Event-central and entity-central subtypes of thetic utterances and their relation to focus constructions

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Definition

“The thetic statement forms a unit with respect to what it contributes to the discourse at a given point. It expresses a pragmatically unanalyzed state of affairs and presents it as a piece of complex information. ... This is not the case with the categorical statement. It presents a state of affairs as something analyzed, dissected into different information units. It selects one of the participants of the state of affairs in order to present it as a predication base and arranges the rest in such a way that it forms the predication about the selected predication base.”

(Sasse 1987: 558)
Assumptions

Theticity
- is a functional notion that can be encoded in different ways
- requirement for such a construction: it has to be able to cancel the prototypical categorical interpretation of a sentence (Güldemann 2010: 86)

Bipartiteness of categorical utterances
pragmatic: topic ← comment
grammatical: subject ← predicate
Two types of thetic utterances

event-central
states the existence of the event and attributes the participant to it;
prototypical: impersonal constructions (‘it is raining’)
“fails to contain a referential NP, and thus fails to tell something about an entity” (Sasse 1987: 526f.)

entity-central
statement about the existence of an entity to which the property of being involved in an event is attributed (Sasse 1987: 527)
prototypical: presentative expression (‘there is a man’)
“introduces an entity but fails to report an event about it” (Sasse 1987: 527)
Encoding devices for thetic utterances as described by Sasse (1987)

- **entity-central**
  - subject accentuation
  - subject inversion
  - split constructions
  - existential construction

- **event-central**
  - subject incorporation
  - impersonal construction

Some of these constructions are as well be used to express focus on part of the utterance.
Claim

entity-central strategy
- entity is highlighted, predicate deranked
- relates to S(ubject) F(focus)

event-central strategy
- event highlighted, entity backgrounded
- relates to P(redicate)-C(entered) F(ocus)
- firstly explicitly stated by Güldemann (1996)
Entity-central construction in German

(1) HANS hat dich gerufen. (Sasse 1987: 530)

uttered as unexpected information - thetic
as answer to: Who has called me? - SF
Event-central construction in Bantu

(2) Gusii (E 42): first sentence of a story

Bwana D.O. na -ba -chiig-ete aba-nto ...

1:district chef ny:1S-2S.OBJ -advise-PRS.PROG 2-person ...

The district chef is advising people (how to improve their villages).

(Güldemann 1996: 190, example from Whiteley 1965: 95)
Question

What is the relation between focus strategies and thetic utterances? What do both occurrences have in common that enables them to share the same construction?
Investigation is based on

1. sentences expressing a state of affairs containing both an event and an entity as these can be uttered as event-central or as entity-central

2. the expression of the most typical discourse contexts where thetic statements can be expected (explanations, background descriptions, surprising or unexpected events, weather expressions, beginning of a story, cf. Sasse 1987: 566-7)

3. a sample of 21 African languages (all or them belonging to the language sample of our project):
Language Sample

**Niger-Congo:**
Wolof, Bambara, Suypire, Fulfulde, Mombo, Aja, Emai, Makuwa, Matengo, Northern Sotho

**Afro-Asiatic:**
Hausa, Tamashek, Somali, Amharic

**Nilo-Saharan:**
Koyraboro Senni, Ama, Mbay, Maa, Kanuri

**Khoisan:**
Ts’ixa, Sandawe
Wolof uses three different constructions for the expression of theticity:

- SF construction
- PCF construction
- non-focus construction: presentative
Wolof – Subject focus construction

(3) subject focus verb paradigm

\[
\text{Daba moo ma ko bind.} \\
\text{PN 3S:SBJ.FOC 1S.OBJ 3S.OBJ write} \\
\text{ \{Who wrote you this letter?\}} \\
\text{It was DABA (lit. It was DABA (who) wrote it to me)}
\]

(Robert 2010a: 254, Robert 2000: 238)
Wolof – Subject focus construction and the expression of theticity

(5) explanatory
{A person arrives and hears screaming. He asks: What is going on here?}

Musaa moo dóor Ndey
PN 3S:SBJ.FOC beat PN
Musa trashes Ndey.

(Robert 2010a: 254, Robert 2000: 238)
Wolof – Predicate-centered focus construction

(4) verb focus paradigm

tóx-u-ma, da-ma-y fo
smoke-NEG-1S PC.FOC-1S-IPFV play
I am not smoking, I am PLAYING (with the cigarette).

(Robert 2000: 259)
Wolof – Predicate-centered focus construction and the expression of theticity

(8)  explanatory
{An old man who met every afternoon his friends under the palaver tree, did not show up a certain afternoon. When he came again, one of his friends asked him: My friend, you didn’t come here yesterday!}

da-ma  am-oon  gan  démb
PC.FOC-1S  have-PST  guest  yesterday
I had a guest yesterday.

