

No FAT and not a LOT: Verum focus in Nguni

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A sentence has verum focus (VF; also termed polar(ity) focus) when it places emphasis on the truth of its proposition. With (1), for example, where VF is expressed with the stressed auxiliary *do*, the speaker emphasises that it is true that John cleaned the room:

(1) John DID clean the room.

Gutzmann et al. (2020) distinguish two approaches to VF. According to the “Focus Accent Thesis” (FAT), VF is a genuine focus construction. VF accent marks focus on the polarity of the sentence, and the semantic/pragmatic effects of VF follow from the interpretative mechanisms of a general theory of focus (see e.g. Goodhue 2018). In contrast, according to the “Lexical Operator Thesis” (LOT), VF is not related to focus; instead, its interpretative effects are brought about by a conversational operator which may be realised by intonational, grammatical or lexical means. One of Gutzmann et al. (2020)’s key arguments for the LOT is that in some languages in which focus is not marked by intonation, the strategy for expressing VF differs from the strategies used to mark (other types of) focus.

We contribute to the debate about the status of VF by exploring how VF is realised in the Nguni languages Xhosa (S.41) and Zulu (S.42). In Bantu, focus is typically not marked through prosodic prominence (Downing & Hyman 2016), but VF is nevertheless often closely related to strategies used to express focus (Hyman & Watters 1984; Kerr & Van der Wal 2022). This is also the case in Xhosa and Zulu. In contexts in which verum is obligatory, such as in contradicting a previous utterance, VF in a transitive sentence is expressed by object dislocation (signalled in (2) by object marking and the disjoint verb form). Object dislocation is also used in Zulu for focus marking in ditransitive sentences (Cheng & Downing 2009); by removing the (indirect) object from the focus domain, another element (polarity in (2), the direct object in (3)) can be focused:

(2) Ngi-li-qoq-ile nje *i-gumbi* *l-a-mi*.
1S-5.OM-tidy-PST.DJ INTJ AUG-5.room 5.ASS-my
'I DID clean my room.'

(3) U-Langa u-m-phek-el-a i-n-yama *u-mama*.
AUG-1a.Langa 1.SM-1.OM-COOK-APPL-FV AUG-9-meat AUG-1a.mother
'Langa is cooking MEAT for mother.'

In intransitive sentences a disjoint form is used when the TAM allows it. Interestingly, we notice a strong tendency to divert to a TAM in which such a distinction exists where possible, such as using the present rather than the future when the context given is in the future. In contexts in which verum is optional we often find an additional lexical strategy. The use of pitch raise is optional. Through analysing a variety of contexts in which verum is obligatory, optional or infelicitous, we show that neither the FAT nor the LOT can fully account for VF in Nguni.

References

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