

What is the Information Structure-Syntax Interface in Basque?

PHYLLIS BELLVER

*University of Colorado at Boulder
Centre College, Danville KY*

LAURA A. MICHAELIS

University of Colorado at Boulder

I. Introduction¹

Basque is a language that has inspired a great deal of interest because it seems to have transparent pragmatics. In Basque, as in Hungarian (Kiss 1998), there appears to be a one-to-one relationship between a preverbal syntactic position and focal scope, as in the question and answer contexts of examples (1-2):

- (1) Gaur erosi aldezu zerbait azoka-n?
today buy AUX something market-IN?
“Did you buy anything at the market today?”

Bai, ni-k bi kilo sagar erosi ditut.
yes, I-E two kilo apple buy AUX
“Yes, I bought two kilos of apples².”

- (2) Nork apurtu du hau?
who break AUX this?
“Who has broken this?”

Ume hor-rek apurtu du.
child that-E break AUX
“That child has broken it.” (Zubiri 1991:63)

Many accounts involve movement of phrases to a syntactic focus position, e.g., specifier of CP. In these accounts, a lexical ergative argument is generally regarded as occupying a higher specifier position reserved for a detached or extracausal topic (Aissen 1992, Kiss 1998, Elorrieta 1994, etc.):

- (3) Emakume-ek zer nahi dute?
women-E what want AUX
“Women, what do they want?”

In this paper, we propose a different way to look at these same facts. We make two closely related points about the mapping between syntax and the pragmatic roles TOPIC and FOCUS in Basque. First, despite appearances, there is no syntactic focus position in Basque. We establish this by showing that the relationship between focus construal and word order in Basque is more indeterminate than previous analyses have assumed (see § 3). Our argument will be based on ambiguities of focus construal of the kind described by Ladd 1996 with respect to prosody. Second, it is more revealing to represent the relationship between focus construal and word order in Basque by a grammatical construction than by movement rules (see §2). The construction that we have in mind is Lambrecht's pragmatically preferred clause structure, which was originally proposed to capture the motivation for statistical tendencies in Spoken French syntax (1987).

2. Movement Rules vs. The Pragmatically Preferred Clause Construction

A movement account of focus seems reasonable for VSO languages like, for example, Tzotzil, as described by Aissen 1992. Since Tzotzil is verb-initial, preverbal and extracausal status can be equated. Aissen argues that an element in preverbal focus is in specifier of IP. However, leftward shifts are problematic for Basque, since the preverbal focus position, as we have seen, is also an argument position. However one wants to model semantic scope, it simply does not make sense to treat pragmatically and syntactically basic OV sentences as derived. The derivational account makes Basque look anomalous in comparison to, say, English, in which VO word order is not treated as derived. In English, as in Basque, a direct object may be a narrow focus. For example, (4) can be a narrow-focus answer to the question ‘What did she buy?’:

(4) She bought a BOOK.

However, we don't find a parallel suggestion that the NP *a book* is MOVED to postverbal position in English. We therefore see no strong reason to propose that a focal NP is moved to preverbal position in Basque. Another problem with a focus-movement account for Basque is the status of topical arguments that precede the preverbal focus. For example, Elorrieta and others claim that the ergative argument preceding the focus in (5) is in specifier position of a CP which, in turn, is adjoined to a CP which contains the focus, *bizikleta*, in its specifier position. Such accounts, with two movement transformations that have to be linked and simultaneous, we find problematic.

(5) Mikelek, bizikleta apurtu du. (=Elorrieta (21a))
 Mikel-E bicycle-A break AUX
 “Mikel, he broke his bicycle.”

The comma indicates a boundary tone which Elorrieta sees as creating a separate intonation unit for the detached topic expression (see also Aissen 1992). The problem is, as Elorrieta puts it, that “topicalization of other NPs is obligatory when an NP is in

narrow focus” (p. 42). We could conclude that detached topics are base-generated, as per Aissen 1992, and retain a movement account of focus. We are not sure what such a move would gain us, because we are doubtful that there are long-distance dependencies in Basque. In this respect, we differ from both Ortiz de Urbina (1986:230) and Elorrieta (1994:35). Elorrieta (1994: 35) gives the pair in (6).

