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Volume 91

The Expression of Information Structure.
A documentation of its diversity across Africa
Edited by Ines Fiedler and Anne Schwarz

The Expression of Information Structure

A documentation of its diversity across Africa

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Introduction

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This volume contains a selection of 13 papers presented at the International Conference on “Focus in African Languages”, which took place October 6–8, 2005, organized by members of the Collaborative Research Center on information structure¹ and the Center for General Linguistics (ZAS)² in Berlin. The conference brought together experts on several African languages around one common interface – the interaction of information structure and grammar.

This book adds to recent collections on information structure in African languages which have also been published within the Collaborative Research Center: *Focus Strategies in African Languages. The Interaction of Focus and Grammar in Niger-Congo and Afro-Asiatic*, edited by Enoch Aboh, Katharina Hartmann and Malte Zimmermann (2007), and *Papers on Information Structure in African Languages*, edited by Ines Fiedler and Anne Schwarz (2006). The three volumes complement each other and enable the linguist to acquire a thorough overview on the typology of information structure in African languages. The specific concern of this book is to document the great diversity in information-structural approaches across African grammars by bringing together authors which evaluate grammatical expressions regarding their communicative and pragmatic functions.

Three aspects determine the particular contribution of this volume: the spectrum of information-structural notions and phenomena discussed, the

1. The Collaborative Research Centre (Sonderforschungsbereich, SFB) “Information structure: the linguistic means for structuring utterances, sentences and texts”, funded by the German Research Foundation, brings together scientists from the areas of linguistics, psychology and German Studies of the University of Potsdam and linguistics and African Studies of the Humboldt-University Berlin (cf. <http://www.sfb632.uni-potsdam.de>).

2. www.zas.gwz-berlin.de

investigation of information structure in several relatively unfamiliar languages and the genealogical width of the African languages studied.

The collection reflects a broad range of information-structural phenomena and rounds up our knowledge regarding the typological diversity of information structure. Investigated here are various topic and focus expressions as well as special sentence constructions, including passive andthetic utterances. In some of the papers, less well-known encoding strategies, such as defocalization rather than focalization, are specifically recognized and often-dismissed focal subcategories, like narrow focus on the verb or on verbal operators, are dealt with. The phenomena are investigated from a number of angles. There are several descriptive papers exemplifying the wide range of language-specific possible structures encoding focus and topic. Some papers base their investigation on the analysis of text corpora while others take diachronic or syntactically driven approaches. This collection of papers reveals that morphological focus and topic implementations, comprising particles of various types and semantics and special sets of tempus-aspect-mood morphemes, are particularly well-represented among the African languages discussed – be it in canonical or in syntactically marked sentence constructions. The observations conveyed herein confirm the assumption expressed by several authors that tone languages – to which the majority of African languages belong – exploit morphological and/or syntactic devices to a much higher degree than intonational ones (cf. Dik 1997; Yip 2002; Féry 2007; Féry & Krifka 2008). Besides discussing marked constructions for the encoding of information structure in various African languages, the papers also shed light on the information-structural configuration of unmarked, canonical sentence structures, for which Lambrecht claimed the unmarked pragmatic sentence articulation topic-comment (1994: 132).

A second notable advance of this volume consists in its providing insights into the pragmatic systems of relatively unfamiliar, and often underdocumented, non-European languages. Such contributions are crucial for evaluating existing hypotheses made on the basis of more familiar languages: they may provide challenges to established theories on information structure and are of high relevance for typological approaches.

Finally, the volume offers a comprehensive picture of information structure in African languages, because it supplies studies from all four African language phyla (disregarding African Creoles and Indo-European languages). The following languages are considered:

Afro-Asiatic: Taqbaylit, Tashelhit (Berber), Gawwada (East Cushitic)
Nilo-Saharan: 'ar B'arma (Central Sudanic)

Niger-Congo: Balanta, Baynun̄k, Bijogo, Fula, Gola, Joola-Foñy, Joola-Karon, Joola-Kwatay, Kisi, Mani, Mankanya, Mey, Noon, Palor, Seereer, Temne, Wolof (Atlantic), Buli, Dagbani, Gurene, Kɔnni (Gur), Aghem, Ejagham, Emai, Isu, Makua, Naki (Benue-Congo)

Khoi-San: East !Xoon, N|uu, 'N|ohan, Strandberg |Xam, West !Xoon (Tuu), Sandawe (isolated)

As for the individual papers presented here, the following topics are dealt with:

Based on a corpus of seven Sandawe texts, **Eaton** reveals a close-knit relationship between grammatical and pragmatic information in a verb enclitic respective verb suffix. Both the realis pronominal clitic and the subject focus marker are indicators of information-structural and grammatical categories. The pronominal clitic indicates person, gender and number of the subject, but also has two discourse functions, including focus marking on non-subjects. The subject focus marker, on the other hand, is restricted to marking focus on the subject, with its absence signalling the topic status of the subject.

Good studies word-order phenomena in Naki and reasons that linear fields are more apt for their explanation than constituency trees. He presents evidence that the focus position for non-objects is the immediate after-verb position, that is, the canonical position of the object. The features of this construction lead him to assume a preverbal topic field and a postverbal focus field, in contrast to the widespread assumption of dedicated topic and focus positions in an abstract constituency structure.

