

Movement in the low focus field in Grassfields Bantu

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In this talk, I examine two instances of low focalisation in the Grassfields Bantu languages Lamnso (1) and Limbum (2). In (1) and (2) a pronoun and/or a verbal copula linearly precede(s) a postverbal subject/object which conveys an exhaustive focus reading.

- (1) (a) ki fo a dzə **Buri** Beri s̄
PST2 give PRON be Buri Beri fish
'BURI (not John) gave Beri the fish.'
- (b) Buri ki fo a dzə **Beri** s̄
Buri PST2 give PRON be Beri fish
'Buri gave BERI (not Peter) the fish.'
- (2) (a) à mū fā bá **Nkehni** Nkunku ŋwà? n̄ŋkùr
PST PST1 give be Nkeni Nkunku book yesterday
'NKENI (not John) gave Nkunku the book yesterday.'
- (b) Nkehni à mu fā bá **Nkunku** ŋwà? n̄ŋkùr
Nkeni PST PST1 give be Nkunku book yesterday
'Nkeni gave NKUNKU (not Peter) a book yesterday.'

In (3) the postverbal subject is not morphologically marked. It can be interpreted either as new or as contrastive information depending on the context.

- (3) (a) ki fo **Buri** Beri s̄ [Lamnso]
PST2 give Buri Beri fish
'(No), BURI gave Beri the fish.'
- (b) t̄f̄é fā **Nkehni** Nkunku ŋwà? [Limbum]
PROG give Nkehni Nkunku book
'(No), NKENI is giving Nkunku a book.'

These focus strategies have been explored in previous research across Grassfields Bantu (e.g. Mbiydzennyuy 1999; Fonkpu 2008 for Lamnso, Ndamsah 2015; Becker & Nformi 2016; Becker et al. 2019 for Limbum, Fominyam & Šimík 2017; Fominyam 2018, 2021 for Awing, Tamanji 2009 for Bafut, Keupdjio 2020; Zimmermann & Kouankem 2024 for Mədúmbà, Nchare 2012 for Shupamem etc.).

This talk builds on the hypothesis that verbal copulas are grammaticalised focus markers akin to left peripheral focus markers in some languages (see Aboh 2004; Bassong 2014 for Basaá). Copulas lexicalise the focus head in the low-IP field. In the syntax, they attract focalised elements in Spec-FocP. They are subsequently attracted by a strong verbal feature in a low subject head position where it enters into a Spec-Head configuration with an overt/a covert pronoun in Spec-SubjP in contexts such as (1) and (2). This low subject position is different from the higher subject because and is not involved in a predication relation like lexical subjects (Cardinaletti 2004; Rizzi 2015; Shlonsky & Rizzi 2018; Roy and Shlonsky 2019). The function of the low pronoun in the syntax is to satisfy the subject condition. It is proposed that there are dedicated subject, focus and topic positions in the vP periphery (Belletti 2001). The different ordering patterns observed are derived through head movement as well as various types of phrasal movement such as *smuggling* (Collins 2005; Shlonsky & Rizzi 2018; Belletti & Collins 2020; Shlonsky 2024). *Ceteris paribus*, a reconsideration of the vP-phase is strongly captured in Bantu.

Keywords: *Cartography, copulas, focus, Grassfields Bantu, pronouns, smuggling.*