

# Focus constructions in Limbum

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# In a nutshell

- Limbum (Grassfields Bantu, Cameroon) has two focus constructions that involve two different markers and positions in the clause:

(1) *á ndúr wà (cí) m̀ bí l̄rī*  
 FOC **brother my** (COMP) I FUT1 pick.up  
 'I will pick up MY BROTHER.'

(2) *m̀ bí l̄r b́ ndúr wà*  
 I FUT1 pick.up FOC **brother my**  
 'It is my brother whom I will pick up.'

- We will show that the two focus strategies in Limbum systematically code the two functions of "information focus" and "identificational focus", respectively.
- Both focus markers can be used with wh-questions, providing evidence for the independence of questions and focus constructions.

# Some notes on focus

## Focus

- "The semantic component of a pragmatically structured proposition whereby the assertion differs from the presupposition."  
(Lambrecht n.d.: 213)
- "S may wish to ADD pieces of information to A's pragmatic information, or he may wish to REPLACE some piece of information X [...] "  
(Dik n.d.: 326)

## Examples

- (3) Q: Where did you go last night?  
A: To the MOVIES. (Lambrecht n.d.: 211)
- (4) Q: Is it John who writes poetry?  
A: (No, it is) BILL (who writes poetry.) (ibid.)
- (5) a. The DUCKling was killed by this farmer.  
b. The duckling was killed by this FARMer. (Dik n.d.: 309)

# Previous work on focus

- Formal accounts of focus (e.g. Vallduví n.d.; É. Kiss n.d.; Kenesei n.d.)
- Functional accounts of focus (e.g. Lambrecht n.d.; Dik n.d.)
- Classification of focus types (e.g. É. Kiss n.d.; Kenesei n.d.; Skopeteas & Fanselow n.d.)
- **Typology: expression of focus across languages** (e.g. Drubig n.d.; É. Kiss n.d.; Horvath n.d.; Zubizarreta n.d.; Büring n.d.; *Information Structure. Theoretical, Typological, and Experimental Perspectives* n.d.)
- **Focus in African languages** (e.g. Aboh n.d.a,n; *Focus Strategies in African Languages: The Interaction of Focus and Grammar in Niger-Congo and Afro-Asiatic* n.d.; Aboh n.d.c; Ameka n.d.; Buell n.d.; Collins & Essizewa n.d.; Good n.d.; Hiraiwa n.d.; Hyman & Polinsky n.d.a,n; Kandybowicz & Torrence n.d.; Manfredi n.d.; Sabel & Zeller n.d.; van der Wal n.d.; Watters n.d.; Zimmermann n.d.)

# Parameters of focus

## A. Focus functions

- information focus vs. identificational focus (e.g. É. Kiss n.d.)
- information vs. identification vs. completion (Q/A pairs, clefts) (Drubig n.d.)
- information gap (questioning / completive focus) vs. contrast (rejecting / replacing / expanding / restricting / selecting focus) (Dik n.d.: 331)

## B. Focused constituents / scope

- predicate focus vs. argument focus
- predicate focus vs. argument focus vs. sentence focus (Lambrecht n.d.: 223)
- subject / non-subject focus vs. lexical verb / truth-value / TAM focus (Güldemann n.d.)

## C. Focus strategies / constructions

- in-situ vs. ex-situ focus (e.g. É. Kiss n.d.)
- boundary vs. edge vs. mixed languages (Büiring n.d.)
- prosodic prominence, focus marker, focus construction (Dik n.d.: 327)

# Focus types addressed here

In this talk, we are looking at different focus functions, i.e.

