Maximal backgrounding = focus without focalization
Tom Güldemann
Humboldt University Berlin and Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology Leipzig

1 Introduction

1.1 Short preliminaries

+ functionally-oriented IS theory - definition of focus:

A focal information in a linguistic expression is that information which is relatively the most important or salient information in the given communicative setting, and considered by S [the speaker] to be most essential for A [the addressee] to integrate into his pragmatic information. (Dik 1997: 326)

+ formal encoding is cross-linguistically highly diverse, but a common denominator is that focus marking tends to be close to the element in the scope of focus (unless the encoding represents the focus value ... focus word) - segmentally adjacent to/part of the focus constituent - suprasegmentally on the focus constituent

1.2 From canonical to non-canonical focus marking in Ful1

+ cleft-like ex-situ construction as most frequent construction for term focus in Fuuta Jaloo dialect: [[Ko FOC] S V BG OTHER]

(1)a. ko hannde Aali sood-i pucc-u ngu
    T.FOC today PN buy-BG.PST horse-10 DEF.10
    it is TODAY that Ali has bought the horse (Sylla 1993: 110)

b. ko hannde Aali sood-i pucc-u ngun
    T.FOC GN 1S get.out-MIDDLE.BG.PST
    ko hannde Aali sood-i pucc-u
    T.FOC GN 1S get.out-MIDDLE.BG.PST-1S
    it is TODAY that Ali has bought the horse

> several important segmental ingredients of the construction:

- focus constituent in clause-initial position (= before the subject topic slot)
- the particle ko (derived from an identificational marker ‘it is’) precedes focus NP
- verb form belongs to a specific paradigm used in general for out-of-focus clauses (besides term focus constructions, also in relatives, wh-questions, sequential clauses)
- distinct through inflectional verb suffixes and partly subject concord position
- formal encoding by means of “active” focalization AND “active” backgrounding

(2)a. ko Segu mi cipp-ii
    T.FOC GN 1S get.out-MIDDLE.BG.PST
    ko Segu mi cipp-ii-
    T.FOC GN 1S get.out-MIDDLE.BG.PST-1S
    it is TODAY that Ali has bought the horse (Senegal)

b. Segu njipp-ii-mi
    GN get.out-MIDDLE.BG.PST-1S
    Segu njipp-ii-mi
    GN get.out-MIDDLE.BG.PST-1S
    it is TODAY that Ali has bought the horse (Guinea)

T.FOC GN 1S get.out-MIDDLE.BG.PST
(1)b. Segu njipp-ii-mi
    GN get.out-MIDDLE.BG.PST-1S
    it is TODAY that Ali has bought the horse (Guinea)

- other eastern dialects also with alternation between “full” and reduced structure, for example, Gombe Ful, as in (3)a./b. vs. (3)c., respectively

(3)a. dum Bello wadd-i sheede
    DEM PN bring-BG.PST money
    it was Bello who brought money (Gombe state, Nigeria)

b. Bello woni wadd-i sheede
    PN it.was bring-BG.PST money
    it was Bello who brought money (Mali)

c. Bello wadd-i sheede (nā ‘Umaru)
    PN bring-BG.PST money not PN
    (it was) BELLO (not Umaru) (who) brought money (Arnott 1970: 318)

> “syntactic fronting” a.k.a. marked syntactic position of a constituent (as per Apel 2012) is not dedicated to focus but is also typical for extra-posed topics (cf. Arnott 1970: 33-6)

> differentiation by means of intonation - cf. Arnott (1970: 33-6, 64) for Gombe Ful

> nevertheless, the SEGMENTAL encoding for focusing on the locative noun Segu in (2)b. and the agent noun Bello in (3)c. is reduced to the marking of the verb as non-asserted background information

> “indirect focalization” through marking detached from the focused constituent

1.3 Clause operator focus by topicalization of the state of affairs

+ Güldemann (in preparation), a cross-linguistic study on a certain structural type of predicate-centered focus, involves two radically different types of verb (phrase) preposing

- one type, called “verb (phrase) topic preposing”, can have an unmarked finite verb as the only constituent not backgrounded

> since the verb lexeme occurs in non-finite form as part of the background, the only possible focus is on clause operators like truth-value and TAM

> cf. English “dummy verb stranding” encoding truth value (Aboh 2006: 46)

(4) I told John to wash the car and wash the car he did.

