

Somali Focus and topic system: a global analysis.

According to wide-spread analysis of the Somali focalization and topicalization system (FocTop system), the particle *waa* is considered as a verbal focus particle. This particle, indeed, appears systematically (except in some stylistically marked sentences) when the verb is questioned. When the interrogation concerns a noun phrase, the particles *baa* or *ayaa* appear, these two morphemes being in free variation.

Saeed (1984) attempts to demonstrate that *waa* is a declarative sentence marker and has not any focusing function, while considering *baa* / *ayaa* as focus markers. Although we share the fact that *waa* does not play systematically a focusing role, we agree with Tosco's remark (2002: 48) that indicates that "Saeed's declarative particle' hypothesis is not very convincing". The traditional analysis of the Somali FocTop system including Saeed's study is based only on standard or Northern Somali (NS) and on a synchronic perspective only.

This paper will show that: 1) Saeed's approach is basically not different from the traditional one concerning the Somali focus system which can be put in question on different aspects; 2) the development of the particle *waa*, as well as the *baa/ayaa*, is connected to the reorganization of the syntactic structure of the Somali, after a weakening of the prosodic marking of the grammatical relations; 3) we need to have a global analysis, which takes into account dialectal variation and historical evolution, to understand fully the Somali FocTop system in general and the function of *waa/baa/ayaa* particles, in particular.

1. Saeed's approach (1984) in question

1.1. Methodology and *baa/ayaa* analysis

Saeed (1984) agrees with the traditional analysis of the particles *baa* and *ayaa* as noun phrase (NP) focus markers. He uses the same traditional method of Wh-question to determine the focused element. Nevertheless as shown by Aboh (2007), there is no correlation between question-answers pairs and focus so that a "wh-phrase will necessarily trigger an answer containing a focus marked constituent" (*ib* : 221). Similarly, this idea has been defended by Lecarme (1999: 284) that "...it comes as no surprise that many irregularities are found in the question/answer parallelism, which has routinely been taken as a central diagnostic of focus. Although it is true that felicity conditions are met in the general case, it is also true that questions and answers tend to respect a purely syntactic, rather than a pragmatic symmetry."

However, there is on such thesis that the traditional approach, as well as Saeed's, is based:

- | | | | |
|----|--|--|---|
| 1. | ayaa
ayo+baa
who+BAA | dilay
dilay
Tuer-3M.PAST ² | shimbirta ?¹
shimbir-ta
bird-ART.F |
| | <i>Who has killed the bird ?</i> | | |
| 2. | bisadaa
bissad-da+BAA
cat-ART.F+BAA | dishay
dilay
kill-3M.PAST | shimbirta
shimbir-ta
bird-ART.F |
| | <i>THE CAT has killed the bird.</i> | | |

Saeed, like other scholars of the traditional approach, consider **bisadda**, "the cat" as a focus, because it is the new element in the sentence. First, there is no systematic relation between focus and new information. As Caron (2000 : 10) indicates «...de même qu'on ne peut identifier topic et information connue ou

¹ The official orthography of standard and northern Somali (NS) is used in this article. Some correspondances between this transcription and the IPA are: c= [ʃ], dh=[d], kh=[x], sh=[ʃ]. The IPA is used for the transcription of Somali dialects other than (NS), because certain sounds of these dialects are not available in the official transcription.

² The abbreviations used in the glosses are : ANAPH:anaphoric, ART:article, EXPL=expletive, F: feminine, FOC=focus, INT:interrogative particle, M:masculine, NP:noun phrase, NS:northern Somali dialect, PAST: past tense, NPAST=non past tense, PL:plural, REFL=reflexive, S:singular, VEN:venitive, VP:verbal phrase.

présupposée, la focalisation n'implique pas forcément un apport d'information nouvelle ». In other words, new information is not necessarily focused.

Second, the particle *baa* obligatorily occurs with the interrogative marker *ayo*, “who” as in (1) and it occurs also necessarily with the target constituent in the answer, (*cf.* example (2)). As stated by Lecarme (1991), *baa* is not an optional morpheme in the above sentences, whereas focusing implies a pragmatic choice that the speaker is free to use or not. This statement shows in our sense that *baa/ayaa* has only a syntactic role and that these morphemes do not add any pragmatic information to sentences (1) and (2). The same phenomenon is described by Yiman (1988: 370) for Oromo.