- (6) a. *? **Nor-k** uste du Jonek ekarri-ko dio-la oparia seme-ari?
 who-E think AUX Jon-E bring-FUT AUX-that present-A son-D
 “Who does Jon think will bring a present to her son?”
 (=Elorrieta 1994 (39a))
- b. Oparia seme-ari **nor-k** ekarri-ko dio-la uste du Jonek?
 present-A son-D who-E bring-FUT AUX-that think AUX Jon-E
 “Who does Jon think will bring a present to her son?”
 (=Elorrieta 1994 (39b))

Elorrieta says that both sentences are acceptable and that they mean the same thing. However, we have found that native speakers reject (6a), while they accept (6b), which involves the in situ strategy for focus. This makes us question whether a movement account of focus is appropriate for Basque. Another problem for a movement account is the status of postverbal topical elements, which Lambrecht (1981, 1994) refers to as ANTITOPICS. An example of an antitopic in Basque is given in (7). The subject of the conversation in which this sentence occurs is the Basque immigrant experience in America, and specifically the way in which Americans struggle to pronounce Basque words.

- (7) Mila modu diferenteta-n esaten zuten nire abizena.
 thousand way different-IN say AUX my last-name
 “They pronounced my last name (Urrutia) a thousand different ways.”
 (Interview with Johnny U, Basque Country-Western singer from Idaho, *El Diario Vasco*, January 1997)

In accordance with Ziv & Grosz 1994, we presume that right-dislocated arguments are inferentially related to discourse topics. In (7), the NP *nire abizena* (‘my last name’) denotes something that is related to what is under discussion, Basque words. Example (7) shows that a direct object need not be focal, and that a topical direct object may be realized in postverbal position, with the low pitch accent characteristic of topics. Rightward topics are problematic for approaches like Elorrieta’s, in which topics move to specifier position of multiply adjoined right-branching CPs. They are also problematic for any approach that identifies a particular syntactic position, say specifier of CP, with the topic role.

As an alternative to a movement-based account of topic and focus, we propose a pragmatically preferred clause structure for Basque, in accordance with Lambrecht's (1987) proposal for Spoken French clause structure. This pattern is shown in Figure 1, using certain conventions of unification-based Construction Grammar (Kay & Fillmore 1999):

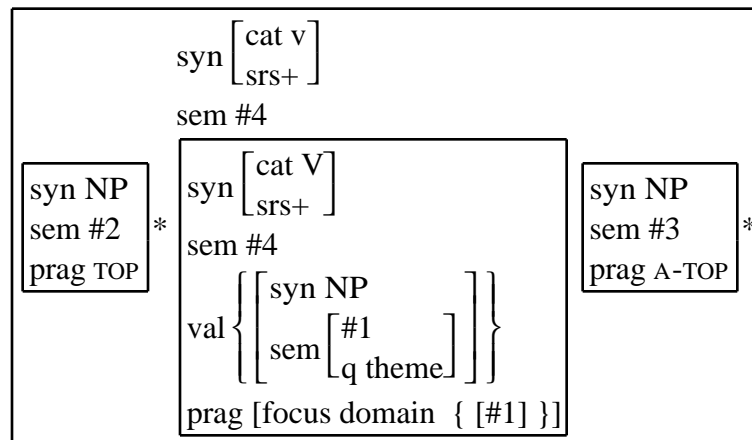


Figure 1. Pragmatically Preferred Clause Structure in Basque

In Figure 1, we use the pragmatic role of TOP to represent a detached or extraclausal topic. This is what Aissen calls an EXTERNAL TOPIC. Herring 1990 observes that these topics tend to be in leftward position, irrespective of word order type. The clausal constituent to the right of the detached topic has a valence structure. This is the set of participant roles licensed by the verb. The focus domain of the clause is represented as a valence set. This valence set contains those elements that are in focus. The set of focus elements includes the absolutive NP that is in the valence set of the lexical verb. The pragmatic role A-TOP represents a rightward detached topic—an ANTITOPIC. Following Ziv & Grosz 1994, we assume that antitopics denote referents which are highly recoverable but not currently under discussion. Lambrecht (1987:233) argues that antitopics are more CONTINUOUS than external topics, which are used for more discontinuous strategies: topic switching and topic establishment.

