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# Focus particles in endangered languages

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## 1. INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

The study of focus particles in endangered and under-researched languages is highly relevant for both descriptive and theoretical linguistics. On the one hand, focus particles often receive little attention in traditional grammatical descriptions. On the other hand, focus particles have received a lot of attention in the theoretical literature, but mostly on the basis of non-endangered European languages. As a result the theoretical literature does not provide information on what may happen with focus particles in a situation of language endangerment. Nor is there much information on focus particles emerging from language contact.

There are several reasons why focus particles are usually ignored by documentary linguistics:

- The meaning contribution of focus particles is difficult to elicit, as their semantics are quite abstract and not easily accessible to native speakers;
- Focus particles are often borrowed, whereas the priority of documentary linguistics is usually so-called ‘native’ data.

By contrast, the theoretical interest in focus particles is not limited to lexical items and their etymologies. Focus particles have quite complex non-trivial meanings which may differ from language to language (König 1991, Beaver and Clark 2008). Moreover, focus particles are an important source for generalizations concerning the constituent structure of a language and the interfaces between syntax-phonology, syntax-information structure, and syntax-semantics (Büring and Hartmann 2001).

Drawing on original fieldwork data from two unrelated endangered languages Kola Saami (Uralic) and Ishkashim (East-Iranian), I will show examples of focus particles emerging as a result of language contact and discuss the semantic processes which take place. Both languages have recently been in intense language contact with Russian. As a result there are two Russian loanwords that can be glossed as ‘only’ in Kola Saami and a Russian loanword meaning ‘even’ in Ishkashim. I will analyze the

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<sup>1</sup> The data on which this article is based were collected during fieldwork carried out for the Kola Saami Documentation Project (KSDP), a DoBeS project financed by the Volkswagen Foundation, and during fieldwork carried out for the SFB 632 ‘Information structure’. I am very grateful to Malte Zimmermann (Potsdam) and Michael Rießler (Freiburg). This work would have been impossible without the assistance of native speaker consultants and I wish to express my thanks particularly to Anastasiya Mozalevskaya, Ivan Danilov, Kseniya Mayagina, Nina Sharshina, Svetlana Danilova, Ganna Vinogradova, Mariya Medvedeva, Anna Yuryeva, Alexandra Antonova (all speakers of Saami), and to Zarifa Nazarova, Bunafsha Nazarova, Tovus Nazarova, Malika Nazarova, Amirbek Nazarov, Nikbakht Borakova, Manucher Borakov, Farzona Borakova, Selsela Abdulaliev, Nurbegim Abdulaliev, Hanjar Kurbonbekov, Usuf Kurbonbekov (all speakers of Ishkashim).

syntactic and semantic interpretation of these borrowed lexical items by contrasting them with the corresponding particle from the source language. It appears that even in situations of intense language contact, when functional words are being borrowed, their syntactic distribution and their meaning in the target language differ from the distribution and meaning of their counterparts in the source language. The lexical borrowing of Russian ‘only’ in Kola Saami and the lexical borrowing of Russian ‘even’ in Ishkashim are connected with different semantic processes. In Kola Saami the new lexical item completely replaces an existing one and semantic bleaching takes place; in Ishkashim the borrowed lexical item is added to the existing system and receives a different interpretation than in Russian (semantic shift).

## 2. FOCUS PARTICLES

The term ‘focus particle’ is a general name for a ‘function word’ such as ‘only’, ‘even’ and ‘also’ (König 1991:10). It has been noted that these elements have a large number of semantic and syntactic properties in common across different languages. One such property is their association with focus. Thus, if we compare the sentences (1a) and (1b) we may notice that *only* makes a different semantic contribution in the two sentences, although all the constituents remain the same. In (1a) *only* is associated with the focused object FOOTBALL; the sentence describes a situation in which Jacob does not watch other sports. In (1b) *only* is associated with the verb WATCHES, and the sentence describes a situation where Jacob does not play football himself.

- (1) (a) *Jacob only watches FOOTBALL.*  
 (b) *Jacob only WATCHES football.*

Note that even without *only* (1a) and (1b) would have different meanings, however it is the presence of the focus particle that changes the truth-conditions of the sentences. (1a) is TRUE if Jacob watches nothing but football and FALSE if Jacob watches football and basketball. This effect on the truth-conditional aspects of the meaning makes focus particles a practical instrument for exploring information structure.

