

Information structure and syntax in Teke

BaSIS conference abstract

At the start of the BaSIS project, Teke was taken into account for the reason that in several geographically close languages such as in Mbuun (B87 Bostoen and Mundeke 2012) and Kisikongo (H16a, De Kind 2014), an immediate-before-verb (IBV) focus position and a mysterious class 1 subject marking alternation which is also associated with focus marking were attested, so we wanted to know what grammatical means are used in Teke for information structure expressions. Through 8.5 months' fieldwork in the Republic of Congo in 2019 and 2021 during my PhD research, I have collected new elicited and spontaneous data on the grammar of the Teke-Kukuya (B77a, [kkw], Congo) variety with special attention to its information structure. The IBV focus strategy (1) and subject marking alternation are also found in Kukuya, on which I pose three main research questions: **a)** what is the historical origin of IBV focus? **b)** where is the structural position of the IBV focused element in syntax? **c)** how to account for the subject marking alternation?

- (1) a. (*Who gave the children the oranges?*)
Mwáana ma-láara **bí-búru** bí-wî.
1.child 6-orange 8-parent 8SM.PST-give.PST
'The child was given the oranges by the PARENTS.' [OOSV subject focus]
- b. Taará lóoso **munkí** ká-dzí?
1.father 5.rice when 1SM.PST-eat.PST
'When did father eat the rice?' [SOXV adjunct focus]

In this talk I present my answers to these questions as key findings of my PhD project. I provide segmental and tonal evidence that diachronically the IBV focus construction has its origin in a basic cleft sentence (also see Li 2022) and has become monoclausal. I also show that the IBV focused element is structurally placed in a high FocP above TP as in (2) rather than in a vP-peripheral low FocP. To account for the class 1 SM alternation, I propose that when a non-subject is focused in IBV, the other preverbal topical elements are all base-generated and the T agrees downwards with a postverbal anaphor in specvP which is featurally identical to a 3rd person pronoun, instead of agreeing upwards with a preverbal subject, as illustrated in (3). This downward agreement hypothesis is compatible with the high FocP in that the postverbal agreed-with element is always anaphoric to a preverbal topic.

- (2) TopP < **FocP** < TP < AspP < vP
- (3) [_{TopP} Subject_i [_{FocP}...[_{TP} T_[uφ]...[_{vP} PRO_i ...]]...]]...

Based on these discoveries, I present particular insights on what determines the word order variation and subject agreement in Teke. Discourse roles are more important than syntactic roles in determining word order in this language, and to study its syntax and information structure, discourse features such as [TOPIC], [FOCUS] as well as [PERSON] feature related to givenness should be taken into account. For further research, I also provide some checkpoints to investigate IBV focus strategy and SM alternation in other West-Coastal Bantu languages.

Reference

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