Lecarme (1991; 1999) has also shown that there is no correlation between a Wh-question and focus. In (4), for example, she explains that the expletive *wax* is marked by *baa* whereas this term is semantically empty and does not convey any new information. It is the verb of the sentence which conveys the main and important information:

3. **maxaad sameeneysaa ?**
 INT-2S do-2S.NPAST
What are you doing ?
4. **wax baan akhrisanayaa**
 thing BAA-1S reading
I'm reading something.

Fourth, the very common NP, *béri* or *wáa*, “one day/ once upon the time”, which usually introduce folktales or legends in NS, are very often followed by *baa/ayaa*, whereas the most salient elements are out of the scope of these particles:

Lecarme (1999:282)

5. **wáa³ baa waxaa beló isugú faanáy**
 time « FOC » EXPL+« FOC » calamity REFL+of+at were proud
libáah, góod iyo habár.
 lion snake and old-woman
(Once upon) A TIME, a lion, a snake and an old woman measured their powers of evil...

These two nouns *béri* and *wáa* enter this category which Chafe (1976: 38) calls “frame of definiteness”. These morphemes, which are the spatio-temporal frame of a discourse has no informational value in themselves. They are part of a fixed formula announcing a type of speech or register. It is difficult consequently to conceive that these words receive a particular pragmatic stress, with regard to the other elements which constitute the assertive kernel. What is more plausible is that *béri* and *wáa* install the frame of the story. And the relation between topic and frame has been largely demonstrated by different scholars amongst them Charolles (2003) and Prévost (2003).

1.2. Saeed's analysis of *waa*

Saeed is strongly opposed to the traditional analysis of *waa* as a verbal focus marker, which he considers a declarative sentence marker. It has been shown (*cf.* Mohamed Ismail, 2011) that this analysis was not convincing because:

- 1) *Waa* can be used also in an nominal interrogative sentence:
6. **waa qolo ma ?**
 WAA tribe INT
He/she/they is/are from which tribe?
- 2) *Waa* can also appear in a verbal predicate sentence. But in this case, we should note, as stated by Andrjeweski (1975: 29) that in the northern Somali dialect (NS), *waa* is in a complementary distribution with *ma*. This latter morpheme is used in the interrogative sentence (7), while *waa* is used in the declarative (8).

³ Zorc et Osman (1993) explain in their dictionary that *waa* has the samemeaning than *ber(r)i* and that the expression “*waa baa waxaa...*” means “once upon the time” and is “(the) common introductory phrase in folktales and legends.”

7. **Cali ma yimid ?**
 Ali INT came
Did Ali come ?

8. **haa Cali waa yimid**
 yes Ali WAA came
Yes, Ali came.

Saeed (1984) disputes the idea that *waa* and *ma* can be allomorphs because this would imply that the latter morpheme is also a focus marker. This appears impossible according to the above author because, in sentences like (9), *ma* can co-occur with *baa*, considered by the author as a focus marker.

9. **ma Cali baa yimi ?**
 INT Ali BAA came
Did ALI come ?

In the Somali language, we cannot have two focus markers in the same sentence (*cf.* Lamberti, 1983:61), Saeed deduces that *ma* cannot be a focus marker in (9).

First, the fact that *waa* and *ma* are in complementary distribution is confirmed by most of the other Somali dialects, like Garre and Maay:

karre

10. **Ala waa daradə hamar ?**
 Ali INT go-3M.PAST Mogadiscio
Did Ali go to Mogadiscio ?

karre

11. **haa ala waa daradə hamar**
 yes Ali WAA go-3M.PAST Mogadiscio
Yes, Ali went to Mogadiscio.

12. ****haa ala yaa daradə hamar**
 Ali Ali YAA go-3M.PAST Mogadiscio

maay

13. **waa uṗtə bariid saakaṅ ?**
 INT eat-2S.PAST rice this-morning
Did you eat rice this morning ?

maay

14. **haa saakaṅ bariid ushə**
 yes this-morning rice eat-2S.INAC
Yes, i ate rice this morning.

