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In Pursuit of Discourse Particles

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1. Longacre (1976) called them "mystery particles and affixes" while Grimes (1975:93) dubbed them "pesky little particles." Both these descriptions aptly express the viewpoint of the linguist when he first runs into these queer little particles or affixes. I'm referring to the type of particle or affix that is found in many languages which defies a simple lexical gloss and, in fact, generally elicits quite a range of unrelated meanings from a naive native speaker, and which at first appears to be arbitrarily "salt and peppered" (Longacre 1976:468) throughout texts. If, however, the particle or affix is eliminated from texts, native speakers generally find the texts unnatural which, of course, leads the linguist to label it a DISCOURSE PARTICLE.[1]

Deciding that it is a discourse particle is only the beginning of providing an analytical explanation of its behavior in the language. How, then, does the linguist determine an analysis?

There is, of course, some preliminary preparation that will help, such as reading a number of analyses of discourse particles in other languages. A list of relevant articles would include Binder 1977, Burgess 1979, Gratix 1978, Henriksen and Levinsohn 1977, Jones and Nellis 1979, Koontz and Anderson 1977, Moore 1977, Morton 1978, McArthur 1979, Salser and Salser 1977, and Wiebe 1977. It is often helpful to chart a text. Various methods are detailed in the literature, such as in Grimes 1975, Jones 1977, and Longacre and Levinsohn 1978.

[1]In the context of this paper, I use particle to cover both particles and affixes.

What I would like to focus on in this paper, however, are the goals which should guide the researcher in pursuing the analysis of a discourse particle.[2] These goals provide a basis for measuring progress toward a satisfactory analysis. For illustrative purposes, I draw on data from the Berik language, a Papuan language of Irian Jaya, Indonesia. These goals were pursued in the analysis of the Berik particle *ga*. My basic purpose here is to present the goals; a complete analysis of Berik *ga* is not detailed here, but is found in Westrum 1987.

2. The first goal is to predict where the particle MAY occur, not where it WILL occur. The key words *may* and *will* correlate loosely with *optional* and *obligatory*, respectively. It has been said that there are no truly optional elements in a text. Thus, *optional* simply means the analysis has not yet been completed, because a thorough understanding of the optional element often reveals that, in fact, it contributes in some important way to the structural coherence of the text.

I would like to suggest a different approach to understanding this notion. If we view one goal of a speaker or writer of a text to be to strike a balance between ambiguity and maximal clarity, we may regard an element as *optional* if:

(1) a. It does not always occur in positions where it may occur. (The principle of ambiguity risk)

b. It may occur in positions where, strictly speaking, it need not occur. (The principle of clarity)

English conjunctions such as *then*, *however*, and *so* fit this definition of OPTIONAL. As an example, consider the following text. The words in parentheses may be deleted with little effect. These words may occur in the places indicated, but they need not (1a).

(2) *Let me tell you what happened to Herb's son. He wanted to get coconuts. So he climbed a coconut tree. He climbed very high. (Then) he cut off some coconuts and they fell to the ground. Then he wanted to go back down. (Then) suddenly he fell.*

In this same text, note the word *so* in the third sentence. While *so* may be deleted here, the result is not as smooth or natural. The same is true for *then* in the penultimate sentence. Strictly speaking, the conjunctions

[2]This is a slightly-edited version of Jones 1988.

are not necessary at these points (1b). However, the text reads more naturally with them.

Discourse particles are often of this type. They are optional in the ways spelled out in (1). This is in contrast with obligatory elements, which may be defined as always occurring where they may. Examples of obligatory elements in English include subject of a clause, tense on the verb, and number marking on the subject.

The Berik particle *ga* is an excellent example of an optional discourse particle. In checking Berik texts with a native speaker, we found that it was quite acceptable to delete some of the occurrences of *ga*. Furthermore, it was acceptable to add *ga* in many places where it did not occur in the original texts. Thorough experimentation with adding and deleting *ga* led to fruitful hypotheses of how *ga* functions.

Example (3) is the first paragraph of a rather lengthy text in Berik in which *ga* appears frequently. Occurrences in parentheses may be acceptably deleted.

The opposite situation is seen in (4). Here we have the first paragraph of a text in which *ga* is used more sparingly. However, it is acceptable to add *ga* in all the places indicated by asterisk (*). Note that a few of these are either-or situations, where the *ga* may be added either before a particular word or after, but not in both places. This is indicated by placing pairs of asterisks in parentheses on both sides of such a word.

It is clear that *ga* is optional in the sense of (1). The goal, then, is to frame an analysis that will fit the occurrences of *ga* which actually do occur as well as those potential occurrences that are discovered through experimentation like that just described. However, it is not the goal of the analysis to predict where *ga* will occur; this is an impossible goal since *ga* is optional. The analysis only predicts where *ga* may occur.

