

Foregrounding Events in Modern Sundanese: The Pragmatics of Particle-to-Active Voice Marking Shift

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Abstract : Discourse information levels may be viewed from either a background-foreground distinction or a multi-level perspective, and cross-linguistic studies on this area suggest that each information level is marked by a specific linguistic device. In this sense, Sundanese, spoken in Indonesia's West Javanese Province, further differentiates the background and foreground information into ordinary and significant types. This paper will report an ongoing shift from particle-to-active voice marking in the way Sundanese signals foregrounding events. The shift relates to decades of contact with Bahasa Indonesia (Indonesia's official language) and linguistic compatibility between the two surface marking strategies. Representative data analyzed include three groups of short stories in both Sundanese and Bahasa Indonesia (Indonesian) published in three periods: before 1945, 1965-2006, and 2016-2019. In the first group of Sundanese data, forward-moving events dominantly appear in particle KA (Kecap Anteuran, word-accompanying) constructions, where the KA represents different particles that co-occur with a special group of verbs. The second group, however, shows that the foregrounded events are more frequently described in active-voice forms with a subject-predicate (SP) order. Subsequently, the third offers stronger evidence for the use of the SP structure. As for the Indonesian data, the foregrounding events in the first group occur in verb-initial and passive-voice constructions, while in the second and third, the events more frequently appear in active-voice structures (subject-predicate sequence). The marking shift above suggests a structural influence from Indonesian, stemmed from generational differences among authors of the Sundanese short stories, particularly related to their education and language backgrounds. The first group of short stories - published before 1945 or before Indonesia's independence from Dutch - were written by native speakers of Sundanese who spoke Indonesian as a foreign language and went through the Dutch education system. The second group of authors, on the other hand, represents a generation of Sundanese native speakers who spoke Indonesian as a second language. Finally, the third group consists of authors who are bilingual speakers of both Sundanese and Indonesian. The data suggest that the last two groups of authors completed the Indonesian education system. With these, the use of subject-predicate sequences to denote foregrounding events began to appear more frequently in the second group and then became more dominant in those of the third. The coded data also signify that cohesion, coherence, and pragmatic purposes in Particle KA constructions are intact in their respective active-voice structure counterparts. For instance, the foregrounding events in Particle KA constructions occur in Sentence-initial KA and Pre-verbal KA forms, whereas those in the active-voice are described in Subject-Predicate (SP) and Zero-Subject active-voice patterns. Cross-language data further demonstrate that the Sentence-initial KA and the SP active-voice structures each contain an overt noun phrase (NP) co-referential with one of the entities introduced in a preceding context. Similarly, the pre-verbal KA and Zero-Subject active-voice patterns have a deleted noun phrase unambiguously referable to the only one entity previously mentioned. The presence and absence of an NP inform a pragmatic strategy to place prominence on topic/given and comment/new information, respectively.

Keywords : discourse analysis, foregrounding marking, pragmatics, language contact

Conference Title : ICALMD 2020 : International Conference on Applied Linguistics and Materials Development

Conference Location : Tokyo, Japan

Conference Dates : October 05-06, 2020