Focus and background.
A comparative view on information structure in Sara

CNRS – Centre A.G. Haudricourt
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1 The field of research

1.1 Basic notions of information structure

Information structure reflects the formal means exploited to organize utterances, sentences and texts according to the common ground of the interlocutors (Chafe 1976, Krifka 2007). The most important categories of information structure are focus and topic.

- **Focus** is the most salient part of the utterance (Dik 1997: 326), which is also associated with the newly added, or asserted information as opposed to the presupposed information (“focus relation” Lambrecht 1994: 209ff.).
- **Topic** marks – in contrast to focus – the old, given or predictable information (e.g. Chafe 1976, Prince 1981, Givón 1987, Gundel 1988).

Different types of focus and topic are distinguished in the literature.

- Depending on the syntactic category of the element, which is in focus we distinguish **term focus** and **non-term focus** or “predicate-centered focus” (Hyman & Watters 1984, Guldemann 2009).
  - **Term focus** concentrates on the information-structural marking of nominal elements.
  - **Predicate-centered focus types** subsume focus on the lexical meaning of the verb (verb focus) and focus on sentence operators. Operator focus can be split in focus on the temporal, aspectual or modal operator and focus on the truth value of the utterance.
- The following types of topic are distinguished:
  - **Discourse topic** refers to the personnel of longer text sections.
  - **Sentence topic** is restricted to (single) sentences within the discourse and comprises the “**aboutness**” topic (Reinhart 1981: 54) and “**frame-setters**”, the temporal or spatial specification of the situation.
  - Aboutness and frame-setting topics can co-occur in one and the same sentence: *(How is John?) [As for his health,] Frame [he] TOP [is fine.] Comment (Krifka 2007: 46).*
  - For all kinds of topics, I will use “background” as an **overall term**.
1.2 The group of Sara languages

1.2.1 Genetic affiliation
Nilo-Saharan > Central Sudanic > Sara-Bongo-Bagirmi > West > Sara

![Diagram of Sara languages]

Figure 1: Languages of Sara (Boyeldieu 2006)

1.2.2 Typological information
- predominantly agglutinative languages with synthetic features
- all languages have S(ubject)V(erb)O(bject) word order
- all languages are tonal languages,
  - for example BAGIRMI, MBAY and KABBA have three level tones (H, L, M)
1.2.3 Geographical and socio-cultural situation

Figure 2: Selected languages for my project (areal information from Lewis 2009)

Possible candidates for my language sample:

**BAGIRMI** (Group: ?)
- ISO 639-3: bmi; 44,800 speakers; Chari-Bagirmi region (SW Chad)

**KENGA** (Group: ?)
- ISO 639-3: kyg; 40,000 speakers; Guéra region (SW Chad)

**SAR** (Group: Central)
- ISO 639-3: mwm; 183,000 speakers; Moyen-Chari region (SW Chad)

**MBAY** (Group: Central)
- ISO 639-3: myb; 88,300 speakers; Mandoul region (NE CAR/SW Chad)

**KABBA** (Group: Central)
- ISO 639-3: ksp; 83,000 speakers; Ouham-Pendé region (NE CAR/SW Chad)

**NGAMBAY** (Group: Central)
- ISO 639-3: sba; 896,000 speakers, Logone-Occidental region (SW Chad)

(statistics from Lewis 2009)
1.3 **Topic of investigation**

1.3.1 Description and Analysis

With my research project, I plan a comprehensive description and analysis of the information-structural systems of selected languages of Sara:

I would like to expand the data base elicited by myself for BAGIRMI and work with existing grammars and large textual data bases for the other languages:

- **KENGA**: Neukom 2010
- **MBAY**: Keegan 2009
- **KABBA**: Moser 2009

The data base and the language descriptions allow a comprehensive view on the strategies used for marking information structure:

- **General**: Bender 1996; Boyeldieu 1989, 2000
- **BAGIRMI**: Jacob 2005, 2010
- **KENGA**: Neukom 2010; Palayer 2004
- **MBAY**: Keegan 1997
- **KABBA**: Moser 2003
- **SAR**: Gakinabay & Wiesemann 1986

The elder descriptive literature allows for a substantial analysis of language-change processes in this language group:

- **BAGIRMI**: Gaden 1909; Stevenson 1969
- **KENGA**: Vandame 1968
- **NGAMBAY**: Thayer & Thayer 1971; Thayer 1973; Vandame 1963
- **SAR**: Delafosse 1897

For elicitation, I will continue using the materials of the CRC 632 Information structure (QUIS, Skopeteas et al. 2006 and Questionnaire on PCF from project B7) and several tests developed by myself.
1.3.2 Genealogical-historical Comparison

Based on the analysis, I would like to compare the data with special emphasis on a historical-comparative view:

I try to analyze existing similarities in the languages, e.g. the focus markers and the verb focus marking by duplication, and examine what they are due to:

- are they based on language contact,
- are they genealogically related or
- are they subject to other processes?

