

# The Expression of Focus in Basque

Françoise Donzeaud

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. TWO THEORIES OF FOCUS ASSIGNMENT

There are two theories which have tried to account for focus assignment in transformational grammar: the deep structure theory and the surface structure theory. According to the deep structure theory, focus is assigned at the deep structure level. Akmajian (1970) thinks focus is identical to a predicate of the higher clause in deep structure. Chomsky in the standard theory discusses the notion of focus as a predicate of the dominant proposition of the deep structure. The first phrase-structure rule of grammar would introduce two arbitrary structures, F and P, for focus and presupposition, and S' would be the initial symbol of the categorial component of the base.

$$S \rightarrow S' F P$$

F and P would be realized later as the constituents bearing the focus and the presupposition of the sentence. Later on a filtering rule would specify that the sentence generated is well-formed only if the focus and presupposition determined from surface structure are identical to F and P respectively. The meaning of the sentence would be entirely determined by deep structure.

In the surface structure theory the focus is entirely determined by interpretation rules operating on surface structure. Chomsky (1970, p. 205) defines focus as the phrase containing the main intonation center. This main intonation center is determined either by phonological rules that assign a certain stress contour to a sentence or by emphatic stress rules assigning a contrastive or expressive stress optionally to one of the elements of the sentence. Since both kinds of rules occur at a shallow level in the derivation, focus assignment can be defined only at the surface structure level. This constitutes a counterclaim to the standard theory by which semantic interpretation would be determined by rules operating on the deep structure only. It seems that surface structure is involved in an essential way in determining the semantic interpretation of a sentence.

### 1.2. PURPOSE OF THIS ARTICLE

We want to propose here a rule of semantic interpretation for focus in Basque which will operate on surface structures. We will argue that the deep structure theory must be dropped in favor of the surface structure theory in assigning focus to a node in the derivation.

### 1.3. PREVIOUS STUDIES

Among the studies concerned with the question of focus one should mention the Prague School's work on the Functional Sentence Perspective, Halliday's study based on intonation in British English, and last but not least Jackendoff's considerations on focus and presupposition in his book *Semantic Interpretation in Generative Grammar*.

The first two studies argue in favor of a surface structure determination of focus inasmuch as they define a focused constituent according to its syntactic behavior in the surface structure sentence. The Prague School tries to locate the focused item giving a term-to-term correspondence between the theme-rheme (1) sequence of an utterance and the sentence positions. Thus the theme of the utterance usually occurs in initial position, whereas the rheme (the phrase containing the focused item) is sentence final.

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(1) The theme of an utterance comprises the sentence-element(s) that is least informative. The rheme is constituted by the sentence-element(s) that is most informative.

Focus is assigned a particular position relatively to the other sentence-elements, creating a basic word-order.

For Halliday (1967a, 1967b, 1970), focus is defined both at the semantic level as the «new information» brought by the speaker in the communication and at the phonetic level as the item containing the tonic syllable. The choice of the tonic syllable is dependent on many intonational factors such as rhythm, the distribution into tone groups, the location of tone group boundaries. The tonic always begins on the last new lexical item.

Jackendoff's definition of focus is also determined from the surface structure sentence as the phrase P for which the highest stress in the sentence will be on the syllable of P that is assigned the highest stress by the regular stress rules (see Jackendoff 1973, p. 237). Jackendoff and Akmajian both claim that focus should be assigned at two levels of derivation: at the level of the semantic representation of the sentence and during the syntactic derivation (surface structure for Jackendoff). Jackendoff proposes to assign a syntactic marker F to a node. This marker is further realized as bearing an emphatic stress, by an emphatic stress assignment rule applying after all other stress rules have applied in the derivation. Chomsky (1970) gives evidence for a surface structure determination of focus. It is technically impossible that deep structure fully determines focus since the focused phrase as determined by the constituent carrying the main stress is not necessarily a phrase of the deep structure. Thus *John is certain to win* (see Chomsky 1970, p. 202), may have the surface structure constituent *certain to win* for focus but there is no constituent of deep structure dominating *certain to win*.