Second, syntactically *waa* cannot be distinguished from *baa*. Saeed takes argument from a sentence like (9) to develop his thesis according to which *baa* is syntactically different from *waa*. For him, *baa* is not specific to declarative sentences and can appear with the interrogative marker, whereas this is not possible for *waa*. The fact that *waa* can also co-occur with the interrogative particle *ma*, in the example (15) and the alike, ruins this argument:

15. **Cali ma waa yimi mise waa soo hadlay ?**
 Ali INT WAA came or WAA VEN called
Did Cali came or did he call ?

Hadduu yimi, waa wanaag. Haddii laakiin uu soo hadlayo keliya
 if+he came WAA good if but he VEN called+and only
If he came, it is good. But if he has called only...

waanu ka fiirsannaynaa
 WAA+1PL ABL look.over-NPAST.1PL
We will look it over.

1.3. The case of miyaa particle

Besides, this argument is put in doubt by the Andrzejewski's (1975) analyses that *miyaa* is morphemically a merger of the interrogative particle *ma* and the focus particle *ayaa* and semantically and syntactically as an equivalent of the particle *waa*, in other words, as a verbal focus particle of the interrogative sentence. So, from this author's perspective the interrogative structure *ma NP baa VP* focalizes the NP, whereas in a structure like *NP miyaa VP*, it is the VP which is focalized.

Saeed is opposed to viewing *miyaa* as a verbal focus marker, as stated by Andrzejewski. The problem of Saeed's analysis arise when we consider the particle *miyaa* (cf. sentence 16) and *miyuu* (cf. sentence 17):

16. **Cali miyaa yimi ?**
Ali INT 3M-come-3M.PAST
Did Ali come ?
17. **Cali miyuu yimi ?**
Ali miyaa+uu yimi ?
Ali INT+3M 3M-come-3M.PAST
Did Ali come ?

Saeed agrees to consider *miyaa* as an association of the interrogative marker *ma* and the particle *ayaa* (*ma+ayaa* > *miyaa*), whereas *miyuu* would be the interrogative marker *ma* suffixed with the 3rd personal pronoun *-uu*. This analysis permits him to consider *miyaa* as a nominal focus marker, and *ma*+personal pronoun (*ma* (INT)+*aan* (1S) > *miyaan*, *ma+aad* (2S) > *miyaad*, *ma+uu* (3M) > *miyuu*, *ma+ay* (3F) > *miyay*, etc.) as a non-focus marker, and as an allomorph of the interrogative marker *ma*.

Andrzejewski's (1975: 29) analysis of *miyaan/miyaad/miyuu* etc., as *miyaa*+personal pronoun, rather than *ma*+personal pronoun finds more sound arguments. First of all, *miyaa* and *miyaa*+personal pronoun are pragmatically interchangeable. The only difference between the two types of particles is that *miyaa* can be suffixed or not with the personal pronouns according to dialectal variation or to eliminate ambiguity in certain sentences where there are two obliques (cf. sentences 18 to 21):

18. **casharkii ma dhigtay?**
lesson+ART.F.ANAPH INT give-2S/3F.PAST
Has you given the lesson ? / Has she given the lesson ?
19. **casharkii miyaa dhigtay?**
lesson+ART.F.ANAPH INT give-2S/3F.PAST
Has you given the lesson ? / has she given the lesson ?
20. **casharkii miyaad dhigtay**
cashar+kii (ma+ayaa)+aad dhigtay
lesson+ART.F.ANAPH (INT+AYAA)+2S give-2S.PAST
Has you given the lesson?
21. **casharkii miyay dhigtay**
lacagtii (ma+ayaa)+ay dhigtay
argent+ART.F.ANAPH (INT+AYAA)+2S give-3F.PAST
Has she given the lesson?

We illustrates here some of Saeed's arguments which support his thesis:

- 1) Saeed (1984: 162) refuses to consider *miyaa* and *miyuu* as being pragmatically the same particles since it is not possible to replace *miyaa* by *miyuu* in (22):

22. **askari miyaa?**
askari ma+ayaa
soldier INT+ AYAA
Is he a soldier ?
23. **** askari miyuu**
askari ma+ayaa+uu
soldier INT+ AYAA+3M
Is he a soldier ?

