Predicate focus and realis mood in Tundra Yukaghir and beyond

Category: Oral
Theme Session: Predicate-centered focus from a cross-linguistic perspective

The purpose of this talk is to investigate the cross-linguistic validity of the category of predicate focus against the background of a moderate version of contextualism, the view according to which much of what we are used to think of as linguistic meaning is a product of pragmatic inference. Even if we assume that a certain meaning must be present in a certain context, such as focus in an answer to a question, it still does not follow that a linguistic category of focus must be involved: languages may underspecify the relevant meaning and leave it to the hearers' inferential abilities to reconstruct it. Alternatively, the meaning in question may happen to coincide, fully or in part, with another meaning. (Matić & Wedgwood 2013). This seems to be relatively frequent with the categories of predicate focus and realis mood.

In this paper, we provide evidence for the expression of predicate focus via realis mood markers. The pragmatic principles on which this semantic affinity is based are explained through a detailed analysis of the Tundra Yukaghir (TY) proclitic *mə(r)=*. This verbal particle has been described in the literature as a marker of declarative illocutionary force, positive polarity, and/or predicate focus. We show that these approaches are inadequate and propose a modal analysis of *mə(r)=.* In our analysis, *mə(r)=* is a realis marker, a quantifier which existentially binds propositions and provides for their existential anchoring. This is clearly shown by the incompatibility of *mə(r)=* with non-realis contexts, directives and hypotheticals, and its obligatoriness whenever a realis meaning is intended. Nominal foci carry their own existential import and are marked with a special set of morphemes, so that they are exempt from obligatory marking with *mə(r)=*; if there is no nominal focus, *mə(r)=* is attached to the verb by default. We show that this analysis is supported by a number of syntactic and semantic arguments.

We claim that the connection of realis mood, which in effect marks the proposition as true, and predicate focus, which asserts the existence of a state of affairs with respect to an entity, is not accidental. We adduce evidence from other languages, notably Somali and a couple of other Cushitic languages, Basque, Hungarian and Ancient Egyptian, which indicates that the formal affinity between realis and predicate focus is a cross-linguistically well-attested pattern, such that realis markers can regularly occur in contexts in which the discourse requires focus on the predicate. Thus, the category of predicate focus is, in some languages at least, based on an inference of the existence of a state of affairs derived from the use of the realis mood, and not a discrete encoded meaning in its own right.

References:

Matić, Dejan & Daniel Wedgwood. 2013. The meanings of focus. The significance of an interpretation-based category in cross-linguistic analysis. *Journal of Linguistics* 49.3.