

Focus fronting in all-new utterances: Syntax-information structure mismatching?

Paul Roger Bassong

prbassong@gmail.com

Edmond Ossoko

edmondossok@gmail.com

University of Yaounde 1

Abstract

We explore focus fronting in the Bantu languages Basaá and Mmaala (Numaala), with special attention to all-new sentences. These languages exhibit an unmarked SVO word order (1) and allow for subject and object focus fronting as in (2) and (3).

- (1) a. mu-daá a-bí-sômb bí-kaat [Basaá]
1-woman 1.SM-PST2-buy 8-books
'The woman bought the books.'
- b. a-gánd a gú-fòlet gjan̄k [Mmaala]
woman SM-PST3-sweep house
'The woman swept the house.'
- (2) a. **mu-daá njé-n** a-bí-sômb bí-kaat [Basaá]
1-woman 1.FOC 1.SM-PST2-buy 8-books
'The WOMAN bought the books yesterday.'
- b. **a-gánd u nja** gú-fòlet gjan̄k [Mmaala]
1.woman 3.SG NYA PST3-sweep house
'The WOMAN swept the house.'
- (3) a. **bi-kaat gwó-n** mu-daá a-bí-sômb [Basaá]
8-books 8-FOC 1-woman 1.SM-PST2-buy
'The woman bought the BOOKS.'
- b. **gjan̄k agánd njá** gú-fòlet [Mmaala]
house woman NYA PST3-sweep
'The woman swept the HOUSE.'

Focus fronting is also attested in all-new sentences like in (4) whereby what apparently undergoes fronting is not the semantic focus itself (whole sentence), but a subpart of it (Fanselow and Lenertová 2011).

- (4) *What's new? /what happened*
- a. **mǎn w-ém njé-n** a-něd makekse jaaní *Subject fronting* [Basaá]
1.child 1.my 1-FOC 1.SM-pass 6-exams 1.yesterday
'MY CHILD PASSED THE EXAMS YESTERDAY.'
- b. **mbua jam ba nja** gu-on bujo *Object fronting* [Mmaala]
dog my they NYA Pst3-kill yesterday
'They killed my dog yesterday.'

The phenomenon in (4) has been reported cross-linguistically (see Sasse 1987; López 2009; Fanselow and Lenertová 2011; Bianchi et al 2015, 2016; Cruschina 2019;) and has raised striking debates about the relation between syntax and IS. We demonstrate that in (4): (i) focus fronting is associated with mirativity and newness (Bianchi et al 2015, 2016; Cruschina 2019). (ii) focus fronting in these contexts challenges the traditional information-structural view that partitions the sentence into new-old information. (iii) there is no mismatching between syntax and IS. Rather, it follows the above that the sentences in (4) are predicative structures whereby the whole sentence focus moves to the focal position of the predicate, followed by the raising of the subject of predication into Spec-TP of the main clause. Thus, what looks like a fronted subpart of the semantic focus is simply apparent as the raised subject is only linked to an operator inside the predicate of the small clause.

Selected references: Cruschina, S. 2019. 'Focus fronting in Spanish: Mirative implicature and information structure'. *Probus* 31(1): 119–146. Fanselow, G. & Lenertová, D. 2011. 'Left Peripheral Focus. Mismatches between Syntax and Information Structure'. *NLLT* 29: 169–209. López, L. 2009. *A Derivational Syntax for Information Structure*. Oxford University Press. Sasse, H. 1987. 'Thethetic/categorical distinction revisited.' *Linguistics* 25: 511–80. Bianchi, V., G. Bocci & S. Cruschina. 2016. 'Focus fronting, unexpectedness, and evaluative implicatures'. *Semantics and Pragmatics* 9 (3): 1–54.