To elicit Object Focus, we asked the question, 'What did the boy catch yesterday?' This question earned the following answer:

d) Object Focus

Rumii ta'aj xnii quii.

Ball caught boy yesterday

The boy caught the ball yesterday.

Alt: The boy caught the BALL yesterday.

This time, Mónica actually rearranged the constituents in her response. While we knew this was possible in Triqui, we weren't sure where, if at all, this action would take place. The sentence kept its semantic meaning, but by switching the positions of the subject and the object, moving the object to the beginning of the sentence, Mónica was able to convey the importance of the sentence's object. The context given by the preceding question, and the impossibility of an alternative make it clear that the boy is the subject and the ball is the object. It would be very difficult to contrive a situation where a boy is caught by a ball. Thus, it is not likely that a Triqui speaker would be confused about what transpired when hearing the sentence in 4d.

Next we elicited Contrastive Subject Focus by asking the question, 'Did the woman catch the ball yesterday?' Replacing the correct subject with a different, clearly incorrect one requires a speaker to reply in a way that will correct any wrong information. To provide the correct subject of the sentence, Mónica replied,

e) Contrastive Subject Focus

Ma'an xnii ta'aj rumii quii.

FOC. boy caught ball yesterday

The boy caught the ball yesterday

Alt: It was the BOY who caught the ball yesterday.

The focus marker, 'ma'an,' is most commonly seen as its reduced form, 'man,' as in example 4c. However, when Mónica used it to mark Contrastive Subject Focus, she pronounced it very clearly in its non-reduced form. This was likely done to add extra emphasis to the subject,

making the focus in this sentence stronger than that in 4c. This is similar to patterns in English. In English, indicators of focus are often more prominent when correcting an inaccurate constituent than when simply emphasizing a constituent already known to be correct.

Lastly, we elicited Contrastive Object Focus with the question, 'Did the boy catch the dog yesterday?' Similar to what was done with the subject in 4e, this question provides an object that is clearly in contrast with the picture provided. Mónica's correction was as follows:

f) Contrastive Object Focus

Man xnii ta'aj rumii quii

FOC. boy caught boy yesterday

The boy caught the ball yesterday

Alt: It was the BALL that the boy caught yesterday.

This sentence is interesting because without context, it is identical to the sentence elicited by the Subject Focus Sentence in example 4c. It is likely that these two sentences appear in different enough contexts to allow for them to lack addition and/or separate focus indicators. Examples 4d and 4e, however are similar enough to other likely forms of focus that they take on their own indicators such as variations in word order or the long form of the focus marker.

In general, it was slightly surprising not to find more variation between the responses. We saw that it is possible to deviate from the most common SVO word order. Yet we only saw this happen with Object-Focused sentences. Similarly, it was surprising not to see more use of tone in determining focus. Copala Triqui has such a complex tonal system, yet tone played no distinguishable role in focusing any constituents.

Despite these unexpected results – or lack thereof – it was satisfying to learn that Triqui does, indeed, have explicit ways to express focus in a sentence. Of the five types of focus tested, only two – Subject Focus and Contrastive Object Focus – appeared to be the same. The rest – Broad Focus, Object Focus, and Contrastive Subject Focus – had their own ways of distinguishing themselves and drawing attention to the constituent in question. And as for the two forms that did seem the same, it seems likely that they are used differently enough from one another that when used in context, a Triqui speaker would not consider them the same at all.

Three of the five sentences employed the focus marker, ‘ma’an,’ or its reduced form, ‘man.’ This is a word that does not have an English equivalent but is essential in Copala Triqui. We can see that it has two variations – a long form and a short form – and it seems that the long form provides a higher degree of focus than the short version. No matter which constituent is focused in a given sentence, this focus marker always appears at the beginning.

Additionally, one of the responses took advantage of Triqui’s flexibility with word order. This variation occurred in the Object-Focused sentence, not in a Contrastive-Focused sentence as we expect to see in English. This simply reaffirms the understanding that Triqui allows for more variation in word order than English does. The variation in 4d is done cleanly and serves a clear purpose.

It is clear that Triqui has several techniques to focus constituents in a sentence that can be used individually or in conjunction with one another.

5. Going Forward

Although insightful, this experiment could still be expanded. The first way to do this would be to have more Triqui speakers participate in the experiment. In any language, each speaker has their own preferences on structure and pronunciation. It is almost certain that additional speakers would provide sentences with different variations in word order, focus markers, and possibly even tone.

Another possible step in the future could be to expand upon the questions in the experiment. A more detailed understanding of focus in Triqui could be gained by studying more and different sentences. It is possible that nontransitive or ditransitive verbs change the focus patterns in a sentence. It is possible that inanimate subjects or animate objects are focused differently from the animate subjects and inanimate objects used in this experiment.

Another interesting topic to explore would be the use of the focus marker, 'ma'an' and its reduced form, 'man.' It is possible that this word could appear in other positions in the sentence. This is something to look out for as other speakers participate in the experiments. We could also test other placements of 'man' in the sentences we have elicited.

6. Conclusion

Copala Triqui employs several techniques to focus constituents in a sentence. These techniques vary depending on which type of focus the speaker is using. We set up an experiment to test for five types of focus: Broad Focus, Subject Focus, Object Focus, Contrastive

Subject Focus, and Contrastive Object Focus. We found that broad focus sentences are the same when elicited by asking a question in Triqui as a basic sentence elicited by asking for a translation. Subject-Focused sentences and Contrastive Object-Focused sentences both utilize the focus marker, 'man.' This word appears at the beginning of these sentences. The difference between the meanings of the two can be determined by context, based on the question they are answering. Similarly, Contrastive Object focus is indicated by a focus marker at the beginning of the sentence. This form uses 'ma'an,' the long form of the same focus marker mentioned above. One form, Object Focus, elicits a response that deviates from the Subject-Verb-Object word order that we are accustomed to seeing in all other sentences. These sentences switch the subject and the object, placing the object at the beginning of the sentence. Triqui speakers do not seem to use changes in tone to determine focus but it is likely that more speakers will demonstrate more and different techniques for focusing constituents.

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