## 3. FOCUS PARTICLES IN THE SITUATION OF LANGUAGE CONTACT

### 3.1. Case 1: ‘only’ in Kola Saami

The Saami languages are part of the Uralic language family. Kola Saami, described as ‘Peninsula East-Saami’ in Sammallahti (1998), is spoken on the Kola Peninsula in Northwestern Russia. Currently, there are approximately 300 speakers of this language. Kola Saami is an inflectional language which almost exclusively uses suffixation. Nominal expressions inflect for 9 cases and 2 numbers; verbs inflect for person, number, tense and mood. The predominant word order in Kola Saami is SVO (Sammallahti 1998:95), but SOV is also frequent. Negation in Saami is expressed by

a special finite verb with negative meaning. The negation-verb precedes the main verb in the so-called connegative form, as in example (3).

- (2) *Munn*            *saran*            *sāmas*  
 1SG                speak:1SG        saami\_language  
 ‘I speak the Saami language.’
- (3) *Munn*            *em*                *sarn*                *sāmas*  
 1SG                not:1SG            speak              saami\_language  
 ‘I do not speak the Saami language.’

There are two lexical items meaning ‘only’ in Kola Saami. Both of them have a Russian etymology: *lyše* < Russian *liš* and *tol’ke~tol’ko* < Russian *tol’ko*. Elicitations with Kola Saami speakers from different areas suggest that there is local variation between these two items: there are speakers who use *lyše* and speakers who use *tol’ke~tol’ko*. These loanwords are mentioned by Itkonen (1958) and seem to have been present in the language for a long time. They belong to the Kola Saami system of focus particles and have a similar distribution to ‘only’ in English. Similar to Russian, *lyše* and *tol’ke* in Kola Saami are adverbs. Normally they appear before the focused constituent. They can have an NP (subject, object or an attribute), an adverb or a transitive VP in their scope.

The Kola-Saami particles *lyše* and *tol’ke* show the following differences to their Russian counterparts. Syntactically *tol’ke* and *lyše* in Kola Saami are not necessarily adjacent to their associates, as seen in examples (4) and (5), whereas in Russian the corresponding lexical items would be necessarily adjacent, compare examples (6) and (7). Some speakers also allow the postpositioning of ‘only’ which is not possible in Russian.

- (4) *Myššk tol’ke ante Ovana kul’a, Mykla kul’a ejj ante*  
 miša PRT gave Ivan fish Kol’a fish not gave  
 ‘Miša gave fish only to IVAN, he gave no fish to Kol’a’  
 Kola Saami *tol’ke*; (I.D.)
- (5) *Koass lyše kulel keahč*  
 cat PRT fish look  
 ‘The cat only LOOKS at the fish (it does not eat it)’  
 Kola Saami *lyše*; (N.A.)
- (6) *Miša (\*tol’ko/\*liš) dal Ivanu rybu*  
 Miša PRT gave Ivan fish  
 Intended: ‘Miša gave fish only to IVAN, (he gave no fish to Nikolaj)’  
 Russian *tol’ko/liš*
- (7) *Miša tol’ko/liš Ivanu dal rybu*  
 Miša PRT Ivan gave fish  
 ‘Miša gave fish only to IVAN, (he gave no fish to Nikolaj)’  
 Russian *tol’ko/liš*

From a semantic point of view, the lexical meaning of Kola Saami exclusive focus particles differs from the meanings of their Russian counterparts. As shown in examples (8) to (10), *lyše* in (8) has a different distribution from the Russian word *liš*, seen in example (9), and a different interpretation than its Russian counterpart *tol'ko*, seen in example (10).

- (8) *Sōnn ejj lyše pudze soaga sonn pyrsanne pudze soaga*  
 3SG not PRT deer caught 3SG well deer caught  
 ‘He did not only catch a reindeer, he caught a reindeer well.’  
 Kola - Saami (I.D.)
- (9) *On (\*ne) liš pojmal olen'a*  
 3SG not PRT caught deer  
 ‘He only caught a reindeer.’  
 Russian
- (10) *On ne tol'ko pojmal olen'a #on horošo pojmal olenja*  
 3SG not PRT caught deer 3SG well caught deer  
 ‘He did not only catch a reindeer (#he caught a reindeer well).’  
 Russian

Example (8) shows that exclusive focus particles in Kola Saami have a wider meaning than the Russian words *liš* and *tol'ko*. *Lyše* in Kola Saami seems to introduce a scale (an ordering for values under consideration) as shown in example (11a). In Kola Saami: ‘He *lyše* caught a reindeer’ may refer to the quality of the hunt. In contrast to *lyše* in Saami, the Russian word meaning ‘only’ does not introduce a scale in such a context; *tol'ko* operates on an unordered set of alternatives, as shown in example (11b). Note that *lyše* in Kola Saami may also have a non-scalar interpretation. In the situation described in example (5), the cat looks at the fish, but does not do anything with it; the alternatives which are activated in this case are shown in (11c).