The pragmatic structure in Figure 1 is closely paralleled by Van Valin's (1993) layered clause structure, which also includes a clausal core and left- and right-detached positions for topics. The structure in Figure 1 unifies with valency and constituency constructions per Kay & Fillmore. The constraints that are represented in Figure 1 come into play only when a verb is paired with a lexical NP. Not all clauses in Basque contain an NP. The clausal pattern in Figure 1 finds a close parallel in Dubois's Given A constraint, which was developed on the basis of statistical tendencies in Mayan narratives. Bellver 1993 found the same tendencies in Basque narratives. Namely: There is one at most one

lexical NP per clause, and this strongly tends to be an absolute argument. This a pragmatically motivated fact. The motivation is captured by Lambrecht's Principle of Separation of Reference and Role (1994). This principle is stated in terms of a maxim: Do not introduce a referent and talk about that referent in the same clause. This principle says basically that topics are introduced outside the clause in which they play a topic role. Following from this, argument-position lexical NPs are in focus.

It is generally presumed that sentences which exhibit OSV orders like (8) give evidence for a 'focus position' because default SOV word order is apparently overridden.

- (8) Bizikleta Mikelek apurtu du. (after Elorrieta (21d))
 bicycle-A Mikel-E break AUX
 "Mikel broke his bicycle."

The implication of our analysis is that word order variation is not taken to be evidence of a syntactic focus position. In this sentence, against the tendency described by the representation in Figure 1, an ergative NP denotes a focus. Such sentences are correspondingly rare³. The lexical NP *bizikleta* is in detached topic position. Crucially, since only the second of the two preverbal NPs is an argument, only this NP is in focus. Therefore, we do not view permutations in the ordering of preverbal lexical NPs as reflecting competition for focus position. Instead, in accordance with Elorrieta, we assume that all preverbal lexical NPs, save that in immediate preverbal position, are extraclassical TOPICS. By extension, we do NOT presume that the putative OSV word order in (8) reflects 'scrambling,' because if there is only one lexical argument NP, it cannot be ordered with respect to other argument NPs.

By drawing a functional distinction between two classes of lexical NPs—topic introducers and participant-role denoters—we motivate Aissen's observation that external topics in Mayan languages are extrasyntactic. For example, as Aissen notices, they do not obey island constraints (1992:69). In addition, as Aissen shows, they may be syntactically unlinked, in not coreferencing with any referent inside the clause. Examples of UNLINKED detached topics in Basque are given in examples (9-11):

- (9) Eta beste hizkuntzak, baduzu aditzak urtebete-an ikastea.
 and other languages-A, have verbs-A year-IN learned
 "Other languages, you can learn the verbs in a year."
- (10) Euskal Herria, ez daukazu etxe-tik irtetzerik guardosolik gabe.
 Basque Country, NEG AUX house-ABL leave umbrella without
 "The Basque Country, you can never leave the house without an umbrella."
- (11) Nere arreba, etxea beti zikiña dago.
 my sister, house always dirty is

“My sister, her house is always dirty.”

Another indicator of the extrasyntactic status of detached topics is their ability to stack. Stacked topics are multiple preclausal detached topics. Their sequence does not determine how they are coindexed with grammatical-function NPs in the following clause. An example from French is given in (12a-b):

- (12) a. Nicole_j, Marie_j, elle_{i,j} ne l_{i,j}'aime pas. (=Lambrecht 1987 (8a))
 b. Marie_j, Nicole_j, elle_{i,j} ne l_{i,j}'aime pas.
 “Nicole, Marie, she doesn’t like her.”
 “Marie, Nicole, she doesn’t like her.”