**information focus** non-presupposed, new information (É. Kiss n.d.: 245)

- also-phrases
  - even-phrases
  - universal quantifiers
- (diagnostic tests)

**identificational focus** represents an exhaustive subset of the set of contextually or situationally given elements for which the predicate phrase can potentially hold (É. Kiss n.d.: 245)

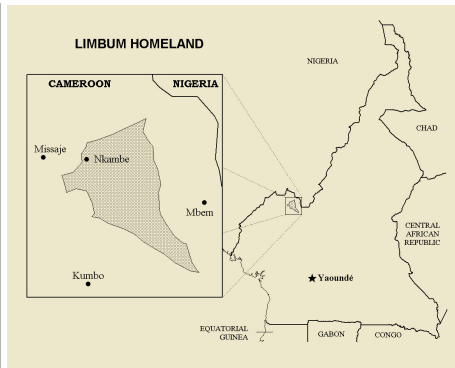
- contrast
  - correction
  - selection
  - restriction
- (contexts)

... and at the relation between focus constructions and wh-questions.

# Some notes on Limbum

- Grassfields Bantu, Cameroon
- Basic word order: S (AUX) V O
- TAM marking auxiliaries precede the verb

(6) *ɲwè f̄ ʔm tí ɲgū*  
 man DET PST3 cut wood  
 'The man cut the wood.'



([https://joshuaproject.net/people\\_groups/14049/CM](https://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/14049/CM))



# Focus in Limbum

(i) Information focus

# Information focus

## Context

Tata and Yaah are talking on the phone, the connection is really bad. Yaah was telling Tata that she was going to meet someone, but Tata could not understand the person's name. Tata asks Yaah to repeat whom she is going to meet.

Yaah: **á** **Ngàlá** (cí) m̀̀ è bí kɔ̀nī  
 FOC **Ngala** (COMP) I FUT1 meet  
 'I will meet NGALA.'

Yaah: \*m̀̀ è bí kɔ̀nī **bá** **Ngàlá**  
 I FUT1 meet FOC **Ngala**  
 '\*It is Ngala whom I will meet.'

## Also-phrases

- (7) **á** **Nfò** (cí) í bā zhē bāā (bá **Tánkó f́ŋ**)  
**FOC Nfor** (COMP) 3SG PST1 eat fufu (and **Tanko also**)  
 'NFOR ate fufu (and so did Tanko).'
- (8) **á** **Ngálá** (cí) m̀è bí kōnī (bá **ŋgwá zhì f́ŋ**)  
**FOC Ngala** (COMP) I FUT1 meet (and **wife his also**)  
 'I will meet NGALA (and also his wife).'
- (9) **á** **àyàṅsè** (cí) sì bífū yé Shey (bá **mínjì**)  
**FOC tomorrow** (COMP) we.INCL FUT2 see Shey (and **behind**  
**àyàṅsè f́ŋ**)  
**tomorrow also**)  
 'We will see Shey TOMORROW (and also the day after tomorrow).'
- (10) **á** **mà ntāā** (cí) yà táā à m̀ dò (bá **mà rfà**)  
**FOC PREP market** (COMP) my father 3SG PST3 go (and **PREP work**  
**f́ŋ**)  
**also**)  
 'My father went TO THE MARKET (and also to work).'

## Also-phrases

- (11) *à bā zhē bá Nfò bāā (#bá Tánkó f́ŋ)*  
 EXPL PST1 eat FOC Nfor fufu (and Tanko also)  
 'It is Nfor who ate fufu (#and so did Tanko).'
- (12) *mè bí kɔnī bá Ngàlá (#bá ŋgwá zhì f́ŋ)*  
 I FUT1 meet FOC Ngala (and wife his also)  
 'It is Ngala (#and also his wife) whom I will meet.'
- (13) *sì bífū yé Shey bá àyàŋsè (#bá mínjì àyàŋsè f́ŋ)*  
 we.INCL FUT2 see Shey FOC tomorrow (and behind tomorrow also)  
 'It is tomorrow (#and also the day after tomorrow) that we will see Shey.'
- (14) *yà táā à m̀ d̀ò bá mà ntāā (#bá mà rfà f́ŋ)*  
 my father 3SG PST3 go FOC PREP market (and PREP work also)  
 'It is to the market (#and also to work) that my father went.'

