Focus in Fang and other Bantu A70 languages

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Fang is an important transnational language of western equatorial Africa spoken altogether by 1,080,000 people distributed in southern Cameroon (ca. 110,000), continental Equatorial Guinea (ca. 575,000), Gabon (374,000), and Congo (Brazzaville) (6,000). It belongs to the subgroup A70 (Beti-Fang, Ewondo-Fang) of the “zone” A of Bantu languages together with four languages localized in southern Cameroon: Eton (52,000 speakers), Ewondo (578,000 speakers), Bebele-Bebil (30,000 speakers) and Bulu(-Bene) (174,000 speakers). The five A70 languages are closely related on a level of partial mutual intelligibility. The peoples who speak these languages feel as if they are part of an interethnic entity called bô-ti (‘lords’).

1. State-of-the-art
Babele-Bebil has not yet been the subject of any studies. With the exception of Eton, we cannot affirm that the A70 languages were adequately described. The grammatical data available on Fang, Ewondo and Bulu are rather or decidedly elementary. The grammars that were realized on these languages concentrate on morphology, limiting syntax to a small “appendix” and indeed deleting the complexity of tonology. The exception, as I have hinted at, is represented by Eton, object of a detailed description by Mark Van de Velde that attempts to explore the various sectors of the phonology and grammar of this complex language.

That which follows is a description of some common traits of A70 languages based on the following sources: Bulu: Alexandre (1966); Eton: Van de Velde (2007); Ewondo: Essono (1993). The Fang data are from my field notes. The dialect represented is that spoken in Bata, an important coastal town of Equatorial Guinea with about 67,000 inhabitants.

2. Typology
Bantu A70 languages belong to Heine’s (1976) “type A”, having (i) subject–auxiliary–verb–object–adverbial(s) word order; (ii) prepositions and (iii) noun phrase constituents, including relative clauses and the genitive construction, that follow the head noun.

They have a typical Bantu gender system, but lack locative genders. Ewondo an Bulu have 11 genders (corresponding to what other authors call “nominal classes”), numbered from 1 to 11. Fang and Eton have 10 genders. Fang lost gender 10, while Eton lost gender 11. As is usually the case in the Bantu languages, only marginally is it possible to predict to which gender a noun belongs on the basis of its semantics. Gender is marked by a prefix on nouns (the controllers) and on nominal modifiers (of various kind: demonstratives, possessives, numerals from ‘1’ to ‘6’ etc.), pronouns, and finite verbs (targets). Most of these prefixes are very similar or identical among each other. Ergo, concord tendentially has an alliterative character.

(1)  bilè binên bìsè̀ sò bì binò èhyàm  
|  bì-lè bì-nên bì-sè̀ sò bì bì-nò è-è-byàm |
8-tree VIII-big VIII-all VIII.DEM VIII-COP AU-PN-VIII.my

‘All these big trees are mine’
For genders 1 to 11, usually the odd numbered genders are the singular of the even numbered
genders which are the plural. For Fang, this may be schematized as in the following chart.

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<tr>
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<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
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</table>

The majority of nouns of gender 11 (singular) pair with nouns of gender 6 (plural). Others pair with
nouns of gender 5 and singular number.

As in many other Bantu languages, in some syntactic environments, nouns receive an obligatory
prefix called “augment”. In Fang this morpheme has two allomorphs, े-, preconsonantal (2), and H-
(a floating high tone), prevocalic (3), and is added to nouns modified by a demonstrative (3), an
ordinal numeral, or a relative clause (2).

(2) ेमोो ऐंजूं े
|े-ः-ॅद ऐ-ः-ह-ज़ू| AU-1-person I-PR-REL-come
‘the person who comes’

(3) अबा दी
|ह-अ-बा दी| AU-5-book V.DEM
‘this book’

Personal pronouns functions as complements of verbs and complements of adpositions and in
focus and topic constructions, as subjects. Interestingly, first and second person personal pronouns
have two forms: one occurring before nouns or other pronouns (called “non-final”) (4) and the other
appearing elsewhere (called “final”) (5).

(4) वाः धो द्खः
|ठ-अ-वो धो द्खः| 2sg-PR-give 1sg.pp 7-what
‘¿What do you give me?’

