

In Fiedler, Ines and Anne Schwarz (eds.), 2010, *The Expression of Information Structure. A documentation of its diversity across Africa*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins: 233-260 [Typological Studies in Language 91]. <https://doi.org/10.1075/tsl.91.09rob>

Prefinal version

Focus in Atlantic languages

Stéphane ROBERT
LLACAN, INALCO, CNRS
stephane.robert@cnrs.fr

Abstract:

This paper presents an overview of the formal markings characteristic of focus in Atlantic languages and reflection on some problematic uses of focused forms. A common (but not universal) feature of these languages is the use of verb morphology (in various ways) to express focus. What is most remarkable in several Atlantic languages (and apparently specific to this group) is that (1) verb forms indicate the syntactic status of the focused constituent; (2) these verb forms often merge focus, aspect, and voice features. This organization of the verb system has consequences for the range of uses of focused forms, in particular, for verb focus which is often used to express a mere statement in the case of verbs expressing a quality. These uses are accounted for through a renewed definition of the focused sentence as a “split assertion” involving a temporal presupposition and a qualitative designation.

Key words: focus, verb, information structure, morphology, Atlantic languages

1. Introduction

Bearth (1999:122) has already noted “the remarkable degree to which many African languages use morphological means allocated to the core grammar in order to express a variety of focus categories, where European languages predominantly use accentual means in a way which very much sets them apart from the rest of grammar”. Atlantic languages provide a good illustration of this principle: in most languages of this group, the information structure of the sentence is expressed by verb morphology; that is, the language uses special verb forms for focusing various syntactic constituents. These forms belong to the paradigms of verb conjugations and constitute an organizing principle of the verb system.

The grammaticalization of focus through verb morphology is, however, a tendency, not an absolute rule, and the Atlantic group is not homogenous in the way its languages mark focus. Still, a good majority of Atlantic languages use verb inflection for focus marking. Interestingly, in some cases like Wolof or Fula, focus marking merges with other verb specifiers (such as tense, aspect, and voice) and functions as an organizing principle of the verb system. This organization has consequences for the range of uses of focused forms, in particular, for verb focus.

As we will see, for this presentation, it is necessary to make a distinction between “rheme” and “focus”. I use the term “rheme” to refer to “new information” conveyed by an utterance: this is a semantic/pragmatic notion which does not necessarily coincide with one linguistic component of the sentence under study (see note 4); and I speak of “focus” only in reference to instances where the rheme corresponds to a syntactic constituent of the sentence and is morphologically marked.

I will now present an overview of the characteristic formal markings of focus in the Atlantic languages, based on the seventeen languages for which I have found documentation; then, in order to explain the range of uses of focused forms, I propose a new analysis of focus; and finally, I mention some other interesting features of Atlantic languages which can be related to the expression of focus in verb morphology and enable me to account for the range of structures used for focusing.

2. Formal marking of focus in the Atlantic languages

Generally and typically in these languages, verb morphology indicates that a given constituent is focalized and specifies its syntactic role. The number of syntactic roles which can be formally distinguished in the focusing process varies from language to language. As we will see in detail, there are always different forms marking argument *vs.* verb focus, but subject focus may or may not be distinguished from the focusing of other arguments. Bijogo, for instance, has a special verb inflection for focusing the subject and uses periphrasis for all other functions, while the verb morphology of BaynuQk, Seereer, and Wolof distinguishes three functions in focus: verb, subject, and complement. Mey (or Konyagi) is exceptional in having four different conjugations for focusing verb, subject, object, and circumstantial phrase.

Atlantic languages vary considerably in their morphology. Apparently there are no two languages with strictly identical systems. There is rather a gradient from the most fully grammaticalized systems (where focus marking merges with verb morphology) to the most analytical ones¹ (in which focus is marked by particles or pronouns).

¹ Classically, grammaticalization chains include the evolution from more autonomous morphemes such as nouns or pronouns into more integrated ones, such as inflectional affixes. Therefore we can consider that a system with affixes is more grammaticalized and synthetic (or less analytic) than a system using particles or pronouns.

2.1. The most fully grammaticalized type: integrated systems of verb inflection

In this first type of language, focus merges with verb morphology. Mey (Tenda subgroup, Senegal: Santos 1992) represents an extreme case in richness of focusing morphology: four different “verb types” (Santos 1992: 217-8 and 272-5) are distinguished according to the tone, prefix, agreement pronoun, and root grade (initial fricative/plosive/prenasal consonant alternation) of the verb; these complex verb “types” corresponding to verbal inflections indicate that different syntactic constituents are focused². The perfective aspect is the unmarked form for these verbal inflections.

(Verb focus: type I i.e. prefix T + high tone, root grade 3: plosive t-, agreement suffix)

- (1) (àwò) (T)wà-t-ɓɓɓ' yɛ'saŋ-vaâ
(Yes) they have eaten, the men²

(Subject focus: type II, i.e. root grade 1: r- for “to eat”, no personal agreement: -nɛ minimal personal verb suffix)

- (2) vɛ'saŋ-vaâ r-ɓɓɓ
(It is) the men (who) have eaten (~ THE MEN have eaten)

(Object focus: type III: i.e. grade 1 for 1st and 2nd persons, grade 3 elsewhere, agreement suffix)

- (3) vɛ'saŋ-vaâ z æ'z ɓɓɓ wà-t-ɓɓɓɓ
The men, (it is)mangoes they have eaten (~ they have eaten MANGOES)

- (4) z æ'z ɓɓɓ uɓɓɓɓɓɓɓɓɓ
It is mangoes I am eating (I am eating MANGOES)

(Circumstantial phrase focus: type IV, i.e. root degree 3, agreement suffix)

- (5) jxɔha wà-t-ɓɓɓ, vɛ'saŋ-vaɔ
When did they eat, the men?

