

# Rigidity and Flexibility in Pashto

**Ghani Rahman<sup>a</sup>, Arshad Ali Khan<sup>b</sup>, Abdul Hamid<sup>c</sup>, Nadeem Haider Bukhari<sup>d</sup>, Akbar Ali<sup>e</sup>**, <sup>a</sup>Assistant Professor, English Department, Hazara University, Mansehra, Pakistan, <sup>b</sup>Associate Professor, Department of Linguistics and Communications, Institute of Liberal Arts, University of Management and Technology, Lahore, <sup>c</sup>Assistant Professor, University of Swat, Swat, Pakistan, <sup>d</sup>Professor of English, University of Azad Jammu and Kashmir, Muzaffarabad, Pakistan, <sup>e</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of English, FATA University, KP, Pakistan, Email: [a<sup>ghani.rahman@hu.edu.pk</sup>](mailto:ghani.rahman@hu.edu.pk), [b<sup>arshad.khan@umt.edu.pk</sup>](mailto:arshad.khan@umt.edu.pk), [d<sup>snhb67@gmail.com</sup>](mailto:snhb67@gmail.com), [e<sup>akbar@fu.edu.pk</sup>](mailto:akbar@fu.edu.pk)

The present study is concerned with the concept of rigidity and flexibility across languages. This concept arises out of the interplay between pragmatic function and its structural representation. One such grammatical function is focus structure in languages. Focus structure in a language is represented through different strategies. The present study specifically focuses on focus structures in Pashto language and their possible structural representations. It discusses rigidity and flexibility in Pashto language. The study tries to find out the rigidity in the language and identifies that there is syntactic rigidity in Pashto and as a consequence, other pragmatic functions like focus realisations are adapted to it. Focal structures in Pashto are realised by changing the locus of the intonational prominence making focus structure flexible in the language. In predicate focus, the topical element can be omitted in Pashto clause, but it cannot be omitted in sentence and narrow focus as we have no topic in sentence focus and argument functions as a focus in narrow focus. Pashto has rigid syntax and the apparently different structural positions of the focal element in sentence and narrow focus is because of the inversion of the 2P clitic (me) realising genitive case. Pashto, being a rigidly verb final language, has the unmarked focus position immediately before the verb. The actual focus position is the predicate and preverbal position in the clause. The referents that are more active are the more non-focal and the referents that are less active are in the focal position in the clause. On the other hand, languages with flexible syntax (French for example) have rigid focus and syntax is adapted to the focus structure in such languages. The study highlights how flexibility of focus gives way to rigidity of the syntax. When the syntax is rigid in Pashto, the focus structure is adapted to it and when the focus is rigid (like in French), the syntax is adapted to focal structure in the language.



**Keywords:** *Rigidity, Flexibility, Pashto, Pragmatic Function, Syntactic Representation, Focus.*

## 1 Introduction

The present study explores the possibility of flexibility and rigidity in Pashto language. The concept of flexibility and rigidity comes from the interplay of pragmatic functions and their syntactic representations in terms of word order and markedness. The intended information is conveyed across languages exploiting the available syntactic possible representations. Every language having its own nature of word order possibilities allows the speakers to convey the intended information in line with the rules allowed in the language. During this interplay of pragmatic functions and syntactic representations, the flexible one gives way to the rigid one and the intended meaning is conveyed by the speakers and decoded by the listeners. The study particularly focuses on achieving the following objectives:

- 1) To determine whether Pashto syntax is rigid or not
- 2) To determine focus structure in Pashto
- 3) To find out the nature of interplay of focus structures and their syntactic representations

In order to achieve the above objectives, the present study first presents the information organisation across languages and the same in Pashto language. The focus structure is particularly important because it sometimes is accommodated and embedded within discourse, which is mostly based on old information but proceeds through new information. The present study specifically investigates these syntactic representations of the new and different information comparing it with the common prosodic patterns in Pashto.