(5) न्यागालू अलोू माः
|न्य-यागालू अ-अलोू माः| 1-learn-CAUS I-PR-call 1sg.pp
‘The teacher calls me’

The verbal morphology is rather atypical for the Bantu languages, in that it is much less
synthetic than in other languages and in Proto-Bantu. Verbs agree in person-number with the subject
argument, but there is no object-verb agreement, contrary to Eastern and Southern Bantu languages.
In addition, a number of TAM values are expressed by auxiliaries (e.g. the hodiernal past in Fang)
rather than by affixes.
In addition to auxiliaries proper, there are numerous quasi-auxiliaries most of which expressing manner-adverbial and modal notions.

Both auxiliaries and quasi-auxiliaries are conjugated as other main verbs and are usually followed by the infinite of the lexical verb. Quasi-auxiliaries can also occur in series. In that case, only the first is finite, the other being infinitival.

Adjectives are very few or do not exist (Eton and, probably, Bulu). In Ewondo and northern Fang dialects the adjective class includes just two members: ‘small’ and ‘big’. Some Fang dialects have a few other forms: ‘old’ and ‘bad’ in Atsi; ‘old’, ‘good’ and ‘bad’ on Mekeny. Adjectival concepts are expressed by means of nouns in A70 languages. Interestingly, in NPs in which there is a noun that denotes a property of a second nominal we are witness to a paradoxical situation. Semantically the second noun is the head of the NP. It is this element that bears the main meaning and that can be replaced by an interrogative modifier. But, from a syntactic point of view, the head of the NP is the first noun. It is this element that controls the agreement of any variable element included in the NP (8).

And it is this element that also controls the predicative agreement (9, 10).

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1. *dàng*, in Fang and Eton, means ‘cross’ as an independent verb and has the meaning ‘most of all’ or ‘a lot’ as a quasi-auxiliary.
Adverbs amount to a rather limited number of elements. The class of ideophones, on the other hand, is very large. In Fang, it includes some hundreds of elements most of which express the impression of a particular sense perception (sound, colour, brightness, form, consistence, movement etc.), as for example bə́b bə́b bə́b ‘quick’, bɔ́d bɔ́d bɔ́d ‘flexible’, dù́g dù́g dù́g ‘hot’, kɔ́gɔ́lè kɔ́gɔ́lè kɔ́gɔ́lè ‘round’, nɛ́n nɛ́n nɛ́n ‘soft’, tʃɔ́g tʃɔ́g ‘bright red, vermillion’, vʊ́g vʊ́g vʊ́g ‘impetuously’.

Prepositions are relatively few. Some of them have a generic meaning. A preposition á (before C) ~ H (before V), for example, in all Bantu A70 languages, is a default locative preposition whose exact meaning is determined by the semantics of the noun of which it is the head or of the verb on which it depends. Various prepositional meanings are expressed by means of two juxtaposed prepositional phrases, both governed by á ~ H, the second of which includes as its complement a relational noun.

(11) á ndʒii á yóñb
  [á n-dʒii á yóñb]
in 3-roof in [5]upper.part
‘on the roof’

(12) á nd été
  [á ndé H è-té]
in [9]house in 7-inner.part
‘inside the house’

Bantu A70 languages are all tonal. They have three structural tones: low (L), high (H), and dissimilating high (D). D is represented by a low tone when preceded by a high tone, and by a high tone elsewhere. It will be marked by a double high tone accent on the vowel (á) in the examples that follow. Tones can combine into rising and falling patterns on the surface and high tones can be downstepped (‘á’). (In Eton the downstepped high tone is a toneme.)

(13) dʒáñ ‘family’
    dʒáñ ‘fleetingly’ (id.)
    dʒáñ ‘disapper, get lost’
    dʒáñ ‘raffia’

Many morphemes (or alternants of morphemes) contain floating tones or consist of a floating tone only.

3. Focus
Given the scenario illustrated above, it should be of no surprise that the investigation of information structure is still at the embryonic stage in the field of Bantu A70 languages. As regards focus, in particular, what we have in the available grammatical descriptions of Fang, Bulu, Ewondo and Eton is just a series of preliminary and brief observations, albeit it has a significant impact on the grammar of these languages (especially on their verb morphology, as we will see).

