

Unifying focus constructions: A view from Grassfields Bantu

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Like many Grassfields Bantu languages, Lamnsó' and Limbum exhibit three salient morphosyntactic focus marking strategies that differ on their surface forms. Both languages exhibit a basic SVO order as illustrated in (1). Contrastive non-subject focus can be realised postverbally. In (2), the focused direct object constituent is preceded by an expletive and a verbal copula in Lamnsó (2a). In Limbum, the focus is preceded only by the copula without any expletive (2b).

(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 a book to Nkunku.'

(2) a. Buri fo a dzə s̄ i Beri [Lamnsó']
 Buri give.PST EXPL COP fish PREP Beri
 'It is the fish (not the cat) that Buri gave to Beri.'

b. Nkehni t̄fē fā bá ŋwà? nè Nkunku [Limbum]
 Nkeni PROG give COP book PREP Nkunku
 'It is the book (not the pen) that Nkeni is giving to Nkunku.'

Interestingly, contrastive focus marking on the indirect object respects the same surface order as shown in (3). In fact, the copula always precedes a postverbal non-subject focus immediately in these languages.

(3) a. Buri fo s̄ a dzə i **Beri** [Lamnsó']
 Buri give.PST fish EXPL COP PREP Beri
 'It to Beri (not to Bih) that Buri gave the fish.'

b. Nkehni t̄fē fā ŋwà? bá nè **Nkunku** [Limbum]
 Nkeni PROG give book COP PREP Nkunku
 'It is the book (not the pen) that Nkeni is giving to Nkunku.'

Both languages also resort to the fronting strategy via clefting to express either information focus¹ or contrastive focus (4). However, they differ to some respects. Lamnsó' makes use of a sentence initial copula without any expletive subject (4a). Focus fronting also triggers morphological change on the lexical verb. Limbum uses only the expletive in the present tense (4b). However, in the past tense, Limbum can also use both the expletive and the copula (5), suggesting that the copula is just silent in the present tense.

(4) a. dzə s̄ ye Buri fo-**on** i Beri [Lamnsó]
 COP fish PRT Buri give.PST.PRT PREP Beri
 'Buri gave the FISH to Beri/It is the fish that Buri gave to Beri.'

b. á ŋwà? t̄fē Nkehni t̄fē fā nè Nkunku [Limbum]
 EXPL book PRT Nkehni PROG give PREP Nkunku

¹ In fact, the examples in (4) can be associated with two readings: (i) As information focus, they can be used as direct answers to 'what did Buri give to Beri?/what is Nkeni giving to Nkunku?' (ii) As contrastive focus, they can be interpreted as corrective answers to statements such as 'Buri gave a cat to Beri/Nkeni is giving a pencil to Nkunku.'

‘Nkeni is giving the BOOK to Nkunku/It is the book that Nkehni is giving to N.’

(5) à mū bā rkar tǰé Nkehni a-mu yuu [Limbum]
 EXPL PST2 be car PRT Nkehni PST-PST3 buy

‘It was a car that Nkehni bought.’

Lastly, both information and contrastive subject focus can be marked either at the Immediately After Verb Position (Watters 1979; Aboh 2007; Hyman & Polinsky 2009), as shown in (6) or through clefting (7). Subject focus fronting to clause initial position requires resumption by a pronominal element. In Lamnsó’, it also triggers morphological change on the lexical verb (7a).

(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 (not someone else) who gave the fish to Beri.’

b. á Nkehni_i tǰé é_i tǰē fā ŋwà? nè Nkunku [Limbum]
 EXPL Nkehni PRT he PROG give book PREP Nkunku

‘It is Nkeni (not Nfor) who is giving a book to Nkunku.’

These three focus marking strategies have been reported in the literature across Grassfields Bantu languages 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 Ghómálá’, Fominyam & Šimik 2017, Becker et al. 2019 etc.).

In this talk, I explore the distributional and interpretational properties of these three strategies as attested in Lamnsó’ and Limbum. I propose a unified syntactic analysis according to which postverbal focus is derived by focus movement into a low focus position in the vP periphery (Belletti 2005) and related work. However, though postverbal subject focus is derived by simple focus movement, postverbal non-subject focus targets the same focal slot by a series of smuggling operations along the lines of Collins (2005; Collins & Belletti 2022). Conversely, the fronting (clefting) strategy is derived from an underlying small clause configuration whereby the focalised constituent is initially merged as the subject of a small clause, the predicate of which is a free relative clause. The subject of predication, namely the focalised constituent raises into a lower focus phrase in the vP-periphery of the matrix clause, just as in the postverbal focus strategy. Taken together, focus fronting in these languages targets a lower focus field in the vP-periphery.

Keywords: *Focus movement, Grassfields Bantu, predicate inversion, small clause, smuggling.*

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