Predicate-centered focus types: A sample-based typological study in African languages
A project of the CRC 632 ‘Information Structure’

Our project

While such notions as argument focus, topic, givensness and contrast have played a major role in the investigation of information structure, other functional categories have been investigated only marginally. However, recent research has shown that such categories are of crucial importance for the grammatical organization of a number of different languages.

Our project concentrates on one of these neglected subjects, namely so-called "predicate-centered focus" types which subsume categories that are typically tied semantically and morpho-syntactically to the verb or predicate as the carrier of both proposition and illocution.

The research is carried out on the basis of a language sample representing the four indigenous African language groups and strives for a representative typological profile of the continent. The overall goal is to model the interaction of predicate-centered focus with other focus types in terms of form and function, taking into account of typological and areal factors into account. Since the typological profile of African languages does not differ fundamentally from that of other continents, we expect that the results of the project will also allow one to draw new insights into information-structural systems of non-African languages, which in turn feeds into the general theory of information structure.

Project goals

I: Formal expression and external comparison of predicate-centered focus types

Which language-specific means are used in the sample languages to express predicate-centered focus types?

Mumbo (Dogon, Prokhorenkov L.n.): Redeplication

(1) ny lima abo ame

no milk DEPU-15-buy.PV

[Did you take (the) milk from our neighbour?] No, I BOUGHT (the) milk.

Rumbi (Bantu, Shürmann 1956:50): Verb morphology

(2) lú mi é la-a-lya

2-eme-2-PDC-ext.PVSmake

Some people actually EAT snakes.

Aghom (Grassfields, Walters 1979:16X): Focus particle

(3) há, óá à mi ni no

sí fuówa EM PST will PDC

[Did the friends kill the hen?] No, the friends SOLD it.

Ndendeule (Bantu, Güldemann f.n.): "Darexy verb"

(4) bí-tendú ku-remente?

3P-PRS-de INF-eat

Do people REALLY EAT them?

Ssun-bi (Bantu, Hadermann 1996:161): Verb fronting

(5) kí-nánga nákkya-tárága

INF-read L B F O C
ter-see

Je vais LIRE. [lit.: As for reading, I will read.]

Can the constructions be used for other information structure configurations and, if yes, why?

Aja-Gbe (Kowa, Findler f.n.): Focus fronting for verb, value, and object.

(6) a. du, dák (yó) é dák

na, tóonk (POC 3S read)

[Did the woman eat the beans?] No, she COOKED them.

b. du, nuyú (yó) nuyú

na, be-beautiful (POC 3S be beautiful)

[She is not beautiful.] No, she IS beautiful.

c. láp-djó (yó) é dák

beam (POC 3S eat)

[What did the woman eat?] She ARE SNACKS.

Types of predicate-centered focus

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predicate-centered focus</th>
<th>Lexical verb</th>
<th>TAM</th>
<th>Polarity</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(What did the princess do with the frog?) She KISSED him.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Is the princess kissing the frog (right now?)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[I cannot imagine that the princess has kissed the slippery frog.] Yes, she DID kiss him.</td>
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II: Internal classification of predicate-centered focus types

The internal classification of the individual predicate-centered focus types and subtypes is analyzed in order to develop a theoretical model of their similarities and differences. What types of formal conflation/syncrasy exist in individual languages and why?

Intentional differentiation of all relevant main focus types in English dependencies.

Buli (Gur, Schwarcz 2010: 302, 304): Synchronization of two focus types in the kánne-construction

(7) a. láyá, mi li-yá kámká

m. 15 wash POC

[Did you wash the clothes?] No, I PROVED them.

b. q vérí, xi s'xákká kámká

yes, 1S wash POC

[Did you wash the clothes?] Yes, I WASHED (them).

Thematic focus

III: Polymorphology of predicate-centered focus structures

The close interaction between information structure and other linguistic properties may disguise a focus function so that a focus construction goes undetected. Diachronic changes can also foreground non-focus readings, so that a polyfunctional construction loses its earlier focus function completely. What is the basis for such functional affinities and changes?

Rwanda (Bantu, Overholtse 1975-94): 2, with predication focus function in simple clause vs. progressive reading in clause with locative adjunct

(a) a-nába ha má-ka àra

(älubahubakona)

2-man 2-LOC-work.PVS puppy

Cest l'âne dont nous avons.

b. a-nába ha má-ka àra

4 man 4-LOC-work.PVS puppy

Les hommes sont maintenant en train de travailler dans les champs.

Kikuyu (Bantu, Bennett et al. 1985:225;)

(10) 13-PROG-PAC-LOC meat

We are buying meat.

IV: Discourse functions of predicate-centered focus types

Previous research suggests that the functional domain of predicate-centered focus types in discourse differs from that of term focus. We therefore undertake pilot studies analyzing how predicate-centered focus types are used in a variety of discourse and identifying diagnostics for their typical discourse contexts.