The selected languages of the Sara group are spoken in an area of less than 700 km of maximal expansion. In this area, a multiplicity of Afro-Asiatic, Nilo-Saharan and Niger-Congo languages affect each other.

Synchronously and diachronically, one can assume an intensive language contact. Probably the (former) wide spreading presence of BAGIRMI has left its traces in the other languages.

1.3.3 Contribution to the current linguistic discussion

The aim of my investigation is to contribute to the modern discussion on the nature of topic and focus by relating to the following issues:

I enrich the empirical basis of linguistic observations by providing novel data from languages which remained unexplored by now.

I will focus on less-intensively examined phenomena and attach my results to the current discussion on information structure cross-linguistically. Two prominent topics are:

- the predicate-centered focus types and
- background marking as a strategy to assign focus interpretation on part of the utterance.
2 Information structure in Sara

2.1 Bagirmi

2.1.1 Background marking

Unmarked background
Subjects appear in the canonical (initial) position. They are default topics:

(1a) Boukar ndugo kro.
    PN PFV.buy donkey
    Boukar bought a donkey.

(1b) Boukar taɗ djùm téŋé.
    PN PFV.do gruel millet
    Boukar cooked millet gruel. (f.n. Jacob)

Background marker ná
All elements of the sentence can be marked for background with marker ná:

(2a) kro ná
donkey DET
    the donkey (a donkey we have in mind)

(2b) ngal kudj nii kii
    in  house DET DEM
    in the house (we can see over there) (f.n. Jacob)

The marker has several functions that are interrelated with each other.
- The primary one is to assign definiteness to a noun (2a).
- It also occurs in the form of nii due to regressive assimilation, for example in the environment of demonstrative kii (2b).

The marker ná may also modify longer entities as background, for example the whole VP taɗ djùm téŋ ngal kudj nii kii ‘cooked millet gruel in the house’:

(3) Naŋ dán tạɗ djùm téŋ ngal kudj nii kii ná wà?
    who T.FOC PFV.do gruel millet in  house DET DEM BG Q
    Who cooked millet gruel in the house? (f.n. Jacob)
In relative clauses, ná appears in final position:

(4a) Ngaɓ ga dάŋ ndugo kro kasko ná, née Boukar.
   person REL T.FOC PFV.buy donkey market BG 3S PN
   The person that bought a donkey at the market was Boukar. (f.n. Jacob)

(4b) Dan ga ngaɓ-inj ki-de ɓe ná, née ná sa-kor-gà.
   before REL person-3S PROG-come home BG woman DEF eat-away-PFV
   The woman ate before her husband came home. (f.n. Jacob)

In example (4), ná marks rather the **border of an information unit.**
- The focus marker dάŋ could be here, as in (4a), or not, as in (4b). If there is a focus marker, it follows the relative pronoun. This observation is interesting, but not unusual (e.g. in AJA Fiedler p.c.)

Additionally, ná can also mark extra-posed **topics** (5a) and **frame-setters** (5b):

(5a) Mùdù-m ná, née mala ndojo déɓ gé N’Djamena.
   brother-POSS.1S BG 3S master PFV.teach person P PN
   And now for my brother, he is teacher in N’Djamena.

(5b) Lua kɛɗɛ ná, ngaɓ kɛɗɛ néɛ-nj mí.
   year ID EF BG person IDEF woman-POSS.3S five
   Once upon a time, there was a man with five wives. (f.n. Jacob)

Marked background structure:

[NP] ná BG – […] FOC

**Marker lá**

**Marker lá** is an optional marker of background which is only assigned to subjects:

(6) context: Speaking about a group of people and asking: “When did Boukar buy a donkey at the market?”

Boukar lá, tepre kasko dάŋ née ndugo kro.
PN SBJ.BG yesterday market T.FOC 3S PFV.buy donkey

As for Boukar, he bought a donkey YESTERDAY at the market.
(lit.: At YESTERDAY’S market, Boukar bought a donkey.) (f.n. Jacob)

Marked background structure for subjects:

**Marker (go) lé**

In addition to ná and lá, the marker lé or go lé occurs in constructions with a **contrast**:

(7) context: I know that Susanne and Anne bought a Toyota and a Benz.

    But who bought what?

    Susanne lé, ndugo Toyota, Anne go lé, (ndugo) Benz.

PN C.TOP PFV.buy PN PN C.TOP PFV.buy PN

Susanne bought the Toyota, Anne bought the Benz. (f.n. Jacob)

Marker (go) lé indicates a **parallel contrast**:

- The marker occurs in parallel constructions only. With respect to the context, here all information is given, but only the relation is new.
- The first topical element is usually followed by lé and the second one by go lé.
- Function and meaning of go are unclear.