### 1.1 Information Organisation Across Languages

Lambrecht (1994) proposes that information is organised across languages in ‘focus types’. In an utterance, the referring expression can have two primary information statuses, i.e., ‘Topic’ and ‘Focus’. The topic in the sentence is what the speaker intends to increase the addressee’s knowledge about, what he gets the addressee to act with respect to it, or what the information is requested about. The focus is the predication in the sentence. It is a comment, it is what the speaker intends to be assessed relative to the topic of the sentence (Gundel, 1993). Van Valin and LaPolla (1997) describing Lambrecht (1994), considers the topic to be synonymous with ‘presupposed’ or ‘given’ part of the utterance<sup>1</sup>. It is one of the salient elements in the proposition. The focus is the new information in the sentence. It is the unpredictable part of the sentence. It is a kind of assertion different from presupposition, the semantic part of the pragmatically structured proposition (Lambrecht, 1994). What is asserted in a declarative

---

<sup>1</sup> Lambrecht assumes a strict distinction between the topic (referent) and a topic expression (the visible constituent) and the topic itself (the referent), but others use them interchangeably

utterance or what is questioned in an interrogative utterance is the focus of the utterance (Van Valin, 2005).

## 1.2 Focus Strategies Across Languages

An element may be focal or topical but may not necessarily receive the pragmatic function of focus or topic because such functions are only assigned in the languages having some special devices to signal focality or topicality. These special devices could be a special prosodic pattern, a special form, a particular linear position in the clause or phrase, or a special construction type (Dik, 1997). There are many languages that have been claimed to be independent of prosodic prominence and the focus structures here are morpho-syntactically realised. In Akan, a Kwa language spoken in Ghana, the focused constituent in focus obligatorily occurs in a left-peripheral position followed by the focus-marking particle *na*. The WH-phrase in WH in situ language usually appears in focus position (Drubig, 1998).

There are three common strategies for focus in different languages (Van Valin, 2005), along with two less common strategies (Dik, 1997). First, it can be marked prosodically with nuclear accent on the focus. Second, it can be marked syntactically by putting the focus in a particular syntactic position<sup>2</sup>. Third, it can be marked morphologically by some morphological marking on the focus. Fourth, a special form is used and finally a special construction type is used to identify focus across languages. English, for example, makes use of both prosodic and syntactic devices. Prosodic focus type is used more than syntactic in English. In the prosodic focus, the focal stress falls on any constituent in a sentence. However, focus may be signalled syntactically, inversion, for example, in *it*-cleft construction may play a role in the presentational sentence narrow focus. (Van Valin, 2005).

- 1) a) My car broke down.
- b) It was my car that broke down.

## 1.3 Focus Types Across Languages

The main focus types proposed by Lambrecht (1994) are narrow and broad focus. In narrow focus, the focus falls on a single constituent, while in broad focus, the focus extends to more than one constituent. The broad focus includes predicate focus and sentence focus. The predicate focus, sentence focus and narrow focus<sup>3</sup> are related to three basic communicative functions. The predicate focus is a comment on the topic (the subject being the topic or presupposed information and the predicate expressing new information). The narrow focus (argument focus) identifies a referent or referring expression and sentence focus introduces

---

<sup>2</sup> The first and second strategy sometimes happen together.

<sup>3</sup> Narrow focus is also called 'argument focus'; but when it is not the focus on the argument alone, the term 'narrow focus' is preferred over 'argument focus'.

new information in the discourse context (Shimojo, 1995; Van Valin, 2005; Belloro, 2007; Ignatova, 2008).

The following examples show the three most common unmarked focus types in different languages. The examples other than Spanish are from Lambrecht (1994) and Van Valin (2005) and the Spanish examples are from Belloro (2007).