- 2) This author states that *miyaa* is pragmatically identical to *baa* as shown by (22) and (24) which have exactly the same meaning:

24. **ma askari baa?**
INT soldat BAA
Is he a soldier ?

- 3) Saeed (*id.*) argues that as *miyaa* can occur with a nominal phrase as in (22), it cannot occur with a verbal focus marker, unless violating the rule stating that "only one constituent may be focused in any sentence" (Saeed 1984: 161). So, he interprets *miyaa* in (16) as a nominal focus particle, pragmatically equivalent to (9), (cf. Saeed, *id.*: 163). This analysis leads Saeed to the conclusion that when the NP is not focused, "*miyaa* never occurs without a pronoun" (*id.*: 164). If the NP is focused, we have a

construction like (16) which has, according to the author, the same meaning as a construction with the interrogative particle *ma*, see example (7) below :

7. **Cali ma yimi ?**
 Ali INT 3M-come-3M.PAST
Did Ali come?

Thus, Saeed associates the sentence (9) and (16) on one hand and (7) and (17), on the other hand.

This analysis presents a certain number of difficulties:

- 1) In the sentence (16) the question is on the verb and not on Cali, exactly as in (17). Both sentences imply an answer with the same particle *ma* if the answer is negative and *waa* if it is positive: *haa, Cali waa wuu yimi*, "yes Ali has come", *maya, Cali ma iman*, "No, Ali has not come". In both sentences, the existence of Cali and the fact that he has done something are presupposed. The question is on the kind of action Ali has done and nothing else. It is the reason why an answer like *maya, Axmad baa yimi*, "No, Ahmed has come" is not a felicitous answer for any of the two sentences. (*cf.* Mohamed Ismail, 2011).
- 2) If the association of (7) and (17) seem pragmatically justified, we cannot say the same for (9) and (15):

9. **ma Cali baa yimi ?**
 INT Ali BAA came
Did ALI come ?

16. **Cali miyaa yimi ?**
 Ali INT 3M-come-PAST
Did Ali come ?

The two sentences have not the same presuppositions. In (9), it is the subject which is questioned, because the interlocutor knows that someone has come, and would like to know if that person is in fact Ali, or someone else. In this sentence, we have a contrastive focus on Ali. Whereas in (16), the question is not on the subject of the predication, but on the kind of action Ali has done, his coming being the presupposed action.

If we complete each of these sentences by another phrase, they will be semantically different:

- 9.B **ma Cali baa yimi mise**
 INT Ali BAA 3M-come-3M.PAST or
qof kale baa soo galey
 someone else BAA VEN come-3MS.ACC
Is that Ali who has come in or someone else ?

- 16.B **Cali miyaa yimi mise**
 INT Ali 3M-come-3M.PAST or
wuu soo hadlay
 WAA+3M VEN call-3M.PAST
Did Ali come or did he call ?

Interchanging the complementary propositions will make these two sentences pragmatically inappropriate:

- 9.C** **ma Cali baa yimi mise**
 INT Ali BAA 3M-come-3M.PAST or
wuu soo hadlay
 WAA+3M VEN call-3M.PAST
 ***Is that Ali who has come in or has he called ?*

- 16.C** **Cali miyaa yimi mise**
 INT Ali 3M-come-3M.PAST ou
qof kale baa soo galay
 quelqu'un autre BAA VEN VEN come-3MS.ACC
 ***Did Ali come in or did someone else call ?*

- 3) Now the question is why *miyaa* cannot be replaced by *miyuu* in a nominal phrase like (17)?

Before answering this question, we should recall that *miyaa* is composed with *ma* and *ayaa*, as stated by Andrjewski (1975) and Saeed (1984). However, even if *ayaa* has pragmatically the same role as *baa*, phonemically there is a slight difference between the two particles. *Baa* undergoes a coalescence

process (*cf.* Saeed, *id.*: 78) with the element placed on its left, when this element ends with a vowel, and on its right, with certain elements (linked pronouns, negative particle, *etc.*). But *ayaa* undergoes this coalescence only with the element placed on its right. This explains the phonological difference between (24) and (25). With *ayaa*, the interrogative particle has to be placed before *ayaa* in the same sentence, as it is the case in (26):

25. **mà** **macállin** **báa**
 INT teacher BAA
Is he a teacher ?
26. ****mà** **macállin** **ayáa**
 INT teacher AYAA
Is he a teacher ?
27. **macállin** **miyáa ?**
 macállin mà+ayáa
 teacher INT+ AYAA
Is he a teacher ?