Lambrecht (1996:221) points out with respect to these examples that neither ordering to the leftward topics affects coreference within the clause. In either ordering, Marie is construable as coreferential with the subject. The same can be said of Nicole. This stacking phenomenon can be found with Basque detached topics. Note the examples in (13):

- (13) a. Zure lagun-ek, seme-ari, oparia ekarri diote.
 your friends-E son-D gift-A bring AUX
 “Your friends brought the gift to their son.” (=Elorrieta 1994 (12a))
 b. Seme-ari, zure lagun-ek, oparia ekarri diote.
 son-D your friends-E gift-A bring AUX
 “Your friends brought a gift to their son.” (=Elorrieta 1994 (12c))

Detached topics do not denote arguments, so their order is not relevant for argument structure. In addition to ordering freedom, we find MORPHOLOGICAL indicators that detached topics are nonsyntactic. Examples (14-15) show that left-detached topics need not be morphologically case-marked for their role in the following clause. Example (14) is reported by Alan King (pers.com. 1999): (14a) represents the “properly” dative-marked topic NP, while the topic NP in (14b) is an alternative in natural speech, and is not case-marked. We see the same situation in (15) where we would anticipate the NP *gizon hori* being case-marked ergative if it were within the clause.

- (14) a. Antxon-i, badakite nork lapurtu zion.
 Antxon-D they-know who-E rob AUX
 “Anthony, they know who robbed him.”
 b. Antxon, badakite nork lapurtu zion.
 Anthony, they-know who robbed him.
 “Anthony, they know who robbed him.”

- (15) Maite du-dan gizon hori, beti opariak erosten dizkit.
 love have-REL man that, always presents-A buy AUX
 “The man that I love, he always buys me presents.”

Caseless detached topics also occur in spoken Spanish, according to Klein-Andreu 1989. In (16a), “the Dative plural clitic *les* ‘them’ refers to the entities affected by the horn-structures’ falling off” (1989:26), the entities being *los cérvidos* ‘deer’. However, “normative prescription would lead us to expect that any explicit mention of this entity should be accompanied by the preposition *a*,” as in (16b). Klein-Andreu refers to such “syntactically unintegrated forms” as *los cérvidos* in (16a) as “X-forms”. She finds that the systematic occurrence of these X-forms in the spoken language points to topic establishment rather than “performance error.”

- (16) a. Los cérvidos se les cae
 the deer it them-DAT falls
 todos los años el cuerno.
 all the years the horn
 “Deer, they drop their antlers every year.” (= Klein-Andreu 1989 (1a))
- b. A los cérvidos se les cae
 To-DAT the deer it them-DAT falls
 todos los años el cuerno.
 all the years the horn
 “Deer, they drop their antlers every year.” (= Klein-Andreu 1989 (1b))

This lack of case-marking on detached topics makes sense when we consider the difference in function between topic NPs and argument NPs. As described by Lambrecht, with respect to strong and weak pronouns in French, topic NPs have a naming function only; they do not denote participants⁴.

By separating topic-establishing and case-role denoting functions of NPs, the preferred clause structure captures discourse tendencies. But does it have any relevance for syntactic analysis? Notice that we have said nothing in Figure 1 about constituency, or even word order within the clause. Instead, we propose the preferred clause structure as a criterion that syntactic analyses must meet in order to have a sound empirical basis. Although one can easily invent Basque sentences in which all case roles are expressed by lexical NPs, these do not occur as products of ordinary linguistic behavior (see Lyons 1977 for discussion). Under the plausible hypothesis that the function of syntax is to convey information, it seems reasonable that constraints on information flow should form the basis for syntactic representation.

The argument-focus construal in (19b) corresponds to Kiss's definition of IDENTIFICATIONAL FOCUS. In (19b) there is an open proposition, *They brought a present to x*, and the assertion in (19a) identifies the variable in the open proposition. Accent projection operates in the context of (19c). In this context, (19a) is construed as a topic-comment structure. The entire VP is in focus. This is roughly what Kiss means by INFORMATION FOCUS.

Predicate focus is also compatible with the presence of topical referents inside the focal VP. Two examples of this are given in (20):

- (20) A: What did they do for their SON?
 B: They brought a PRESENT for their son.
 B': For their SON they brought a PRESENT.

