

Focus Marking in Western Chadic: Implications for a Cross-Linguistic Theory of Focus

The paper investigates the focus marking systems of three Western Chadic languages and their implications for a unified theory of focus: Hausa, Tangale, and Guruntum employ different focus marking strategies and differ in the degree to which focus is grammatically encoded. The discussion highlights (i.) the special status of grammatical subjects concerning focus marking; (ii.) the (optional or systematic) absence of focus marking; (iii.) the pervasiveness of focus ambiguity across languages. The findings support an account of focus marking in terms of violable constraints over rule-based accounts that were developed for accent languages and presuppose focus prominence (Selkirk 1995).

Previous accounts of focus in Hausa (Newman 2000) and Tangale (Kenstowicz 1985, Tuller 1992) concentrate on movement of nominal focus constituents to a focus position. Focus marking of VP- and verbal predicates is largely neglected. Apart from a brief comment in Haruna (2003), there exists no discussion of focus marking in Guruntum.

- i. In **Hausa**, focus can be marked by A-bar-moving the focus constituent to a left-peripheral position (1ab). This movement is accompanied by a change in the verbal aspect, plus an optional focus marker. These are the only means of marking focused subjects (which move vacuously) (1c). Focus marking is obligatory only with subjects (Jaggar 2004): Non-subjects can remain *in situ*, in which case focus is not marked at all, resulting in focus ambiguity (2). The *ex situ/in situ* variation with non-subjects is not governed by semantic factors, e.g. an exhaustive interpretation for *ex situ* foci (Kiss 1998).
- ii. In **Tangale**, focus marking is consistent only with subjects, which are moved to a post-verbal position (3ab). In the perfective aspect, focused non-subjects are marked by a prosodic boundary that blocks prosodic processes such as vowel elision (4). This system leads to focus ambiguities: The boundary in (4) indicates focus either on the OBJ, or on the VP or even on V. The location of the prosodic boundary *inside* focused VPs is not predicted by current theories of focus prominence (e.g. Selkirk 2004). It also shows that the boundary cannot be the result of moving the focus constituent. In the progressive and future aspects, focus ambiguity is even more pervasive. The specific syntactic configuration found with these aspects blocks the insertion of prosodic boundaries: The distinction between focused and non-focused non-subjects is thus neutralised (5).
- iii. **Guruntum** has an obligatory morphological focus marker *a* which normally precedes all focus constituents (6ab). However, focus on OBJ and V (as well as VP) is ambiguously marked by *a* preceding the OBJ (6c). Guruntum and Tangale thus differ from accent languages in which narrow V- and OBJ-focus are formally distinguished.

The Chadic data have various theoretical implications: (i.) The information-structural (IS) category *focus* is grammatically relevant in all three languages because focused subjects must be marked; (ii.) All theories of focus marking that presuppose that focus be necessarily marked have difficulties in accounting for the inconsistency of focus marking in Hausa and Tangale. Why would only F-features on subjects, but not on objects trigger movement/prosodic prominence at PF? It seems more appropriate to capture the subject/ non-subject split in Hausa and Tangale by means of violable IS-constraints such as *Mark Subject Focus* (ranked high cross-linguistically, possibly because subjects are default topics in most languages) and *Focus Prominence (FP)* (outranked by faithfulness constraints in Hausa and Tangale); (iii.) Selkirk's (1995) *Basic Focus Rule* cannot account for the fact that narrow V-focus and OBJ-focus are marked alike in Tangale and Guruntum. Instead, focus ambiguity is better conceived of as emerging from the direct interaction of (conflicting) violable constraints that restrict information-structure, syntax and prosodic structure (Schwarzschild 1999, Büring 2004). The observed focus ambiguities in the three Chadic languages will be shown to follow from the interaction of the above IS-constraints with markedness constraints. In Hausa, ambiguities with *in situ* foci follow from the absence of focus marking (= low-ranked *FP*). Ambiguities with *ex situ* foci follow from syntactic constraints on A-bar-movement. In Tangale and Guruntum, focus ambiguities follow from a categorial constraint: Focus marking in form of a prosodic boundary or morphological marker must be aligned with (maximal) NPs.

More generally, the proposed analysis allows for a unified treatment of focus phenomena in tone languages (Chadic) and in accent languages: In the latter, focus marking is obligatory (*FP* ranked high) and focus ambiguities follow from (prosodic) constraints on accent placement (Büring 2001).

- (1) a. Kànde taa dafà kiifii. b. **Kiifii** (nèe) Kànde ta dafàa.
K. 3sg.f.perf cook fish *fish FM.m K. 3sg.f.rel.perf cook*
 ‘Kande cooked fish.’ ‘Kande cooked FISH.’
- c. **Kànde** (cèe) ta dafà kiifii.
K. FM.f 3sg.f.rel.perf cook fish
 ‘KANDE cooked fish.’
- (2) Sun kaamà dawaakii.
3pl.perf catch horses
 ‘They caught horses/ They caught HORSES/ They CAUGHT HORSES/ They CAUGHT horses.’
- (3) a. Lak way-ug lándà. b. way-ug land-í **nóŋ** ?
Laku sell-perf dress *sell-perf dress-the who*
 ‘Laku sold a dress.’ ‘Who sold the dress?’
- (4) Lak wai-gó / * way-ug lándà.
L. sell-perf dress
 ‘Laku sold A DRESS.’ / ‘Laku SOLD A DRESS.’ / Laku SOLD a dress.’
- (5) Lakú n ball wasiika.
L. prog writing letter
 ‘L. is writing a letter/ L. is writing A LETTER/ L. is WRITING A LETTER/ L. is WRITING a letter.’
- (6) a. Tí bà wúm kwálingálá. b. **Á fúrmáyò** bà wúm kwálingálá.
3sg prog chew colanut *FM fulani prog chew colanut*
 ‘He is chewing colanut.’ ‘THE FULANI is chewing colanut.’
- c. Tí bà wúm á kwálingálá.
3sg prog chew FM colanut
 ‘He is chewing COLANUT/ He is CHEWING colanut/ He is CHEWING COLANUT.’

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