

Unifying focus constructions in Grassfields Bantu

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Abstract

Some Grassfields Bantu languages exhibit two major focus strategies that are associated with a contrastive focus reading (see Fonkpu 2008 for Lamnsɔ', Tamanji 2009 for Bafut, Ndamsah 2015 for Limbum, Talla 2015 for Ghɔmálá' among others.). However, the two focus constructions apparently differ on their surface realisation. Building from the canonical Limbum sentence in (1a), the focalised constituents in (1b)–(1c) are preceded by a verbal copular and seem to occur in their canonical (in-situ).

- (1) a. Nkehni tʃē fā ŋwà? nè Nkunku
Nkehni PROG give book to Nkunku
'Nkeni is giving a book to Nkunku.'
- b. Nkehni tʃē fā bá ŋwà? nè Nkunku
Nkehni PROG give COP book to Nkunku
'It is the book (not the pen) that Nkehni is giving to Nkunku.'
- c. Nkehni tʃē fā ŋwà? bá nè Nkunku
Nkehni PROG give book COP to Nkunku
'It is to Nkunku (not to Malah) Nkehni is giving a book.'

Contrastive focus can also be expressed by fronting the focalised constituent to clause initial position as in (2).

- (2) a. á ŋwà? tʃé Nkehni tʃē fā nè Nkunku
EXPL book PRT Nkehni PROG give to Nkunku
'It is the book (not the pen) that Nkehni is giving to Nkunku.'
- b. á nè Nkunku tʃé Nkehni tʃē fā ŋwà?
expl to Nkunku PRT Nkehni PROG give book
'It is to Nkunku (not to Malah) Nkehni is giving a book.'

Even if Limbum speakers are not using a verbal copula in focus fronting contexts nowadays as illustrated in (2), there are still evidence for the presence of that copula when focus fronting occurs in the past as in (3).

- (3) à mū bā kāŋi tʃé yī mū gwè mbà rò (Ndamsah 2015:198)
expl PST2 be dish PART it PST2 fall to(down) stream
'It was the dish that fell into the stream.'

The major difference between the strategy in (1) and its counterpart in (2) is the absence of the expletive subject in the former and the absence of the verbal copula in the latter. Building on (1)–(3) and their uniform focal interpretation, we explore these focus strategies and propose that the apparently in-situ strategy in (1) and its counterpart in (2) are actually derived from the same syntactic structure in a subject-predicate configuration inside a small clause (Belletti 2005) whereby the focus strategy in (1) is derived by predicate inversion while its counterpart in (2) is derived via subject raising.

Keywords: *Focus, Grassfields Bantu, predicate inversion, subject raising*

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