### 2.1.2 Focus marking

**Subject focus**

Focus on the subjects is marked by **fronting** plus additional assignment of the focus marker đánj following the focused phrase:

(8) Q: Naŋ đánj tád djúm téŋ tepre

who T.FOC PFV.do gruel millet yesterday

ngal kudj nii kii ná wà?

in house DET DEM BG Q

WHO cooked millet gruel in the house yesterday?

A1: Boukar đánj tád djúm téŋ tepre ngalá.

PN T.FOC PFV.do gruel millet yesterday in

BOUKAR cooked millet gruel in (the house) yesterday. (Jacob 2010: 123)

A2: Boukar đánj (tádà).

PN T.FOC PFV.do

BOUKAR (did it). (f.n. Jacob)

**Subject focus structure:**

[SBJ] đánj FOC – [(V) – (OBJ) – (ADV)] bg
Non-subject focus

Focus on non-subjects can be realized in three different ways:
- focused non-subjects remain focus unmarked (9-A2),
- focus can be marked directly (10-A1) or,
- focus can be marked indirectly (10-A2).

(9) Q: Boukar ndugo dīi gee ṭepre kasko ná wà?
   PN PFV.buy what PRT yesterday market DET Q
   What did Boukar buy at the market yesterday?
   A1: ṭepre kasko ná, Boukar ndugo kro kɛɗɛ.
       yesterday market BG PN PFV.buy donkey IDEF
       Boukar bought A DONKEY at the market yesterday. (Jacob 2010: 124)
   A2: Boukar ndugo kro kɛɗɛ ṭepre kasko.
       PN PFV.buy donkey IDEF yesterday market
       Boukar bought A DONKEY at the market yesterday. (Jacob 2009: 7)

In (9), interrogative and focused objects are in their canonical position. Except for the pause-marking element gee in the question and the adverbial frame setting in (9-A1), there is no morphosyntactic focus marking.
- Particle gee is an optional supplement to dīi. It only occurs in in-situ questions, as in (9-Q), and will be replaced by dāŋ in ex-situ questions, as in (10-Q).
- The occurrence of both the adverbials in sentence-initial position entails the appearance of the focused object in sentence-final position. As seen in examples (10-A2) and (11), this final position seems to be the preferred position for focus.

The focusing system for non-subjects is organized symmetrically:
- Answers to in-situ wh-questions could be information-structural unmarked (9).
- Answers to ex-situ wh-questions must be marked (10).

(10) Q: dīi dāŋ, Boukar ndugo ṭepre kasko ná wà?
    what T.FOC PN PFV.buy yesterday market DET Q
    WHAT did Boukar buy at the market yesterday?
    A1: kro kɛɗɛ dāŋ, Boukar ndugo ṭepre kasko. direct
        donkey IDEF T.FOC PN PFV.buy yesterday market
    A2: ṭepre kasko ná, Boukar ndugo ná, kro kɛɗɛ. indirect
        yesterday market BG PN PFV.buy BG donkey IDEF
    Boukar bought A DONKEY at the market yesterday. (Jacob 2010: 125)
The ex-situ wh-question (10-Q) requires a morphosyntactically marked answer:
- In (10-A1), focus is marked directly: the object appears, like the subject in (8-A1, A2), in sentence-initial position and is marked with the focus marker čάŋ.

Non-subject focus structure with direct marking:
[OBJ/ADV] čάŋ FOC ~ [SBJ ~ V ~ ADV/OBJ] BG

- In (10-A2), focus is marked indirectly: all non-focused elements are left-peripheral and are marked by the particle ná as background.
- The focused element is not focus marked itself. As the only unmarked element it must be interpreted as focus, because it is excluded from the background domain.
- The focused element remains (without any morphological marking) in sentence-final position. The right periphery of the sentence is therefore analyzed as the preferred position for (unmarked) focus.

Non-subject focus structure with indirect marking:

Predicate-centered focus

Semantic focus on a verb is expressed by the duplication of the verb:

(11) Q: Boukar tάɗ djùm téŋ làbà sά ksàa wà?
PΝ PFV.do gruel millet or PFV.eat INF.eat Q
Did Boukar cook millet gruel or did he eat it?

A1: Djüm téŋ nά, Boukar tάɗ tάdà. object preposing
gruel millet BG PN PFV.do INF.do
A2: Boukar tάɗ djùm téŋ tάdà. object inclusion
PN PFV.do gruel millet INF.do
Boukar COOKED millet gruel (Jacob 2010: 129)

Example (11) could by analyzed as an in-situ focus strategy.
- The first verb in the construction is finite, the second one is infinite, cf. the “marked” infinitive with k-prefix in (11-Q).
- There is no focus marker.
The lack of (any other) information-structural marking and – at least in (11-A2) – the occurrence of a presupposed object between the verbs, implies that only the second part of the duplication, i.e. the infinite form, has to be analyzed as focal domain.