2) a) Predicate focus

Q: What happened to your car?	
A: My car / it broke DOWN.	English
(La mia macchina) si é ROTTA.	Italian
(Ma voiture) ell est en PANNE.	French
(Kuruma wa) KOSHOO-shi-ta.	Japanese
(El auto) se me DESCOMPUSO.	Spanish

b) Sentence focus

Q: What happened?	
A: My CAR broke down.	English
Mi si é rotta la MACCHINA.	Italian
J'ai ma VOITURE qui est en PANNE.	French
KURUMA ga KOSHOO-shi-ta.	Japanese
Se me descompuso el AUTO.	Spanish
El auto se me descompuso.	

c) Narrow Focus

Q: I heard that your motorcycle broke down.	
A: My CAR broke down.	English
Si é rotta la mia MACCHINA.	Italian
C'est ma VOITURE qui est en panne.	French
KURUMA ga koshoo-shi-ta.	Japanese
El AUTO se me descompuso.	Spanish
Se me descompuso el AUTO.	
Es el AUTO el que se me descompuso.	

#### 1.4 Focus Structures in Pashto

The focus structures in Pashto are realised by changing the locus of the intonational prominence like English. The following examples show predicate focus, sentence focus and narrow focus in Pashto.

##### 3) a) Predicate focus

Q: What happened to your car?

A: (motar me) KHARAB sho

Pashto<sup>4</sup>

Car clitic broke be.PST

My car broke down.

A: (Zama motar) KHARAB sho

My car broke be.PST

My car broke down.

##### b) Sentence focus

Q: What happened?

A: MOTAR me KHARAB sho

Pashto

Car clitic broke be.PST

My car broke down.

A: Zama MOTAR KHARAB sho

My car broke be.PST

My car broke down.

##### c) Narrow Focus

Q: I heard that your motorcycle broke down.

A: MOTAR me kharab sho

Pashto

Car clitic broke be.PST

My car broke down.

A: Zama MOTAR kharab sho

My car broke down.

---

<sup>4</sup> We have two structures for focus representation in Pashto. The first one has a clitic while the second one has full argument instead, a possibility discussed in detail in the present study.

In predicate focus, the topical element can be omitted in Pashto clause but it cannot be omitted in sentence and narrow focus as we have no topic in sentence focus and argument as a focus in narrow focus<sup>5</sup>. Accordingly, the focal element can be the predicate. In some languages like Italian and French, they are expressed by syntactic means as there is a restriction over pre-verbal focal elements, which must be post-verbal. In Japanese, they are realised by both intonation and morphological marking. Still in other languages like Spanish, a free word order language, it is possible to express the focal structures by altering the syntactic structures. Pashto has rigid syntax and the apparently different structural positions of the focal element in sentence and narrow focus is because of the inversion of the 2P clitic (*me*) realising genitive case<sup>6</sup>. Languages differ in terms of word order flexibility to express focal structure.

## 2.1 Syntactic Ordering of Focus in Pashto

If the syntax is rigid like syntax in Pashto and English, the focus is adapted to it; and if the focus is rigid like focus in French, the syntax adapts to the focus structure in the language. The following figure with Pashto added compares the focal structure and word order in different languages (Van Valin, 2005; Belloro, 2007).

	RIGID FOCUS STRUCTURE	FLEXIBLE FOCUS STRUCTRE
RIGID SYNTAX	Toba Batak, French,	Toura, English, Pashto
FLEXIBLE SYNTAX	Sesotho , Italian	Portuguese, Russian, Polish, Brazilian, Croatian, Spanish

Figure 1: Interaction of Syntax and Focus Structure

The above figure shows that Pashto has a rigid syntax<sup>7</sup> and the focus is adapted to it making it possible to prosodically mark any of the constituents as focus in the clause.

## 2.2 Potential and Actual Focus Positions in Pashto

<sup>5</sup> In all types of focus in Pashto we have two structural realisations of the arguments. The possessor NP may precede or follow the possessed NP, if it follows, it appears as second position clitic.

<sup>6</sup> See Roberts (2000) and Rahman (2017) for details of clitic inversion in Pashto.

<sup>7</sup> Pashto is a rigid syntax language and the apparent scrambling is because of the flexible focus structure in the language which has been discussed in detail.

Pashto, being a rigidly verb final language, has the unmarked focus position immediately before the verb (Van Valin, 2005). The following examples show the unmarked preverbal focus position in Pashto.

