Construction-specific interpretations of Sümi differential case marking
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Sümi is a Tibeto-Burman language spoken in Nagaland, North-East India. Like many Tibeto-Burman languages (see Chelliah & Hyslop 2011), Sumi displays optional/differential case marking of core arguments, where the choice of case marking is sensitive to the semantic transitivity of the clause, as well as discourse pragmatic factors, including whether a speaker wishes to flag the identify of a referent as counter to an interlocutor’s expectations (Teo 2012). In general, S arguments of intransitive clauses are morphologically unmarked or flagged by an enclitic =no or =ye, while A arguments of transitive clauses and subjects of verbless clauses are obligatorily marked by =no or =ye.

In this paper, I show that the interpretation of the enclitic =no as a “focus” morpheme that marks an argument for some kind of pragmatic salience is construction-specific, i.e. determined by the type of clause in which it occurs, including the nature of the verbal predicate. In some constructions, a focus interpretation is most likely, while in others there is greater ambiguity in interpretation.

In verbless clauses, the subject is marked by =ye, coinciding with a new or continuing topic, as in (1). But if the speaker wants to place emphasis on the subject, e.g. when correcting an interlocutor’s presupposition or to identify a referent from a set of other possible referents, =no is used, as in (2).

(1) **Tiye ninga keno ...**
  ṭī=je  nī-pā  ke=no
  MED=ye  1PL-daughter  PRF=CONN
  ‘That was our daughter ...’ [IZ1-20070905-Kutili_bird_story_short, line 29]

(2) **Paza no Sümi**
  pā-zā=no  sūmī
  3SG-mother=no  Sümi
  ‘His mother is Sumi.’ (correcting the interlocutor) [conversation, unrecorded]

In transitive clauses, =no typically marks a potent agent, as in (3). In this example, a contrastive focus reading is possible, but not necessary. If a speaker really wished to mark an A argument as being salient, e.g. correcting the interlocutor, the suffix -u is added, which is likely from the definite marker -u, as in (4). The use of -u to mark salience is not possible in examples like (2).

(3) ... **azū no kūma yipesū uve.** (*azū kūma yipesū uve*)
  ā-zi=no  kūmā  jīpēsī  ū-vē
  NRL-water=no  3DU  carry.away  go-VM
  ‘... the water (supernatural force, mentioned before in story) swept them both away.’
  [IZ1-20070905-Kutili_bird_story_short, line 9]

(4) **Atsūu no awu ha cheni.**
  ā-tsi-u=no  ā-wù  hā  tʃē-nī
  NRL-dog-u=no  NRL-chicken  chase  HAB-NPST
  ‘A dog is chasing a chicken.’ (not another animal doing the chasing) [elicited]

The data suggest that there is no single dedicated “focus” marker in Sümi, but that speakers co-opt morphemes with different meanings in other contexts/constructions to fulfill similar communicative goals. In addition, the choice of morphemes, i.e. the agentive/ergative and definite might be of interest from a cross-linguistic perspective.

References