- The first part seems to provide the background and only the right-most element of the sentence is the exponent of focus.
- This observation confirms the idea of a sentence-final focus position, c.f. example (11-A2).

**Lexical verb focus structure:**

\[ [S \rightarrow V \rightarrow (OBJ)]_{BG} \rightarrow [INF.V]_{FOC} \]

### 2.1.3 Summary

*BAGIRMÌ* marks information structure morphosyntactically.

- **Fronting** can apply both to the foci and topics. These are disambiguated by means of the markers
  - *ná* or *lá* for **background**, *(go) lé* for a **contrastive topic**, and
  - *dáŋ* for **focus**.

- **Focus** is usually realized by **fronting** the relevant element followed by focus marker *dáŋ*.
  - Furthermore, focus can be realized in-situ, e.g. example (6) and (11).
  - There is a tendency to place focal elements in **sentence-final position**, c.f. examples (10-A2) and (11).

- *BAGIRMÌ* shows – concerning morphology – a “**simple marking**”:
  - For indication of focus, the occurrence of **one marker** (focus marker *dáŋ* or background marker *ná*) is **sufficient**.
  - Verb focus is realized by doubling without morphological markers.

- Focus can be marked **indirectly**:
  - The focal element itself remains unmarked, but the **whole background information is marked** by the background marker *ná*. 
2.2 Kenga

2.2.1 Background marking

**Unmarked Background**

Subjects in sentence-initial position are *default topics*:

(12) m̃ táḁ́n m̃ɛ̀t̃ tààr tūpiyù.

1S:FUT dire-CONN après-CONN parole:CONN lion

Je vais raconter l’histoire du lion. (Neukom 2010: 265)

**Marked background**

Topical or background information can be marked by the *determiner sé*:

(13) Naẫ sé m̃-jèèl jà̄y è k-ɔŋ k-ààj èyō.

lui BG 1S-savoir d’abord 3:FUT INF-pouvoir INF-survivre NEG

Quant à lui, je ne sais pas s’il va survivre. (Neukom 2010: 226)

Determiner sé can be replaced by *determiner lè*:

(14a) Naấ sé kàl-ì kì, nàάjè kà-mìì.

toi BG seul-2S DAT nous 1P-cinq

(Les voleurs disent à la victime:)

Tu es tout seul, et nous sommes cinq. (Neukom 2010: 91)

(14a) Naấ lè kàl-ì kì, nàάjè kà-mìì.

toi BG seul-2S DAT nous 1P-cinq

(Les voleurs disent à la victime:)

Tu es tout seul, et nous sommes cinq. (Neukom 2010: 228)

- Both of the determiners function as *background marker*.
- As seen in example (14), they both occur in the same context and with the same function.
- Marker sé is much *more frequent* than marker lè.
  - Example (14) presumes, that sé probably is the “common” marker and lè indicates more than only background.
  - Probably it has a special function as a *contrastive topic marker*, c.f. example (7) from BAGIRMI.
2.2.2 Focus marking

Term focus

Focus is realized by fronting. The focused element is marked by focus marker ɓó:

(15a) Māām ɓó m-ā-ì k-ɛ́f.  
   moi FOC 1S-FUT-2S.OI INF-donner  
   C’est moi qui vais te le donner. (Neukom 2010: 223)

(15b) Kɔrrɔ̀ (kì) ɓó m-ɛ́d-iŋ gûrs.  
   PN DAT FOC 1S-donner-3S.OI argent  
   (À qui as-tu donné l’argent? –) C’est à Korra que je l’ai donné.  
   (Neukom 2010: 224)

(15c) Jáakì ɓó mì-jèè tèd ëyô.  
   adverbial focus  
   aujourd’hui FOC 1S-vouloir travailler NEG  
   (Quel jour ne travailleras-tu pas? Aujourd’hui ou demain? –)  
   C’est aujourd’hui que je ne veux pas travailler. (Neukom 2010: 224)

Focus fronting is possible for subjects (15a), objects (15b), and adverbials (15c).
- Focus realization in KENGA seems not to involve any subordination strategy.

For focused complex noun phrases the focus marker is used as well:

(16a) Dèb-ni kéŋ ingle Mɔŋɔŋ-í sé ɓó dán-jë.  
   personne-REL SUB 3:rester PN-LOC DET FOC appeler-1P.O  
   C’est celui qui habite à Mongo qui nous a invités. (Neukom 2010: 223)

(Term) focus structure:  
[ SBJ/OBJ/ADV ] ɓó FOC – […] BG

Predicate-centered focus

Predicate-centered focus can be expressed by duplication of the verb:

(17) K-àànąa kic ʔŋ àannée ëyo, bàà mákálà mákálà.  
    INF-courir aussi 3:pouvoir 3:courir NEG aller doucement doucement  
    Il (= un serpent) ne pouvait pas courir (lit. courir, il ne pouvait pas courir),  
    il s’en est allé doucement. (Neukom 2010: 226)
Example (17) shows the following properties:
- There is a nominalised verb, “marked” with infinitive $k$-prefix, which is fronted.
- There is a finite remaining verb.
- No additional information-structural markers are present.