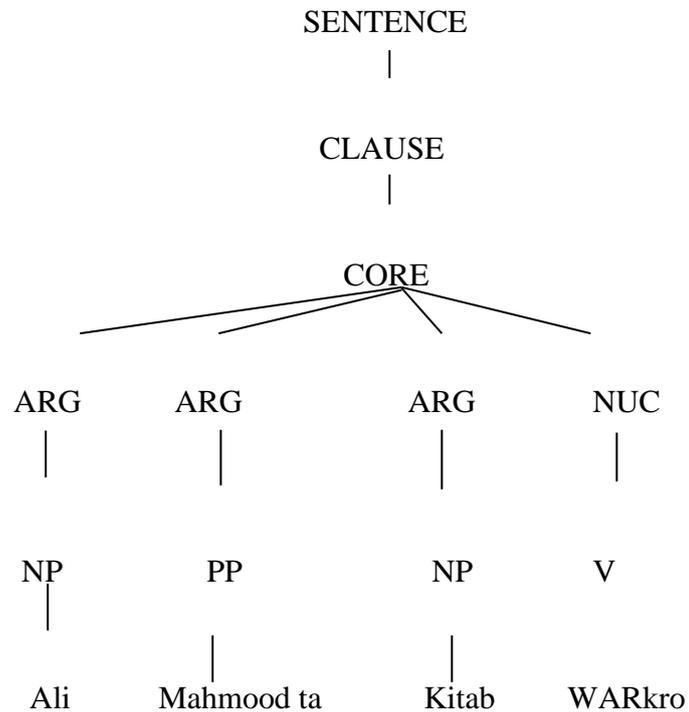
- 4) a) Ali Mahmood ta kitab WAR kro  
Ali Mahmood DAT book 3.VC. give.PST.PF

Ali gave Mahmood the book.

- b) Ali kitab Mahmood ta WAR kro  
Ali book Mahmood DAT 3.VC give.PST.PF

Ali gave the book to Mahmood.

The above examples show flexible syntax of a kind but commonly, the focus position is realised by prosodically marked position. The potential focus position in Pashto<sup>8</sup> is the clause, while the actual focus position is the predicate and preverbal position in the clause<sup>9</sup>.



#### Actual focus domain

<sup>8</sup> Potential focus position is useful in the sense that it determines which constituent is allowed to be focus in the language. If clause is the potential focus like it is in Pashto and English, it allows every constituent to the focus.

<sup>9</sup> The potential focus position is the possible position in the clause for focus to be realised; while the actual focus position is the actual position of the clause.

The above figure shows that the potential focus domain (PFD) is the whole clause and actual focus domain (AFD) is the nucleus and the preverbal arguments. Along with this unmarked position in the clause, we have marked focus position in the clause which is realised prosodically by accentuating the focus constituent. The following examples show prosodically marked focus in Pashto, the focused constituents are in all caps.

- 5) a) ALI paroon Mahmood ta kitab war kro  
ALI gave the book to Mahmood yesterday.
- b) Ali PAROON Mahmood ta kitab war kro  
Ali gave the book to Mahmood YESTERDAY.
- c) Ali paroon MAHMOOD ta kitab war kro  
Ali gave the book to MAHMOOD yesterday.
- d) Ali paroon Mahmood ta KITAB war kro  
Ali gave the BOOK to Mahmood yesterday.
- e) Ali paroon Mahmood ta kitab WAR KRO  
Ali GAVE the book to Mahmood yesterday.

### 2.3 Focus Structure and Activation Level in Pashto

The focus structure is determined by the relative degree of activation of the referents. The relationship between focus and activation is captured in the following figure. The referents that are more active are the more non-focal and the referents that are less active are the focus in the clause<sup>10</sup>. (Shimojo, 1995; Rahman, 2017).