In (20), A's question has two possible responses. The first B response involves what Lambrecht & Michaelis (1998) call the discourse condition on unaccented argument expressions. This is shown in (21):

- (21) **Discourse Condition on Unaccented Argument Expressions.** An argument expression is unaccented iff the speaker assumes that its referent can be construed as a ratified topic at the time of the utterance. (ibid.)

In accordance with this principle, the NP *their son* in B' lacks accent because the speaker views it as an established topic. The B' response is a different situation. Here, *their son* contrasts with other possible beneficiaries. Left dislocation signals this contrastive or set-inclusion function (Prince 1997). Notice that in the B' response there are two accents. One is on the left-dislocated NP and the other falls inside the VP. This double accent pattern makes sense according to a corollary principle given by Lambrecht & Michaelis, the Topic-Comment Principle. This is given in (22):

- **The Topic-Comment Principle.** If a predicate capable of integration with its argument is not subject to accent projection, i.e. if both the predicate and the argument constituent are accented, the two denotata have a topic-comment relation to each other. (ibid.)

Accent projection is a major component of predicate focus. It also occurs in the more specialized case of SENTENCE FOCUS. Sentence-focus sentences, according to Lambrecht (1994) are used to report an event or to assert a state of affairs. They are formally constrained: they require an intransitive verb that is typically stative or inchoative AND a lexical NP subject. The sentence *My CAR broke down* is an example of sentence focus in context (23b):

- (23) a. My CAR broke down.
 b. **Sentence-focus context.** Bus passenger apologizing to fellow passengers as she slowly loads grocery bags onto bus.
 c. **Argument-focus context.** What broke down?

Sentence focus is like predicate focus: it permits a narrow or argument-focus reading. We can see in (23c) that the sentence *My CAR broke down* can be used in an argument-focus context, where the NP *the car* is the focus, rather than the whole sentence. What we propose is that preverbal position in Basque acts like a prosodic peak in English. An NP or other phrase in the preverbal position can project its focus value onto the whole predicate or, under certain circumstances, onto the whole clause. Evidence that focus projection operates in Basque is found in (24):

- (24) a. Opari bat ekarri diote.
 present-A one-A bring AUX
 ‘‘They brought a present.’’
 b. **Argument-focus context.** What did they bring?
 c. **Predicate-focus context.** What did they do?

As Elorrieta observes (1994:13), (24a) is ambiguous between the argument-focus reading that is appropriate in context (24b) and the predicate-focus reading that is appropriate in context (24c). As in English, we can find a TOPICAL ELEMENT inside a focal VP in Basque, as well. CONTRASTIVE topic will occur in the left detached position as in English. This is shown in (25a). A NONCONTRASTIVE topic will be placed in the right detached position. This is shown in (25b):

- (25) a. Semeari, opari bat ekarri diote.
 son-D present-A one-A bring AUX
 ‘‘For their SON, they brought a present.’’ (What did they do for their son?)
 (25) b. Opari bat ekarri diote, semeari.
 present-A one-A bring AUX son-D
 ‘‘They brought a PRESENT for their son.’’ (What did they do for their son?)

As in English, focus projection also occurs in the SENTENCE-FOCUS CONTEXT. Examples of this are found in (26):

- (26) a. Nere kotxea puskatu egin da.
 my car broke do AUX
 ‘‘My CAR broke down.’’
 b. **Sentence-focus context.** Bus passenger apologizing to fellow passengers as she slowly loads grocery bags onto bus.
 c. **Argument-focus context.** What broke down?

Sentence (26a), like its English translation beneath, is ambiguous with regard to focal scope. It has a sentence-focus reading in the context of (26b) and an argument-focus reading in the context of (26c). Other examples of sentence-focus are given in the news reports in (27-29).

(27) Zure ama-k deitu egin du.
 your mother-E call do AUX
 “Your MOTHER called.”

(28) Nere errelojua gelditu egin bai-da.
 my watch stop do AFF-AUX
 “My WATCH has stopped.”

(29) Kartera galdu zait.
 wallet lose AUX
 “My WALLET is missing.”