Because no information-structural marking is present, except the particle $kic$ ‘also’, the information-structural property of the fronted verb can be related both to topic or focus:
- Because the focus-sensitive particle for additive focus often marks preceding elements as topics, (17) could be analyzed as “topic fronting” (Güldemann 2010).
  - This implies that the entire construction must be interpreted as expressing truth-value focus.
- Due to analogy to formally equivalent examples in BAGIRMI (11) and in MBAY, (20) and (21), the construction can be analyzed as an instance of “focus fronting” of the nominalized verb.
  - In this case, the construction is interpreted as focus on the lexical content on the verb.

Lexical verb focus structure:

\[
[\text{INF.V}]_{\text{FOC}} \rightarrow [\text{V}]_{\text{BG}}
\]

2.2.3 Summary

KENGA marks information structure morphosyntactically.
- Fronting can apply both to the foci and topics. These are disambiguated by means of the markers $sé$ or $lé$ for background, and $bó$ for focus.
- Focus on the verb is marked by doubling and “focus fronting” without morphological marking.
- KENGA shows – concerning morphology – a “simple marking”: For indication of focus, the occurrence of the focus marker $bó$ is sufficient.
2.3  **Mbay**

2.3.1 **Background marking**

Presupposed elements can be **fronted**, followed by a **background marker**:

(18) Ndɔ̀ kò kɔ̀-mɔ̀tɔ́ dá Súu àw gɔ̀gá bǎa-á.

  day that DET-three **BG** PN go back river-LOC

Three days later, Suu went back again to the river. (Keegan 2009: 35)

*MBay* has several background markers:

- Keegan (1997: 116) describes the particles dá, nò, yé, ... as “end-of-clause markers” which mark the end of a (relative) clause.
- In example (18) particle dá can be analyzed with respect to its function as a (real) background marker. For marker yé holds the same, as can be seen in example (19).

2.3.2 **Focus marking**

**Term focus**

Focused elements can be **fronted**, too. They are marked with the particle lā ‘and, and then or but’ immediately after the focused element. Particle yé marks the rest of the sentence as background:

(19a) Súu lā ndà ngõn-ń yé.

  PN **G.FOC** hit child-POSS.3S.MSR **BG**

  It was Suu, who hit his child.

(19b) Ngõn-á lā Súu ndà-á yé.

  child-POSS.3S **G.FOC** PN hit-3S **BG**

  It was his child that Suu hit. (Keegan 1997: 158)

Focus marking is characterized by **fronting** and a morphological **“double marking”**:

- The focused element is marked by the focus marker lā, and the background information is marked by yé.
- In contrast to the translation, this focus marking does not include any subordinating strategy, like clefting, as neither a copular nor a relative marker are attested.
**Predicat-centered focus**

**Focus on a verbal element** can be expressed in nearly the same way as term focus:

(20) A: Kā-gā lò-í màj-àí.  
   tree-P POSS-2S good-be.NEG  
   Your wood is bad.

B: Jāgō, i kā-gā kó màjà kàři,  
   no be tree-P GEN good fine  
   nà ndūsš lā ndūsš yé.  
   but INF.worm.eaten **G.FOC** worm.eaten BG  
   No, the wood is fine; it's just that it's worm-eaten (Keegan 1997: 148)

Example (20) shows the combination of the markers *lā* and *yé*.

- In addition to that morphological marking, the **verb is duplicated**:
  - For lexical verb focus, the **first part** of duplicated verbs is **nominalized** and marked with the focus marker, the **second one is finite** and provides the background.
  - This analysis contradicts the description in literature. Keegan (1997: 147f.) describes the first element as finite and the second one as infinite. Compared to the focus marking strategies for term focus in *Mbay* it is more likely that verb focus follows the same structure.

**Focus structure:**

\[ [\text{SBJ/OBJ/ADV/INF.V}] \text{lā FOC} - […]/V] \text{yé BG} \]

In other examples for **intensifying the lexical verb**, the generic focus marker *lā* is replaced by the marker *ń* and background marker *yé* is replaced by the marker *dá*:

(21a) Tèjō ŋi-tèn dá yīkō ŋ yīkō dá.  
   honey DEM BG INF.sweet FOC sweet BG  
   This honey is very sweet.

