Investigating focus marking in Luganda and Lingala

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While it is admittedly difficult to investigate information structure in an unfamiliar language, in this talk I hope to show that there are some manageable diagnostics for focus that can be applied in elicitation. Based on data from Luganda and Lingala I show why the discoveries about focus marking in Bantu languages are crucial for understanding both the synchronic analysis and the diachronic development of focus.

For Luganda I discuss the presence vs. absence of the augment (e.g. o-mu-ntu vs. _-mu-ntu 'person'), arguing that the absence indicates not just underspecified focus but exclusivity (1). For Lingala I show the use of two focus markers nde and moto (2), showing how the latter has grammaticalised from a cleft construction in an unexpected way.

(1) a. Y-a-gúla e-bí-tábo. [Luganda]
   1SM-PAST-buy 8A-8PX-books
   'He bought books.'

   b. Y-a-gúla bi-tábo.
   1SM-PAST-buy 8PX-books
   'He bought books.'

(2) a. Mwána moto azalí na ndáko. [Lingala]
   child MOTO ASG.be.PRF in.the house
   'It is the child who is in the house.'

   b. Mwána ndé azalí na ndáko.
   child FOC ASG.be.PRF in.the house
   'It is rather the child who is in the house.'

References