Typically in Atlantic languages, focus marking merges with other verb specifications such as aspect, tense, and voice so as to constitute different paradigms. This is the case in Fula (Northern branch), for instance, which provides different focusing suffixes for each voice and aspect of verb morphology:

² Santos does not use the term “focus” for these different verb forms and rather calls them “types processif, subjectif, objectif, et inflexionnels du mode énonciatif”. But, besides translating most of them with a focused form in French, she clearly indicates that the different “types” are used in questions and answers bearing respectively on yes/no questions (for example 1), wh- questions on the subject (2), object (3 and 4) and circumstantial phrase (5), which correspond to the different constituent foci I have indicated. For a discussion on verb focus, see 2.2.

² Unfortunately Santos does not gloss her examples. I have followed her French translation in my English adaptation.

Table 1: *Fula verb suffixes marking aspect and focus (adapted from Sylla 1993, on Fula from Fuuta Tooro, Senegal)*

	<i>Active</i>	<i>Middle</i>	<i>Passive</i>
<i>Perfective Suffixes</i>			
P1 Verb focus	∅ / -u	-i	-a
P2 Argument Focus³	-i	-ii	-aa
(P3 Non focusing perfective)	(-ii)	(-iima)	(-aama)
<i>Imperfective Suffixes</i>			
(IMP1 Injunctive)	(∅)	(-o)	(-e)
IMP2 Verb focus	-a	-oo	-ee
(IMP3 Non focusing imperf. ⁴)	-at	-oto	-ete
IMP4 Argument focus	-ata~(a)t(a)	-otoo~(o)t(o)	-etee~(e)t(e)

In contrast to Mey, according to this table, the verb morphology of Fula does not distinguish between the different focused arguments and opposes only verbal and argumental foci, but it includes voice and aspect distinctions for the different focusing suffixes.

In the following examples, from Labatut (1986) on the Gâbunke dialect (Senegal), (6) has no focus. By “no focus” we mean that no *syntactic* constituent is focused. As we will see for Wolof (cf. here below), there can be a variety of non-focusing verb forms, some of which can be considered as in fact focusing aspect or tense. Here example (4) contrasts with (7) and (8) which have argument focus and with (9) which indicates verb focus:

- (6) cukalel ngel ayn-**at**⁵ puccu ngu
 child the tend-IMP3 horse the
 the child will tend the horse

(Subject focus)

- (7) cukalel ngel ayn-**ata** puccu ngu
 child the tend-IMP4.ARG.FOC horse the
 it is the child who will tend the horse

(Object focus)

- (8) (**ko**) puccu ngu cukalel ngel ayn-**ata**
 PTCL horse the child the tend-IMP4.ARG.FOC
 it is the horse that the child will tend

(Verb focus)

- (9) cukalel ngel ayn-**u** puccu ngu, ngel lootaani ngu
 child the tend-PERF1.VB.FOC horse the he wash.PERFNeg the
 the child TENDED the horse, he did not wash it.

³ Sylla (1993: 48) and Diallo (2000: 160) indicate that P2 is used both for narratives and for argument focusing. Sylla does not give examples of the latter use; noticeably, those given by Diallo all have a *ko* particle.

⁴ Sylla (1993: 52) indicates that IMP3 is used for ‘foregrounding the action’ (“mise en relief de l’action”) as IMP3 does, but in inconclusive examples and also mentions gnomic uses; Diallo (2000: 170) does not mention any focusing effect of IMP3 but rather future and gnomic values, and Labatut (1986: 23) explicitly comments on the form as being a “non focusing imperfective” and translates it by a simple future. I have followed the latter two authors.

⁵ Labatut glosses the -at suffix as ‘non focusing active imperfective’.

Seereer and Wolof also display highly grammaticalized systems with focusing “conjugations”. Seereer will be discussed in 1.2 rather than here, because it makes use of more than one kind of verb morphology for focus. The Wolof (Northern branch, Senegal) verb constituent has two components (Robert 1991, 2000): an invariant lexical stem and an inflectional marker conveying the grammatical specifications of the verb (person, number, tense/aspect, mood) as well as the information structure of the sentence (focus). The inflectional marker is preposed, postposed, or suffixed to the lexical stem, and organizes the verb system into ten paradigms or conjugations: Perfect, Presentative, Aorist, Verb Emphatic, Subject Emphatic, Complement Emphatic, Negative, Emphatic Negative, Obligative, and Imperative. In the absence of the imperfective suffix (-y), these conjugations have present perfective value: action verbs refer to a past event while stative verbs refer to a present state. In the affirmative indicative mood, there are three non-focusing conjugations (Perfect, Presentative, and Aorist) and three focusing conjugations which are traditionally called “emphatic” (Verb Emphatic, Subject Emphatic, and Complement Emphatic). The latter vary according to the syntactic function of the focused constituent: subject, verb, or complement (in the wide sense of any constituent which is neither subject nor main verb).

Thus, for *gis* ‘see’, *loolu* ‘that’, we have:

Table 2: *Affirmative indicative (perfective) conjugations in Wolof*

	Perfect	Presentative	Aorist
1 SG	<i>gis naa</i>	<i>maa ngi gis</i>	<i>ma gis</i>
2	<i>gis nga</i>	<i>yaa ngi gis</i>	<i>nga gis</i>
3	<i>gis na</i>	<i>mu ngi gis</i>	<i>mu gis</i>
1 PL	<i>gis nanu</i>	<i>nu ngi gis</i>	<i>nu gis</i>
2	<i>gis ngeen</i>	<i>yeena ngi gis</i>	<i>ngeen gis</i>
3	<i>gis nañu</i>	<i>ñu ngi gis</i>	<i>ñu gis</i>
	Verb Focus	Subject Focus	Complement Focus
1 SG	<i>dama gis</i>	<i>maa gis</i>	<i>loolu laa gis</i>
2	<i>danga gis</i>	<i>yaa gis</i>	<i>loolu nga gis</i>
3	<i>da(fa) gis</i>	<i>moo gis</i>	<i>loolu la gis</i>
1 PL	<i>danu gis</i>	<i>noo gis</i>	<i>loolu lanu gis</i>
2	<i>dangeen gis</i>	<i>yeena gis</i>	<i>loolu ngeen gis</i>
3	<i>dañu gis</i>	<i>ñoò gis</i>	<i>loolu lañu gis</i>

In examples (10a-d), the first sentence (in the Perfect) with no focused constituent contrasts with the following ones where one constituent or another is in focus.