3. In analyzing a discourse particle, one of the first steps is to note its distributional privileges. Many discourse particles are confined to a single position in a structural unit, such as an affix to a verb or a particle that always follows the subject. Or perhaps it is a proclitic or enclitic that is not tied to a specific constituent but rather floats to a specific position in the sentence (first and second position are most common). When a particle is associated with a specific constituent, this may give important clues to its function.

(3) *1. Angtane' bosna Usafe je gatas tarnap ge nuin.*
person name Usafe he sago place dual live

2. Tesa ga belim taban, ga jes talebowel.
sago cut^down finished it pounded

3. Ofona ga Jaume-mana, bosna ga Sebaf. 4. Ofo
pig Jaume-POSS name Sebaf pig

aiserem je (ga) tesa ga jes tumawel. 5. Usafe ga wini
this it sago it ate Usafe woman

naura gam tet. 6. Wi naurana aiserem je
two had married woman two this they

ga tesa ga je ge talebawel. 7. Tesa gam ge
sago it dual pounded sago had dual

wilni ofona gam fortia tesa gam tumili ga jeber
pound pig would arrive sago would eat there

ge nuin. 8. Jamare abaka tesa (ga)umef ga
dual stay until long^time sago remainder

nanki fal. 9. Ofo Sebaf gamjon ga forial, tas
middle lies pig Sebaf again arrived sago

nanki ga tuin.
middle ate

1. There was once a person named Usafe who lived near the sago acreages. 2. Whenever he finished cutting down a sago tree, he pounded it. 3. There was also a pig belonging to Jaume, whose name was Sebaf. 4. This pig always ate the sago. 5. Usafe had married two women. 6. These two women often pounded sago there. 7. Whenever they had pounded sago, the pig would arrive, and would eat the sago, then stay there with them. 8. This continued for a long time so that (only) a little sago remained in the middle. 9. Sebaf the pig then arrived, then ate the middle part of the sago trunk.

(4) *1.Ir* *ai* *jafnant* *Muarbumwer.* *2. Dewaf* *ai*
yesterday I went Muarbum matoa^nuts I

jafnant *jamerai* *aiya* *forotfant* *Toganfu,* *Munanton*
went until I arrived Toganfu Munanton

3. Mutofo *jeba* *ai* * *fornant* *Habelem* *jinab* *4. Dewana*
Mutof there I arrived Habel's house matoa^nuts

(*)ai(*) *tombanant* *jamer* *taban.* *5. Wina* *gwanan* *gol*
I ate until finished wife first married

aiserem *je* *(*)* *fona* *(*)* *daktanant* *tesado.* *6.* * *Aiya*
this she water hung sago^pudding I

tumanant *tiyon* *tul* *nanggal.*
ate sago^grubs fish tails

1. Yesterday I went to Muarbum. 2. I went in order to get matoa nuts, until I arrived at the village of Toganfu on Munanton peninsula. 3. There at Mutof (peninsula, however) I arrived at Habel's house. 4. I ate matoa nuts until (I was) finished. 5. This first wife (Habel) had married, she hung water (over the fire) for sago pudding. 6. I ate sago grubs and fish tails.

There are times, however, when a particle may have more than one distributional possibility. Berik *ga* is like that. It may occur sentence initially, following a noun phrase (usually subject), preceding the verb, and even occasionally sentence finally.[3] When a particle may occur in different environments, one should expect somewhat different meanings or functions in each different environment, but nonetheless one should also seek a common thread of meaning or function.

Analysis of Berik *ga* in its four different environments revealed the following functions (Westrum 1987):

Sentence initially or preceding a verb or verb phrase, *ga* indicates progression of time or logic. *ga* is used frequently in a narrative when events follow one another in chronological order. It simply indicates that

[3]Because Berik is an sov language, it is not always clear whether a particular occurrence of *ga* is to be considered as following a noun phrase or preceding the verb, especially when the object is not present. This leads to a certain arbitrariness in the analysis.

the tagged event follows the preceding event chronologically. In these positions it might be glossed 'and then'.

Following a subject or object noun phrase, *ga* indicates progression in topic.[4] It is very commonly used to signal a new topic, such as introducing an important new participant in a story. It is also commonly used for switching the spotlight back and forth between participants already on stage.

The particle *ga* may occur sentence finally when a subject or object noun phrase is postposed to the end of a sentence, in which case it appears to be clarifying the identification of the topic. It may also tag a time word or time phrase which occurs sentence finally (normal position is near the beginning of the sentence). Such occurrences are relatively rare but probably indicate progression on the time line.[5]

There are differences, then, in the functional meaning of *ga* which depend on the grammatical position in which it occurs. That is, the position itself has a component of meaning (Pike 1983:110). At the same time, however, there is a rather abstract lexical meaning for *ga* that can be deduced from meanings in specific environments—there is a thread of meaning common to all occurrences of *ga*. The generalized meaning of *ga* might be expressed in this way: *ga* signals progression in time (e.g., sequence of events), logic (e.g., ordering of ideas in logical sequence), or topic (e.g., succession of participant reference). It is a relatively low-level particle which marks a succession relationship between a pair of clauses (preceding and following). For example, the participant in the second clause or sentence succeeds the participant in the preceding one as being the topic ('what is being talked about') or the event described in the second one succeeds chronologically the event in the preceding one.