During the course of this talk, I will consider the various focalization strategies described in the literature and which has been observed personally by me in the course of my research on Fang carried out in Bata, in Equatorial Guinea, in 2009, which had the aim of producing a first “technical” grammar of this language. The various devices used to mark constituents as salient

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2 Yet again, the examples cited are in the dialect of Bata and from my field notes.
enter into relation with different types of constituent: subject, complement, adjunct, verb, and numeral.

3.1. Subject

3.1.1. Use of personal pronouns

Personal pronouns normally are not used as subjects in the pro-drop Bantu A70 languages. This is because the referents are usually clear from the verbal person-number marking. Only focalized or topicalized subjects are expressed by means of subject pronouns.

(14)  
\[
\text{mà màdʒɨ}  \\
\text{|mà mà-à-dʒi|}  \\
\text{1sg.PP 1sg-PR-eat}  \\
\text{‘I eat’}
\]

(15)  
\[
\text{mà məŋətəl}  \\
\text{|mà mə-ŋə-təl|}  \\
\text{1sg.PP II-RP-write}  \\
\text{‘I wrote’ (Essono 1993:493)}
\]

(16)  
\[
bɔ̃ bɔ̃-tə sà  \\
\text{|bɔ̃ bɔ̃-Lt sà|}  \\
\text{II.PP II-PR INF-work}  \\
\text{‘They are working’ (Van de Velde 2007:322)}
\]

If there is a nominal subject, a coreferential personal pronoun (of the same gender) follows it.

(17)  
\[
kôn ébən édʒʊ dəwúŋ kôn  \\
\text{|kôn é-bən é-dʒʊ də-å-wúŋ kôn|}  \\
\text{[9]ghost IX-only AU-IX.PP IX-PR-kill [9]ghost}  \\
\text{‘Only a ghost kills a ghost’}
\]

(18)  
\[
yi mòd pɛ́ àtɛ kwám dʒòm pɛ́ tɔ yɛm  \\
\text{|yi N-ðd pɛ́ à-Lt L-kəm H dʒ-om pɛ́ tɔH yɛm|}  \\
\text{Q 1-person LPP I-PR INF-do LT 7-thing LPP NEG know}  \\
\text{‘Do people do things without understanding them?’ (Van de Velde 2007:322)}
\]

3.1.2. Use of special contrastive focus pronouns

Interestingly, in Fang and Eton (cf. Van de Velde 2007:140-41), there is a special set of pronouns that tend to be used when the subject of the clause does not have the same reference as the subject of a previously-stated/implied clause.

(19)  
\[
mà; màdʒi fɔ́  \\
\text{|mà; mà-à-dʒi fɔ́|}  \\
\text{1sg.CFP 1sg-PR-ear also}  \\
\text{‘I eat, too’}
\]
3.1.3. Simultaneous use of personal and contrastive focus pronouns

Interestingly, in Fang, the predicate may be preceded by a contrastive focus pronoun and this by a personal pronoun. The resulting construction is also a focus construction, but more contrastive than the previous one (without the personal pronoun).

(21)  má mà: màdʒó

1sg.PP 1sg.CFP 1sg-PR-say

‘I say so’ (i.e., I have the last word)

3.1.4 Use of augmented personal pronouns

Van de Velde (2008:322) reports for Eton a type of subject focus/topic construction in which the verb is preceded by a personal pronoun (coreferential with its subject prefix) which always has a falling tone.

(22)  nè ànè imód àwé

AU-I.PP I-RCOP AU-1-person I-SP-REL-kill

‘He is the murdered one’ (Van de Velde 2007:323)

The personal pronoun with falling tonality can be analyzed as the augmented antecedent of a relative clause and this is the only situation, in Eton, in which a personal pronoun is “augmented” and modified, just like a nominal head. The focus construction in question is said to be more contrastive than that which makes use of non augmented personal pronouns (3.1.1).

This strategy is not used in Fang. In this language, third person pronouns always occur in “augmented” form when they are used as subjects (23). While, in other functions, they occur without “augment” (24).