> cf. English “dummy verb stranding” encoding truth value (Aboh 2006: 46)

1 Most of the material has been collated in Apel (2012).
- similar constructions attested in a number of other languages

> cf. Hausa, where the preposed verbal noun (phrase) can involve both a dummy verb (as in English), as in (5)a., and verb doubling, as in (5)b., both encoding operator focus

(5a. savy-এ abinci kọ, ẹ̀ sù yi

buy:VN-GEN food moreover FUT 3P do

b. savy-এ abinci kọ, ẹ̀ sù savyaa

buy:VN-GEN food moreover FUT 3P buy

| [ BG ] | [ FOC ] |

[lit.:] Buying food moreover, they will buy/do. [They WILL buy food.] (Jaggar 2001: 542)

- preposed verb phrase topic not necessarily the only background constituent

> change of focus type, for example, NP-internal adjective focus

(6) sayaar dà mootooći dai, munàa sayaar dà mootooći ìrì-ìrì

sell:VN with car.P TOP 1P.IPV sell with car.P different

| [ BG ] | [ BG ] | [ FOC ] |

As for selling cars, we sell ALL KINDS of cars. (Jaggar 2001: 542)

> “indirect focalization” through marking detached from the focus constituent

### 2 Focalization without focus markers

#### 2.1 An isomorphism in some West Chadic languages

+ Schuh (2005) identifies a contact area of West Chadic languages of different sub-groups in Yobe state (Nigeria), notably involving a syntactic phenomenon of isomorphic encoding in superficially disparate contexts:

- definite nouns
- protases in some conditional clauses (cf. Haiman (1978) on their “topical” nature)
- before final ex-situ S/A-focus (as opposed to other in-situ constituents)
- before final focus on different constituents in negative wh-questions

The resemblance of the post-VP subject markers to the markers of conditional clauses [...] is immediately obvious. [...] Assuming that conditional markers and post-VP subject markers all have their source in definite determiners, the semantic motivation for using these markers with questioned and focused subjects emerges. The post-VP subject marker is actually in constituency with the clausal material that PRECEDES it, and that material refers to a presupposed proposition that is relevant to the variable expressed by the WH word or to the value assigned in place of the variable, i.e. the referent that answers the WH question or a subject that takes contrastive focus. (Schuh 2005: 27, emphasis mine)

> marker universally takes scope over preceding material

> cf. Ngamo: suffix -i/-e marks

- definite noun, as in (7);
- conditional protasis, as in (8b.);
- questioned S in affirmative, as in (9b.);
- questioned O in negative, as in (10)c.

(7) tímhsí’ (Ngamo)

the sheep (Schuh 2005: 23)

(a. na ko gotko apa wuyo-k nauta, ko ọṣi duklu

if you going.to dig hole-of evil you dig:SUBJ shallow

If you are going to dig a hole of evil intent, dig it shallow.

b. ngọt na an-ko ta a go-nni
dala-

person if say-to.you QUOT AUX going-he swallow axe-BG

hold-for.him handle-of-it

If a person says he will swallow an axe, hold the handle for him. (Schuh 2005: 25)

(9a. Sauna kaja miya?

PN buy:COMPL what

[ BG ] [ FOC]

What did Sauna buy?

b. bo’ota soto ki Sauna-lo?
sell:COMPL bean.cake to PN-BG who

[ BG ] [ FOC]

Who sold bean cakes to Sauna? (Schuh 2005: 26)

(10a. Sauna tuba mota-s bu

PN push:COMPL car-? not

[ BG ] [ FOC]

Sauna did not push the car (Schuh 2005: 28)

b. tuba mota bu-i lo?
push:COMPL car not-BG who

Who did not push the car? (Schuh 2005: 30)

c. Sauna moiko-si bu-i are-i dabba yiya?

PN see:COMPL-it not-BG kind-of animal which

[ BG ] [ FOC ]

Which kind of animal did Sauna not see? (Schuh 2005: 30)
2.2 Multifunctional ye/yê in Bole as a focus marker?