# Even-phrases

- (15) *ká?* **Nfò** à *bā* *zhē* *bāā*  
 even **Nfor** 3SG PST1 eat fufu  
 'Even NFOR ate fufu.'
- (16) *ká?* **Ngàlá** *mè* *bí* *kōnī*  
 even **Ngala** I FUT1 meet  
 'I will meet even NGALA.'
- (17) *ká?* **àyànṣè** *sì* *bífū* *yé* *Shey*  
 even **tomorrow** we.INCL FUT2 see Shey  
 'We will see Shey even TOMORROR.'
- (18) *ká?* **mà** **ntāā** *yà* *tāā* à *m* *dò*  
 even **PREP market** my father 3SG PST3 go  
 'My father went even TO THE MARKET.'

# Even-phrases

- (19) \*à bā zhē **ká?** **Nfò** bāā  
 EXPL PST1 eat **even** **Nfor** fufu  
 'It is even Nfor who ate fufu.'
- (20) \*mè bí kōnī **ká?** **Ngàlá**  
 I FUT1 meet **even** **Ngala**  
 'It is even Ngala whom I will meet.'
- (21) ?sì bífū yé Shey **ká?** **àyàṅsè**  
 we.INCL FUT2 see Shey **even** **tomorrow**  
 'It is even tomorrow that we will see Shey.'
- (22) ?yà táā à m̀ d̀ **ká?** **mà ntāā**  
 my father 3SG PST3 go **even** **PREP market**  
 'It is even to the market that my father went.'

# Universal quantifiers

- (23) **á** **ŋwè** **nsip** (cí) í bā zhē bāā  
 FOC **person all** (COMP) 3SG PST1 eat fufu  
 'EVERYBODY ate fufu.'
- (24) **á** **ŋwè** **nsip** (cí) mē bí kōnī  
 FOC **person all** (COMP) I FUT1 meet  
 'I will meet EVERYBODY.'
- (25) **á** **nòŋ** **nsip** (cí) sì cī yé Shey  
 FOC **day all** (COMP) we.INCL PROG see Shey  
 'We will be seeing Shey EVERYDAY.'
- (26) **á** **à** **bdi?** **sip** (cí) yà táā à m̀ d̀ò  
 FOC **PREP place all** (COMP) my father 3SG PST3 go  
 'My father went EVERYWHERE.'

# Universal quantifiers

- (27) \*à bā zhē **bá** ηwè **nsìp** bāā  
 EXPL PST1 eat **FOC** **person all** fufu  
 'It is everybody who ate fufu.'
- (28) \*mè bí kōnī **bá** ηwè **nsìp**  
 I FUT1 meet **FOC** **person all**  
 'It is everybody that I will meet.'
- (29) \*sì cī yé Shey **bá** nòη **nsìp**  
 we.INCL PROG see Shey **FOC** **day all**  
 'It is everyday that we will be seeing Shey.'
- (30) \*yà táā à m̀ dò **bá** à **bdiʔ sip**  
 my father 3SG PST3 go **FOC** **PREP place all**  
 'It is everywhere that my father went.'



# Focus in Limbum

## (ii) Identificational focus

# Identificational focus

## Context

Tata and Yaah are talking on the phone, the connection is really bad. Yaah tells Tata that she is going to meet Ngala later, but since it is Tanko's birthday, Tata assumes that Yaah is going to meet Tanko. Tata is confused and asks Yaah if it is not Tanko that she is going to meet.

Yaah: *mè bí kɔ̃nī bá Ngàlá*  
 I FUT1 meet FOC Ngala  
 'It is Ngala whom I will meet.'

Yaah: \* *á Ngàlá (cí) mè bí kɔ̃nī*  
 FOC Ngala (COMP) I FUT1 meet  
 '\*I will meet NGALA.'

## Contrast

The expression of contrast does not necessarily involve a focus construction:

- (31) *mí Cameroon bì ó kí zhé bāā, cí zhé tortillas ní Mexico*  
 in Cameroon people 3PL HAB eat fufu but eat tortillas in Mexico  
 'In Cameroon people eat fufu, but they eat tortillas in Mexico.'