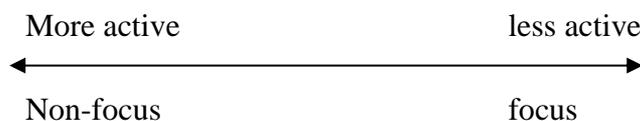


Figure 3: Focus-non-focus hierarchy in terms of activation

The active or more active referents are the referents who are the topic of a discourse and if so, can be realised by clitic or pro in Pashto<sup>11</sup>, while the less active or unactive ones are realised by full NPs. That is one of the reasons that clitics in Pashto go with the topicality of referents not with the focal ones.

<sup>10</sup> The referents in the clause have cognitive activation level in the mind of the interlocutors.

<sup>11</sup> See Rahman (2017) for detail about cognitive accessibility and activation level in Pashto.

### 3 Prosody and Syntax Interplay in Pashto Language

*Prosody* is the branch of linguistics that “goes beyond the study of phonemes to deal with such features as length, rhythm, stress, pitch, intonation, and loudness in speech” (McArthur 1992). In languages commonly, the prosodic features along word stress can mark pragmatic function such as emphasis, suggestive meaning, communicative intention etc. (Leech, 1983). Prosody is based on rules about prosodic features which are closely connected with the grammatical structure of utterances (Firbas, 1964) and word order and thus prosody interacts with syntax, though primarily attributable to pragmatics. This interaction is language specific not universal across languages (Pilch, 1984).

Pashto being different from all Iranian languages in some prosodic features, for example, it is the only Iranian language to have phonemic stress (Robson & Tegey, 2009). While stress is generally not predictable in Pashto, as a rule of thumb, stress falls on the last syllable when ending in a consonant, and on the penultimate syllable if the last syllable ends in a vowel (Robson Tegey, 2009; Rahman, 2017). However, this pattern of stress is contradicted in many words and some prefixes (Robson Tegey, 2009). If Pashto had flexible syntax (which it does not), the focus in the clause could be represented through different structural positions in the clause. On the other hand, if Pashto had rigid syntax (which it has according to the findings of the present study), the focus in the clause could not be represented through different structural positions in the clause. The intonational prominence in the language shows the focus structures in the clause (see examples, 3, 4 and 5 above). The actual and unmarked focus position is the predicate or preverbal arguments in Pashto (see figure 2). But if any other argument(s) is marked as focus, it is prosodically marked by accentuating the focus constituent (see examples in 5 above) overriding the prosody of the language. This prosodic flexibility is used to communicate the intended meaning and pragmatic functions like focus in rigid syntax in Pashto language.

### 4 The Structural Representation of Focus in Pashto Clause

The structure of the clause is influenced by two aspects of discourse-pragmatics. Both of these aspects are concerned with either the pragmatic relations or with the pragmatic properties of the referents. The first aspect of discourse-pragmatics concerns the ‘focus structure’ or distribution of information in terms of the pragmatic relations among the referents<sup>12</sup> based on Lambrecht (1994). The second aspect of discourse-pragmatics includes the properties of the referents involving the forms chosen to encode the activation status in the mind of the interlocutor<sup>13</sup>.

---

<sup>12</sup> This aspect includes the role of constituents as topic or focus (Belloro, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> See Rahman (2017) for details about referents encoding possibilities

The arguments in Pashto are linked to their syntactic positions according to the topic and focus positions arguments in the language. The topical position is the first position in the predicate; while the focal position is the position immediately before the predicate (see figure 2). If any marked focus structure in the discourse is intended other than the unmarked focus position in line with the prosody of the language, intonational prominence on that constituent help us recognise the new information or doubt/need of clarification about old or new information. In other words, it means that syntactic rigidity does not help us a lot in conveying the new information and prosodic features like intonational prominence's flexibility is exploited from the said purpose. The findings above show that Pashto has a rigid syntax but flexible focus structure; as a consequence, the flexibility (intonational prominence) gives way to rigidity of syntax.