The paper by **Güldemann** concentrates on cleft-like constructions characterized by a sentence-initially clefted constituent in the Tuu languages. The investigated constructions are used to express contrastive focus, but they serve the expression of entity centralthetic utterances as well. He argues that this polyfunctionality of the construction is motivated by the need for highlighting a nominal within a sentence in both functions: in contrastive argument focus the nominal is marked as most salient, whereas in the case ofthetic utterances the nominal is “up-graded” from being just the topical predication base.

Hyman reconsiders the complex focus system in Aghem, emphasizing its strong interaction with the grammar – be it in the verbal or nominal system. The former affects tense-aspect morphology and the latter the noun phrase and its determiners. He focuses on the two nominal forms with noun class prefix (the so-called A form) respective enclitic determiner (B form), and their relation to the focus structure of the sentence in which they occur. He brings several arguments to bear against the semantic approach proposing that a syntactic approach accounts better for their realization.

Studying focus constructions in Tar B'arma, **Jacob** highlights the asymmetry between focal subjects and non-subjects. This asymmetry shows up in different focus-marking strategies: whereas focal subjects are always directly marked by means of movement to sentence-initial position and morphological marking with the focus marker, to non-subjects other focus marking strategies are applied, depending on the focus type. An typologically interesting way to focus on non-subjects is the cross-linguistically less known "indirect focus marking", which is achieved by moving all non-focused elements of the sentence to the left periphery, where they are additionally marked with the topic marker.

The morphosyntactic strategies to encode information structure in Isu, a relative of the more familiar Ring language Aghem, are studied by **Kießling**. It is shown that despite several parallels with Aghem, some typologically remarkable language-specific properties exist which allow us to draw low-level diachronic conclusions concerning the morphological form of the Isu noun. He argues that, due to a process of defocalisation, the morphologically marked form of the noun, represented by the B-form, is pragmatically less marked than the morphologically more basic A-form.

The paper by **Kröger** studies specificthetic sentence constructions in the form of inverted passives in Makua, characterized by the inverted word order verb-subject and the use of a passivized verb. He combines pragmatic and discourse-analytical approaches to describe the use and function of this utterance type in Makua narratives, concluding that the highly marked structure serves to increase the prominence of a referent or to change the "narrative" role of a referent.

Mettouchi and Fleisch compare two closely related Berber languages (Taqbaylit and Tashelhit) which have parallel basic syntactic structures but follow different paths in encoding information structure. While the existing word-order variation in Taqbaylit can be related to its discourse-configurationality, Tashelhit is more restrictive in terms of word-order flexibility. This finding, they argue, has to be related to the strategies of case marking in both languages, which differ as well. The observed divergences between Taqbaylit and Tashelhit exemplify the existing variation among Berber languages and indicate that information-structural interpretations can change diachronically and, consequently, require historical investigation.

A comparative overview of the focus-sensitive verb morphology of Atlantic languages is provided in **Robert's** paper. In several of these languages verb forms signal the syntactic status of the focused constituent and often merge focus with grammatical aspect and voice information. Proposing a new analysis of focus, it is shown that the information-structural driven organization of the verb system also has consequences for verb focus, which is often marked by verb copying or reduplication of the verb stem.

Schaefer and Egbokhare discuss and compare topic and focus constructions in Emai. They show that despite the fact that the focus as well as the topic constituent are in sentence-initial positions, the constructions differ with respect to some well-known features such as resumption, the definiteness requirement for the (topic-respective focus) referent, constraints on the main clause and the use of some particles. These differences are traced back to some contrast between topic and focus constituent along a dimension of shared information structure, but they are also due to the structure of grammatical relations.

The paper by **Schwarz** investigates cognate particles that seem to be involved in predicate-focus marking in a small group of four closely related Gur languages. They are approached via a questionnaire specifically dedicated to focus on the verb and its operators, generating data that confirms the particles' focus analysis. The study reveals a close interaction of these focus particles with the aspectual system which may lead to a conflict between their pragmatic and grammatical interpretation. The author demonstrates that this conflict is not uniformly resolved across the four languages.

Tosco shows that the verb-final language Gawwada makes use of a whole array of means to encode different pragmatic categories, comprising syntactic means like word order change for the expression of argument focus and object incorporation for backgrounding a nominal phrase. He indicates that, in contrast to other Ethiopian languages, clefts are rare in Gawwada and reveals that rather morphological means, such as subject clitics and contrastive particles, among others, are used.

The interaction of focus and the verbal system in Ejagham is central in **Watters'** paper. Looking at the focus system in Ejagham from a comparative perspective, his study reveals two unexpected deviations concerning the scopal and communicative subcategorization of focus: First, the Ejagham verb forms have a 'constituent' focus form that subcategorizes predicates with terms and an 'operator' focus form used whenever the verbal operator is within the scope of focus, while Bantu languages commonly have a form used when the verbal complement falls within the scope of focus but another form for other cases. Second, the distinction between assertive and contrastive focus is not as important as in other Bantoid languages.

We would like to take this opportunity to express our gratitude to the contributors to this volume, to two anonymous reviewers, to all participants of the International Conference on "Focus in African Languages" and to the German Research Foundation (DFG) who funded the conference. Last, but not least, we thank Christopher Hank for checking the English and Paul Starzmann, Katharina Nimz, Sören Schalowski, Doreen Großmann and Lars Marstaller for the preparation of the book manuscript.

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