(Sall 2005: 101)
Wolof – Presentative construction and the expression of theticity

(11)  explanatory

Maria mu-ngi nelaw.
PN 3S-PRES sleep
{Where is Maria?} Maria is sleeping.

(B. Dione, p.c.)
Summary of findings cross-linguistically

1. Most languages may resort to a construction that is also used to express subject focus
   - exceptions: (i) Makhuwa, Matengo (ii) Sandawe
   - unclear cases (no SF construction found, maybe due to missing data): Amharic, Mbay, Ts’ixa

2. Only three languages use a dedicated predicate-centered focus strategy:
   - Wolof, Northern Sotho, Somali
   - this is in all three languages not the only strategy, others, like a subject focus construction or a canonical sentence form, can also be found
Summary of findings cross-linguistically

3. Many languages seem to prefer a canonical construction:
   Hausa, Amharic, Mbay, Supyire, Aja, N. Sotho

4. There are some languages that use a construction which combines elements of subject focus and PCF constructions:
   (i) Makhuwa, Matengo: which use a special thetic VS construction
   (ii) Sandawe: which marks the subject with the focus marker, but additionally all other non-verbal elements in the clause with a person-gender-number marker
   (iii) Ama: which uses a dedicated PCF marker in a canonical construction
Summary of findings cross-linguistically

There is a strong empirical basis that confirms our claim, that focus expressions and thetic statements share the same construction type. What is the motivation behind this?
Theticity and focus

Sasse (1987) denies that thetic sentences express focus on the subject or on the entire sentence, for two reasons:

1. there is an obvious pragmatic difference between subject focus and thetic statements (Sasse 1987: 572)

2. thetic statements cannot be regarded as focus on the entire utterance, as focus is understood by him as part of a notional pair, operating on sentence level, that necessarily needs a non-focal counterpart (what he calls “the ‘up hill and down dale’ concept of the traditional notion of focus”, Sasse 1987: 573)
Theticity and focus

– nevertheless, both functionally very different notions may choose the same structures, which are, in the languages under study here:
1. cleft-like structures
2. morphological marking of the focused item
3. use of different verb paradigms
4. word order change
Cognitive motivation

as the two “focus” constructions represent two different variations of thetic utterances, it is assumed that there are different cognitive principles underlying both structures, as already observed by Sasse (1987: 563):

entity-central thetic statements:
the entity is stated, to which the event is attributed

event-central thetic statement:
“is a kind of part-whole relationship, the ‘whole’ being the state of affairs, and the ‘part’ the individual involved.” (Sasse 1987: 563)

→ in both cases, the grammatical subject-predicate relation is removed
The ‘subject focus’ construction as entity-central construction

(3) subject focus verb paradigm (moo > mu + -a)

Daba moo ma ko bind.
P{3}S:SBJ.FOC 1S.OBJ 3S.OBJ write
{Who wrote you this letter?}
It was DABA (lit. It was DABA (who) wrote it to me)

(Robert 2010a: 254, Robert 2000: 238)
The ‘subject focus’ construction as entity-central construction

can be analyzed as cleft construction with the subject clefted and marked by an identificational marker \(a\)

(13) Gàllaay a ‘It is Gallay’ (Torrence, to appear: 5)

- this clefted part is followed by the predicate, including objects
- there is no indication that the predicate is grammatically deranked, even though it is pragmatically subordinated

\[
\text{SUBJ/pro + ID -a + verb + object} \rightarrow [\text{it is X}] [\text{predicate}]
\]
The ‘subject focus’ construction as entity-central construction

from a pragmatic point of view, the subject is upgraded and the predicate downgraded, with the effect that
- the subject is clearly marked as non-topic (cf. Fiedler et al. 2010: 249), and the predicate as non-assertive

- that is interpreted
  → in SF constructions: as highlighting the subject
  → in thetic utterances: as both elements having the same information-structural value, thus constituting a single information unit
The ‘subject focus’ construction as entity-central construction

Categorical sentence

SF structure

Topic Comment subject upgraded → identical IS value or predicate downgraded subject higher

(Güldemann 2011, seminar on “Theticity in African languages”)
The ‘predicate-centered focus’ construction as entity-central construction

+ this structure is not easy to analyze in Wolof

(4) tóx-u-ma, da-ma-y fo
smoke-NEG-1S PC.FOC-1S-IPFV play
I am not smoking, I am PLAYING (with the cigarette).