In these last sentences, the particles *baa* and *ayaa* (in *miyaa*) function as copulas. Lamberti states (1983: 69) that “...the particles *waa*, *baa* and *ayaa* accomplish in some determined sentences the tasks of the copula.” As the interrogative particle position is always before the predicate, we should normally have NP *ma* PRED in yes-no sentences. But because of the coalescence rule, such structure entails a semantic ambiguity when *baa* is used. This constraint forces the speaker to stress prosodic distinction between (27) and (28), in order to avoid ambiguity:

28. **macállimáa** **yímí ?**
macállin+ mà+báa **yímí**
 teacher+ INT+BAA 3MS-come-3M.PAST
Which teacher has come ?
29. **macállimáa** **yímí ?**
macállin+ má+báa **yími**
 teacher+ INT+BAA 3MS-come-3M.PAST
Did a teacher come ?

We should note that the sentence (27) introduces also another ambiguity if the noun is a plural ending with *-ó* (*cf.* Saeed, 1999:62):

30. **macállimáa** **yímí**
macállimó+bàa **yími**
 teachers+BAA 3MS-come-3M.PAST
Some teachers have come.

The difference of accentuation of *ma* in (27) and (28) sentences is due to the fact that the morpheme occurs in different phonological domain. In (27), the interrogative particle belongs to the same phonological domain than the NP, and *baa* has its own phonological domain: [*macallimá*] [baa] [yimi]. This configuration activates the coalescence rule of *baa* and produces the prosodic structure of (27). Whereas in (28), *ma* and *baa* belong to the same phonological domain, that is the verbal phrase domain: [macallim] [ma baa yimi] ?

The coalescence rule undergone by *baa* and the weakening of prosodic marking in Somali, as in other Cushitic languages (*cf.* Sasse, 1984:226), motivates the changing position of the interrogative particle which moves from left to a head position (*cf.* sentence 9). So this is the only difference between (24) and (25). From a pragmatical point of view, these two sentences are equivalent.

Moreover, it has been suggested that *baa* and *ayaa* function as a copula in certain sentences. This is proved by the fact that (24) and (25) have the same meaning as (30):

31. **macállin** **má yáhay**
 teacher INT 3M-être-NPAST
Is he a teacher ?

Scholars (*cf.* Lamberti, 1983; Heine and Reh, 1984; Frascarelli and Puglielli, 2005, *etc.*) derive the particles *baa* and *ayaa* (and also *waa*) from the verb “to be”, *ak-/ahyaa/. This reconstruction will be discussed later on, but in any case, the hypothesis deriving the particles *baa*, *ayaa* and *waa* from an original form of the verb “to be” seems very relevant because it explains why *miyaa* can occur in a nominal sentence,

examples (21) or (26), and a verbal predicate sentence as in (16). In the former sentences, *miyaa* (*ma+ayaa* /INT+COP) has the properties of both interrogative particle *ma* and the copula *ayaa*. Without a verbal predicate, *miyaa* functions as an association of the interrogative particle and a copula and keeps the proprieties of each morpheme. With a verbal predicate, *miyaa* functions like one single morpheme (as stated by Andrzejewski 1975) comparable to *ma*. In this second case, the two morphemes composing *miyaa* are merged in one single morpheme which has exactly the same pragmatical and syntactic role as *ma*. It is only in this case that we can have suffixed pronouns to *miyaa* particle.

So, if *miyuu* cannot replace *miyaa* in (22), it is simply because the particle functions here as a unique and fixed morpheme, comparable to the interrogative particle *ma*. The fact that *miyuu* contains a personal pronoun, *-uu* (3M) implies that, in this case, the sentence needs explicitly a verbal phrase to be complete.

So Saeed did not prove that *baa* and *waa* function differently with respect to focus. We support, as does Lamberti (1983: 87-89) that *baa* and *waa* are closely related, even if synchronically *baa* and *ayaa* have the same grammatical function.