- (11) (a) {catch a reindeer; ...catch a reindeer well; ...catch a reindeer very well...}  
 (b) {catch a reindeer; ...tie a reindeer; ...slaughter a reindeer...}  
 (c) {look at the fish; ...lick the fish; ...eat the fish...}

There are cases when *tol'ko* operates on a scale, but these are cases when the excluded alternatives are naturally ranked on some kind of scale, as for example time or numbers, as in (12a-b). Russian ‘only’ does not introduce scales, for ‘social status’ or ‘quality’. Such scales can be introduced by a combination of two particles: *tolko liš*, *vsego liš*, *tolko-to* or by a special lexical item like *prosto*.

- (12) (a) {5 rubles; ...10 rubles; ...100 rubles...}  
 (b) {6 PM; ...9 PM; ...11 PM...}

It appears that the meaning of the Russian loanwords for ‘only’ has been spreading in Kola Saami: *tol'ke* and *lyše* still have the meaning which they used to have in

Russian, but they have also acquired additional meanings (as for example operating on a scale). The process is reminiscent of semantic bleaching during grammaticalization, where the meaning changes from a narrower set to a broader set. The examples from Kola Saami show that the lexical item is borrowed but its function in the target language is not identical to the source.

### 3.2. Case 2: ‘even’ in Ishkashim

Ishkashim is an East-Iranian language belonging to the Indo-European language family. It is spoken by approximately 1000 people in the Pamir Mountains in Tajikistan and adjacent Afghanistan. The most recent grammar of Ishkashim is Pakhalina (1959). Other earlier works on this language are Grierson (1920) and Morgenstierne (1938). Ishkashim has predominantly SOV word order, but the verb can also appear in non-final position (Pakhalina 1959:65).

An interesting syntactic feature of Ishkashim is the presence of cliticizing person-number particles. Thus, in the past tense person-number is seldom marked on the verb itself but appears more often on the first constituent, as in examples (13) and (14). Ishkashim is often described as a language with a high degree of optionality: it has optional object marking and optional plural marking, as shown in these examples, as well as optional marking for 3rd person singular (Pakhalina 1959; Payne 1980).

- (13) *Az-əm*            *nər*                    *čwənd*            *xūl*  
 1SG-1SG            today                    apricot            ate  
 ‘I ate apricot/apricots today’.

- (14) *Az-əm*            *nər*                    *čwənd-o-i*            *xūl*  
 1SG-1SG            today                    apricot-PL-OBJ    ate  
 ‘I ate apricots today’.

Similar to Kola Saami, one of the focus particles in Ishkashim has a Russian etymology: *daže* < Russian *daže* ‘even’. It seems to be a recent borrowing, as the word is not mentioned in the existing dictionaries and the phonological form is the same as in Russian. Originally Ishkashim used the same particle *-məs* for ‘even’ and ‘also’ as in example (15). According to König (1991:68) it is the case in many languages that an unspecific additive particle like ‘also’ is used in both scalar and non-scalar contexts. Such languages make no lexical distinction between ‘even’ and ‘also’.

*Daže* in Ishkashim is the only focus particle which can freely appear after the verb. *Daže* can have NPs, Adverbs and VPs in its scope. The syntactic distribution of *daže* in Ishkashim is freer than in Russian. In Russian *daže* normally precedes the focused word, whereas Ishkashim also allows *daže* to follow the focused item, (indeed this is the most frequent order). Compare Ishkashim sentences in (16), (17) and (19). Normally *daže* in Ishkashim does not appear in a sentence without the additive particle *-məs*. In contrast, Russian *daže* usually does not appear together with *tože/ takže* ‘also’, as shown by example (19).

