

On pure focus movement in Syntax – Observations from Limbum

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Introduction. The *Strong Modularity Hypothesis* (Horvath 2010) bans formal features representing informational structural notions such as focus from narrow syntax (see also Reinhart 1995). One way to reanalyze apparent “focus movement” structures is by attributing the movement trigger to an independently motivated semantic feature which happens to be focus sensitive, e.g. exhaustivity in Hungarian (Horvath 2007, 2013) or Q in Japanese, Sinhala (Hagstrom 1998), and Tlingit (Cable 2010). This feature is located on a (often covert) particle adjoined to or merged with a focused phrase or *wh*-phrase, mediating between its sister and a higher functional head.

A somewhat related observation comes from cross-linguistic comparison: while *information focus* is often encoded by means of a canonical focus structure, *contrastive focus*, i.e. focus with an additional semantic/pragmatic component, is realized with a relatively more marked focus strategy, e.g. in-situ vs. ex-situ structures (Hartmann & Zimmermann 2007, Fiedler et al 2010), prosodic prominence vs. reordering/clefting (Skopeteas & Fanselow 2009), etc. The different levels of complexity do not arise from deep structural differences but receive a pragmatic explanation: contrastive information often comes with an unexpectedness flavour, requiring the more marked focus strategy which facilitates common ground update (Zimmermann 2008, 2011, Zimmermann & Onea 2011).

Enter Limbum. A potential counter-example to the claims made above is provided by Limbum, a Grassfield Bantu language, spoken in Cameroon. Limbum has two focus particles *á* and *bá*, the former seemingly encoding information focus and the latter contrastive (exhaustive) focus. Evidence comes from (i) correction (1) and contrast contexts, where the *bá* strategy wins over the *á* strategy and (ii) additive adverbs such as *also* which cannot scope over *bá* (2).

(1) Njobe: í bá yū bcè?

she PST2 buy dresses

‘She bought dresses.’ (telling someone else that Yaah bought dresses)

Yaah: #á blábá? (cí) mē bā yú	Yaah': mē bá yū bá blábá?
FOC shoes CI I PST2 buy	I PST2 buy FOC shoes
‘I bought SHOES.’	‘It is shoes that I bought.’

(2) a. á ntùmntù (cí) í mū yū fój. b. *í mū yū bá ntùmntù fój.
 FOC motorbike CI 3SG PST2 buy also 3SG PST2 buy FOC motorbike also
 ‘He bought a MOTORBIKE also.’ ‘It is a motorbike that he also bought.’

Since Limbum is SVO, the *á* strategy clearly involves fronting and is thus more marked than the *bá* strategy. Two puzzles arise: not only does Limbum exhibit a proper focus movement structure, solely motivated by a discourse notion, the strategy expressing semantically more complex contrastive focus is less marked formally than pure information focus.

Analysis. In order to solve the first puzzle, we propose that focus, signaling the presence of alternatives (Rooth 1992), is not marked morphologically by a particle. Focused constituents in answers to questions as well as under the scope of focus sensitive particles such as *only* and *also* are not necessarily accompanied by a focus particle, nor do they require fronting. Focus marker *á* associates with focus alternatives and introduces an existence presupposition on those alternatives (Dryer 1996, Rooth 1999, Geurts & van der Sandt 2004, Büring 2004), see (3). This explains why unmarked focus and *á* focus exhibit a nearly identical distribution pattern.

(3) $[[á \phi]]^o = \lambda w : \exists p[p \in [[\phi]]^f \wedge p(w) = 1]. [[\phi]]^o(w)$

Evidence for (3) comes from the fact that (i) *á* cannot co-occur with quantifiers denoting an empty set, see (4), and (ii) existence seems to be stable under negation, see (5): Yaah’s answer is infelicitous if focus marker *á* is present because the existence inference contradicts the fact that Yaah answers the question if someone is playing the drums with *I don’t know* (see also Dryer 1996:490).

(4) (*á) ηwè mē mū yē ká?
 FOC person 1SG PST2 see NEG
 ‘I saw NOBODY.’

(5) Shey: m̀è shī yōʔ yū m̄ʔ. ŋwè m̄ʔ shī bōʔ ncùh à
 1SG PROG hear thing one person one PROG play drum Q
 ‘I heard something. Is somebody playing the drums?’

Yaah: m̀è r̄h̄ k̄aʔ m̀è shī kwàʔshī nē (#á) Nfò í shì bōʔ ncùh k̄aʔ
 1SG know NEG 1SG PROG think that FOC Nfor 3SG PROG play drum NEG
 ‘I don’t know. But I don’t think NFOR is playing the drums.’