## 2. SCOPE OF THE STUDY

### 2.1. DEFINITIONS

Here the term focus will be understood as the value which, assigned to the variable in the presupposition of a sentence, forms an assertion about this sentence. For instance in

- (1) Aitona etorri da  
Grandfather has come,

the presupposition (i.e. the proposition that must be true in order for the sentence to have a truth-value) will be

- (2) X etorri da.

Any value replacing X in the above presupposition will constitute the focus of the sentence. Thus when «aitona» replaces X in (2), it yields an assertion (1) which is true only with «aitona» for focus. In

- (3) Ez da aitona etorri  
Not has grandfather come.

the assertion of (1) is negated but the presupposition (2) still holds, i.e. «aitona» is the wrong focus chosen for the sentence (2).

## 2.2. FOCUS ASSIGNMENT

In the following sections, an attempt will be made to propose a focus assignment rule for Basque which will be based on syntactic factors. First, evidence will be presented for a syntactic surface structure determination of focus in Basque. Then, a description of the system of focus-marking in Basque will follow, based on Altube's work *Erderismos* (see references). Lastly we will try to give an account of focus-marking in Basque in terms of transformational grammar. This will lead us to the formulation of a semantic interpretation rule for focus in Basque.

## 3. FOCUS AS A SURFACE STRUCTURE SYNTACTIC PHENOMENON

In his chapter on «Focus and Presupposition» Jackendoff (1973) proposes to assign a syntactic marker to a node. But Jackendoff does not specify when this F marker must be attached to a node: at the level of phrase-structure rules, as proposed by Akmajian (1970), or at the surface structure level.

Some facts about Basque rule out the assignment of the F marker at the level of deep structure. If the marker were assigned at the deep structure level, this would mean that one could determine which node would bear the focus in the surface. This is impossible in Basque. The focused constituent must occur in a definite position. Since Basque is a «scrambling» language, like Latin, the order of the constituents is relatively free, i.e. not determined by any phrase-structure rule. However, in the surface structure, the constituent in focus must always be in focus position, i.e. immediately precede the verb in affirmative sentences (see section 4).

(4) *Aita gaur dator*  
Father today is coming.

(5) *Makillaz jo nuan*  
With a stick beat I-past-him.

(6) *Sutan erre degu* (2)  
In the fire burned we have.

The foci *gaur*, *makillaz*, *sutan* respectively precede the verbs *dator*, *jo nuan*, *erre degu*. Basque has been argued to be a verb-final language by R. de Rijk (1969). If the final position of the verb in the sentence can be predicted from the deep structure, no phrase-structure rule can place the node that will bear the focus in preverbal position, since the order of all constituents is relatively free, and since transformations like scrambling can reorder them in the sentence during the derivation. For instance if negative sentences are transformationally derived, they will yield a different key-position for the focus. The constituent in focus must be in the scope of the negation, i.e. immediately on the right of the verbal proclitic *ez* followed by the verb.

(7) *Ez dakit noiz etorriko dan*  
I don't know when he will come.

(8) *Noiz etorriko dan ez dakit.*

In (8) the negative verb itself is in focus, no constituent being in the scope of *ez*.

If the syntactic marker F was assigned by a phrase-structure rule in Basque, it would have to be attached to a constituent in pre- or post-verbal positions by such rules as the following:

(a)  $S \rightarrow NP F VP$

F would be realized in the surface structure as a focused constituent or as the particle *ba* proclitic to the finite verb.

If the sentence is negative or if the verb is followed by a long sequence of constituents, (b) would apply:

(b)  $S \rightarrow (\text{neg}) VP F NP\dots$

(2) Examples taken from *Erderismos* (see references).

F might or might not be realized as a focused constituent on the surface.