Perfect

(10a) Momar **na** ko gis
 Momar see PFT3S OPR
 Momar has seen it.

Verb Focus

(10b) Momar **dafa** ko gis.
 Momar VBFOC3S OPR see
 Momar DID see it⁶

Subject Focus

(10c) Momar **moo** ko gis.
 Momar SUBJFOC3SG OPR see
 It was Momar who saw it
 ~ MOMAR saw it

Complement Focus

(10d) Momar **la** gis
 Momar COMPFOC3S see
 It was Momar he saw
 ~ He saw MOMAR

The complement-focusing paradigm consists of inflexional markers (3sg *la* in 10d) encoding both the focusing of the (preposed) object, the subject personal marker and the aspectual (perfective) value of the following predicate; it is therefore obligatory, even with a lexical subject as in *Momar la jigéen ji gis* ‘it was Momar that the woman saw’. This paradigm is used for any complement, whether direct object or prepositional, phrasal, or clausal complements as in (11):

Complement Focus

(11) [Bi ma nekkee xale te ma doon bey sama
 [When AOR1SG happen.to.be+ANTER child and AOR1SG d+PAST hoe my
 toolu baay] **laa** gis gaynde
 field-CONNfather] COMPFOC1SG see lion
 It was [when I was young and was hoeing my father's field] that I saw the lion

In contrast to the focusing conjugations, the three non-focusing conjugations indicate that the rheme (informative part of the utterance) is not a syntactic constituent as such. The Perfect indicates that a process (initially known to be ongoing) has now reached its end-point; hence, its informational content consists of the aspectual component of the process. The Presentative reports the current state of affairs by situating the predicative relationship in the speaker's space-time. The Aorist holds a special place in the system, defined by its being the only non-tensed conjugation; it expresses a “temporal anaphora”⁷.

In Bijogo (Guinea-Bissau) too, focus marking merges with other verb specifications such as aspect (*cf.* focusing perfective *vs.* focusing imperfective). This language uses verb inflection for focusing, but only for Subject focus: otherwise, a periphrasis (*to be* + relativization) is used (Segerer 2000).

Table 3: *Focusing vs. Non-focusing perfective and imperfective in Bijogo (Segerer 2000)*

Verb –da ‘to come’ (3sg o-, 3pl ya-: class makers for human beings)

*Perfective***Simple**

I came...

Subject Focus

I am the one who came...

⁶ On the uses of verb-focus markers, see 2.2.

⁷ For a full description of the Wolof verb system, see Robert (1991); for the Aorist in particular, see Robert (1996).

1SG	©aḏa	Hḏa
2	maḏa	ḏḏa
3	ḏa	tndaC
1PL	tḏa	ḏḏnda
2	ndḏa	ḏḏnda
3	yḏa	yandḏC

Imperfective

	Simple	Subject Focus
	I am coming...	I am the one who is coming...
1SG	©iḏa	iḏa
2	miḏa	aḏida
3	uḏa	udaC
1PL	tiḏa	aḏida
2	niḏa	aḏida
3	yaḏa	yadaC

(12) ka-jtk† ka-nrH© kaḡgot
 CL-house CL-of.me CL.IMPERF-burn
 my house is burning

(13) ka-jtk† ka-nrH© ka-goC
 CL-house CL-of.me CL.IMPERFFOC-burn
 MY HOUSE is burning

Thus the difference between the two utterances, (13) which contains subject focus and (12) without pragmatic focus, is marked by the mere change in verb inflection, namely here a change in the accentuation of the verb for the Imperfective 3sg person.

2.2. Less homogenous systems: languages using more than one kind of verb morphology

Still other Atlantic languages use verb morphology to indicate the focusing of a syntactic constituent but mark **verb** focus (by reduplication or nominalization of the verb) differently from that of other constituents (by verb suffix). Interestingly, some of these languages make use of a (verb) defocusing strategy for subject or complement focus.

2.2.1. Verb suffixes and verb reduplication

In BaynuQk (Senegal: Sauvageot 2001), the forms focusing the different constituents all involve a verb suffix –ne (~ nH): this suffix is sufficient to mark subject focus (cf. 15): , but the complement focus (be it direct object, indirect object or circumstant), also requires another morpheme ‘g(u)⁸’ which is postposed to the fronted complement (cf. 19), constituting therefore a discontinuous focusing morpheme ‘gu’ (FOC1)... -ne (FOC 2) .

⁸ When there is a lexical subject, the variant of this morpheme is ‘gu’ (as in 19); when the subject of the verb is

- (no focus, prospective)
- (14) Samba ⊕ dek.hine gU.saw.U...
 Samba MOD go.PROSP CL.hunt.CONN
 Samba will go hunting...

- (Subject focus prospective)
- (15) Samba ⊕ dek.hine.**ne** gU.saw.U...
 Samba MOD go.PROSP.FOC CL.hunt.CONN
 SAMBA will go hunting...

Concerning the merging of focus and aspect markers, BaynuQk presents an interesting situation. For the prospective, the aspectual marker (-hine) is distinct from the focusing suffix (-ne). But remarkably, for the perfective, focus marking merges with aspect: while the (simple) perfective is marked by the reduplication of the verb stem (e.g. ‘yIcIn.yIcIn’ in 16), this reduplication disappears when an argument is in focus (‘yIcIn-’ in 17).

- (no focus, perfective: verb stem reduplication)
- (16) Aisatu a yIc.In.yIcIn. gu.koj.je
 Aisatu MOD wash-TRANS.(PERF)RED CL.calabash.the
 Aisatu has washed the calabash

- (Complement focus, perfective: no verb reduplication)
- (17) gu.koj.o **gu** Aisatu a yIc.In.**nH**
 CL.calabash.the FOC1. Aisatu MOD wash.TRANS.(PERF)FOC2
 Aisatu washed THE CALABASH (~ It is the calabash that Aisatu has washed)

Note that when the verb stem bears a suffix, this suffix may (as in ‘yIcIn.yIcIn’, reduplicated form of ‘yIcIn-’, which is made up of ‘yIc’ “to wash” and a transitive suffix -In) or may not be included in the reduplication, as is the case in (18): ‘dek.ri.dek’ corresponds to the reduplicated form of ‘dek.ri’- (19): ‘dek-’ “to go” suffixed with a deictic directional –ri..

