Exclusive focus in Telugu

Overview. Much attention has been paid to the semantics of *only* and English's other exclusive particles (Beaver & Clark 2008 contains a comprehensive literature review). Much less has been given to non-English data. Recently, more studies on the semantics of exclusive particles in other languages have been published (Liu 2017; Orenstein & Greenberg 2021; among others), but many of these are devoted to analyses of the coocurrence of adfocal and adnominal markers (Lee 2005; Aremu 2024; Yip 2024; Yip & Adedeji 2024; among others). This paper will explore the semantics of a so-called "emphatic" clitic in Telugu (Dravidian; India), which has not been explored in the formal semantic literature. Based on detailed fieldwork in the US with a speaker from Guntur, I will show that this clitic marks exclusive focus, and that it differs from *only* in its scopal properties and allowed ordering of focus alternatives.

Background. The clitic *=ē* has been described most thouroughly in Krishnamurti & Gwynn (1985). It attaches to the left edge of a phrase and is phonologically dependant on the previous word, prompting deletion of a word-final vowel or insertion of an epenthetic consonant—either /y/ or /n/.

(1) a. *abhikē pilli undi*
abhi-ki=ē pilli un-di
A-DAT=EXCL cat be-3SG.NM
'Only Abhi has a cat.'

b. *abhiki pilli**n/yē** undi*
abhi-ki pilli=ē un-di
A-DAT cat=EXCL be-3SG.NM
'Abhi only has a cat.'

Krishnamurti & Gwynn describe *=ē* merely as "emphatic" and most of their translations don't use English exclusives to charicterize its meaning. Felicity judgements of sentences with *=ē* in context show that it is an exclusive operator very similar to English *only*, but with some key differences.

Exclusivity. I will assume an approach to exclusives as argued by Beaver & Clark (2008) and Coppock & Beaver (2014) wherein exclusive particles operate on ordered sets of alternative propositions provided by the Current Question. Exclusives presuppose a positive inference—at least the prejacent—and assert a negative inference—at most the prejacent. Most English exclusive operators associate with focus at a distance (Rooth 1985 among others). *=ē* can only attach to the focussed constituent. It is felicitous on different arguments depending on what is background in the conversational context.

(2) Context: You tell a friend that you are having Abhi over for dinner. They say that Abhi is a picky eater and dislikes most foods.

a. *abhiki iḍḷi**yē** iṣṭam*
abhi-ki iḍḷi=ē iṣṭam
A-DAT idli=EXCL like
'Abhi only likes idli.'

b. # *abhikē iḍḷi iṣṭam*
abhi-ki=ē iḍḷi iṣṭam
A-DAT=EXCL idli like
'Only Abhi likes idli.'

(3) Context: You are shopping for idli ingredients and run across a friend at the store. They ask what you're making, and when you respond they say that nobody likes idli.

a. # *abhiki iḍḷi**yē** iṣṭam*
abhi-ki iḍḷi=ē iṣṭam
A-DAT idli=EXCL like
'Abhi only likes idli.'

b. *abhikē iḍḷi iṣṭam*
abhi-ki=ē iḍḷi iṣṭam
A-DAT=EXCL idli like
'Only Abhi likes idli.'

(4) and (5) show that both the 'at least' inference and the 'at most' inference are entailed. A sentence with *=ē* is incompatible with scenerios either stronger or weaker than it.

(4) Context: You bought a hat and nothing else.

a. *nēnu topi**yē** konnānu*
nēnu topi=ē kon-nā-nu
1SG hat=EXCL buy-PST-1SG
'I only bought a hat'

b. # *nēnu topi mariyu cokka**nē** konnānu*
nēnu topi mariyu cokka=ē kon-nā-nu
1SG hat and shirt=EXCL buy-PST-1SG
'I only bought a hat and a shirt'

(5) Context: You bought a hat and a shirt but nothing else.

a. # *nēnu topi**yē** konnānu*
nēnu topi=ē kon-nā-nu
1SG hat=EXCL buy-PST-1SG
'I only bought a hat'

b. *nēnu topi mariyu cokka**nē** konnānu*
nēnu topi mariyu cokka=ē kon-nā-nu
1SG hat and shirt=EXCL buy-PST-1SG
'I only bought a hat and a shirt'

Evidence from polar questions and conditional embedding indicate—as expected of an exclusive focus particle—that the negative inference is asserted and the positive inference is presupposed. That Abhi has at least a cat is preserved when the sentence is made into a polar question (6), but whether he has other pets is still in question. Likewise, the positive inference projects out of a conditional while negative one does not (data omitted for space).

(6) *abhiki pilli**nē** undā*
abhi-ki pilli=ē un-di=ā
A-DAT cat=EXCL be-3SG.NM=Q
'Does Abhi only have a cat?'

Differences from *only*. Per Beaver & Clark, exclusives can associate with different orderings of the focus alternatives. *only* is compatible with an ordering of propositions based on direct entailment and evaluative rank-based ordering. *=ē* seems to be incompatible with some but not all rank-based orderings. In English, the equivalent exchange to (7) using *only* is perfectly felicitous assuming a relevant scale of price or similar, but my consultant rejected it. (8) clearly has a number-based rank-order scale, but the felicity of *only* in the situation is questionable because it requires a low value even when the context makes a high one less strong.

(7) a. *abhi kāruni konnāḍu*
abhi kāru-ni kon-nā-ḍu
A car-ACC buy-PST-3SG.M
'Abhi bought a car.'

b. # *lēdu, baṇḍinē konnāḍu*
lēdu baṇḍi-ni=ē kon-nā-ḍu
no bike-ACC=EXCL buy-PST-3SG.M
'No, Abhi only bought a bike.'

(8) Context: You are rolling a six-sided die for a game and want a low roll.
nāku ārē paḍindi
nā-ku āru=ē paḍ-in-di
1SG-DAT six=EXCL roll-PST-3SG.NM
'I only rolled a six.'

=ē can outscope other operators higher in the structure that *only* can't, most notably negation.

(8) a. *abhi topi**yē** kona lēdu. cokka kōḍā konnāḍu*
abhi topi=ē kon-a lēdu cokka kōḍā kon-nā-ḍu
A hat=EXCL buy-INF not.be shirt also buy-PST-3SG.M
'Abhi **didn't only** buy a hat. He also bought a shirt.' (NEG>EXCL)

b. *abhi topi**yē** kona lēdu. cokka mariyu pustakamē konnāḍu*
abhi topi=ē kon-a lēdu cokka mariyu pustakam=ē kon-nā-ḍu
A hat=EXCL buy-INF not.be shirt and book=EXCL buy-PST-3SG.M
'Abhi **only didn't** buy a hat. He only bought a shirt and a book.' (EXCL>NEG)

Conclusion. Telugu *=ē* is an exclusive focus particle very similar to English *only*, but differs from *only* semantically in its scopal properties and scale association. This research expands our understanding of exclusive focus particles in the world's languages. In the talk I will explore how to model these differences formally in the style of Beaver & Clark. I'll also look at how the scope of *=ē* behaves in islands. Given time I'd like to investigate the interaction of *=ē* with the question clitic *=ā* (Balusu 2018) as well as with the word *mātram* which is generally translated as 'only' and usually coocurs with *=ē*.

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