(21b) bègō ŋ à bègō dá.  
   INF.steal FOC PRT 3S.PST.steal BG  
   He really steals a lot.

(21c) Ngōn ŋi-tèn dá k-āy kàsə ŋ āy ŋ dá.  
   child DEM BG INF-drink alcohol FOC PRT 3S.PST.drink BG  
   This boy really drinks a lot. (Keegan 1997: 151)

With dynamic verbs (21b, c), particle *à* appears, but it lacks with stative verbs (21a).
Even if examples (20) and (21) differ in marking strategies, both could be interpreted as **lexical verb focus**.

- Since no context is available for the examples in (21), an (additional) **truth-value focus** interpretation cannot be excluded.

### 2.3.3 Summary

**MBAY** marks information structure morphosyntactically.

- **Fronting** can apply both to the foci and topics. These are disambiguated by means of the markers dá, nò or yé for **background**, and lâ or ñí for **focus**.
- **Focus** is realized by **fronting** the relevant element followed by a focus marker.
- Term focus and predication-centered focus types are marked in the same way.
- Focus on a verb is realized by **doubling** and additional morphological marking.
- **MBAY** shows a **morphological “double marking”**: 
  - Focus and Background are marked morphologically with markers.
- Focus marking in **MBAY** seems not to involve subordination strategies.

### 2.4 Kabba

#### 2.4.1 Background marking

**Marker** dá usually occurs for background marking:

(22) Esú pànà: Bábbí! Kanji lèé-m nèénn dá m-ìnga bàá àång.

PN say really fish of-1S this BG 1S-find simply not

Esu answered and said: This, my fish I did not find it easily. (Moser 2004: 442)

#### 2.4.2 Focus marking

**Marker** á can be used as a focus marker:

(23a) Dèné ngo-màndè ké bàánn bbá màndè bè á wòy …

woman child-beautiful REL like.this before beautiful PRT FOC die

How can a beautiful girl like this die … (Moser 2004: 445)

(23b) Kubbu á m-ndoko tàkànè.

material FOC 1S-buy yesterday

This is the material I bought yesterday. (Moser 2004: 412)
Focus in KABBA is realized by **fronting**.
- The focused element is additionally marked by focus marker á.
- The marker can highlight subjects (23a) and objects (23b).
- The background information remains unmarked.

**Focus structure:**

\[ \text{SBJ/OBJ} \á_{\text{FOC}} - [\ldots]_{\text{BG}} \]

Focus marker á occurs also in **thetic sentences**, where it follows the subject:

(24) Esú dé kè Gúma-je á ŋ-to mè dàm té.

PN 3P with PN-P **FOC** 3P-be in granary LOC

(Once upon a time) Esu and Wasp lived in a granary. (Moser 2004: 411)

There is another marker. **Marker lá** seems to be an (multifunctional) **information-structural marker**. Following Moser (2004: 413f.), it is used to indicate focus, topic, given information, and contrast. But, most contexts are indifferent with respect to any particular information-structural interpretation.

In the story of “Esu and Enjamgotoje”, **markers á and lá** occur in almost the **same context**:

(25a) Esu found some birds swallowing mud and he asks: “What are you doing here?”

And the birds replied:

Bbo á dda nè-je á n-túru-je bàrò-nn bbò.

hunger **FOC** make thing-P **FOC** 1P-swallow-P mud-this DM

We are hungry. That’s why we are swallowing mud. (Moser 2004: 441)

(25b) And he said: “Really, if you are hungry, then here is my fish. Take some and eat then!” The birds ate all the fish and when he came to have a look, he saw the empty calabash. So he said: “Really how can you eat all my fish?” The birds said:

Bbo lá dda-je nya lá j-úšà tỳn bbò.

hunger **FOC** make-P much **FOC** 1P-eat all DM

This terrible hunger made us eat all, you see? (Moser 2004: 442)

Due to the similarities between (25a) and (25b), á could be just a reduction of lá.

In contrast to the common usage of the markers, in both (25a) and (25b) the markers occur twice. Neither the reason of this “double” marking nor the particular structure of these sentences (e.g. the function of final discourse markers) is clear yet.
2.4.3 Summary

KABBA marks information structure morphosyntactically.
- **Fronting** can apply both to the foci and topics. These are disambiguated by means of the markers
  - *dá* for *background* and
  - *á* for *focus*.
- The information-structural status of *lá* is not clear yet.
- **Focus** is realized by **fronting** the relevant element followed by focus marker *á*.
- The focus marking seems not to involve any subordination strategy.
- KABBA shows – concerning morphology – a “**simple and double marking**”:
  - For indication of focus, the occurrence of the focus marker *á* is sufficient,
  - But the focus marker sometimes occurs twice in one sentence.

2.5 Ngambay

2.5.1 Background marking

**Unmarked background**

The subject occurs in sentence-initial position as a **default topic**:

(26) M-̀rā  kùlà tàgànè.