- (no focus, perfective: verb stem reduplication)
- (18) Samba ⊕ dek.ri.dek gu:b t⊕pro
 Samba MOD go.DIR. (PERF)RED today morning
 Samba came this morning

- (Subject focus, perfective: no verb reduplication)
- (19) Samba ⊕ dek.ri.**ne** gu:b t⊕pro
 Samba MOD go(PERF).DIR.FOC today morning
 SAMBA came this morning

Moreover, when the verb itself is in focus, it not only bears the discontinuous focusing morpheme ‘g(u)’ (FOC1)... -ne (FOC 2), but must also be nominalized by a class prefix (gU- in the following example). Note that a focused argument is always fronted:

- (Verb focus)
- (20) **gU**.yaxla **g-i** Qay.Hç.**ne**...
 CL.eat FOC1. I IMPERF.PAST.FOC2
 I was EATING (when...)
 Lit. (it was) the eating I was doing...

a personal the g- variant appears bearing a personal affix (as in 20).

2.2.2 Verb reduplication and the defocusing strategy

The various Joola languages apparently use the same strategy to express focus, namely, a reduplication of the verb stem for verb focus, and an $-e \sim -H$ verb suffix for argument focus (along with fronting of the focused constituent without verb reduplication). This is the case, for instance, in Joola-Karon (Galvagny 1984)⁹:

- (Verb focus)
- (21) Kodie a **li-a:-li** uli...
 Kodie he eat-PERF-eat rice
 [What did Kodie do?] Kodie ATE RICE¹⁰

- (Subject focus)
- (22) Kodie **a li-H** uli...
 Kodie he eat-DEFOC.PERF rice
 [Who ate rice?] KODIE ate rice

Galvagny also indicates that, beside the verbal marking, a different personal pronoun is used to refer to the subject when the object is focused ('na:' in 23 vs 'a' in 21 and 22):

- (Object focus)
- (23) uli Kodie **na: li-H**
 rice Kodie he eat-DEFOC.PERF
 [What did Kodie eat?] Kodie ate RICE

The same procedures are used in Joola-Kwatay (d'Ivoire 1987, Payne 1992) and Joola-Foñy (Sapir 1965, Gero & Levinson 1993):

- (Verb focus)
- (24) **nin tñ tñ** ebe
 1SG-buy-RED C3-cow
 I BOUGHT a cow

- (Argument focus)
- (25) e-be □□□ni-n tñ-H
 C3-COW 1SG-BUY-E
 I bought A COW

Interestingly, Galvagny and Sapir converge in considering that the $-e$ ($-H$) verb suffix indicates that the verb loses its rhematic ("emphatic" in Sapir's terms) status: "Functionally equivalent to the simple subordinate, the noun emphasis marker [i.e., the $-e$ verb suffix] deflects emphasis from the verb. Except in certain special constructions, it is used exclusively

⁹ Galvagny actually uses the term "rheme" and not focus, for all the cases I am presenting here. The "defocusing perfective" gloss for $-H$ (22, 23), is mine and is explained after (cf. 25).

¹⁰ Formally we have verb focus here but semantically, as part of the predicate, the object is attracted into the scope of the verb focus. The case is different in (23): the two parts of the predicate (verb and object) have a different informative status: the verb is presupposed while the object is selected as the informative part of the utterance, which corresponds to true object focus; for more details see 2.2.

to emphasize the subject or the complement” (Sapir 1965: 35). Therefore, we can consider that Joola languages express argument focus through a **defocusing** or more precisely a verb deranking strategy: the verb has to be marked as deranked from its rhematic status. On the other hand, “by reduplication of the verb theme, emphasis is placed on the action or state at the expense of the subject and complement” (Sapir 1965: 35).

Seereer (Northern subgroup, Senegal: Mäkelä 1989, Faye and Mous 2006) also uses a verb suffix (-u) for focusing any constituent (Subject, Object, Circumstantial complement), together with the fronting of the focused constituent. According to Maarten Mous (p.c.), this suffix plays the same role as the –e suffix in Joola, namely, defocusing the verb. The following examples are taken from Creissels (1978); note (1) that the –u suffix apparently has perfective value and (2) that when the subject is in focus, the anaphoric pronoun is deleted:

(no focus)

- (26) Jeen a nyaama atege’y ake fak
 Jeen he ate meat the yesterday
 John ate the meat yesterday

(Subject focus)

- (27) Jeen Ø nyaamu atege’y ake fak
 Jeen ate.FOC meat the yesterday
 It is John who ate the meat yesterday ~ JOHN ate the meat yesterday

(Object focus)

- (28) atege’y ake Jeen a nyaamu fak
 meat the Jeen he ate.FOC yesterday
 It is the meat that John ate yesterday ~ John ate THE MEAT yesterday

(Circumstant focus)

- (29) fak Jeen a nyaamu atege’y ake
 yesterday Jeen he ate meat the
 It was yesterday that John ate the meat ~ John ate the meat YESTERDAY

However, instead of reduplication (as in Joola), Seereer uses a particle “kaa” with personal pronoun suffixes for focusing the verb (Faye 1980: 64):

- (30) kaam (= kaa+um) y’ewaa foofi
 C’est que je puise de l’eau en ce moment
 (What I am doing now is drawing water ~ it so happens that I am now drawing water¹¹)

Waly Coly Faye (p.c.) considers that this “kaam” has the aspectual value of a present perfective (“accompli actuel”); when suffixed with a –u (“kaamu”), it becomes a non-present perfective (“accompli inactuel”).

