

### The function word *wəli*: Post-verbal focus in Maay Maay

Maay Maay is a language spoken primarily in Southern Somalia and portions of Kenya, and is closely related to Somali. The linguistic literature on Maay is very limited relative to what has been reported on Somali. Data collected recently on Maay reveal the presence of the function word *wəli*, which is not mentioned in Saeed's (1982) overview of the language.

In elicitations, *wəli* frequently appears in a sentential position before the constituent whose composition and behavior appear similar to the Somali Verb Complex (Green 2021). It often appears in sentences with a long or complex object, or with multiple constituents. The basic SOV word order is like that found in other closely related languages, including Somali, but initial data collection revealed an obligatory reordering to SVO in the presence of *wəli*, with no substantive difference in meaning. The language consultant states that the sentences are grammatical with or without *wəli*, but without *wəli* the constituent returns to the expected position before the verb.

(1a) *an:ə r<sup>h</sup>oot-ə      ʕaam-ε*  
I bread-DET eat-1SG  
'I eat bread.'

(1b) *an:ə wəli aam-ε zeb r<sup>h</sup>oot-ə*  
I *wəli* eat-1SG piece bread-DET  
'I eat a piece of bread.'

To assess the pragmatic functions of *wəli*, we used a storyboard to force narrow focus readings of either the subject or direct object (Littell, 2010). In both cases *wəli* appeared and the focused constituent was moved to post-verbal position.

#### (2a) Object Focus

*məs-kə      wəli hagaδ-e bijoo-gii*  
snake-DET *wəli* bring-3SG drinks-DET  
'Snake brought the DRINKS'

#### (2b) Subject Focus

*bijoo-gii      wəli hagaδ-e məs-kə*  
drinks-DET *wəli* bring-3SG snake-DET  
'SNAKE brought the drinks'

The storyboard demonstrated that placing either constituent in narrow focus results in the use of *wəli* and the post-verbal shift. Based on this test and other data, *wəli* appears to function as a post-verbal focus marker. While Saeed (1982) reports pre-verbal focus in Maay along the lines of what we have also observed, post-verbal focus is said to be accomplished via *wey ba*, whose composition is unclear. As a post-verbal focus marker, the use of *wəli* in the grammar of our speaker appears to have a clearer and more immediate connection to *wáxa*, a focus marker used in Northern Somali (or *wáxaa*, used elsewhere in Somalia), which introduces a cataphoric focalization of a constituent that follows the verb complex (Green, 2021). Both *wáxa(a)* and *wəli* are post-verbal focus markers and tend to focus a longer noun phrase or a clause. *Wəli* shares morphological and semantic similarities with *wáxa(a)*, as *wəl* (Maay) and *wáx* (Somali) both mean 'thing'. These similarities suggest the focus markers must be connected in some way. It would appear they are not cognate, which might suggest the focus construction is borrowed.

### References

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