- (15) *Mə bibi pə da koncert-məs šed*  
 1SG.POSS grandmother to DD.III.ACC concert-PRT went  
 ‘My grandmother also went to the CONCERT/ My grandmother even  
 went to the CONCERT’  
 Ishkashim, Z.N.
- (16) *Mə bibi pə da koncert-məs daže šed*  
 1SG.POSS granny to DD.III.ACC concert-PRT PRT went  
 ‘My grandmother even went to the CONCERT’  
 Ishkashim, Z.N.
- (17) *Mə bibi daže pə da koncert-məs šed*  
 1SG.POSS granny PRT to DD.III.ACC concert-PRT went  
 ‘My grandmother even went to the CONCERT’  
 Ishkashim, Z.N.
- (18) *Mə bibi pə da koncert-məs šed daže*  
 1SG.POSS granny to DD.III.ACC concert-PRT went PRT  
 ‘My grandmother even went to the CONCERT’  
 Ishkashim, Z.N.
- (19) \**Moja babuška pošla daže takže na concert*  
 1SG.POSS GLOSS 2 GLOSS 2 GLOSS 4 GLOSS 5  
 Intended: ‘My grandmother even went to the CONCERT’  
 Russian

Regarding the semantic contribution of *daže*, it appears that in contemporary Ishkashim the particle *-məš* is sufficient to express the meaning of Russian ‘even’, as shown in (15). Sentence (15) which contains the particle *-məš* has two possible readings, one being ‘My grandmother even went to the CONCERT’, while the other is ‘My grandmother also went to the CONCERT’. If *daže* is added to the sentence, as in (16), (17), and (18) then only this latter reading is possible. Most probably *daže* was borrowed by Ishkashim speakers to fill an existing lexical gap (underspecification).

However, the Ishkashim particle *daže* shows some important differences from Russian *daže*. Crucially, at least for some speakers of Ishkashim, *daže* does not have an existential presupposition, which is normally one of the meaning components of ‘even’ (König 1991:68). As shown in example (20), this meaning component can be cancelled with simple negation (Renans et al. 2011).

- (20) *Daže Usuf-(məš)-əs məčəv ɣul na diru digar*  
 PRT Usuf-PRT-PROG 1SG.ACC ear not does other  
*zodbud-o-s məčəv ɣul dir-on*  
 child-PL-PROG 1SG.ACC ear do-3PL  
 ‘Even Usuf does not listen to us, other children listen to us’  
 Ishkashim, T.N., A.N., F.B.

Probably the following process took place: speakers of Ishkashim noted that *daže* in Russian is normally connected with a strong semantic/pragmatic effect. For the speakers adding *daže* to the sentence is connected with unexpectedness, emotional or affective meaning. The speakers of Ishkashim associate those effects with the meaning of *daže*. The two main meaning components of ‘even’: existential presupposition and additive meaning (König 1991:68) are not necessarily expressed by *daže* in Ishkashim. In many cases *daže* is used as an emotive discourse particle, as in example (20). Thus, the set of contexts which allow *daže* in Russian differs from the set of contexts which allow *daže* in Ishkashim. Examples like (16) belong to the intersection of those sets.

### 3.3. Comparing the two cases

As shown above there is a lexical item with Russian etymology both in the Kola Saami and the Ishkashim systems of focus particles. However there is an important difference between the way the borrowed lexical item is integrated into the different language systems. In Saami the indigenous word for ‘only’ is not present any more and the word with a Russian etymology is used instead (in some cases the meaning of ‘only’ is also expressed with the help of the word ‘one’). The process which takes place is lexical replacement. In Ishkashim the Russian lexical item did not replace an existing one, it was simply added to the system.

The syntactic distribution of the borrowed lexical items in Kola Saami and Ishkashim is not the same as in Russian. Both *lyše* and *tol’ke* in Kola Saami and *daže* in Ishkashim show much more freedom in their syntactic distribution than *liš*, *tol’ko* and *daže* in Russian. There are similarities in the syntactic distribution of the borrowed lexical items in both languages.

Interestingly the semantic processes which take place seem to go in different directions in Kola Saami and Ishkashim. In Saami we can talk about semantic bleaching of Russian ‘only’; its meaning becomes broader. In Kola Saami ‘only’ operates on a scale as well as on a set of alternatives, as shown in examples (8) and (5). *Daže* in Ishkashim is added to the sentence only when disambiguation is needed. For the speakers its meaning is connected to a specific pragmatic effect. It results in a change of the meaning of *daže* in Ishkashim: it is moving away from ‘even’ in the direction of an emotive discourse particle like ‘well’.

Given these facts one cannot really say that focus particles are being borrowed. The lexical items are being borrowed and as a result new particles emerge in the target languages. The system of focus particles changes but it does not become identical to the system of the source language.

