

Tonic Prominence and Contextual Meaning in English and Telugu

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Abstract

This paper is based on systemic network of functional grammar. The network analyses the connections among different strata of language such as phonology, lexicogrammar, semantics and context. In this paper, the phonological stratum in terms of tonic prominence and lexicogrammatical stratum in terms of verb, and their context based connection are attempted for analysis. Telugu is a Central Dravidian language, mainly spoken in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. The language has some special morpho-syntactic properties like complex verb groups. In English, complex verbs are rarely found. Some English sentences and their equivalent Telugu sentences are studied in accordance with tonic prominence and contextual meaning. The tonic prominence is analyzed in terms of marked and unmarked phenomenon. Marked place of tone refers to non-neutral meaning (specific meaning) and unmarked place of tone refers to neutral meaning (general meaning).

Introduction

Telugu is a Dravidian language primarily spoken in the Indian states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. It has a rich linguistic tradition and features that distinguish it from other languages. Here are some notable linguistic features of Telugu:

Telugu is an agglutinative language. This means that words are formed by combining morphemes (meaningful units) together. For example, verb conjugation, noun declension, and other word formations involve adding affixes to a root.

Telugu exhibits vowel harmony, which means that certain affixes will harmonize with the vowels in a word. This feature can affect the way affixes are attached to roots.

Telugu has a relatively simple syllable structure compared to languages like English. Most Telugu words are constructed using consonant-vowel (CV) syllables. The language allows for complex clusters of consonants in certain positions.

Telugu has extensive use of complex verbs. Complex verb groups generally contain some combinations like noun + verb, verb + verb, adjective + verb, etc. Marked or unmarked tonicity in such groups depends on the semantic value of morpheme/word in the verb group. Unmarked tonicity is generally attracted to the element with more semantic (content) value. The element with lesser semantic value is a dependent on the other for its complete sense of meaning. The theoretical approach used for this study is the Systemic Functional Grammar Proposed and Developed by M.A.K. Halliday. This approach emphasizes on context relatedness with language at different levels such as semantics, lexico-grammar and phonology. In this study, the contextual connection with meaning, grammar and tonic placement is observed in some sentences with complex verb groups in Telugu. For each Telugu example, an equivalent contextual comparison with English at the level of utterance and meaning has also been attempted to propose the difference of usage.

Note: some notations are employed in this paper for the purpose of making the point clear. Two slashes // indicate tone group boundary. The capital letters in every tone group is the indication of tonic prominence. Colon: in the tone groups mean length of vowels. In every tone group, the tones are assumed to be falling tones according to the context.

Tonic Prominence

Tonic prominence, also known as tonic accent or stress, is a linguistic term that refers to the emphasis or prominence placed on a syllable or word in a sentence. In many languages, including English, some syllables or words are pronounced with greater force or intensity than others. This prominence is typically perceived as a higher pitch, increased loudness, or longer duration compared to surrounding elements.

In English, stress plays a crucial role in determining the meaning of a word or sentence. For example, consider the words "record" and "record." Depending on which syllable is stressed, the meaning changes (i.e., a noun meaning a physical object vs. a verb meaning the act of capturing something).

Tonic Prominence in English

Tonicity and focus are two important aspects of English prosody (the patterns of stress and intonation in speech), and they play distinct but related roles in conveying meaning and emphasis.

Tonicity refers to the prominence or stress placed on a syllable within a word. It's the syllable that is pronounced with greater emphasis compared to the surrounding syllables. This prominence is achieved through factors like pitch, loudness, and duration. For example, in the word "banana," the second syllable "na" receives the primary stress, making it the tonic syllable.

Understanding tonicity is crucial for correct pronunciation and comprehension of English words. It helps in distinguishing between words that have the same letters but different meanings and pronunciations due to differences in stress patterns.

Focus in English refers to the part of a sentence that conveys new, important, or contrastive information. It's the element that the speaker wants to draw particular attention to. This can be a word, phrase, or even an entire sentence. For example, in the sentence "I saw the cat," if the listener previously thought you saw a dog, then "cat" is in focus because it provides new information.