Limbus, thus, provides a unique window into the discussion of existence focus, in that it ties the existence presupposition to an additional marker – a counter-argument to theories that take focus alone to be the reason for the presupposition (Geurts & van der Sandt 2004). The analysis in (3), furthermore, provides novel evidence for the strong modularity hypothesis, the underlying syntactic structure for the *á* strategy is given in (6). In contrast to Tlingit and Hungarian, Limbus makes an even more compelling case, as it spells out the particle as well as the higher functional head *cí*, whose distribution is restricted to structure containing focus particle *á*.

(6) $[_{Exp} \underbrace{[_{Ex} \text{cí}] [_{TP} \dots [_{QP}_{[ex]} [_{Q}_{[ex]} \acute{a}] X_{PF}]}] \dots]]$

Supporting evidence for (6) comes from obligatory pied-piping of non-focused material, be it adpositions or possessums in possessor structures (see Cable 2010), where the latter is in principle surprising, since possessor extraction is not permitted per se, as it is possible in topic configuration, albeit with a resumptive pronoun.

The analysis for *á* does not solve the second puzzle, since *bá* seems to encode the same existence component (test (4) and (5) return the same results). Hence, *bá* would still be more complex (existence+exhaustivity) than *á* (existence). We propose that Limbus does not rely on pragmatic principles but hard-wires unexpectedness directly into the lexical entry *bá*, shown in (7). Since modeling exhaustivity and existence as a presupposition lets the entailed content look trivial – a problem which has been discussed for English clefts (Velleman et al. 2012) – we follow Büring & Križ (2013) who make the exhaustivity presupposition depend on the assertion.

(7) $\llbracket [b\acute{a} \alpha_F] P \rrbracket^o = \exists x [x \in \llbracket \alpha \rrbracket^f \wedge \llbracket P \rrbracket^o(x) = 1] \wedge$
 $\forall y \in \llbracket \alpha \rrbracket^f [y \in \max(\llbracket P \rrbracket^o) \rightarrow \llbracket \alpha \rrbracket^o \not\subseteq y] \wedge$
 $\forall z \in \llbracket \alpha \rrbracket^f [z \neq \llbracket \alpha \rrbracket^o \rightarrow \llbracket P \rrbracket^o(z) \geq_{\text{likely}} \llbracket P \rrbracket^o(\llbracket \alpha \rrbracket^o)] .$
 $\llbracket P \rrbracket^o(\llbracket \alpha \rrbracket^o)$

(where for any $P \in D_{et}$, $\max(P) = \{ x \in P \mid \neg \exists y \in P [x \sqsubset y] \}$)

The likelihood component is at work independently of exhaustivity, see (8), where *bá* scopes under another exhaustive operator *càʔcàʔ* ‘only’. If one ensures exhaustivity with *càʔcàʔ*, *bá* becomes licit only if the selected alternative is also unexpected, as in scenario B.

(8) Context: Shey is looking for Ngala and Tanko who are supposed to be at the market. Shey tells Yaah to go find Ngala and Tanko and bring them back.

A. Yaah comes back with Ngala.

B. Yaah comes back with Njobe.

Yaah: m̀è ∅ kóní (bá[#]) Ngàlá càʔcàʔ
 I PERF find FOC Ngala only
 ‘I only found NGALA.’

Yaah: m̀è ∅ kóní (bá[#]) Njobe càʔcàʔ
 I PERF find FOC Njobe only
 ‘I only found NJOBE.’

Conclusion. Three things we can learn from the rich focus marking system of Limbus: (i) fronting focused constituents requires a high functional head and a local mediating particle which adds a semantic component, both of which are overt in Limbus, (ii) existence is not triggered solely by a focus/background structure, (iii) mirativity does not have to arise from different levels of markedness.

Selected References: Büring & Križ (2013) “It’s that, and that’s it! Exhaustivity and homogeneity presuppositions in clefts (and definites)”, *Semantics and Pragmatics*, 6:1-29. Cable (2010) “The Grammar of Q”, OUP: Oxford. Geurts & van der Sandt (2004) “Interpreting focus”, *Theoretical Linguistics*, 30:1-44. Horvath (2010) “Discourse features, syntactic displacement and the status of contrast”, *Lingua*, 120:1346-1369. Zimmermann & Onea (2011) “Focus marking and focus interpretation”, *Lingua*, 121:1651-1670.