However, if the contrasted constituent is focused, only the marker *bá* is felicitous here.

- (32) *mí Cameroon bì ó kí zhé bāā, cí zhé **bá** tortillas ní*  
 in Cameroon people 3PL HAB eat fufu but eat **FOC** **tortillas** in  
*Mexico*  
 Mexico

'In Cameroon people eat fufu, but they eat tortillas in Mexico.'

- (33) *mí Cameroon bì ó kí zhé bāā, cí zhé \***á** tortillas ní*  
 in Cameroon people 3PL HAB eat fufu but eat **FOC** **tortillas** in  
*Mexico*  
 Mexico

'In Cameroon people eat fufu, but they eat tortillas in Mexico.'

# Correction

## Context

Yaah bought a pair of shoes. Njobe does not remember correctly and tells Tanko that Yaah bought a dress. Yaah corrects that saying that she bought shoes (instead).

Njobe: *í bá yū bcè?*  
 3SG PST2 buy dresses  
 'She bought dresses.'

Yaah: *mè bá yū **bá** blábá?*  
 1SG PST2 buy **FOC** shoes  
 'I bought SHOES.'

Yaah: \* ***á** blábá? (cí) mè bā yú*  
**FOC** shoes (COMP) 1SG PST2 buy  
 'I bought SHOES.'

# Selection

## Context 1

Shey is about to cook dinner and asks Yaah whether she wants to eat fufu or yams.

Shey: à bí zhē **bāā** kè **mbrè?** à  
 2SG FUT2 eat **fufu** or **yams** Q  
 'Will you eat FUFU or YAMS?'

Yaah: mè bí zhē **bá** **mbrè?**  
 1SG FUT2 eat **FOC** **yams**  
 'I will eat YAMS.'

Yaah: \* **á** **mbrè?** (cí) mè bí zhē  
**FOC** **yams** (COMP) 1SG FUT2 eat  
 'I will eat YAMS.'

# Selection

## Context 2

Shey is about to cook dinner. Shey knows that Yaah loves yams and assumes she will prefer it over fufu, but he asks her nevertheless.

Shey: à b́í zhē **bá** **bāā** kè **mbrè?** à  
 2SG FUT2 eat **FOC** **fufu** or **yams** Q  
 ‘Will you eat FUFU or YAMS?’

**A.** Shey was right: Yaah prefers yams.

Yaah: m̀è b́í zhē **mbrè?**  
 1SG FUT2 eat **yams**  
 ‘I will eat YAMS.’

**B.** Shey was wrong: Yaah wants to eat fufu.

Yaah: m̀è b́í zhē **bá** **bāā**  
 1SG FUT2 eat **FOC** **fufu**  
 ‘I will eat FUFU.’

Yaah: \* **á** **bāā** (cí) m̀è b́í  
**FOC** **fufu** (COMP) 1SG FUT2  
 zhē  
 eat  
 ‘I will eat FUFU.’

# Restriction: only-phrases and argument focus

Nominal constituents combine with the marker **cà?cà?** ‘only’. It is compatible with both focus strategies.

## Context 1

She is looking for Ngala and Tanko who are supposed to be at the market. She tells Yaah to go find Ngala and Tanko and bring them back.

A. Yaah comes back with Ngala.

Y: *mè kóní bá Ngàlá cà?cà?*  
 1SG find FOC Ngala only  
 ‘I only found Ngala.’

B. Yaah comes back with Njobe.

Y: *mè kóní bá Njòbé*  
 1SG find FOC Njobe  
**cà?cà?**  
**only**  
 ‘I only found Njobe.’

## Restriction: only-phrases and argument focus

Nominal constituents combine with the marker **cà?cà?** ‘only’. It is compatible with both focus strategies.

### Context 2

Shey is looking for someone to help repair the car. Shey tells Yaah to go to the market and bring back some people who can help.

Yaah comes back with Ngala.

