Focus constructions in Limbum

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Introduction
- Focus
- Limbum

Focus in Limbum
- Information focus
- Identificational focus
- Focus & wh-questions

Outlook

Concluding remarks
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)*  *m bí*    *lɔrĩ*
    **FOC**  *brother my*  *(COMP)*  *l FUT1 pick.up*

    ‘I will pick up MY BROTHER.’

(2)  *m bí*    *lɔr*      *bá*    *ndúr*    *wà*
    *l 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.)
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 (Büring 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 (diagnostic tests)
- universal quantifiers

**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 (contexts)
- selection
- restriction

... 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) \( \eta \nu \nu \nu \ f5 \ \dot{a} \ m \ t\dot{i} \ \eta \nu \nu \ u \) man DET PST3 cut wood ‘The man cut the wood.’

(https://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/14049/CM)
Focus in Limbum

(i) 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) mè bí kōnī
FOC Ngala (COMP) I FUT1 meet
‘I will meet NGALA.’

Yaah: *mè bí kònī bà `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 főŋ)  
    FOC Nfor (COMP) 3SG PST1 eat fufu (and Tanko also)  
    ‘NFOR ate fufu (and so did Tanko).’

(8) á Ngálá (cí) mè bí kūnī (bá ngwá zhì főŋ)  
    FOC Ngala (COMP) I FUT1 meet (and wife his also)  
    ‘I will meet NGALA (and also his wife).’

(9) á àyàŋsè (cí) sì bífū yé Shey (bá mínjì  
    FOC tomorrow (COMP) we.INCL FUT2 see Shey (and behind  
    àyàŋsè főŋ)  
    tomorrow also)  
    ‘We will see Shey TOMORROW (and also the day after tomorrow).’

(10) á mà ntāā (cí) yà táā à m dò (bá mà rfà  
    FOC PREP market (COMP) my father 3SG PST3 go (and PREP work  
    főŋ)  
    also)  
    ‘My father went TO THE MARKET (and also to work).’
Also-phrases

(11) à bā zhē bá  Nfò bāā (#bá Tánkó fōŋ)  
EXPL PST1 eat  FOC  Nfor fufu (and Tanko also)  
‘It is Nfor who ate fufu (#and so did Tanko).’

(12) mè bǐ kōnī bá  Ngàlá (#bá ŋgwá zhì fōŋ)  
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 fōŋ)  
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 m dò bá  mà ntāā (#bá mà rfà fōŋ)  
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?  \textcolor{orange}{Nfò} à  bā  zhē bāā
even \textcolor{orange}{Nfor} 3SG PST1 eat fufu
‘Even NFOR ate fufu.’

(16)  ká?  \textcolor{orange}{Ngàlá} mè bí  kōnī
even \textcolor{orange}{Ngala} 1 FUT1 meet
‘I will meet even NGALA.’

(17)  ká?  àyàŋse  sì  bifū yé Shey
even \textcolor{orange}{tomorrow} we.INCL FUT2 see Shey
‘We will see Shey even TOMORROR.’

(18)  ká?  mà ntíä  yà táä à m dò
even \textcolor{orange}{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 kɔnī ká? Ngàlā
I FUT1 meet even Ngala
‘It is even Ngala whom I will meet.’

(21) ?sì bífū yè Shey ká? àyàŋse
we.INCL FUT2 see Shey even tomorrow
‘It is even tomorrow that we will see Shey.’

(22) ?yà tǎā à m dò 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 nọ́ọ́ nṣìp (cì) í bā zhē bāā

FOC person all (COMP) 3SG PST1 eat fufu

‘EVERYBODY ate fufu.’

(24) á nọ́ọ́ nṣìp (cì) ì mè bí kōnī

FOC person all (COMP) I FUT1 meet

‘I will meet EVERYBODY.’

(25) á nọ́ọ́ nṣìp (cì) sì cī yé Shey

FOC day all (COMP) we.INCL PROG see Shey

‘We will be seeing Shey EVERYDAY.’

(26) á à bdìʔ sìp (cì) yà tāa à m dò

FOC PREP place all (COMP) my father 3SG PST3 go

‘My father went EVERYWHERE.’
Universal quantifiers

(27) *à bā zhē bā ŋwè nsìp bāā
EXPL PST1 eat FOC person all fufu
'It is everybody who ate fufu.'

(28) *mè bí kɔnĩ bā ŋwè nsìp
I FUT1 meet FOC person all
'It is everybody that I will meet.'

(29) *sì cĩ yé Shey bā nɔŋ nsìp
we.INCL PROG see Shey FOC day all
'It is everyday that we will be seeing Shey.'

(30) *yà táā à m dò bā à bdìʔ sìp
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: \( mè bì \ kɔnī \, \text{bá} \, \text{Ngàlá} \)
I FUT1 meet FOC Ngala
‘It is Ngala whom I will meet.’