2. Alternative approach

2.1. Some preliminary observations

Saeed has differentiated the syntactic and pragmatic function of *baa/ayaa* and *waa*. Lamberti (1983) agrees with the traditional approach (*cf.* Bell, 1953; Hetzron, 1965; Andrzejewski, 1975) of *baa/ayaa* and *waa* as focus markers. This last scholar, however, derives *baa* and *waa* from the same etymon, **awaa*. We agree that these two morphemes are “retraceable back to an older common origin” as indicated by Lamberti (*id.* : 87) and that their differentiation is due to a later development. We prefer, however, the reconstruction by Heine and Reh (1984) who take into account, in their study, not only the Somali dialects, but all the Sam languages. According to these authors, the focus particles of the Sam⁴ languages derive from proto-Sam **-é* and **á-*. These forms are still present in the Rendille and Boni languages. Heine and Reh state that the noun focus **-é* and the verb focus **á-* have given, in Somali, respectively *baa/ayaa* and *waa*, through the development described by Lamberti (1983).

Unfortunately this latter study of Lamberti does not explain some of the phenomena observed in the FocTop system of Somali dialects:

1. The equivalent of the *baa* particle (proper to NS) in the Benaadiri dialect is *aa*. The two particles have the same distribution in the respective dialects. However, we observe that the *aa* of Benaadir functions sometimes like the *waa* of the NS, which is interpreted as a verb focus particle by Lamberti also. He (1983: 66) writes “the verbal focus particle of the Mat. [*maxaa-tiri*] dialects is *waa* (much more rarely in the benaadir dialectes also *aa*)”⁵. What is the cause of the ambiguity between *aa* and *waa* in Benaadir ? Unfortunately, Lamberti’s study does not tackle this peculiarity.
2. Why is that most of the interriverine dialects do not have an equivalent of the NS particle *waa*, considered as verb focus in the traditional approach of the FocTop system?
3. Why does *baa* exist only in the NS and why this particle corresponds to *waa* or *woo* in certain dialects like Ashraaf or Dabarre dialect ?
4. Why does the NS dialect have two morphemes, *baa* and *ayaa*, who have exactly the same syntactical and pragmatical function?
5. Why do the Sam languages develop one NP focus marker (and even two for certain dialects) when these languages have the unambiguous nominal focus marker, *waxa* or its dialectal variants?

These questions and many others do not have answers in the traditional frame of analysis of the Somali FocTop system, but they may only if we change our approach of the particles evoked here. Some

⁴ Somali, Rendille, Boni and their respective dialects.

⁵ For more details, *cf.* Mohamed Ismail (2011).

other scholars (*cf.* Saeed 1984 ; Lecarme 1994, 1999; Tosco, 2004; Morin 1995) have already began to question partially or totally the interpretation of the particles *baa*, *ayaa* and *waa*, as focus markers.

Similar to Saeed (1984), Morin (1995) analyses *baa/ayaa* as a nominal focus marker, but he interprets *waa* as a topic marker. By considering the FocTop system of the dialects other than NS, it is more relevant to postulate the same origin for *baa* and *waa*, and for a different origin for *ayaa*. Moreover, the FocTop of Somali language has to be considered as a whole and its evolution to be explained accordingly.

2.2. Diachronic evolution of *ayaa*, *baa* and *waa*

As far as the synchronic functions of these particle is concerned, we have shown that these particles have topic function rather than a focus one (see also Biber 1984; Sasse 1981; Lecarme 1991, 1999; Morin, 1995; and Tosco 2004; Mohamed Ismail 2011).

For example, Biber (1984) has shown that, in discourse, the Maay dialect particle *yaa* (corresponding to *ayaa*, in NS) “provides salient information through establishing a new framework of aboutness this is not a word for the following discourse” (p.10). He writes elsewhere that *yaa* “which appears to be strictly a marker of focus in elicitation data, functions as a topic-marker in narrative discourse.” Morin (1995: 156), interprets *waa* as a topic marker, a “thématisateur” in French.

Tosco (2003:29) has also put in doubt the traditional approach of *baa* and *ayaa*, as a focus particles : “...a cursory look at a Somali text reveals that the particles *baa* and *ayaa* are employed with variety of constituents which it would be very difficult to qualify as « in focus » on either semantic or pragmatic grounds”.