Y: *mè kóní bá Ngàlá cà?cà?*  
 1 SG find FOC Ngala only  
 ‘It is only Ngala who I found (and no one else).’

Y: *á Ngàlá cà?cà? (cí) mè kóní*  
 FOC Ngala only COMP 1 SG find  
 ‘I found only Ngala.’



## Restriction: only-phrases and verb focus

Verbs combine with the marker **kū** 'only'. This is compatible with the identificational focus position only:

- (34) *wèr à kū lá bzhī lá*  
 we 1PL **only** **cook** food **cook**  
 'It is only cooking that we did to the food.'

- (35) \* *kū r-lá (cí) wèr à lá bzhī*  
 only **INF-cook** COMP we 1PL **cook** food  
 'We only COOKED the food.'

However, the information focus construction is compatible with the nominal marker *cà?cà?*:

- (36) *á r-lá cà?cà? (cí) wèr à lá bzhī*  
 FOC **INF-cook only** COMP we 1PL **cook** food  
 'We only COOKED the food.'

# Focus and wh-question

- Wh-questions have been argued to represent a (particular) type of focus constructions (e.g. Lambrecht (n.d.: 283), Horvath (n.d.: 118)).
- Aboh (n.d.*b*) showed that some languages distinguish between focused and non-focused wh-phrases.
- The data from Limbum provides evidence in favour of Aboh (n.d.*b*) by showing that wh-questions and focus marking can be independent from each other.
- Moreover, wh-questions can combine with both focus constructions, leading to a three-way distinction of wh-questions.

# Focus & wh-questions

## (i) wh-questions with no focus marker

(37) *ndá á bā zhē bāā* (38)  
**who** 3SG PST1 eat fufu  
 'Who ate fufu?'

*wè bā yé kéré*  
 you.SG PST1 see **what**  
 'What did you see?'

## (ii) wh-questions with information focus

(39) *á ndá (cí) í bā*  
**FOC who** (COMP) 3SG PST1 (40)  
*zhē bāā*  
 eat fufu  
 'Who is it that ate fufu?'

*á kéré wè bā yé*  
**FOC what** you.SG PST1 see  
 'What is it that you saw?'

## (iii) wh-questions with identificational focus

(41) *à bā zhē bá ndà*  
 EXPL PST1 eat **FOC who**  
*bāā*  
 fufu  
 'Who (if not X / of them) ate fufu?'

(42) *wè bā yé bá kéré*  
 you.SG PST1 see **FOC what**  
 'What (if not X) did you see?'

# Outlook: other Grassfields Bantu languages

Language <sup>1</sup>	FM	cxt	-contrast	+contrast	wh-questions
Medumba	<i>a</i>	cleft	FM + cleft	FM in-situ	FM optional
Tuki	<i>odzu</i>	cleft	FM cleft		FM optional
Nweh	<i>mə</i>	cleft	FM cleft		
Aghem	<i>no</i>	IAV	<i>maa</i>	<i>no</i>	QM excludes FM
Noni	<i>lo</i> (V) <i>ε nuu</i>	IAV	no FM	FM	IAV, no FM
Naki	<i>li</i> (Sbj.)	IAV, cleft	FM	FM	FM optional

<sup>1</sup>Medumba (Kouankem & Zimmermann n.d.), Tuki (Aboh n.d.c), Nweh (Aboh n.d.c), Aghem (Hyman & Polinsky n.d.b), Noni (Hyman n.d.), Naki (Good n.d.)

# Concluding remarks

- We argued that Limbum has two types of focus:

<i>á</i>	information focus	–	no set of potential referents presupposed
<i>bá</i>	identificational focus	–	a set of potential referents is presupposed

- In contrast to what has been suggested in previous works, Limbum provides evidence for two distinct semantic functions of focus.
- Moreover, the two functions are shown to be encoded by two separate constructions.
- In addition, wh-questions support this distinction by being compatible with both focus constructions.
- A preliminary look at other related languages suggest that this division might be found outside of Limbum as well.
- More detailed work on different focus functions and constructions expressing them is needed.

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