3 This interpretation is also supported by the occurrence of a partially suppletive relative form of the copula ‘be’ after the personal pronoun with falling tonality, as in (23).
3.1.5 Cleft
A further strategy used to focus subjects, adopted by all Bantu A70 languages, is by means of a cleft construction which takes the following form:

| copula + focussed constituent + pronominal copy + predicate |

Examples:

(25) \[\text{ànò ndõò ëpò àsò à ndé}\\ \text{[â-nò ndõò ë-nò à-à-sò à ndé]}\\ \text{I-COP Ndong AU-I.PP I-PR-come from house}\\ \text{‘It is Ndong who comes from the house’}\\

(26) \[\text{inè ëkènè wò úyi:bàn}\\ \text{[i-nè ë-kènè wò ú-H-yi:bàn]}\\ \text{VII-COP 3-knife III.PP III-PAST-be.stolen}\\ \text{‘It is a knife that is stolen’ (Van de Velde 2007:323)}\\

For lack of an agreement controller, the copula takes a default subject prefix, which, is not the same for all A70 languages: in Fang and Bulu it is the prefix of agreement pattern I (25, 33, 34), while in Eton it is the prefix of pattern V (35) or VII (26). It should be noted that the agreement pattern I in A70 languages is selected not only for agreement in gender. It is used, for example, with an interjection (a word that is by definition genderless, because it is not a noun). The agreement pattern V of Eton might recall the gender 5 of the noun \(d-àm\) ‘thing (immaterial)’, while the agreement pattern VII might recall the gender 7 of the noun \(3-òm\) ‘thing (material)’.

3.2. Complements and adjuncts

3.2.1 Placement in clause-initial position
In all Bantu A70 languages, complements and adjuncts can be focalized (or topicalized) by assuming clause-initial position.

(27) \[\text{wà màdʒìn}\\ \text{[wà mà-á-dʒìn]}\\ \text{2sg.PP 1sg-PR-love}\\ \text{‘I love you’}\\

(28)  
\[\textit{kà: mòbò àkòkò ò yób}\]

\[\textit{kà: mò-bò à-á-kò•kò ò yób}\]

without VI-foot I-NEG-F•go towards upper.part

‘Without feet, you don’t (lit., he doesn’t) arise’

(29)  
\[\textit{ŋkwáŋ džé i 'mén bi ‘té dànŋ nùu}\]

\[\textit{N-kòg džé imèn bi-Ltè L-dànŋ H nùu}\]

3-trunk what INTS 1pl-Pt INF-cross LT III.DEM

‘What kind of trunk are we crossing here?’ (Van de Velde 2007:324)

(30)  
\[\textit{kidí mòtè kè}\]

\[\textit{kidí mò-Ltè L-kè}\]

[9]tomorrow 1sg-Pt INF-go

‘Tomorrow I leave’ (Van de Velde 2007:324)

### 3.2.2. Placement in clause-initial position and pronominal copy

Preposed complements can be followed in Eton by an augmented personal pronoun.

(31)  
\[\textit{mwé yò zamá àŋgálóm nà bódâŋ pè á mbúz}\]

\[\textit{nóč H-yò zamá à-ŋgá-lóm ná H-bó-dâŋ-L pè á mbúz}\]


‘The snake, God sent it so that they could cross (the river) on its back’ (Van de Velde 2007:325)

### 3.2.3. Placement in clause-initial position and use of a focus particle

Again in Eton (Van de Velde 2007:325), a preposed focused complement can also be followed by a special focus particle: \(\textit{yì}\).

(32)  
\[\textit{mwé yì mà mòtè dànŋ 'yág}\]

\[\textit{m-óč yì mà mò-Ltè L-dànŋ H L-yáŋ}\]

6-name FOC 1sg.PP 1sg-Pt INF-cross\(^4\) LT INF-need

‘It’s the name I need most!’ (Van de Velde 2007:325)

This particle is segmentally identical to the question marker \(\textit{yì}\) (Van de Velde 2007:326) and this might be not casual. In various languages of the world, focus constructions and questions (constituent questions in particular) are very similar as Haiman (1985:237ff) indicates: they share the function of foregrounding a referent and backgrounding the remainder of the proposition.

\(^4\) See note 1.
3.2.4. Cleft
In all Bantu A70 languages, both complement and adjunct can also be focussed by using a cleft construction.