4. The most obvious task is to note where the discourse particle does occur. It is equally important, however, to note the environments in which a particle is NEVER permitted. This should include a systematic examination of the restrictions in distribution, both syntactically (sentence-level and below) and contextually (discourse-level).

There may be certain types of discourse (Longacre 1983, especially chapter 1) where the particle is never found. For example, a particle may occur only in narrative or procedural texts, but never in expository or hortatory ones. Such a situation might be a clue that the particle is associated with chronological movement or the marking of the eventline in some way. A further contextual restriction is the employment of a particle

[4]By topic is meant the roughly sentential or intersentential notion of what is being talked about.

[5]The fact that a nominal or time expression is postposed undoubtedly adds a dimension of meaning which is not explored here.

in only certain styles; compare usage of the particle in written versus oral texts, monologue versus dialogue, formal versus informal, ritual versus ordinary, polite versus familiar, male versus female.

On the lower levels (e.g., sentence, clause, phrase), there may be rigid syntactic restrictions. These might include restrictions regarding the occurrence of the particle in a clause with certain tense or aspect marking, occurrence with a negative, occurrence with an imperative or interrogative, or occurrence with certain other particles.

As an example, in examining some of the restrictions governing the use of Berik *ga*, we found that it occurred in virtually all discourse types (hortatory, expository, procedural, narrative, conversational) except in songs. It may occur in the sentence initial position with only certain other conjunctions: *ane ga*, *jewer ga*, and *ga enggam* occur; however, *jengga*, *gamjon*, *jeuga* and *jamer* never occur with *ga*.[6]

Further, *ga* has not been found in sentences containing sentential negatives. Nor is it found in sentences expressing simultaneous activities. Both these last two restrictions are naturally explained by the analysis: *ga* marks progression of topic, event, or logic. When a sentential negative is used, there is no progress, but merely a description of what did not happen. Further, because *ga* is used with chronological succession of events, it is precluded from being used in simultaneous constructions. In fact, both the negative and simultaneous restrictions could be predicted from the analysis, and the fact that they are supported by the data is good evidence for the credibility of the analysis.

The restrictions just described for Berik illustrate the usefulness of studying restrictions in distribution of a discourse particle. While some restrictions may seem arbitrary (such as occurrence with some but not all conjunctions), other restrictions are helpful in corroborating the analysis (such as the restrictions about simultaneity and negation).

5. It is sometimes supposed that the analysis is not good until it accounts for one hundred percent of the occurrences of the particle in the data. But this is unrealistic. Certainly the analysis should account for ninety percent

[6]Actually, some of these appear to originate from a morphological combination with *ga*, which explains why another *ga* is not permitted.

or more of the occurrences, but there may be many reasons why one hundred percent accountability is not possible.[8]

The optional nature of many discourse particles makes it more difficult to formulate rules that take care of every instance. Differences in individual styles are especially evident with optional particles, such as differences in frequency of use. Further, there may be a special extension of meaning that is almost idiomatic. A good analysis will at least capture the central core of meaning, the range of most common usage. Finally, some uses of the particle may be of marginal acceptability, but that is difficult to assess in the average field situation. This is especially a problem with oral texts.[9]

Even with extensively studied topics such as tense or pronouns in English, the best analyses that have been produced to date always leave a residue of data that does not fit. For some reason, however, I have found that when a fieldworker begins studying discourse matters in a language, he is more troubled by pieces of data that do not fit neatly. At first, of course, this means that he should scrutinize his hypotheses more closely, try to refine them to make a better fit, or propose altogether new ones. But I believe that there comes a point when no better analysis can be found and yet there is still a small residue, and I believe it is time to submit the analysis to the scholarly world and let time or other linguists improve the analysis if they may.

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[8]Perhaps even 90% is too high. Hopper (1979:221) suggests 80% in a relevant quote: "It should be noted at this point that in discourse work explanations and hypotheses are not obviously validated with every example. Apparent inconsistencies and irregularities often mean that a certain proportion of the data contradict the general hypothesis. As a rule of thumb, I take this proportion to be about 20%; that is, I expect my explanations to account for an obviously large majority of the data. The remainder are then assumed not to be contradictory or arbitrary but to REFLECT A SPECIFIC INTENTION OF THE AUTHOR. The exegesis of this remainder may be quite convincing, or it may be guesswork."

[9]Working with edited texts or getting the judgment of a second speaker may help correct this problem.

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