However this arbitrary symbol F would be like a dummy since it does not necessarily correspond to a constituent of the surface structure, as shown by Chomsky (1970 —see section 1.3.). Besides, transformations may bring new constituents in the surface sentence that were not present in deep structure. For instance in the Bizcayan sentence

(9) *Etorri dator aita*

Come is coming father (Father is coming),

the verb is in focus. If rule (a) would apply, we would get

(10) *Ba-dator aita.*

Then a later rule would introduce *etorri*, the normal infinitive or past participle of «to come», before the synthetic verb form *dator* («is coming») and yield the wrong sentence

(11) \**Etorri ba-dator aita,*

where focus is marked twice.

When the periphrastic flexion of the verb is used, the verb is marked as focus by introducing the periphrastic verb *egin* (to do) after the verb of the sentence:

(12) *Etorri egin da aita.*

According to rule (a), *egin* should bear the focus instead of *etorri*. Focus is determined redundantly at the two levels of deep structure and surface structure. The preceding arguments constitute evidence that F cannot be assigned by a phrase-structure rule without yielding the wrong focus since focus is also determined by later rules. A better account of focus assignment would be given by a surface interpretation rule assigning focus to any constituent in preverbal position (preceding the finite verb form or *egin*) and to the verb preceded by *ba*, in the case of affirmative sentences.

## 4. FOCUS-MARKING SYSTEM IN BASQUE

Focus is marked syntactically in Basque at the surface structure level in two different ways. First, the focused constituent, called «miembro inquirido» by Altube (1930), occurs in a definite position in the surface structure sequence of sentence-elements. This position differs according to certain factors. The factors determining focus-position are mainly syntactic. Thus focus-position differs in affirmative and negative sentences. In affirmative sentences, the focused constituent occurs in immediate preverbal position.

(13) *Asko* dakargu  
Much we carry.

(14) *Atzo* etorri da  
Yesterday come he has.

(15) *Oraintxe* dator  
Now (intensive) he is coming.

(16) *Orain etorriko* da  
Now he will come.

Only the modal particles *omen* (*ei*), *ote* (*ete*), *al*, *bai(t)*, *bide* violate this general principle.

(17) *Oraintxe* ei-dator (Biscayan)  
He is said to be coming now.

(18) *Oraintxe etorriko* ei-da  
He is said to be coming now.

But these particles are considered as part of the verbal group. An argument for such a position is provided by the stress shift from the synthetic verb (normally accented on the first syllable) to the modal particle, thus creating a verbal group also accented on the first syllable:

éi-da, ál-dator.

In negative sentences, the element(s) in focus must always be

in the scope of the negative verb (3). Thus in the case of negative sentences focus-position is always postverbal.

- (19) *Miren'ek ez daki noiz etorriko zeran*  
Miren not know when you will come.

The constituent *noiz etorriko zeran* is in focus.

There are some deviations from this basic pattern. These are due to certain verbs which must be specified as modifying the focus-position in the sentence. For instance *esan* (to say) has the same behavior as a negative verb inasmuch as it requires a postverbal focus. It must be mentioned here that in modern speech in Basque the negative morpheme and the auxiliary to which it is proclitic have changed position in the sentence and under the influence of Spanish, occur less and less in sentence final position. In actual speech, the negative flexion is then often followed by elements which are in the scope of the negation and therefore in focus-position. The effect of this change of usage is a change of focus in the sentence.

Focus is also marked morphologically in the sentence. Pronouns in focus take an «intensive» suffix *-(t)xe*.

- (20) *Auxe da ederrena* (4)  
This one is the most beautiful.

- (21) *Auxe emon deuste*  
They have given me this one.

This suffix is not specific of a focused pronoun and constitutes its emphatic form. Pronouns must be marked for emphasis when in focus.

In the case when the focused constituent is the verb, some morphological material is introduced in the sentence. In affirmative sentences, a proclitic particle *ba* is attached to the focused verb.

