

Focus movement in the low focus field in Grassfields Bantu

Paul Roger Bassong
Collège de France & University of Yaounde 1
Gratiana Linyor Ndamsah
University of Yaounde 1

Like many Grassfields Bantu languages, Lamnsó' and Limbum exhibit three salient focus marking strategies that differ on their surface forms. Both languages exhibit a basic SVO order as illustrated in (1).

- (1) a. Buri fo s̄ i Beri [Lamnsó']
Buri give.PST fish PREP Beri
'Buri gave the fish to Beri.'
- b. Nkehni t̄fē fā ŋwà? nè Nkunku [Limbum]
Nkeni PROG give book PREP Nkunku
'Nkeni is giving the book to Nkunku.'

Contrastive non-subject focus can be realised postverbally. In (2), the focused direct object is preceded by a pronominal element and a verbal copula in Lamnsó (2a) while in Limbum the focus is preceded only by the copula (2b).

- (2) a. Buri fo a dzə s̄ i Beri [Lamnsó']
Buri give.PST PRON COP fish PREP Beri
'Buri gave to Beri the FISH (not the cat) to Beri.'
- b. Nkehni t̄fē fā bá ŋwà? nè Nkunku [Limbum]
Nkeni PROG give COP book PREP Nkunku
'Nkeni is giving the BOOK (not the pen) to Nkunku.'

In fact, the copula always immediately precedes a postverbal non-subject focus in what apparently seems to be the canonical position of the focused element.

- (3) a. Buri fo s̄ a dzə i **Beri** [Lamnsó']
Buri give.PST fish PRON COP PREP Beri
'Buri gave the fish to BERI (not to Bih).'
- b. Nkehni t̄fē fā ŋwà? bá **nè Nkunku** [Limbum]
Nkeni PROG give book COP PREP Nkunku
'Nkeni is giving the book to NKUNKU (not to Nfor).'

Both languages also use the English cleft-like strategy to express either information focus or contrastive focus (4), depending on the context.

- (4) a. dzə s̄ ye Buri fo-on i Beri [Lamnsó]
COP fish PRT Buri give.PST.PRT PREP Beri
'It is the fish that Buri gave to Beri.'
- b. á ŋwà? t̄fē Nkehni t̄fē fā nè Nkunku [Limbum]
PRON book PRT Nkehni PROG give PREP Nkunku
'It is the book that Nkehni is giving to Nkunku.'

In (4a), Lamnsó’ makes use of a copula without any expletive pronoun. Focus marking also triggers morphological change in the lexical verb. Limbum uses only the expletive in the present tense (4b). However, in the past tense the copula is overtly realised in Limbum, suggesting that it is just silent in the present tense.

- (5) à mū bā rkar tǰé Nkehni a-mu yuu [Limbum]
 PRON PST2 be car PRT Nkehni PST-PST3 buy
 ‘It was a car that Nkehni bought.’

Under appropriate contexts, information and contrastive subject focus can be realised either at the Immediately After Verb Position (Watters 1979; Aboh 2007; Hyman & Polinsky 2009), as illustrated in (6) or through a cleft-*like* strategy (7). Subject focus fronting requires resumption at the base.

- (6) a. fo Buri sā i Beri [Lamnsó’]
 give.PST Buri fish PREP Beri
 ‘BURI gave the fish to Beri.’
 b. tǰé fā Nkehni ŋwà? nè Nkunku [Limbum]
 PROG give Nkehni book PREP Nkunku
 ‘NKENI is giving the book to Nkunku.’
- (7) a. dzə Buri_i w-o wu_i fo-on sā i Beri [Lamnsó’]
 COP Buri AGR-PRT he/she give.PST fish PREP Beri
 ‘It was Buri who gave the fish to Beri.’
 b. á Nkehni_i tǰé é_i tǰē fā ŋwà? nè Nkunku [Limbum]
 PRON Nkehni PRT he PROG give book PREP Nkunku
 ‘It is Nkeni who is giving a book to Nkunku.’

These focus marking strategies have been reported in the Grassfields Bantu literature from various descriptive and theoretical guises (see Watters 1979; Aboh 2006; Hyman & Polinsky 2009 for Aghem, Fonkpu 2007 for Lamnsó’, Tamanji 2009 for Bafut, Ndamsah 2015 for Limbum, Talla 2015 for Ghòmálá’, Fominyam & Šimík 2017, Becker et al. 2019 etc.).

In this talk, we explore the distributional and interpretative properties of these focus strategies. We build on cartographic assumptions that there is above the vP periphery a low focus position (2005; Aboh 2006) whose head is lexicalised by the verbal copula in syntax (Frascarelli 2010, 2011). Focalised elements always move to the specifier position of a low focus phrase. The order in which the pronoun and/or the copula precede(s) the focused constituent on the surface is a consequence of (remnant) head or phrasal movement within the inflectional domain.

Keywords: *Cartography, focus movement, Grassfields Bantu, low focus phrase.*

REFERENCES

- Aboh, Enoch. 2006. Leftward Focus versus Rightward Focus: the Kwa-Bantu Conspiracy. *SOAS Working Papers in Linguistics* (15), 81–104.
 Becker, Laura, Driemel, Imke & Nformi, Jude A. 2019. Focus in Limbum. In S. Lotven, S.

- Bongiovanni, P. Weirich, R. Botne & S. Gyasi Obeng (eds.), *African linguistics across the disciplines: Selected papers from the 48th Annual Conference on African Linguistics*, 219–237. Berlin: Language Science Press.
- Belletti, Adriana .2005. Answering with a “cleft”: the role of the null subject parameter and the vp periphery. In: *Proceedings of the Thirtieth “Incontro di Grammatica Generativa”*, L. Brugè, G. Giusti, N.Munaro, W.Schweikert, G.Turano eds., 63-82, Cafoscarina, Venezia.
- Fominyam, Henry & Radek Šimík.2017. The morphosyntax of exhaustive focus: A view from Awing (Grassfields Bantu). *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory* 35 (4), 1027–1077.
- Fonkpu, Charles Banfegha .2008. *The syntax of focus and topic constructions in Lamnsɔ’*. Ph.D. dissertation. University of Yaounde 1.
- Frascarelli, Mara .2010. Narrow Focus, clefting and predicate inversion. *Lingua* 120. 9, 2121–2147.
- Frascarelli, Mara .2011. Scope marking and focus in Somali. *Linguistic Variation Yearbook* 10, 78-116.
- Hyman, Larry M. & Maria Polinsky. 2006. Focus in Aghem. In Malte Zimmermann & Caroline Féry (eds.), *Information structure: Theoretical, typological, and experimental perspectives*, 206–233. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Mkounga Talla Teku, Blaise .2015. *The structure of the left periphery in Ghɔmálá’*. MA dissertation. University of Yaounde I.
- Tamanji, Pius .2009. *A descriptive grammar of Bafut*. Koln: Rudiger Kope Verlag.
- Watters, John. 1979. Focus in Aghem: A study of its formal correlates and typology. In Larry M. Hyman (ed.) *Aghem grammatical structure. Southern California Occasional Papers in Linguistics* 7: 137–197.