## 5 Conclusion

The present study explored the concept of rigidity and flexibility in Pashto language. The concept of rigidity and flexibility arises out of the interplay between pragmatic function and its structural representation. One such grammatical function identified in the study was focus structure in the language. The study focused on focus structures in Pashto language and their possible structural representations. Focus structure in a language is represented through different strategies. There are three common strategies for focus in different languages (Van Valin, 2005), along with two less common strategies (Dik, 1997). First, it can be marked prosodically with nuclear accent on the focus. Second, it can be marked syntactically by putting the focus in a particular syntactic position. Third, it can be marked morphologically by some morphological marking on the focus. Fourth, a special form is used and finally a special construction type is used to identify focus across languages.

The study discussed rigidity and flexibility in Pashto language in detail. It was found out that Pashto syntax is rigid and as a consequence, other pragmatic functions like focus realisations are adapted to it. Focal structures in Pashto are realised by changing the locus of the intonational prominence making focus structure flexible in the language. In predicate focus, the topical element can be omitted in Pashto clause but it cannot be omitted in sentence and narrow focus as we have no topic in sentence focus and argument functions as a focus in narrow focus. The apparently different structural positions of the focal element in sentence and narrow focus is because of the inversion of the 2P clitic (me) realising genitive case. Pashto, being a rigidly verb final language, has the unmarked focus position immediately before the verb. The actual focus position is the predicate and preverbal position in the clause. The referents that are more active are the more non-focal and the referents that are less active are in the focal position in the clause (Rahman, 2017). The study found out how flexibility of focus gives way to rigidity of the syntax in Pashto language unlike other languages (like French, for example) where flexible syntax gives away to rigid syntax, as a consequence the flexible syntax in such languages is adapted to the rigid focus.



## REFERENCES

- Belloro, V. (2007). Spanish Clitic Doubling: A Study of the Syntax-Pragmatics Interface. Doctoral dissertation, University at Buffalo.
- Dik, S. C. (1997a). *The Theory of Functional Grammar, Part 1: The Structure of the Clause*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. Ed. K. Hengeveld. (Functional Grammar Series 20.) Berlin & New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Drubig, H. Bernhard (1998). Focus and connectedness: Towards a typology of focus constructions. Unpublished MS Thesis, University of Tübingen.
- Firbas, J. (1964). On defining the theme in functional sentence analysis." *Travaux Linguistiques de Prague* 1. 267-80.
- Gundel, J., & Hedberg, N. et al. (1993). Cognitive Status and the Form of Referring Expressions in Discourse. *Language* 69(2): 274-307.
- Ignatova, S. A. (2008). A Functional Approach to Bulgarian Verbal Aspect and Reduplication of Clitics within the Framework of Role and Reference Grammar. Doctoral dissertation, Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia: Spain.
- Lambrecht, K. (1994). *Information Structure and Sentence Form. A Theory of Topic, Focus, and the Mental Representations of Discourse Referents*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.
- Leech, Geoffrey. 1983. *Principles of Pragmatics*. London. Longman.
- McArthur, Tom (ed.). 1992. *The Oxford Companion to the English Language*. Oxford, New York. UP.
- Pilch, Herbert. 1984. "Intonation als kommunikatives Problem." In Halfmann, Ulrich, Kurt Müller and Klaus Weiss (eds.). *Wirklichkeit und Dichtung. Studien zur englischen und amerikanischen Literatur. Festschrift zum 60. Geburtstag von Franz Link*. Berlin. Duncker & Humblot. 195-210.
- Rahman, G (2017). Cognitive Accessibility and Referents Encoding Possibilities. *Kashmir Journal of Language Research* ISSN: 1028-6640, 20(2), 37-50.
- Roberts, T. (2000). Clitics and Agreement. Doctoral dissertation, Massachusetts *Institute of Technology*.
- Robson, B and Tegey, H (2009), *Pashto in The Iranian Languages* ed. by Windfuhr, G (2009). Routledge: New York.
- Shimojo, M. (1995). Focus Structure and Morphosyntax In Japanese: *Wa* and *Ga*, and Word Order Flexibility. Doctoral dissertation, SUNY at Buffalo.
- Van Valin, R. D. Jr. (2005). *Exploring the Syntax-Semantics Interface*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.
- Van Valin, R. D., & LaPolla, R. J. (1997). *Syntax: Structure, Meaning & Function*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.