

Focus marking and interpretation in Mabia languages

É.Kiss' (1998) classification of new information and contrastive focus based on in-situ and ex-situ focus marking strategies in intonation languages respectively, has been confirmed in some (West) African languages, especially those without a morphological in-situ focus marking strategy (cf. Aboh et al. 2007, Hartmann & Zimmermann. 2007, Grubic et al. 2019). However, studies on languages with optional in-situ focus marker argue for a contrastive and exhaustive focus interpretation in an in-situ position in the presence of the focus marker, but new information for unmarked in-situ focus. An example of such languages is Mə̀dumba (Zimmermann & Kouankem t.a.). Some open questions are (a) What happens if a language obligatorily marks not only ex-situ focus but also in-situ focus morphologically? (b) What would be the status of the focus morpheme in relation to the in-situ vs. ex-situ focus strategies? These are some of the questions answered in this talk. In this talk, I present data from two Mabia languages- Kusaal and Kasem- that obligatorily mark in-situ focus (as well as ex-situ focus) with morphological focus markers. I argue that, unlike Mə̀dumba, morphologically marked in-situ focus in the Mabia languages can be new information as well as contrastive and exhaustive. In addition to contrastivity and exhaustivity, I show that ex-situ focus in the left periphery involves additional interpretive effects such as existence presupposition and mirativity (cf. Grubic et al. 2019, Cruschina 2019, Cruschina & Bianchi 2021). This shows that the morphological focus markers in these languages are not primarily contrastive/exhaustive markers. They are formal focus markers, and it is the contexts that influence the focus interpretation. The left periphery however, is specified for other interpretations. The theoretical implication of this study is that there is a structural ambiguity in focus interpretation in these languages which shows that contrastive and exhaustive foci are not morphosyntactically marked.