(33) ànò àbág édò bò-djìb mà
‘It’s a book that they stolen from me’

(34) ànò màtúà énà ndòngò àngákùs
‘It’s a car that Ndongo bought’ (Ndi 2001:83)

(35) éné ànà wó átè sù:nì
[Eton] |é-nè à-ná wò à-Lté L-sù:nì|V-COP 3-today III.PR I-PR INF-come
‘It’s today that he comes’ (Van de Velde 2007:194)

3.3. Verbs
In the same languages, verbs are focalized by reduplicating their stem, or more precisely, adding a reduplicative $CV^*$ prefix to their stem (a reduplicant that copies the first two segments of the element that follows). The vowel of the reduplicative prefix is always short and often reduced. In Fang only four vowels appear in the reduplicants (36).

(36) stem |prefix
/í/, /ý/ |/í/
/e/, /ɛ/ , /e/ , /ɛ/ , /ɑ/ , /a/ , /ɑ/ |/ɔ/
/o/, /ɔ/ , /o/ , /ɔ/ |/o/
/u/, /u/ |/u/

There are no toneless syllables in Bantu A70 languages, and the reduplicative $CV^*$ prefix is not an exception. Its tone is established by rather complex rules (which we will not consider here).

(37) édò òsòg àbòbò fòd
‘Then the monkey had (lit., did) a party’

(38) mivéyènèvà
[Bulu] |mi-yè•yèn-èyà| 2pl-F•see-PERF
‘You saw’ (Alexandre 1966:127)
Verb reduplication also has an habitual meaning in Bantu A70 languages and this is the value usually attributed to it in the available descriptions of Fang (Bibang Oyee 2007:163), Bulu (Alexandre 1966:67, 127) and Ewondo (Essono 1993:540).

In Eton, in the presence of the adverb ‘already’, verb reduplication can be translated as ‘always’ (Van de Velde 320)

While, accompanied by the adverb ‘really’ or with a negative verb form and the adverb ‘at all’, it conveys insistence.

It has to be noted that in Bantu A70 languages focus concerns the lexical meaning of the verb (“verb focus”), but apparently not predicate operators like the truth value of the utterance or such categories as tense, aspect, modality etc. (“operator focus”). Bantu A70 languages do not have free form particles expressing TAM values, but only affixes and auxiliaries, as indicated. It remains to investigate if auxiliaries can be focused by means of reduplicative prefixes or not (as it seems).
3.4. Numerals
In Eton, also numerals can be focalized by reduplicating their stem (root).

\[(45)\] 

\[\text{itôn bôkê dåŋ ná bôsâsâmà}\]

Eton
\[\text{ii-PST-go INF-cross thus ii-F\*six}\]

‘The Eton crossed (the river being) only six!’ (Van de Velde 2007:321)

This strategy is not applied in Fang, where reduplicating a numeral means obtaining a distributive numeral.

3.5. An overview
To sum up our talk, we will re-examine the various focus types met in Fang and in the other Bantu A70 languages and how these are distinguished from each other.

**Focus strategies in Bantu A70 languages**

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<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Languages</th>
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<td>use of personal pronouns</td>
<td>Fang, Bulu, Ewondo, Eton</td>
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<td>simultaneous use of personal and</td>
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<td>cleft construction</td>
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<td>complement</td>
<td>placement in clause-initial position</td>
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<td>placement in clause-initial position and</td>
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<td></td>
<td>cleft construction</td>
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<tr>
<td>verb</td>
<td>prefixation of a reduplicative ( CV^* )</td>
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**Multifunctionality of three focus strategies**

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>Scope</th>
<th>Languages</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>placement in clause-initial position</td>
<td>complement, adjunct</td>
<td>Fang, Bulu, Ewondo, Eton</td>
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<td>cleft construction</td>
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The study of focus in Bantu A70 languages is in need of further research. What we saw are still simple preliminary observations.
References

Abbreviations
AU = augment; CAUS = causative; CFP = contrastive focus pronoun; CMP = complementizer; CON = connective morpheme; COP = copula; CS = consecutive; DEM = demonstrative; F = focus reduplicant; FOC = focus particle; HOD.P = hodiernal past; IMPF = imperfective; INF = infinitive; INTS = intensifier; LT = link tone; NCOP = negative form of the copula; NEG = negative; NOM = nominalizer; PERF = perfect; PN = pronominalizer; PP = personal pronoun; PR = present; Q = interrogative particle; RCOP = relative form of the copula; REL = relative verb form; RP = remote past; SB = subjunctive.