Focus helps to convey the speaker's intention, emphasize key points, and clarify meaning. It's crucial for effective communication, especially in contexts where there might be ambiguity or misunderstanding.

While tonicity and focus are related, they are not the same thing. Tonicity is about the stress patterns within individual words, while focus is about the information structure of a sentence.

However, they can interact in speech. When a word is in focus, it often receives extra prominence, which can include increased tonicity. For instance, in the sentence "I want the blue shirt," if the color is the new, important information, the word "blue" might receive greater tonicity.

In summary, tonicity is about the stress within words, while focus is about the emphasis on certain words or elements within a sentence to convey important information. Both play crucial roles in effective communication in English.

Tonic Prominence in Telugu

In Telugu grammar, complex verbs, also known as compound verbs, are formed by combining two or more verbs together. These combinations often convey nuanced or specialized meanings that may not be easily expressed with a single verb. Complex verbs are a distinctive feature of the Telugu language. Here are some examples of complex verbs in Telugu.

Verb Group: Noun and Verb

The following are the examples of verb group: Noun + Verb combination

Context: She went into sleep (as a general answer to "what did she do")

1) Telugu: //a:me nIdra po:indi// (unmarked, 'po:vu'(go) is dependent on 'nidra' (sleep))

She sleep went

English: //she SLEPT// (unmarked)

Context: She went into sleep (believe me, I am really telling the truth)

2) Telugu: //a:me nidra PO:indi// (marked, additional meaning of emphasis on the action)

English: //she DID sleep// (marked, additional meaning of emphasis on the action)

Here, both 'nidra' (sleep) and 'po:vu' (go) are content morphemes. Since 'nidra' has more semantic value in the information, the example is said to be the instance of unmarked tonicity. The example can also be ambiguous if its context is not available to the listener.

Context: She lost her sleep

3) Telugu: //a:me nidra PO:indi// (unmarked, here, 'nidra' (sleep) is the part of noun group)

her sleep went

English: //her sleep is disTURbed//

The ambiguity of meaning in or can be understood both at the level of grammar and intonation (in terms of marked or unmarked system tonicity). Here, the ambiguity is also because of 'a:me' (*she* or *her*). In such cases, the location of tone also plays a role to distinguish between noun groups and verb groups in a clause.

Verb Group: Verb and Verb

The following are the examples of verb group: Verb+ Verb combination

Context: They came here and died

4) Telugu://va:llu ikkadiki vacchi CHAccha:ru// (unmarked)

They here to came died

English://They came here and DIED//

Context: they died only after coming here

5) Telugu://va:llu ikkadiki VAcchi chaccha:ru// (marked, tone shifted from the last word)

They here to came died

English://They CAME here and died//

Context: They came here (I am not at all receptive)

6) Telugu://va:llu ikkadiki VAcchi chaccha:ru// (unmarked, 'die' has no literal realization)

They here to came died

English://They CAME here //

To convey the same contextual meaning in English, some lexical item or tone of voice with non-receptive sense of meaning is additionally needed.

Verb Group: adverb and verb

The following are the examples of verb group: adjective+ verb combination

Context: the sky turned into red

7) Telugu:// a:ka:sam ERrabadindi // (unmarked)

sky red fell

English:// the sky turned into RED//

Context: the sky turned into red (the speaker is emotionally emphasizing this as a fact)

8) Telugu:// a:ka:sam erraPADindi// (marked, emphasis on the action)

sky red fell

English:// the sky turned into RED //

In English, to convey such kind of emphasis, high falling tone is required.

Conclusion

All the above discussed are the potential instances in Telugu according to situational context. So far there are no previous studies regarding the marked or unmarked choice of tonicity in relation to complex verb groups in Telugu. Contextual meanings affect language in its grammar and intonation. The meaning of complex verb groups is very much connected with ambiguity. The choice of tone and its place play a very important role in understanding actual meaning of an utterance. The theoretical comparison between English and Telugu uncovers some specific typological differences which are considered as important in the determination of contextual meaning of certain expressions.

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