In Mohamed Ismail (2011), we have postulated, following Heine and Reh (1984) that *ayaa* derives from **-é*. This evolution is made through a phonological process which goes in two directions: 1) the opening and lengthening of the vowel which resulted to the particle *aa* (of the Maxaa-tiri dialects) and 2) the closure and diphthongization of the vowel which has given the particle with the glide *-y-* (*iyə*, *iya*, *yaa*, *iyaa*, *ayaa*, etc.), which is common to all Somali dialects.

We assume that the appearance of *aa* particle has created an analogical leveling with the original **á-* which leads to the loss of the corresponding particle in Somali dialects. This explains why this morpheme does not exist at all in these dialects. In our view, the *waa* in NS is not deriving from the etymon **á-* but from the “noun focus” particle *aa* (<**-é*). This is realized through a topicalisation process and more precisely, through the prefixation of the 3rd person subject clitic, *-uu*, to the particle *aa*. This kind of topicalisation process is well known and described by Li and Thompson (1976) for some other languages such as Palestinian Arabic, Hebrew or Chinese language.

This stage constitutes the second phase of the evolution of the original particles, as summarized in the table below. The third phase explains the appearance of the morpheme *baa*, which is first a phonological consequence of the usage of *waa* in certain syntactic constructions. In fact, it should be mentioned that the phonological rule *w > b/ V_V*, still existing in NS and Dabarre, motivates the change from *waa* to *baa*. The only phonological context which permits the change from *waa* to *baa* are attributive clauses like (31), or sentences where the subject is morphologically marked with the suffix *-i*, examples (32) and (33) :

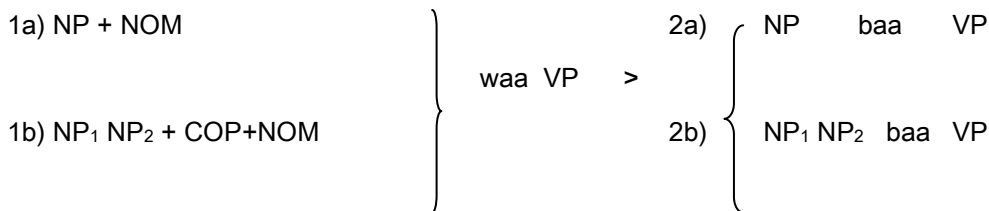
32. **nin faransiisa, waa yimi**
nin faransiis+ah waa yimi
 man french+COP TOP 3MS-come-3M.PAST
A French man has come. (Lit. A men, who is french, has come).
33. **nin askariyi, waa joogaa halkaas**
nin askari+ih+i waa joogaa halkaas
 men soldat+COP+NOM TOP stay-3MS.NPAST there
A soldier is there. (Lit. A man, who is soldier, is over there).
34. **naagi, waa martay halkan**
 woman.NOM TOP pass_by-3F.PAST here
A woman passed by here. (Lit. Someone, who is a woman, passed by here).

In Dabarre, we have also the same attributive clause which could have caused the appearance of the particle *boo*:

35. **iishə maalimadow**
iishə maalim-ad-ow
 Aïcha teacher-F-COP
Aïcha is a teacher.
36. **Malow, askarow**
malow askari-ow
 Malow soldier-COP
Malow is a soldier.
37. **hartə askari boo aragi**
hartə askari- ow oo aragi
 man soldier-COP TOP see-1S.PAST
I have seen a soldier (Lit.I have seen a man that was a soldier).

The coexistence of the particles *boo* and *woo* in free variation shows that the difference is first all based on phonological consideration. It is why, as in NS, we assume that the appearance of *boo* is posterior to *woo* and *oo* (the use of these two last particles depending respectively on the fact that the last element of word preceding the particle is respectively a vowel or a consonant). In this dialect, only the attributive clause (cf. 36) permits the activation of the *w ~ b* rule.