2.3. Analytical systems using particles and pronouns

A third group of languages has to be distinguished from the preceding ones insofar as they do not use verb morphology (such as verb suffixes or conjugations) to indicate argument focusing; on the contrary, they make use of either particles or pronouns. However, 1) some of the languages already mentioned (such as Seereer) also use particles in certain cases; and 2) in this third group of languages, the use of particles is also sometimes accompanied by verb

¹¹ On the semantic value of verb focus, see 2.2.

reduplication (Kisi, Palor) or verb nominalization (Mankanya) for verb focus, just as in the preceding group; finally, the use of emphatic pronouns for marking focus can again be accompanied by a “defocusing strategy” (as in Joola) but involving change of position or use of an auxiliary (Noon). Therefore, the various ways of marking focus in the Atlantic languages appear rather to form a continuum.

2.3.1. Using particles

According to Trifkovic (1969), subject focus in Mankanya (Bak subgroup) requires a “ka” particle along with what seems to be “verb nominalization”:

(no focus)
 (31) iui i noha
 EMPH.PR PERS.PR.I verb
 you, you have a good time

(Subject focus)
 (32) iui i ka ten-uQ
 EMPH.PR PERS.PR.I PTC verb-DEMII
 it is the child who will tend the horse

In the last example, the verb is suffixed with a “relative demonstrative” which is used for relativization of the verb as in the following example (34). That is why I consider that we have a form of verb nominalization in the focused clause in (33).

(33) íiinc)a biiQ
 man he come- DEMII
 that man **who** came

No other constituent focusing is mentioned in this study of Mankanya.

For Palor (Cangin subgroup), d’Alton (1987) mentions only the use of a ^mdd particle for focusing the subject:

(34) tedox ^mdd ten fanfa
 shepherd FOC milk cow¹²
 It is a shepherd who is milking the cow ~ A SHEPHERD is milking the cow

However, she indicates elsewhere (p. 127) that this language has a special verb inflection, the “modalité état acquis”, expressed by verb reduplication and an -o suffix; this is reminiscent of the verb reduplication mentioned for verb focus in 1.2. That is why I suspect that this “modalité état acquis” actually corresponds to verb focus:

(35) tedoxa ten fanfa tedo
 shepherd milk cow milk-SUFF
 the shepherd milks the cow

¹² Glosses are mine.

(Subject focus)

- (40) Mi **yërã** Ø yáh Padee
 I EMPH.PR Ø go Fandène
 It is me who goes to Fandène (/has gone/will go...)

(Object focus)

- (41) Kodu **yërã** mi Ø hot
 Kodu EMPH.PR I Ø see
 It is Kodu that I see

To conclude this overview, we must mention Mani, Gola, Temne, and Balanta, which display the simplest focus systems of all. These languages use only (anaphoric or emphatic) pronouns for focusing. Mani (also called Bullom: Southern branch, Mel group, Sierra Leone) uses fronting of the focused element followed by a pronoun (Childs, forthcoming). According to Koroma (1994:148-9), Gola (Southern branch, Liberia) fronts the focused argument and optionally uses pronominal anaphora (obligatory only for subject focus). Temne (Southern branch, Sierra Leone) uses distinct emphatic pronouns for focusing subject and object (Wilson 1961). In Balanta (Bak subgroup, Senegal and Guinea Bissau), too, there is clear non-verbal marking of focus: in the case of object focus, the constituent is fronted and followed by a clitic noun-class marker which, interestingly, shows no agreement (Fudeman 1999):

(no focus)

- (42) a-lama womu saa
 CL1-king eat snake
 the king ate a snake

(object focus)

- (43) [saa-**fi**] a-lama womu
 snake-CL5.PRON CL1-king eat
 it was a snake the king ate

However, for these last languages, the authors make no mention of verb focus, and one wonders whether or not it is possible there. The existence of a special form for verb focus may be restricted to the languages in which focus is grammaticalized in the verb system. In these languages, there are clear specialized uses of verb focus forms (see 2.2.).

3. Focus: uses and definition

3.1. A new definition of focus

Wolof has three focusing conjugations according to the syntactic function of the focused constituent (subject, verb, or "complement", i.e., any other constituent, cf. example 10). The focusing conjugations are also used in *wh*- questions and are obligatory in the replies to such questions (even when there is no conceivable alternative to the focused constituent):

(44) - Fan **nga** dem?
where COMPFOC2SG go
Where did you go?

- Ndar **laa** dem
Ndar COMPFOC1SG go
I went to Ndar

This reply is straightforward and without nuances such as contrast. The complement is clearly the informative part of the sentence however, which is why the focusing conjugation is required. In fact, focusing conjugations are obligatory in Wolof whenever a constituent (whatever its syntactic function) is the rheme (informative part) in the information structure of the utterance.

The focusing conjugation therefore indicates that a syntactic constituent has a **double function**: in the syntactic structure, it may be subject, predicate, or complement; but in the information structure, it is the new information, the “rheme” or core of the assertion. To account for focus marking as it appears in the Atlantic languages, I define focus as combining morphological marking, syntactic function, and pragmatic function. I reserve the term “rheme” for the semantic/pragmatic notion of “new information”¹⁴ and speak of “focus” only in reference to instances where the rheme (1) corresponds to a syntactic constituent and (2) is morphologically marked (see comment below example 11). For instance, in my terminology, the notion of “subject focus” applies to a morphological form which prototypically indicates that the syntactic subject is the rheme. In discourse, however, focusing forms may have a variety of uses in addition to this prototypical one indicating that the lexical content of the focused constituent is the informative part of the utterance, in particular for the verb which is a syntactic constituent having the special status of predicate (see 2.2. and 2.3 below, and Robert (1991), (2000) for the interplay between the general semantics of focusing operations and their actual context of use, defining various discursive landmarks or reference points).