  1S-PFV.do work yesterday

  Me, I did the work yesterday. (Thayer & Thayer 1971: 65)

**Background marker**

Marker *lé* is used as background marker:

(27a) Mā  lé,  m-̀rā  kùlà tàgànè.

  1S  BG  1S-PFV.do work yesterday

  Me, I did the work yesterday. (Thayer & Thayer 1971: 66)

(27b) Tàgànè  lé,  m-̀rā  kùlà kènè-̀g.

  yesterday  BG  1S-PFV.do work then-?

  Yesterday, I did the work then. (Thayer & Thayer 1971: 66)

For background marking, **fronting** of the relevant element is necessary.
2.5.2 Focus marking

Focus can be realized by means of the focus marker ɓá:

(29a) ŋeè ɓá, dèè ār-eé né k-ùsù.  \(3S \text{FOC} 3P\) cause-3S thing INF-eat
   It was HIM, they gave to eat. (Thayer & Thayer 1971: 50)

(29b) Bélé ɓá, dèè d-àskàm ndògò koò kènè-ğ.  \(3P\text{FOC} 3P\) can buy millet then-?
   TOMORROW, we [sic] can buy millet. (Thayer & Thayer 1971: 66)

Focus is marked by \textbf{fronting} the relevant element.
- Marker ɓá indicates focus on the object (29a) and the adverbial (29b).

Marker ɓá occurs in (subject) \textbf{wh-questions} for highlighting the pronoun:

(30) Seé ná ɓá à tûrà kêtè wà?
   It.is who \textbf{FOC} ? read first \textbf{Q}
   Who is it that will read first? (Thayer & Thayer 1971: 66)

2.5.3 Summary

\textbf{NGAMBAY} marks information structure morphosyntactically.
- \textbf{Fronting} can apply both to the foci and topics. These are disambiguated by means of the markers lé for \textbf{background} and ɓá for \textbf{focus}.
- \textbf{Focus} is realized by \textbf{fronting} the relevant element followed by focus marker ɓá.
- The focus marking seems not to involve any subordination strategy.
- \textbf{NGAMBAY} shows – concerning morphology – a “\textbf{simple marking}”:
  - For indication focus, the occurrence of \textbf{the focus marker ɓá is sufficient}.  

Marker lé refers, just as marker ndá in example (2) in \textbf{BAGIRMI}, to \textbf{definiteness}:

(28) maktujá lé
    book-P DET
    the books (Thayer & Thayer 1971: 18)
## 3 Comparison

### 3.1 Overview

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3.2 Hypotheses

3.2.1 Similarities concerning the marking of term focus

The Sara group involves quite similar strategies for marking term focus. All of the languages under study show focus fronting with an adjacent focus marker:

\[ \text{NP} \text{ marker}_{\text{FOC}} - [...] \text{marker}_{\text{BG}}. \]

The only exception to this rule is the obligatory double marking in MBAY, where focus is expressed with one focus marker following the focal part and one background marker following the background part of the sentence,

\[ \text{NP} \text{ marker}_{\text{FOC}} - [...] \text{marker}_{\text{BG}}. \]

For this topic, see second hypothesis (3.2.2).

The focus markers themselves show similarities as well. Three of them start with an implosive: \( \ddot{d} \ddot{d} \) in BAGIRMI, \( \dot{b} \dot{o} \) in KENGA and \( \dot{b} \dot{d} \) in NGAMBAY. Two languages, BAGIRMI and KENGA, belong to the unnamed branch, and NGAMBAY is a central Sara language. The observation that nearly the same focus marker occurs in languages from different branches and without (direct) contact, suggests that an indigenous focus marker once existed in Sara. This means, that information-structural strategies have been existing in these languages for a long time. In KENGA and NGAMBAY, the markers \( \dot{b} \dot{o} / \dot{b} \dot{d} \) seem to be native and not borrowed by language contact, for the other the origin is not clear. A closer inspection of the strategies of marking term focus in other languages of this area will provide an answer to this question.

3.2.2 Loss of “double marking” as ongoing language change

All languages under study have developed a morphological “single marking” system. Focus is realized by an adjacent focus marker, and background is realized by an adjacent background marker. The only exception is MBAY, which explicitly marks both focus and background in the sentence. Usually languages behave more economically and use only a single marking strategy. It can be expected that MBAY will also lose double marking and will be subject of language change in this respect. The direction of change is unclear. It is not impossible, that MBAY is on the way to an “indirect focus marking”, e.g. hypothesis V (3.2.5).
3.2.3 Differences in background marking strategies

The multitude of different background markers – even in one and the same language – suggests differences in function. All of these markers are used in similar constructions:

\[ [...] \text{marker}_{\text{BG}} - [...] \text{FOC}. \]

The marker *ná* in BAGIRMI is used for definiteness, background information, aboutness and frame-setting. With these functions it covers the whole spectrum of background marking. But, interestingly, there are two other background markers, the marker *lá* and the marker (*go*) *lé*. This co-occurrence reflects the rich system of background marking and implies that they are necessary for assigning different interpretations. Many grammars of other Sara languages point out the frequent use of background marking. But, there is evidence for different functions of these markers.

