

Clause-medial focus marking – the perspective from West-African languages

Johannes Mursell & Katharina Hartmann

Goethe-Universität Frankfurt

In this talk, we discuss clause-medial focus marking in different West-African languages from the Mabia and Chadic families. In these languages, focus is marked by morphological particles, which mark fronted foci (Mabia and Chadic) and in situ foci (Mabia). We are pursuing two main goals, to (i) develop a typology for the different morphological focus marking strategies; (ii) show that morphological focus marking leads to massive ambiguity.

Focus marking in many European languages mainly relies on prosody, i.e. the nuclear pitch accent of the clause being placed on the focused constituent. In addition to this, a dedicated syntactic position can be used as well, especially for contrastive or mirative focus types (Cruschina, 2012), which is mainly left peripheral (Italian, English) or sentence final (Spanish, Italian).

The West-African languages under consideration in this talk do not employ phonology for focus marking, mainly because they are tone languages, but rely on other means, focus marking by morphological particles, which occur ex-situ as well as typologically exceptionally in-situ, cf. (1) from Dagbani (Mabia) (Olawsky, 1999; Issah, 2020).

- (1) a. Noo **ka** Adam korigi.
fowl FOC Adam slaughter
'Adam slaughtered a FOWL.'
b. Adam korigi **la** noo.
Adam slaughter FOC fowl
'Adam slaughtered a FOWL.'

In the talk, we will discuss two classes of languages employing morphological focus markers. On the one hand, there are languages in which the marker attaches to the focused constituent itself (Type 1), (2). On the other hand, we also find languages in which the focus marker occurs in a fixed low position in the clause, following the verb (Type 2). This gives rise to the patterns in (3).

- (2) a. subject Tns V-Asp [object-1_{FOC} **FM**] object-2
b. subject Tns V-Asp object-1 [object-2_{FOC} **FM**]
(3) a. subject Tns V-Asp **FM** object-1_{FOC} object-2
b. subject Tns V-Asp **FM** object-1 object-2_{FOC}

In both types of morphological focus marking languages, it seems to be the case that focus marking is subject to relatively strict constraints, as the focus marker, even in Type 1 languages, like Dagbani in (1-b), must be on the main clausal projection line. Thus, direct marking of, for example, possessors or adjectives, is simply impossible. This restriction, as well as the fixed position of the marker in Type 2 languages, leads to massive focus ambiguity, as the same position of the focus marker is compatible with very different focus interpretations (e.g. focus on possessor, possessum, NP or VP), see (4) from Likpakpaanl (Mabia) (Acheampong, 2024), a type 2 language, illustrating the possessor / possessum ambiguity. Note that (4) is also compatible with a VP-focus interpretation.

- (4) Mari nan kɔr Piita aa-kɔla **la**.
Mari PST slaughter Peter POSS-fowl FOC
a. 'Mary slaughtered PETER'S fowl.'
b. 'Mary slaughtered Peter's FOWL.'

We will provide an analysis for the different patterns in terms of a low focus position in the edge of vP (Belletti, 2004, et seq.) and discuss some more general implications of assuming dedicated information-structural projections in the vP edge. At the same time, such cases of focus ambiguity highlight the importance of context and pragmatic reasoning for focus interpretation in the West-African languages.

References

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