Given these two distinct functions of the focused constituent (as syntactic component and rheme), I define a focused proposition as a complex or “split” assertion (“assertion dédoublée”) with an assertive center (the focus), distinguished from the syntactic center (the predicate or the verb), whereby the predicative relationship is presented as a given or presupposed background (Robert 1993): this does not mean that the verb is excluded from the pragmatic focus but rather that it may have the two separate functions of focus and predicate (see 2.2. for details). This overt distinction between the two functions of the linguistic constituents (as rheme and as syntactic component) is what constitutes the particular salience of focused sentences. Let us take a simple English utterance which is somehow overtly marked for focus, whether through syntactic structuring as in:

(45a) It was Peter who ate the bread

or by stress alone as in:

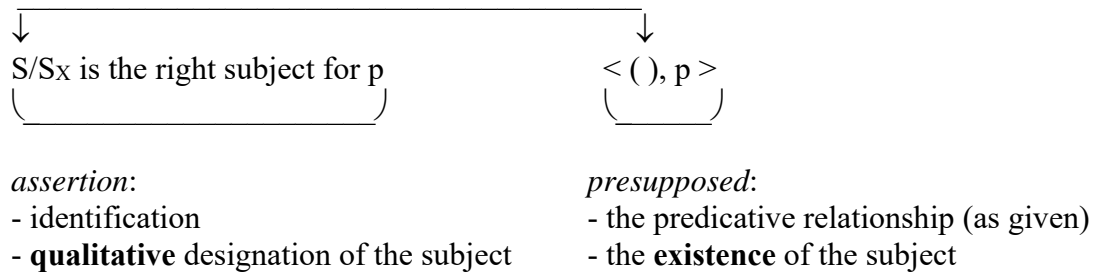
(45b) PETER ate the bread

Either can be characterized as a complex assertion with at least two components: one a preconstructed predicative relationship (‘somebody ate the bread’) and the other, the identification of the subject of that relationship (‘Peter is the one who ate the bread’). This characterization is in line with Lambrecht’s definition (1994:213) of focus as “the semantic

¹⁴ More precisely to what is presented as such by the speaker in the discourse dynamics, independently of the actual “newness” of the information for the interlocutor.

component of a pragmatically structured proposition whereby the assertion differs from the presupposition”. I would, however, like to make this characterization a bit more precise: in a clause with a focused subject, the existence of a subject is presupposed or presented as preconstructed (‘somebody ate the bread’ is a known fact) and what is asserted is the qualitative designation of the subject (‘among whatever possible subjects there may be, Peter is the right referent’). This characterization can be represented as in the following diagram, where S refers to the subject and p to the predicate:

Figure 1. *The subject-focusing proposition*



Therefore the focused proposition can be characterized more specifically as a split assertion involving a **temporal presupposition** (of the predicative relationship) and a **qualitative designation** (of the focused constituent). This definition, which applies to focus in general, is of particular importance in accounting for the uses of focused forms in languages where focus marking is grammaticalized in verb morphology. In these languages, the information structure constrains the choice of the verb form more strictly than in other languages. Furthermore, according to this definition, in the focused sentence, the verb is backgrounded as presupposed, while the focused element is foregrounded. This can explain why, in the case of argument focus, the verb morphology is often reduced (reflecting the backgrounding of the verb), and, by contrast, in the case of verb focus, the verb morphology is often heavier (through reduplication for instance), reflecting the double status of the verb as syntactic predicate and focus.

First of all, this definition accounts for the common use of the subject-focusing conjugation with comparative verbs (46) or whenever there is a choice among possible subjects (47). In the following Wolof examples, a non-focusing form is impossible. The use of the subject-focusing conjugation is triggered by the fact that the meaning content (here the verb “surpass” or the question “what time? which hour of the day?”) requires the “qualitative designation” of the right subject among a “presupposed” choice of possible subjects (individuals in (47) or times of day in (48)), which corresponds to the semantics of the subject focusing operation:

(46) **Moo** ko dàqa liggéey.
 SUBJFOC3SG_i OPR_j surpass-CONJ work
 He_i works better than he_j does.

(47) Ban waxtu **moo** jot ?
 which hour SUBJFOC3SG reach
 What time (hour) is it?

This obligatory use of subject-focus forms with comparative verbs is also reported by Segerer (2000: 274) for Bijogo.

Next, this definition of focus as a qualitative assertion with a temporal presupposition sheds new light on some particular problematic uses of verb focus.

3.2. A puzzling use of verb focus

As expected in systems marking constituent foci in verb morphology, verb focus marking forms can be used to focus on the lexical value of the verb, as in example (9) and also (56), (58) below. But the verb is a particular constituent taking up the function of predicate, and predication implies the assessment of the sentence. Therefore, most of the time, a sentence with a verb-focusing form also expresses focus on the truth value or assessment of the predicate, as in (10b). Note that, for the same reasons, verb-focusing forms may also include the object in the scope of focus, as a part of the new information consisting in the whole predicate (verb and object) as in examples (21), (54) or (57) below. The case of these objects attracted into the scope of the verb focus is distinct from true object-focus: in contrast, the object-focusing form is required when the object is selected as the only informative part of the utterance while the verb is specified as presupposed and not informative (see 23 vs. 21).

There is something more puzzling in the uses of verb focus: verb-focusing forms in Wolof show a meaning difference between action verbs and stative verbs: when focused, beside their use of focusing on the lexical value of the verb (cf. above), action verbs always have the semantic value of an explanation (49), while stative verbs, or more precisely, verbs expressing a quality or property, are commonly used with this focusing conjugation as mere statements serving for the predication of that property (48):

(48) **Dafa** liw (stative verb expressing a quality)
 VBFOC3SG be-cold
 It is cold (unmarked statement)

(49) **Dafa** dem (action verb)
 VBFOC3SG¹⁵ go
 Actually, he left ~ it is because he left (confirmation or explanation)

It will be helpful to contrast focusing and non-focusing paradigms, such as Verb Focus and Perfect¹⁶, in this context. Action verbs show the expected difference: the Perfect generally indicates that a process (already known to be underway) has now reached its end-point (50), while Verb Focus is used to provide an explanation or confirmation (51).

(50) **Lekk** naa (Perfect)
 eat PFT1SG
 I have eaten / I have finished eating / I have already eaten

(51) **Dama** lekk (Verb Focus)
 VBFOC1SG eat
 in fact, I ate / it is because I ate that....

