Contrastive topic in Karuk

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In his grammar of Karuk, a Hokan language of northern California, Bright (1957:157) identifies an appositional construction in which the third person pronoun *uum* accompanies an NP. Bright notes that the effect “seems to be the emphasis of the noun form, as contrasted with some other noun form in the context”. He cites the example in (1) where the host of *uum*, *pa’-avansáxíich* (the boy), is contrasted with his mother in regards to their feelings about the departure expressed in the embedded clause.

(1) muí-taat u’aachícha pa-tá kun-ivyíhkhip. xís [pa’-avansáxíich uum] t-óo táírák.
3SG.POSS-mother 3SG-be.glad C-PERF 3PL-leave then the-boy 3 PERF-3SG to.mourn

*His mother was glad that they had left. But the boy was sad.*

In this talk, I explore the hypothesis that appositional *uum* marks CONTRASTIVE TOPIC (CT) in the sense of Büring (2003) and Constant (2014). In their QUD based theories, contrastive topic marking signals partial resolution of a question under discussion. In (1), the relevant question under discussion is “How did the boy and his mother feel about leaving?”. The use of *uum* in the second sentence signals that this sentence only partially resolves that question. In particular, the second sentence answers one of two subquestions to the overarching question, namely “How did the boy feel about leaving?”. The other subquestion is answered by the first sentence. In Büring’s original analysis, contrastive topic is a basic information-structural category, separate from focus, which has its own semantic value that is calculated separately from the focus-semantic value. Wagner (2012) and Constant (2014) argue against this bifurcation and propose to analyze contrastive topic as a focus in a particular configuration. I adopt Constant’s topic-abstraction analysis, and propose that *uum* is a contrastive topic operator that associates with a focus-marked phrase in its specifier. This analysis provides an account for the left-peripheral position of contrastive topic in Karuk as well as the fact that *uum* follows the NP it associates with. It is furthermore consistent with the general requirement that focus-marked elements precede the verb in Karuk.

One striking fact about Bright’s example in (1) is that the contrastive topic marking is located in the second sentence, and not in the first. Following Constant (2014:308), I call this ‘backward-looking CT marking’, as contrasted with ‘forward-looking CT marking’. Büring and others have shown that English requires forward-looking prosodic CT marking, but Constant shows that Mandarin Chinese allows both forward- and backward-looking CT marking, and in fact seems to prefer backward-looking marking. Using Karuk textual materials, I show that Karuk also allows both forward- and backward-looking CT marking. This is one of three striking similarities between Karuk and Mandarin as regards CT marking. The second is that CT marking is done, not by prosody, but through lexical means: the particle *-ne* in Mandarin, and the pronoun *uum* in Karuk. The third is that CT marking appears to be optional in Mandarin and Karuk, whereas it is required in certain contexts in English. These observations, together with Tonhauser’s (2012) examination of contrastive topic marking Paraguayan Guarani, suggest some possible dimensions of cross-linguistic variation in the properties of CT marking that deserve further investigation.

References