+ Gimba (2005) analyzes the relevant marker ye/yê in one of Schuh’s (2005) sample languages, Bole, in more detail > partly confirms above range of functions:

- definiteness, as in (11)b.; possible scope over a preceding demonstrative, as in (12) and relative clause, as in (13), resulting in scope ambiguity
- conditional protasis, as in (14)

(11)a. mèemù dëppáu mòndù
man follow:PFV woman
A man followed a woman
b. mèemù ye dëppáu mòndù yê
man DEF follow:PFV woman DEF
The man followed the woman (Gimba 2005: 3)

(12) làawo émèy ye
child this DEF
this (spec.) child (Gimba 2005: 2)

(13)a. mèemù làa ndi-n ye dëppáu mòndù yê
man REL [go:PFV-VEN] DEF follow:PFV woman DEF
The man who came followed the woman (Gimba 2005: 3)

b. mèemù làa gòjjúu tèmsáh ye dëppáu mòndù yê
man REL [buy:PFV sheep] DEF follow:PFV woman DEF
*The man who bought the sheep followed the woman (Gimba 2005: 4)

c. mèemù làa gòjjúu tèmsáh dëppáu mòndù yê
man REL [buy:PFV sheep] follow:PFV woman DEF
The man who bought a sheep followed the woman (Gimba 2005: 4)

(14) bèäl Léngi 'yòrá-y yê, Bámói à dëppá-tó
if PN stop:PFV-3F.S ? PN 3S follow:FUT-her
[ BG ] [ FG ]
If Lengi stops, Bamoi will follow her (Gimba 2005: 9)

- author adds function of a focus marker, as in (15), facultative in this S-focus context

(15) (Án) sóönú (yê) mèemù
(AGR) fall:PFV ? man
[ BG ] [ FOC]
(one) who fell is a man/ A MAN fell (Gimba 2005: 5)

I can summarize the salient issues as follows: [1] ye marks definiteness when it appears to the right of an element; [2] ye marks focus when it appears to the left of an element; [3] any material following a focused element is also followed by ye; ...; and finally [4], ye functions as a post-clausal marker [in conditional clause linkage]. (Gimba 2005: 11)

> “4-function” analysis at odds with Schuh’s (2005) above conclusion and the general typological expectation about the unitary scope direction of one and the same element

> leaves context 3 (outlined below) entirely unexplained

> search for an alternative analysis

- ye/yê is dedicated to clause-final O/A focus, as in (16)b., (18)b., and (19)b. - it resolves a potential ambiguity without ye/yê, as in (16)a., (18)a., and (19)a.

(16)a. mèemù dëppáu mòndù
man follow:PFV woman

 *[SBJ.TOP] [ FOC ]
A man followed a woman or

[ BG ] [ FOC ]
A man followed a WOMAN (Gimba 2005: 6/7)

b. mèemù dëppáu ye mòndù
man follow:PFV ? woman

[ BG ] [ FOC ]
A man followed a WOMAN (Gimba 2005: 7)

(17) mòndù lào wife who
 whose wife (Gimba 2005: 6)

(18)a. dëppáu mòndù lào
follow:PFV woman who
[ BG ] [ FOC ] WHOSE wife did he follow? or
[ BG ] [ FOC ] WHO followed a woman?

b. dëppáu mòndù yê lào
follow:PFV woman ? who
[ BG ] [ FOC ] WHO followed a woman? (Gimba 2005: 6)

(19)a. dëppáu mòndù mèemù
follow:PFV woman man
[ BG ] [ FOC ] one followed a MAN’S WIFE or
[ BG ] [ FOC ] A MAN followed a woman

b. dëppáu mòndù yê mèemù
follow:PFV woman man
[ BG ] [ FOC ] A MAN followed a woman (Gimba 2005: 6)
- use of yé/yê in ditransitive clause reveals further complexity:
  - no restriction to S/A/O-focus, as in (22)
  - no restriction to clause-final focus, as in (23)
  > post-focus constituent also marked by yé/yê irrespective of definiteness (see function 3 above)

(20) Bamoi ónúu dóodó th móndu
PN give:PFV money to woman
[ SBJ:TOP ] [ FOC ]
Bamoi gave money to a woman (Gimba 2005: 7)