¹⁵ In the absence of the imperfective suffix (-y), all the Wolof conjugations have present perfective value: action verbs refer to a past event while stative verbs refer to a present state; cf above in 1.1.

¹⁶ For more details regarding the differences between stative and action verbs with these conjugations, see Robert (1991: 52-68 and 74-116) and Robert (1994).

By contrast, as (52a) and (52b) show, stative verbs in the Perfect take on a contrastive or polemic value¹⁷ which is absent from simple statements expressed by Verb Focus:

- (52a) Tey dafa tàng (Verb Focus)
 today VBFOC3SG be-hot
 It is hot today (unmarked statement, no presupposition regarding yesterday)
- (52b) Tey tàng na (Perfect)
 today be-hot PFT3SG
 i. It is hot today (unlike yesterday)
 ii. It is hot today (as foreseen)
 iii. [after discussion on this point] (I assure you that) it is hot today (there is no question about it)

How can we account for these divergences and, more specifically, for the absence of contrastive meaning in the verb-focusing conjugations with stative verbs?

By my definition, when the verb is focused, a given event (“X did something”) must be presupposed or preconstructed, and the verb is asserted for its **qualitative** properties only. This approach gives us an explanation for the Wolof “puzzle”, namely, the flat sense of focused verbs of quality (such as ‘be cold’, ‘be kind’, ‘be far away’, etc., which are verbs in Wolof), contrasting with the marked (focalized) sense of action verbs: since verb focus is an assertion of the qualitative properties of the verb, its use with verbs of quality follows from the affinity between the semantics of the verb (indicating a quality) and the semantics of the focusing conjugation itself (expressing a qualitative identification of the predicate). This is particularly true in a language where there is no “simple present”. This affinity between verb focus and the meaning of the focused verb itself is further evidenced by the contrasting use of the verb-focusing conjugation and the perfect conjugation in 53a and 53b, respectively:

- | <i>Verb focus</i> | <i>Perfect</i> |
|--|--|
| (53) (a) Dafa ragal
VBFOC3SG fear
He is a coward | (b) Ragal na
fear PFT3SG
i. He is afraid (in the current circumstances)
ii. He is definitely afraid |

With the verb-focusing conjugation, the proposition expresses a quality defining the subject, while with the perfect, it refers to a temporary state.

By contrast, in the case of action verbs, the predicate expresses an event. With verb focus, this event is presented as presupposed. If the sentence were uttered without clause chaining, the hearer would wonder what event the speaker was referring to. With clause chaining, however, the sentence with verb focus asserts the predicate for its lexical or qualitative properties, and thereby serves as a qualitative explanation to a preceding proposition. In the following examples, the verb-focusing conjugation is obligatory:

¹⁷ This particular but regular value results from applying the semantics of Perfect to stative verbs that have no unfolding in time: what was a temporal resulting state for action verbs comes to indicate an epistemic resulting state: the predicate is now definitely validated or asserted, the uncertainty about the predicate or the discussion has reached its end-point; the inchoative reading of stative verbs (‘to become hot’) is impossible. For details see Robert (1991: 52-68) or (1994).

(54) - *Néeg bii mu ngi sedd!*
Room this 3SG...PREST be-cold
This room is cold!

- *Paa bi dafa dindi palanteer bi*
Daddy the VBFOC3SG remove shutter the
(It is because) Daddy **has removed** the shutter

This explanatory use in chained clauses is also possible for stative verbs:

(55) - *Lutax nga-y ñibbisi?*
Why AOR2SG-IMPF returning-home
Why are you coming back home?

- *Damaa xiif.*
VBFOC1SG be-hungry
(Because) I am hungry.

Note that in languages where focus is grammaticalized in verb morphology, the various kinds of focus (contrastive, polar, parallel, selective, exclusive, or replacing: Chafe 1976, Waters 1979, Dik et al. 1981) are all expressed by the same marker, namely the focusing verbal inflection.. For instance, the verb focus form in Wolof may be used for completive verb focus as in (56), for predicate (including verb and object) focus as in (57), and for replacing focus as in (58):

(56) - *Loo def ak mburu mi ?*
What+AOR2SG do with bread the
What did you do with the bread ?

- *Dama ko lekk.*
VBFOC1SG OPR eat
Actually, I **ate** it.

(57) - *Loo bëgg ?*
What+AOR2SG want
What do you want ?

- *Dama la soxla, seriñ*
VBFOC1SG OPR need master
It happens that I **need you**, master

(58) *Waxuma la sax rekk lekk, dama ko wann*
Tell-NEG3SG OPR even only eat VBFOC1SG OPR eat
I have not just EATEN it, I have **DEVOURED** it
[litt. I do not just say only “eat”, in fact I “devoured” it]

3.3. The main uses of subject focus

As we have already seen (2.1), the subject-focusing conjugation is required in Wolof whenever the subject is the rheme, whether sole rheme (see example 10c) or in a context of comparison(46-47). My study of Wolof (Robert 1991, Robert 2000) has shown that the

subject-focusing form has three main uses (see Table 4) as exemplified in 59-62, subject identification being just the prototypical one.

Table 4: *The main uses of subject focus*

- Identification or qualitative designation of the subject (59)
- Definition or explanation of the current situation (60, 61)
- Exclamation with an intensification of the **verb** (62)

(59) - Ku la bind bataaxal bii?
 who+AOR3SG you write letter this

- Who wrote you this letter?

- Daba moo ma ko bind.

 Daba FOCSUBJ3SG me it write

- It is Daba (lit. DABA wrote it to me ~ it was Daba who wrote it to me).

A person arrives and hears screaming. He asks:

(60) - Lu Ø xeew fi?
 What (AOR3SG.) happen here

- What is going on here?

- Musaa moo dóor Ndey

 Musa, FOCSUBJ3SG beat Ndey

- It is Musa who is thrashing Ndey

People are talking about a man called Kebe and the crowd of people visiting him:

(61) Kebe moo am alal, mootax nit ñi di ko topp
 Kebe FOCSUBJ 3SG have wealth that-is-why human the IMPF.PRED him follow

Kebe, (it is because) he has money that the people come to him

(lit. KEBE has money, that is why people follow him).