(Robert 2000: 259)
The ‘predicate-centered focus’ construction as entity-central construction

- there are probably two elements involved in the form da + pro:
  1. the equational copula di (also described as “verbe d’existence” by Sauvageot (1965: 102))

(14) góor gii di sunu njiit
    man DEM be 1P.POSS chief
This man is our chief. (Kihm 1999: 247)

2. a suffix -a which is at least homophone to the identificational marker a and to a deictic suffix -a indicating distance
The ‘predicate-centered focus’ construction as entity-central construction

- furthermore, the subject does not need to be expressed as overt nomen, but must be expressed as suffix to the form *da* (never as independent form) – thus, the nominal subject appears to be topicalized by left-dislocation or simply left out, the pronominal form is pragmatically less important than the verb
- thus, *da* + pro marks the event as the most important element of the clause
- the predicate-centered focus construction can therefore eventually be paraphrased as

(SUBJ) + *di* + -a-pro + verb → [X, it is pro-verb]
(for the sentence in (4): it is my playing)

→ part-whole relation as proposed by Sasse
The ‘predicate-centered focus’ construction as entity-central construction

from a pragmatic point of view, the subject is backgrounded and the predicate foregrounded by this operation with the effect that

→ as PCF construction: the state of affairs is in focus
→ as thetic utterance: the predicative relationship between subject and predicate is removed, there is a compact, non-structured presentation of the event

- the predicate is often restricted to intransitive verbs thus avoiding the ambiguity between highlighting the verb or the object
The ‘predicate-centered focus’ construction as entity-central construction

Categorical sentence

PCF structure

Topic Comment predicate upgraded \(\rightarrow\) difference in IS range expanded
(subject)(predicate) subject downgraded predicate alone bearing assertion

(adapted on Güldemann 2011, seminar on “Theticity in African languages”)

Ines Fiedler, LAGB - Theticity, London 30 August 2013
Form – Function correlation?

**entity-central thetic utterances** - preferably used for the stage-setting of new discourse participants

**event-central thetic utterances** - might be restricted to cases where the event as a whole is in the center of attention

- Sasse’s 1987 description for Arabic
- Güldemann (1996: 192) for Gusii: the PCF construction is not used to make entities prominent but rather at places where the whole proposition introduces new discourse topics

→ Wolof data contradict these observations
Form – Function correlation?

→ Wolof data contradict these observations
both the subject focus construction and the verb focus construction are
used for explanations and at the beginning of a story

(15) (= 5) explanatory
SF construction used instead of more appropriate PCF construction
{A person arrives and hears screaming. He asks: What is going on here?}
Musaa moo dóor Ndey
PN 3S:SBJ.FOC beat PN
Musa trashes Ndey.

(Robert 2010a: 254, Robert 2000: 238)
Form – Function correlation?

(16)  (= 9)
beg_ of a story - PCF construction for stage-setting of an
ent_i instead of SF construction

Ca jaman_yu yàgg, dafa am-oon
in t_rel last_long, PC.FOC:3S have/exist-PST
benn ilimaanu jàkka
one imam mosque
In former times, there was an imam of a neighborhood mosque.

(Robert 1996: 155)
Form – Function correlation?

(17) PCF in an out-of-the-blue context, as explanation
Sama woto dafa paan.
1S.POSS car 3S:PC.FOC break down
{Hey my friend, come and help me.} My car is broken.

(FT-005, B. Dione, p.c.)

(18) SF as answer to the question “What happened?”
Sama woto moo paan-oon.
1S.POSS car 3S:SBJ.FOC break_down-PST
{What happened?} My car broke down.

(FT-009, B. Dione, p.c.)
Form – Function correlation?

→ no functional explanation behind the choice of the two structures at hand
→ rather, it is influenced by the way the speaker interprets the current context
Correlation with IS profile

- languages without dedicated predicate-centered focus construction
  → cannot use it for the expression of thetic statements
- languages that exploit a doubling strategy for the expression of SoA focus, hence dispose about a special PCF strategy,
  → don’t use it for the expression of theticity – probably because it is in fact a nominal strategy
- languages with a highly grammaticalized focus system, which mostly use special verb morphology to express focus with different scope
  → may use subject focus as well as predicate-centered focus constructions to express theticity
Constraints on class of verbs and aspectual value of the predicate

- in most cases of languages which may use more than one structure, the choice seems to be arbitrary
- only in some languages, it is clearly triggered by grammatical constraints
(i) Tamashek: canonical structure with intransitive verbs, SF with transitive verbs (Prokhorov 2010)
(ii) Kanuri: the so-called verb emphasis completive and the subject focus construction are used with perfective verbs; with imperfective verbs, the canonical structure is found (Cyffer 1974, 1998, Hutchison 1981, 2000)
(iii) Wolof presentative in my data is in most cases used in progressive environments – that is conform to Robert’s characterization concerning the main function of the presentative as situating the event “which happen to him suddenly and, strictly speaking, unexpectedly” “in the speaker’s space-time” (Robert 2010b: 477f.)
Constraints on class of verbs and aspectual value of the predicate

(iv) Somali:

• SF is predominantly used
• with intransitive verbs and transitive verbs with pronominal objects (3 person object pronoun = Ø), in the answer to ‘What happened’, the so-called verb focus structure is attested, which is claimed by Tosco as having rather declarative value (Tosco 2012: 3)
• this structure is therefore used when no ambiguity between SoA focus and VP focus can arise
Constraints on class of verbs and aspectual value of the predicate

(iv) Somali:
subject focus: baa/ayaa, verb shows reduced agreement

(19) nin = kíi            baa Maryan dil-áy
man = M.ANAPH.SBJ   T.FOC   PN      beat-PST.3M.FOC
{Who beat Maryan?} The MAN beat Maryam.