The data from BAGIRMI show that *ná* is used as a generic marker. Marker *lá* is restricted to the backgrounding of subjects. It is very rare and can be interpreted as a “relict”. More interesting is the marker (*go*) *lé*, which is used for contrast. In KENGA, we found the same situation: Marker *sé* could be interpreted as the generic marker and *lè* indicates contrast.

3.2.4 Two ways of verbal doubling

Beyond the similarities with respect to term focus marking, Sara languages show different strategies to mark focus on a verb. Based on the data from MBAY, semantic focus on a verb is marked by doubling and fronting of the nominalized verb (and morphological marking for focus and background):

\[ \text{[INF.V]} \text{marker}_{\text{FOC}} - \text{[V]} \text{marker}_{\text{BG}}. \]

In KENGA, the same strategy is observed, but without morphological marking:

\[ \text{[INF.V]} \text{FOC} - \text{[V]} \text{BG}. \]

BAGIRMI adopts a different strategy. Semantic focus on the verb involves verb doubling without fronting:

\[ \text{[V]} \text{BG} - \text{[INF.V]} \text{FOC}. \]

While MBAY marks all types of focus in the same way, it can be assumed that this strategy could be the basic strategy for verbal focus marking in Sara. This can be confirmed on the basis of data from KENGA, which uses the same construction, but without the markers.
Concerning **in-situ focus marking** in BAGIRM, we can refer to parallels in other languages in the area. In TANGALE (Afro-Asian, Chadic) semantically focused verbs remain in-situ and display no additional morphological markers:

\[
[SBJ \to V]_{BG} \to [INF.V]_{FOC} \quad (Jacob \ 2009).
\]

It is assumed that BAGIRM has borrowed this strategy from Afro-Asiatic languages.

### 3.2.5 Marked background information for indicating focus

In BAGIRM, there are two strategies for marking term focus: First, the **direct focus marking** (focus fronting), and second, the **indirect focus marking**. In the latter case the focused element remains itself unmarked, as far as the whole background information is marked. This focus marking construction could apply in KABBA as well.

The data from KABBA, especially the function of **marker lá**, deserves more attention. If the marker is not analyzed as a focus marker, but rather as a **background marker**, the picture will change. In example (31), one could argue that lá marks an afterthought:

\[
[..., \text{FOC} \to [\text{Baro}] \\text{lá}_{BG} \to [...]_{\text{FOC}}.]
\]

(31) Né Baro lá núju Nàrègótó.

3S PN BG engender PN

It is he, Baro, who engendered Naregoto (Moser 2004: 413)

Thus, example (25) should be analyzed another way. Here, it is repeated for marking with á (32a) and with changed interpretation for marking with lá (32b):

(32a) Esu found some birds swallowing mud and he asks:

“What are you doing here?” And the birds replied:

Bbo ádda nè-je á n-türü-je bàrò-nn bbò.

hunger FOC make thing-P FOC 1P-swallow-P mud-this DM

We are hungry. That’s why we are swallowing mud. (Moser 2004: 441)

(lit: It is the HUNGER which makes us swallowing mud – PJ)

(32b) And he said: “Really, if you are hungry, then here is my fish. Take some and eat then!” The birds ate all the fish and when he came to have a look, he saw the empty calabash. So he said: “Really how can you eat all my fish?” The birds said:

Bbo ládda-je nya lá j-ùsà tòyn bbò.

hunger BG make-P much BG 1P-eat all DM

This terrible hunger made us eat all, you see? (Moser 2004: 442)

(lit: The hunger is so terrible that we ATE ALL – PJ)
Example (32a) is a reply to a *wh*-question which licences a wide focus interpretation in the answer. This is in contrast to the analysis according to which the answer with *dí* has narrow focus on the subject (what not unusual is for thetic utterances). Example (32b) is a reply to a causal question. Its structure is similar to that of (32a), but using *lá* instead of *dí* results in a fundamental **change in the information-structural interpretation** of the sentence. More precisely, *lá* marks the preceding elements as background and thus indicates focus on the (information-structural non-marked) quantifier.

In this case, the construction in (32b) bears **parallels to the indirect focus marking** in **BAGIRMI**.

**Abbreviations**

**Glosses:**
Arabic numerals indicate a noun class or, when immediately followed by a gloss for gender and/or number, a person category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
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<td>BG</td>
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