The contrast marker =*i*/=ɪ in Tima (Niger-Congo)

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Tima (Niger-Congo, Sudan) makes use of a number of different information structural devices: the sentence-initial position as the default position for topics, morphological focus marking (for constituents) and, additionally, the contrast marker =*i*/=ɪ. The latter expresses a contrast, or highlights an oppositional relation, between two or more similar enough elements chosen from a set of alternatives (explicit or implicit). Contrast marking in Tima is of a morphological nature and we show that it is compatible with (but independent of) both topic and focus functions. In addition, =*i*/=ɪ is involved in structuring discourse by highlighting relationships between different discourse referents.

In (1), granaries from the past and those from today are contrasted. The referents are made semantically independent (and can thus become alternatives, cf. Umbach (2004)) by their distinct modifiers which both bear contrastive marking.

(1) Tima (Schneider-Blum, primary data)
Iduŋkuduŋ=nʌ   *mɪhɪ=**ɪ***   *ɪ-yakɔm=aʈaŋ*
granaries=DEM.PROX ancient=**CONTR**   STAT.PL-strong=COMPL
a=yi-nʌ   *kuhunʌŋ=**i***
SOURCE=PL-DEM.PROX   today=**CONTR**
'These granaries from *former times* are stronger than these from *to-day/nowadays*.'

Additionally, contrastive marking is used to highlight the relation between different discourse referents; it marks them as similar and opposing elements with respect to their discourse function, i.e. topics of discourse segments.

(2) Tima (Schneider-Blum, primary data)
Ʈamaa=na   *u=kwʌyʌwu-w=**i***   *ŋkɔ*   *nʌŋ,*
talk=DEM.PROX   DIR=sausage.tree-EP=**CONTR**   COP.SG   here
'This is what can be said about the *sausage* tree.'

The core function of the marker =*i*/=ɪ is to oppose referents that form subtypes of the same concept. As such, it may operate on the one hand on a sentence or inter-sentence level, as shown with (1). On the other hand, the Tima marker can also indicate the opposition between two or more referents in a larger discourse segment, as in (2).

References: • Umbach, C. 2004. On the notion of contrast in information structure and discourse structure. *Journal of Semantics* 21(2). 155–175.