For each of the examples in (27-29), there is a narrow-scope/wide-scope ambiguity, as in the ‘car broke down’ example in (26). What this means is that preverbal position in Basque cannot be equated with argument-focus construal.

Basque has disambiguating devices for both predicate-focus and sentence-focus. These indicate that the different focus construals we have talked about are true ambiguities. In the case of predicate focus, we find that a construction which Aske (1997) calls DELAYED FOCUS forces a predicate-focus reading. The contrast between delayed focus and preverbal focus is nicely illustrated by the following passage from de Rijk. The lines are from an old folk tale about some brothers setting out on a quest:

(30) a. Bat-ek topau eban astronomo bat
 one-E run-into AUX astronomer one-A
 “One (brother), he met an astronomer.”
 b. Bigarren-ak sastre bat topau eban.
 second-E tailor one-A run-into AUX
 “The second, he came across a tailor.” (de Rijk 1969:348)

In the first passage, delayed focus is used to convey predicate focus. The new information is that the brother met an astronomer. By the second passage, (30b), the reader can treat as background the open proposition ‘A brother ran into x’. This background makes it appropriate to produce an argument-focus assertion, in which the focal argument is in preverbal position. In the case of sentence focus, Spanish-like inversion appears to provide for unambiguous sentence-focus construal. Examples of inversion constructions are given in (31-33). Example (31) is taken from an old tale of a

wife's tough love plan to reform her inveterate drunk of a husband, while (32-33) are more recent examples.

- (31) An etorren taberna-tik etxealde-ra trinkulun-trankulun
 there came tavern-from farmhouse-to bouncy-bounce
 mozkortia.
 Drunk-DEF
 "There came the drunk tripping along down the road from the bar back to his house." (de Azkue 1934: 264)
- (32) eta eztanda egin du beste lehergailu batek
 and explosion-A make AUX other bomb one-E
 "...and another bomb exploded." (*Egunkarria* newspaper, 1996)
- (33) Balaztarik gabe geratu zen kamioi bat.
 brakes without appear AUX truck one-A
 "Along came a truck with no brakes." (*Euskaldunon Egunkaria*, 1997)

In (31-33) an inversion structure is used to convey sentence focus. Notice that the postverbal elements in these examples are not antitopics or continuous topics, since they denote discourse-new referents. Examples of postverbal focus provide further evidence against an account of Basque syntax in which focus is identified with a single syntactic position.

4. Conclusion

This analysis suggests a more descriptively adequate and typologically realistic picture of the pragmatics of word order in Basque than one based on movement to a syntactic focus position. The word-order permutations we have described now represent just one basic construction for predications containing lexical NPs, in which:

- Focal scope in an OV or SV sequence is indeterminate, because of focus projection;
- There is at most one lexical argument per clause, and it is typically absolutive;
- One or more lexical NPs can appear in the extraclausal positions that are reserved for detached topics.

We conclude that pragmatic generalizations based on word order should not be based upon relative ordering of lexical NPs, since pragmatic functions and grammatical functions are orthogonal: a lexical NP may not be an argument. Syntactic representation should be compatible with functional principles like Lambrecht's Principle of Separation of Reference and Role. We should not, however, overstate the isomorphism between syntactic representation and pragmatic representation. The view that pragmatic construal

is directly ‘read off’ syntactic representation is difficult to maintain when we look closely at Basque as it is spoken.

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Endnotes

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² The uncited data were gathered in the Spanish Basque Country. They include both elicited and spontaneous productions in the Gipuzkoan dialect of Basque; this dialect accounts for the largest group of native speakers.

³ The markedness of focal ergative NPs, as captured by Du Bois's (1987) Given A Constraint, is suggested by their rarity in Basque corpora. Aske 1997 reports no instances of OSV word order in his data bank, while de Rijk 1969 reports only 4%. With regard to the Given A Constraint in particular, Bellver 1993 found that only 12% of ergative arguments were new mentions in a Basque narrative.

⁴ See Davidson 1996 for a similar discussion of the topicalizing function of emphatic pronouns in spoken Madrid Spanish.