- (22) *Badaukat zeregiña tretzakaz* (Aguirre)  
I have a job to do with the «tretzas» (a «tretza» is a fishing line with many hooks used for catching sea-bream).

(3) The elements in the scope of a constituent are those situated on the right of this constituent in the linear sequence of words in the sentence.

(4) Examples (13)-(18), (20)-27) are taken from Altube (1930).



This proclitic particle is restricted to synthetic verbs. In that case the focus is put on the affirmative quality of the verb. When the verb itself is in focus two cases must be considered: when the verb is conjugated synthetically (*dator, dabil, dakar...*), its past participle is placed before it (in the Bizcayan dialect described by Altube):

(23) *Etorri dator aita.*

(24) *Ibilli dabil ori.*

(25) *Ekarri dakar.*

In the periphrastic conjugation the periphrastic flexion of *egin* is introduced between the verb and the auxiliary (5):

(26) *Etorri egin da aita.*

(27) *Aita etorri egingo da.*

In both cases the verb is in focus in spite of the material (*egin*) occurring in focus-position before the auxiliary.

In this brief sketch of Altube's review of the form of the «elemento inquirido», only simplex sentences have been considered (except for (19)). Some variants may occur with subordinate clauses which are disregarded in the present study.

## 5. A SEMANTIC INTERPRETATION RULE FOR FOCUS ASSIGNMENT

As hinted in section 3, focus assignment in Basque would be accurately accounted for by a rule of semantic interpretation applying at the surface level. By «semantic interpretation rule of focus assignment» we mean a rule that will mark the portion of semantic reading in the sentence which corresponds to a focused constituent in the syntactic surface structure. Consider a sentence like

(28) *Aita dator.*

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(5) Sometimes instead of *egin*, the verb phrase is repeated, giving instead of *Ekarri neuk egin neban*, *Ekarri neuk ekarri neban*.

Scrambling can apply to (28), changing the order of constituents and yielding

(29) Dator aita.

On the other hand, the particle *ba* must be inserted in a sentence in the position before AUX after pause. The structural description for *ba*-insertion is thus met in sentence (29) but not in (28), since there is already a constituent in initial position. If the constituent «aita» was to be chosen for focus in (28), scrambling should be constrained so as not to apply when it would move the focused item out of focus-position.

Scrambling should be equally constrained in negative sentences. Consider the negative sentence

(30) Ez-dator aita.

If «aita» is chosen for focus in (30), it should not be moved out of the scope of the negation. Therefore scrambling should not apply in (30) in that case. If scrambling applies, «aita» is no longer in focus:

(31) Aita ez-dator.

In (31) the focus is the negative verb itself.

In order for sentences (28) and (30) to yield the right focus, we would have to constrain scrambling from applying several times. It seems more convenient to adopt the following solution: allow all transformations, including scrambling, to apply to a sentence, and then formulate a post-cyclic rule (if we admit that transformations in Basque apply in a cycle), or a last rule of *ba*-insertion whenever the structural description Pause—AUX is met. Then we state the following interpretation rules at the surface structure level:

In the case of affirmative sentences:

1. Assign the value focus to a verb if preceded by *ba*.
2. Otherwise assign the value focus to any constituent in pre-verbal position.

In the case of negative sentences:

1. Assign the value focus to a verb if preceded by *ez* and not followed by anything else in the scope of the negation.
2. Otherwise assign the value focus to any constituent in post-verbal position in the negative sentence.

This formulation, however, is far from being complete. We still have to account for the presence of *egin* and for the duplication of the verb in front of its conjugated form in some sentences. This could be done by adding some conditions on the preceding rules.

We are aware that the sketch proposed here for a semantic interpretation of focus in Basque needs further development but we hope it will contribute to a better understanding of the relations holding between the semantic readings of a sentence and the expression of focus in Basque.

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