The sentences (31-33) are syntactically equivalent to a relative clause with a defining or contrastive function. Thus, these relative constructions, because of their defining character, are interpreted as focusing the noun element and become semantically equivalent to clauses with *ayaa* (or its dialectal variants):



Even if the two types of constructions (1a/b and 2a/b) originally have the same topical value, after the transformation of *waa* to *baa*, there is a slight syntactic differentiation which takes place. In the first type of construction, the particle belongs to the VP: [NP (NP)] [*waa* VP]. In the second construction, the NP attracts the particle so that we have a modification of the structure of the sentence: [NP (NP) **baa**] VP. That is the reason of the difference for interpretation of these particles in the traditional approach of the FocTop Somali system.

On the one hand, it should be noted that sentences with *baa* are interpreted syntactically as relative clauses, because of the presence of verbal origin copula, in the underlying level. However, as Lamberti (1983:102) has indicated “*the speakers did not consider anymore the sentences following the focus particles as subordinate clauses but as main sentences.*” It is why these particles cannot be interpreted today as focus markers, at least in declarative sentences.

On the other hand, the difference between *waa* and *baa* is rather a difference of the degree of topicality, which is well translated by the difference existing between “*thème*” and “*topique*”, in French linguistic literature⁶. Caron (2000: 11) explains, that “*topique*” corresponds to the « *à la réalisation, marquée formellement d’un thème dans l’énoncé* ». So we can assert that the *waa* particle highlights the theme, by dislocating it, rightward or leftward, from the predication: *Cali, waa yimi*, “Ali, he has come” or *waa yimi, Cali*, “he has come, Ali”. Whereas, there is not such dislocation with *baa/ayaa*, and there is no intonative pause between the NP and these particles: *Cali baa yimi*, “Cali has come” and not *Cali, baa yimi* or even less **baa yimi, Cali*.

⁶ In Anglo-Saxon linguistic literature the notions of theme or topic are employed as synonyms.

The last phase (phase IV) consists of another stage of the topicalisation process which is characterized by the appearance of a pronominal resumption, when the subject is not the topic of the sentence.

Conclusion

We have seen that the distinction made by Saeed between *baa/ayaa* on the one hand and *waa* on the other hand is not relevant. Using the same question-answer methodology will ineluctably lead to the same conclusion as the traditional approach of these particles. But, we have showed that *baa/ayaa* cannot be considered as having a focusing role in the ordinary speech and especially in the introduction of folktales.

After a comparison of the FocTop system of Somali dialects, in a both synchronic and diachronic perspective, we come to the conclusion that the unmarked Somali syntax does not show a topic-focus structure (see also, *cf.* Lecarme 1999: 282) as the traditional view presents it, but rather a topic-predicate structure. As Sasse (1981: 262) has pointed out for the Boni language as well as in Somali, the starting point of a predication is always a topic or a theme.

If the theme or topic has become a “center of information” as stipulated by Sasse (*id.*:265) for Boni, we have assumed that it is for syntactic reasons. In fact, because of the weakening of prosodic marking and the consecutive difficulty to distinguish subject and object, in the original SOV structure, the Somali language (and probably, its related languages such as Boni or Rendille) has developed morphological marking of the subject. But, due to the correlation between subject and topic, the morphological marking has been directed to the topic rather to the subject. This evolution has given the high flexibility in word order observed in the NS Somali (as in Boni and Rendille) where the topic/theme can be the subject or another constituent of the sentence.

In any case, if we take into consideration the FocTop system of Somali dialects and all the characteristics of the system in each dialect, it will be difficult to defend the particle *baa/ayaa* and *waa* as focus markers in the declarative sentences.

Proto-sam	Phase	Somali dialects					
		I	II	III	IV		
*á-VP	*á						
				NP-COP waa/woo NP-NOM waa/woo	→ NP baa/boo	→ baa +Pr.	Linked to NP > THEME marker
*NP-é	*-é	(NP) a(a)	*uu-a(a) > waa ⁷ 3M-a(a) > TOP			waa+Pr.	Independent from NP > TOPIC marker
	(V)y ~ (V)yV(V)	1.1	1.2	1.3	1.4	1.5	
Attested In Boni and Rendille	in all Somali dialects	In all somali dialects, but very frequent in NS and benaadir	Only in NS, benaadir and karre	NS, benaadir and dabarre	NS		

Table: the evolution of the particles ayaa, baa and waa as assumed in this paper.

⁷ Waa is considered here as predicate focus marker in the traditional approach.

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