(21)a. ónúu dóodó th móndu yé lò
give:PFV money to woman who
Who gave money to a/the woman?
b. ónúu dóodó th móndu yé Bamoi
give:PFV money to woman ? PN
[ BG ] [ FOC ]
BAMOI gave money to a/the woman (Gimba 2005: 7)

(22)a. Bamoi ónúu dóodó yé î lò?
PN give:PFV money ? to who
Who did Bamoi give (the) money to?
b. Bamoi ónúu dóodó yé th móndu
PN give:PFV money to woman ?
[ BG ] [ FOC ]
Bamoi gave (the) money TO A WOMAN (Gimba 2005: 8)

(23)a. Bamoi ónúu yé lè th móndu yé?
PN give:PFV ? what to woman ?
What did Bamoi give a woman?
b. Bamoi ónúu yé dòódó th móndu yé
PN give:PFV money to woman ?
[ BG ] [ FOC ] [ BG ]
Bamoi gave MONEY to a/the woman (Gimba 2005: 8)

> possible unitary analysis: yé/yê is a background marker with unitary scope over the constituent preceding it, which can be of different complexity (NP, VP, or clause)
> purported focus use of yé/yê is an instance of “indirect focalization” by means of maximal backgrounding detached from the focus constituent

2.3 Multifunctional ná in Bagirmi

+ very similar situation observed for left-scoping ná in Bagirmi:
  - definite noun, as in (24); possible scope over relative clause, as in (25)b.
  - clause-initial topic, as in (26), (27), (28)b.
  - background after the focus-marked constituent, as in (28)a., (29)a.
  - background before the unmarked focus constituent, as in (29)c.

(24) kro ná
donkey DEF
the donkey (a donkey we have in mind) (Jacob 2010: 126)

(25)a. Boukar ngaɓa
PN person
[ SBJ:TOP ] [ FOC ]
Boukar (is a) man. (Jacob 2010: 135)
b. got ga Boukar ndugo kro tepre ná, kasko.
place REL [ PN PFV.buy donkey IDEF yesterday ] DEF market
[ SBJ:TOP ] [ FOC ]
The place, where Boukar bought a donkey yesterday, (it was the) market. (Jacob 2010: 136)

(26) tepre ná, Boukar ndugo kro.
yesterday TOP Boukar PFV.buy donkey
[ TOP ] [ SBJ:TOP ] [ FOC ]
Boukar bought a donkey yesterday.
(lit. As for yesterday, Boukar bought a donkey.) (Jacob 2010: 126)

(27) lua kede ná, ngaɓ kede nɛɛ-ŋ mli.
year IDEF TOP person IDEF woman-POSS.3S five
[ TOP ] [ FOC ]
Once upon a time, there was a man with five wives. (Jacob, field notes)

(28)a. Q: Boukar ndugo dili gee tepre kasko ná wá?
Boukar PFV.buy what ? yesterday market DEF Q
[ BG ] [ FOC ] [ BG ]
WHAT did Boukar buy at the market yesterday?
b. A: tepre kasko ná, Boukar ndugo kro kede
yesterday market TOP Boukar PFV.buy donkey IDEF
[ TOP ] [ BG ] [ FOC ]
Boukar bought a DONKEY at the market yesterday. (Jacob 2010: 124)
2.4 Nupe o - another covert case of “indirect focalization”?

+ neutral transitive clause with assertive focus on ‘wide’ VP (and possibly narrowly on O)

(30) Musa zú tsùkú
              PN break:PFV stick
    [SBJ.TOP] [FOC ]

Musa broke the stick. (George 1971: 82)

+ predicate-centered focus with á (cf. Hyman and Watters’ (1984) ‘auxiliary focus’)

(31)a. ké Musa jì bè tsùkú nyí o?
                what PN do:PFV OBL stick OBL ?
    [FOC ] [BG ]

What did Musa do with (or to) the stick?

b. Musa á tsùkú zú
                PN PCF stick break:PFV
    [SBJ.TOP] [FOC ]

Musa GOT the stick BROKEN./Musa HAS BROKEN the stick. [emphasis mine] (George 1971: 93)

[In (31)b.] the focus is on the action performed by Musa, that is, what Musa brought into being, or the action he has performed and its tangible effect. (George 1971: 93)

The out-of-focus status of tsùkú ‘stick’, although apparently in the syntactic domain of the foreground, is evident at its non-canonical pre-verbal position, as compared to (30) above.

