

## Characterizing Nukuoro Copulas

Nukuoro is an endangered Polynesian Outlier language spoken by approximately 1,200 people, mostly on Nukuoro Atoll and on the island of Pohnpei in the Federated States of Micronesia (Drummond 2023). In Nukuoro, copular clauses with referential predicates ((Higgins 1973)'s specificational (1), identificational (2), and equative clauses (3)) are characterized by use of the particle *go*.

- (1) Senala **go** de meiolo.  
Senard COP.FOC DET mayor  
'Senard is the mayor.'
- (2) Mee laa **go** de meiolo  
thing DIST COP.FOC DET mayor  
'That's the mayor.'
- (3) **Go** au **go** Soni.  
COP.FOC 1SG COP.FOC Johnny  
'I am Johnny.'

I analyze *go* as a copula with focus properties; specifically, it is unacceptable for *go* to co-occur with one DP if the other DP in the clause is focused. To account for this, I adopt Büring (2009)'s formulation of the prominence theory of focus, but extend the understanding of prominence to include morphological marking as well as prosodic prominence. This analysis suggests that theories of focus within a particular language should integrate the different strategies used to mark focus, and provides a window on the relationship between focus and copularization.

According to Pustet (2003)'s definition, *go* is a copula: it co-occurs with certain lexemes (definite nominals) when they function as predicate nuclei, and it adds no semantic content to the predicate phrase. However, *go* interacts with focus in ways that cannot be accounted for by its copula status. *Go* can appear in multiple positions in specificational clauses, preceding the focused DP, and it is unacceptable in identificational clauses where the demonstrative is in focus. (4)-(6) demonstrate these patterns. Questions and corrections are common diagnostics for focus; it is generally assumed that the constituent which answers a question is focus, as is the contrasting constituent when making a correction. In (4), focus is expected to fall on *de meiolo* 'the mayor', and in (5), it is expected to fall on *au* 'I'. In both examples, *go* must precede the focused element. In (6), *de laa* 'that' answers the question 'Who?', and should bear focus. *Go* cannot precede demonstratives, so we wouldn't expect to see it sentence initially here, but it is impossible for *go* to precede *Margaret* in (6).

- (4) 'Who is that person?'
  - a. (**Go**) tangada laa **go** de meiolo.  
COP.FOC DET.person DIST COP.FOC DET mayor  
'That person is THE MAYOR.'
- (5) 'S/he is the teacher.'
  - a. E dee ai, **go** au tangada agoago.  
PFV NEG OBL COP.FOC 1SG DET.person teach  
'No, I am the teacher.'
- (6) 'Who is Margaret?' (among a crowd)
  - a. De-laa (**\*go**) Margaret.  
DET-DIST COP.FOC Margaret  
'THAT is Margaret.'

It's worth noting that *go* is a reflex of the Proto-Polynesian focus marker *\*ko*, and its cognates still have that function in many Polynesian languages (Brown and Koch 2016). In light of the evidence in (4)-(6), it may be tempting to say that focus marking remains the primary function of *go* as well. Taking an either-copula-or-focus approach, however, cannot fully characterize the meaning and distribution of *go*. As a first note, the distribution of *go* does not match that of a typical morphological focus marker (Aissen 2023). *Go* cannot appear in verbal clauses, even if the argument it co-occurs with is focused:

- (7) 'What did you find?'
- a. Au gu gidee (\*go) luu ogu suusuu.  
 1SG INC find DET.DU 1SG.GEN.O shoe  
 'I found MY SHOES.'

Appearing in verbal vs. non-verbal clauses is not an acknowledged parameter of variation for focus markers, and focus markers in a variety of languages can freely appear in verbal clauses (Aissen 2023). The relationship between *go* and focus, then, seems to be more complex. Considering (6), above, and (8), a common theme emerges: it is unacceptable for *go* to appear adjacent to one DP if the other DP is focused. In other words, if a DP is focused, *go* must minimally appear with that DP, although it can occur twice in one sentence.

- (8) 'Who is that person?'
- a. #Go tangada laa de meiolo.  
 COP.FOC DET.person DIST DET mayor  
 Intended: 'That person is THE MAYOR.'
- b. Go tangada laa go de meiolo.  
 COP.FOC DET.person DIST COP.FOC DET mayor  
 'That person is THE MAYOR.'

Extending Büring (2009)'s theory of prosodically-marked focus to morphosyntactically-marked focus, I argue that this distribution of *go* is due to the requirement that focus be maximally prominent. Co-occurring with *go*, like prosodic focus marking (which is present in Nukuoro (Drummond 2023)), increases the prominence of a DP. This increased prominence is felicitous where the DP preceded by *go* is in focus, but infelicitous where another DP should be maximally prominent.

This requirement explains the infelicity of (8a), and the impossibility of using *go* in (6). In (8), we would expect *de meiolo* 'the mayor' to be in focus, since it is the DP which answers the question. If *go* precedes *tangada laa* 'that person' (8a), however, *tangada laa* would be either equally prominent or more prominent than *de meiolo*. This would violate the requirement of maximal focus prominence. (8b) shows one possible way to resolve this conflict; having both DPs preceded by *go* would make them equally prominent, and I predict that the focused DP would also be prosodically marked. (4) and (5) show the other resolution strategy: *go* can change positions so that the additional prominence it provides is assigned to the DP that's in focus. In (6), it is impossible for *go* to change positions, because it cannot precede a demonstrative (it's unclear exactly why this is the case, but it is a robust pattern). To satisfy the requirement that focus be maximally prominent, then, the only available configuration when the demonstrative is in focus is to omit *go*, so that the non-focused DP is not competing for prominence (presumably assigned by prosody, or possibly syntactic position).

While *go* may not actually evoke alternatives to DP it co-occurs with, it retains from its earlier use as a focus marker the ability to increase the prominence of that DP. The exact source of this increased prominence (whether prosodic, morphological, syntactic, or a combination) and the roles of prosody and syntax in marking focus are areas for further study, but regardless of the which mechanisms are at play, the analysis outlined above still helps us understand the dynamics governing the use of *go*. More generally, Nukuoro *go* provides valuable insight into possible ways in which copulas can develop and interact with other elements of the grammar (especially focus), as well as furthering our understanding of the workings of non-verbal clauses in Austronesian languages in general.

## References

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