(Tosco 2002: 31)
Constraints on class of verbs and aspectual value of the predicate

(iv) Somali:
subject focus: baa/ayaa, verb shows reduced agreement

(22) beginning of story = SF

laba nacas baa waa is qab-ay
two fool T.FOC time REFL take-PST.3M.FOC
There were once two fools married to each other.

(Cissé 1985: 73, in Tosco 2002: 32)
Constraints on class of verbs and aspectual value of the predicate

(20) predicate-centered focus: particle *waa* (= declarative particle)

haa, Cali lacagtii [wuu] keenay.
yes PN money.DEF PC.FOC:3M brought

{Ali brought the money, didn’t he?}
Yes, Ali BROUGHT the money.

(Saeed 1984: 178, ex. 61)
Constraints on class of verbs and aspectual value of the predicate

(24) thetic, explanatory = PCF

nin-kíi  waa  dhint-ay
man-M.ANAPH.SBJ  PC.FOC  die-PST.3M
{What happened?} The man died.

(Tosco 2012: 3)
Language change: Ama

- in elicitation, mainly the predicate-centered focus strategy (respectively a mixed strategy) occurred
- subject focus construction was only delivered later, but regarded as even better by the speaker, preferred by older people, and is also found in texts (used as explanations, reasons, general statements, background of history, surprise (cf. Fiedler 2013))

→thetic interpretation of PCF constructions as new development?

- this might be influenced by the fact that the people I have worked with were refugees living already longtime outside the traditional language area
Language change: Ama

(26) subject focus: cleft

kér a/bá né (fúl-ò) tàl
woman DECL FOC (bean-ACC) eat.PFV

{Who ate the beans?} A/THE WOMAN ate (the beans).

(Fiedler, f.n.)
Language change: Ama

(27) PCF construction: marker *ka* preverbal in canonical sentence-structure, all known information is dropped

bwêr,  ká       tířē.
no,  PC.FOC call.PFV
{The woman hit Kamal.} No, she CALLed (him).

(Fiedler, f.n.)
Language change: Ama

(29) thetic: explanatory – predicate-centered focus construction
{Hey Kamal, please come here and help me.}
ě tirmíl áŋ ká lówā-n
CNJ car 1S.ACC PC.FOC die.PFV-remPST
My car broke down. (lit.: The car broke me down.) (Fiedler, f.n.)

(30) thetic: explanatory – subject focus
(wőń) tirmíl bá nē áŋ lōwá.
(1S.POSS) car DECL FOC 1S.ACC break/die.PFV
{What happened?} My car broke down.

(Fiedler, f.n.)
Conclusion

- for the expression of functionally thetic statements a great range of constructions is used
- predominant use of special, non-canonical constructions to express thetic statements – these constructions answer the need to avoid the categorical interpretation of subject-predicate structures as found dominant in canonical sentence structures
- languages differ as to how they encode thetic statements – either as entity-central or as event-central, reflected by polyfunctional structures that are also exploited for the expression of subject focus or predicate-centered focus
- thus, there is a strong empirical foundation for the relation between focus utterances and thetic statements based on cognitive principles
Conclusion

- strong preference for the use of the SF construction in the language sample
  - possibly based on the fact that it is easier to achieve to take the subject out of its role as predication basis/topic
  - might also be related to the fact, that cross-linguistically, argument focus is more often especially marked than predicate-centered focus

- the event-central thetic strategy is only found in languages which show verb paradigms sensitive for information-structure
  - in some of them, both the event-central as well as the entity-central strategy exist side by side
  - the choice of one or the other strategy seems to be arbitrary in some languages
  - in other languages, the restrictions on the use of the event-central strategy are clearly determined by the class of verbs involved: the entity-central strategy is used for utterances with transitive verbs, and the canonical (Tamashek) or event-central strategy for intransitive verbs
Conclusion

- surprisingly, there are a number of languages which prefer the canonical sentence structure – this structure is generally analyzed as default categorical structure, with the subject as topic and the predicate as comment
  - Is the canonical structure representing an unmarked event-central statement?

- obviously, these languages don’t need special thetic constructions – disambiguation achieved by interpretation of the context

- confirms my preliminary assumption that theticity is rather a functional than a grammatical category
Thank you!