(32)a. ké jì tsùkú o?
                what do:PFV stick ?
    [FOC ] [BG ]

What happened to the stick?

b. tsùkú á zú
                stick PCF break:PFV
    [SBJ.TOP ] [FOC ]

The stick is BROKEN. [emphasis mine] (George 1971: 93-4)

+ term focus in neutral past with final o on A, S, and O, as in (33), (34), (35), respectively⁴

(33)a. zé zú tsùkú o?
                who break:PFV stick ?
    [SBJ.TOP ] [FOC ]

Who broke the stick?

b. Musa zú tsùkú o
                PN break:PFV stick ?
    [FOC ] [BG ]

(It was) MUSA (who) broke the stick. [emphasis mine] (George 1971: 93)

(34)a. ké zú o?
                what break:PFV ?
    [FOC ] [BG ]

What broke?

b. Musa á tsùkú zú
                stick break:PFV ?
    [SBJ.TOP ] [FOC ]

(It was) the STICK (that) broke. [emphasis mine] (George 1971: 93)

(35)a. mfí gí eci
                1S eat:PFV yam
    [SBJ.TOP ] [FOC ]

I ate the yam.

b. eci mfí gí o
                yam 1S eat:PFV ?
    [FOC ] [BG ]

[It is (the) YAM I ate] (George 1971: 95)

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⁴ This clause can also be elaborated by an oblique agent phrase in clause-final position (George 1971: 97). In this case, the information structure is likely to be different.

⁵ The verb zú ‘break’ appears to be ambitransitive, like in English.
Thus, á is used to topicalize (obviously ‘focalize’) the verb aspect of the sentence. This is the sense in which á and ó are said to be in complementary distribution: á topicalizes [focalizes] the verb aspect, and ó topicalizes [focalizes] NP’s, and only one topicalization [focalization] is permitted per sentence. (George 1971: 93)

> ó as a “topicalizer” of NP’s? - inappropriate terminology; if anything, ó FOCALIZES NPs
> however, ó as a contrastive term focus marker (similar analysis by Kandybowicz 2008)
> unusual in being maximally detached from the constituent in its scope
> ?alternative approach in view of previous cases: ó derives from or can be analyzed as a backgrounding device with scope over the preceding extra-focal predicate including all non-initial extra-focal terms
> ó is not used in non-asserted subordinate clause marker.

Is the locative postposition ó historically related?

3 Preliminary summary

+ Do the relevant term focus strategies in the Chadic languages (§2.1-2) and Bagirmi (2.3) really rely on just “maximal backgrounding” or do they have other structural ingredients?
  a) focus in ex-situ position? No, in-situ focus possible (cf. (16)b., (22), (23) of Bole)
  b) focus in final position? No, non-final focus possible (cf. (23) of Bole)
  c) suprasegmental feature? not yet excluded, but so far no indication of relevance
> possible unified account of strategies: the central common denominator is left-scoping background marking which removes all other potential focus hosts from the assertion
> “indirect focalization” or “focalization by subtraction” detached from the focus

The formal constituent-bound IS encoding and the global IS function in a linguistic expression can be dissociated.

An IS function arises from the interaction of all IS-relevant structural devices in a linguistic expression.

> necessary distinction between local form and global function

+ “Focalization by subtraction” is never the only focus strategy but complements others like (assertive) in-situ focus (cf. Bole) and (contrastive) ex-situ focus (cf. Bagirmi).
> Under which circumstances does it develop?

+ “Focalization by subtraction” is in principle available for different focus scopes, depending on the constituent that is exempted from backgrounding.
> Does it prefer particular focus scopes, cross-linguistically and/or language-specifically?
  - operator focus in predicate-centered focus in general, but pseudo-cleft on verb?
  - subject in term focus of Chadic but not in Bagirmi

References


Güldemann, Tom. in preparation. Verbs “outside the predicate” and predicate-centered focus.