Yaah: *\( á \, \text{Ngàlá (cí)} \, mè bì \ kɔnī \)
*FOC Ngala (COMP) I FUT1 meet
‘*I will meet NGALA.’
**Contrast**

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

(31) \(mí \text{ Cameroon } bì \ó \ kí \ zhé \ bāā, \ cí \ zhé \ tortillas \ ní \ Mexico\) 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) \(mí \text{ Cameroon } bì \ó \ kí \ zhé \ bāā, \ cí \ zhé \ bá \ tortillas \ ní \) in \ Cameroon \ people \ 3PL \ HAB \ eat \ fufu \ but \ eat \ tortillas \ in \ Mexico
‘In Cameroon people eat fufu, but they eat tortillas in Mexico.’

(33) \(mí \text{ Cameroon } bì \ó \ kí \ zhé \ bāā, \ cí \ zhé \ * \ á \ tortillas \ ní \) in \ Cameroon \ people \ 3PL \ HAB \ eat \ fufu \ but \ eat \ tortillas \ in \ Mexico
‘In Cameroon people eat fufu, but they eat tortillas in Mexico.’
Correction

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

Nj obe: 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  yū
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 kē mbrè? à
2SG FUT2 eat fufu or yams Q
‘Will you eat FUFU or YAMS?’

Yaah: mè bí zhē bà 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.’
Focus in Limbum

Identificational focus

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 bì zhē bà à bāa kē mbrē? à
2SG FUT2 eat FOC fufu or yams Q
‘Will you eat FUFU or YAMS?’

A. Shey was right: Yaah prefers yams.

Yaah: mè bì zhē mbrē?
1SG FUT2 eat yams
‘I will eat YAMS.’

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

Yaah: mè bì zhē bà à bāa
1SG FUT2 eat FOC fufu
‘I will eat FUFU.’

Yaah: * à bāa (cí) mè bì
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
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.

\[
\begin{array}{l}
Y: & mè kóñí bá Ngàlá cà?cà? \\
& 1 \text{SG find FOC Ngala only} \\
& \text{‘I only found Ngala.’}
\end{array}
\]

B. Yaah comes back with Njobe.

\[
\begin{array}{l}
Y: & mè kóñí bá Njòbé cà?cà? \\
& 1 \text{SG find FOC Njobe only} \\
& \text{‘I only found Njobe.’}
\end{array}
\]
Restriction: only-phrases and argument focus

Nominal constituents combine with the marker à?à? ‘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:  
\[
\text{mè } \text{kònì} \text{ bá } \text{Ngàlà à?à?} \\
\text{1SG find FOC Ngala only}
\]

‘It is only Ngala who I found (and no one else).’

Y:  
\[
\text{á } \text{Ngàlà à?à? (cì) mè kònì} \\
\text{FOC Ngala only COMP 1SG find}
\]

‘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) \[ \text{wèr à } \text{ kū } \text{ lá } \text{ bzhīī lá} \]
we 1PL only cook food cook

‘It is only cooking that we did to the food.’

(35) * \[ \text{ kū } \text{ r-lá } (cí) \text{ wèr à } \text{ lá } \text{ bzhīī} \]
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) \[ \text{ à } \text{ r-lá } \text{ cà*cà* (cí) wèr à lá bzhīī} \]
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)  
\[
\text{ndá á bā zhē bāā}
\]
who 3SG PST1 eat fufu
‘Who ate fufu?’

(38)  
\[
\text{wè bā yé kēē}
\]
you.SG PST1 see what
‘What did you see?’

(ii) wh-questions with information focus
(39)  
\[
\text{á ndá (cí) í bā}
\]
FOC who (COMP) 3SG PST1
zhē bāā
eat fufu
‘Who is it that ate fufu?’

(40)  
\[
\text{á kēē wè bā yé}
\]
FOC what you.SG PST1 see
‘What is it that you saw?’

(iii) wh-questions with identificational focus
(41)  
\[
\text{á bā zhē bā ndá}
\]
EXPL PST1 eat FOC who
bāā
fufu
‘Who (if not X / of them) ate fufu?’

(42)  
\[
\text{wè bā yé bā kēē}
\]
you.SG PST1 see FOC what
‘What (if not X) did you see?’
### Outlook: other Grassfields Bantu languages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>FM</th>
<th>cxt</th>
<th>-contrast</th>
<th>+contrast</th>
<th>wh-questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Medumba</td>
<td><em>a</em></td>
<td>cleft</td>
<td>FM + cleft</td>
<td>FM in-situ</td>
<td>FM optional</td>
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<td><em>odzu</em></td>
<td>cleft</td>
<td>FM cleft</td>
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<td>FM optional</td>
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<td><em>mø</em></td>
<td>cleft</td>
<td>FM cleft</td>
<td></td>
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<td>IAV</td>
<td><em>maa</em></td>
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<td>IAV</td>
<td>no FM</td>
<td>FM</td>
<td>IAV, no FM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naki</td>
<td><em>li (Sbj.)</em></td>
<td>IAV, cleft</td>
<td>FM</td>
<td>FM</td>
<td>FM optional</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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1Medumba (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.)
We argued that Limbum has two types of focus:

- á | information focus — no set of potential referents presupposed
- bá | 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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