## 4. METHODOLOGY AND METHODOLOGICAL PROBLEMS

### 4.1. Problems in data collection

Describing focus particles in endangered languages often appears to be a nontrivial methodological task. The socio-linguistic situation plays a very important role: new lexical items borrowed from a dominant language like Russian are not immediately



‘emotionally’ accepted by speakers as a part of their language. This fact should be considered while analyzing published texts: they are often edited according to ‘aesthetical criteria’. Those focus particles which emerge as a result of language contact usually belong to a class of words or constructions which never appear in written texts, but instead they belong to the ‘oral language’ (Fernandez-Vest 2009:45). However analyzing recordings of spontaneous speech is also not unproblematic. Spontaneous texts in Kola Saami show a very high amount of code-switching, which makes it difficult to differentiate between code-switching and loanwords.

One might also come across language purism during an elicitation session. A purist attitude is commonly an important factor in situations of language endangerment. Being aware that their language is endangered, speakers try to ‘save it’ from Russian influence. While working with a linguist, speakers might want to avoid loanwords, such as borrowed focus particles. Thus, for Kola Saami it is easier to elicit the word *lyše* than *tolke*, which has a more transparent Russian etymology.

#### 4.2. Methodology

For my research I used a combination of different methodologies: corpus analysis, spontaneous speech analysis and direct elicitation. Preliminary research was done on existing dictionaries and text collections. Kola Saami has been written in its current orthography since 1980, which means that there are some texts available. I have also analyzed annotated texts from the Kola Saami spontaneous speech collection gathered by the Kola Saami Documentation Project (Rießler et al. 2005-2010). Unfortunately I could not do the same kind of analysis for Ishkashim. Ishkashim is not a written language and there are only a few texts in transcribed form available; the biggest collection of Ishkashim texts is Pakhalina (1959), but there are no occurrences of *daže* in those texts. However, this is not surprising, as over the last 50 years the language has experienced considerable changes (Nazarova, p.c.).

After the initial research on the textual material I collected my own data through direct elicitations with Kola Saami speakers and with speakers of Ishkashim. Direct elicitation is extremely important for semantic analysis. Matthewson (2004) shows that only with the help of elicitation can the researcher who does not speak the object language natively establish semantic facts about the meanings of utterances; spontaneous discourse alone is not sufficient. In my elicitation sessions I used translation tasks, judgement tasks and non-verbal stimuli. For eliciting Ishkashim data I have been using the ‘Questionnaire on focus semantics’ (Renans et al. 2011), which was developed at Potsdam University. This questionnaire includes production tasks, translation tasks and judgement tasks. It provides a tool for collecting and analyzing data on focus sensitive particles and on their semantic contribution. The advantage of using this questionnaire is the possibility to have both qualitative and quantitative analysis.

By combining different methodologies the researcher accumulates data from various sources, which makes it possible to get a broad overview of the phenomena. The naturally occurring data (spontaneous speech and text corpus) give first impressions about how the system might function. Direct elicitation, including

production tasks, translation tests and asking consultants for judgements provides further information about the meaning of the utterances.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Focus particles are an instrument to explore information structure of a language and thus can help to understand how the system works. However, language documentation does not usually pay much attention to the study of focus particles, nor is there much information available on focus particles in situations of language endangerment. One of the reasons focus particles are not studied in minority languages is that they are often borrowed through language contact. I have discussed two cases of such ‘borrowing’. Two unrelated languages, Kola Saami and Ishkashim have been in intense contact with Russian and, as a result, there are Russian lexical items in the system of focus particles of both languages. However, the syntactic distribution of these lexical items is not the same as in Russian. Their lexical meaning in the target languages differ from the source language. Even the nature of the semantic process is different in Saami and in Ishkashim. It seems more appropriate not to speak about ‘borrowing of the focus particles’, but about the emergence of new functional elements in the target languages.

Language documentation is very important for the study of focus particles, because the best methodology for researching them proves to be a combination of textual analysis and direct elicitation. Documentation allows the researcher to distinguish the lexical items which actually function as focus particles and provides natural examples of the contexts in which they occur. A combination of spontaneous text analysis and further direct elicitation helps to establish the facts about aspects of the meaning of the utterances.

The two examples presented in the paper are not representative enough to make generalizations, and more case studies of focus particles emerging in situations of language contact could contribute to a better understanding of this process. It could also be interesting to see if there are parallels between focus particles and some other lexical items which are eagerly borrowed from Russian by its contact languages. Apart from swear words those include adverbs like *uže* ‘already’, *konešno* ‘certainly’ and *objazatel’no* ‘necessarily’.

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