Note that this utterance corresponds pragmatically to a sentence focus expressing an explanation, but morphologically to a subject focus. The explanatory function of focus which we have seen for verb focus (cf. 2.2.) holds true for argument focus too.

(62) Mbuum bii, moo gudd!
 rope this, FOCSUBJ 3SG be.long
 How long this rope is!

In Wolof, this intensive value of subject focus is possible only for verbs expressing a measurable quality (scalar stative verbs). Actually, these three main uses of subject focus are not restricted to Wolof: they are equally possible in French, even the most surprising one (predicate intensity, cf. 63), and they are confirmed by Bassene (200: 294) for Jóola Banjál.

(63) C' est Pierre qui va adorer!

 This is Peter who FUT.3SG love

(a) It is PETER who will love (it)!

(b) HOW Peter will love (it)! Peter will LOVE it!

The range of values of subject focus depends on interclausal linkage and particularly on the available discourse reference points, which may or may not coincide with the presupposition of the focused sentence (for further details, see Robert 2000).

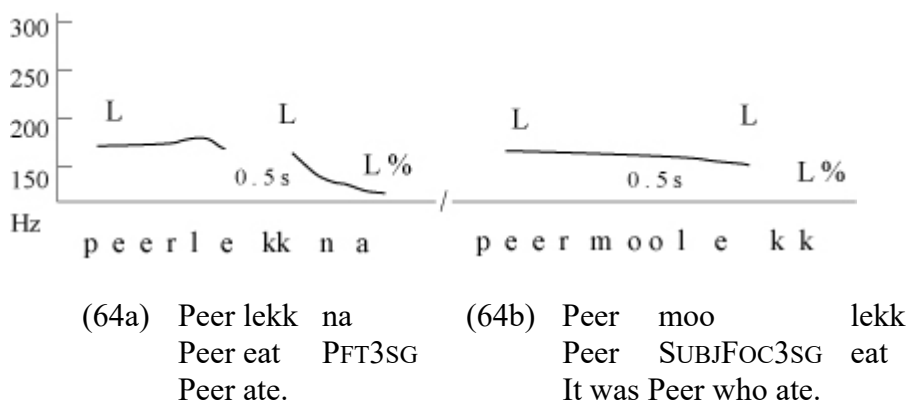
4. Related features

There are a few related features which seem often to accompany the expression of focus through verb morphology. Firstly, in languages with this feature, focus marking is obligatory in discourse: whenever a constituent is the rheme, the use of a focusing verb form is required; hence, the information structure of the sentence must be explicitly marked. This point was noted by Sapir for Joola: “An isolate phrase without mood marking [i.e., focus marking]...will often be rejected outright or considered as incomplete” (Sapir 1965: 36). In addition, the focused forms are used in *wh*- questions and in the replies to these questions where they are not necessarily contrastive (they are simply rhemes, cf. 44), as is also generally the case for verb focus with verbs expressing a quality (cf. 48 and 2.2.), in particular in languages where there is no “simple present”. Interestingly, languages which have focusing verb forms also often express negation by verb inflection. This is the case for Fula, Seereer, and also Wolof, which has a complex system of negation with a negative suffix used with the focusing conjugations in addition to two negative conjugations (Robert 1990).

In order to explain the affinity between focus and negation, Childs states that “in a pragmatic sense, the negative and the focus particle are quite similar. Negation has inherent focus comparable to that produced by the focus particle” (Child 1998, see also Givón 1975). I would say more specifically that negation and focused sentences are both complex assertions whereby the predicate is backgrounded as presupposed while either focus or negation is foregrounded as the scope of the assertion.

Furthermore, it seems that when focus is expressed in verb morphology and obligatorily marked in the proposition, there is no intonational marking of focus. This is the case in Fulfulde where there is “a high pitch on the stressed syllable of the focused word” but “focus has no distinctive intonational realization when it falls on the first word in the phrase, which is the most common position for a focused constituent” (Breedveld 1995: 140); and also in Wolof (see Rialland & Robert 2001), at least when the focus is not contrastive. Thus, in the examples below, one (63b) contains focus while the other (63a) does not. It is clear that focus has no effect on the melodic contour of the sentence; both are equally flat and superposable.

Figure 2: *Absence of prosodic marking of focus in Wolof (Rialland & Robert 2001)*



Conclusion

The analysis of focus which has been proposed here sheds a new light on the various attested morphological means or strategies for expressing focus in the Atlantic languages. In the focusing operation, the verb relinquishes its central informational function to the benefit of the focused constituent, which becomes the center of the assertion. There are various strategies to indicate this “deranking” of the verb when another constituent is focused: this is marked in some languages by reduced verb morphology, defocusing of the verb, loss of agreement, or a special verb morphology indicating a kind of dependency or verb nominalization. By contrast, verb focus is often marked by verb copying or reduplication of the verb stem, reflecting the “split assertion” marked by focus.

Apparently, in most Atlantic languages, focus is marked by a synthetic or grammaticalized strategy consisting of a special verb form. This is a tendency which is not absolute (*cf.* the clear exceptions of Mani, Gola, Temne, and Balanta). However, this synthetic verbal strategy seems to be characteristic of, though not specific to Atlantic languages. It is apparently common in Niger-Congo, at least in the Benue-Congo branch; for instance, there are verb affixes to mark focus in Bantu (Nurse and Philippson 2003:9 and 543), in the Bantoid language Vute (Thwing and Watters 1987), and in Efik, a Cross-River language (Cook 2002).

Zima (2006) speaks of a verbal category of “focality” which is widespread over the Sahelian area. He proposes the hypothesis “that the genetic roots of this category are still to be located somewhere within the Afroasiatic macro-family, the present distribution in several genetically non-Afroasiatic languages being a consequence of subsequent language contacts and interference, and hence also Sprachbund phenomena.” (2006: 234).

What is most remarkable in several Atlantic languages (and apparently specific to this group) is that (1) verb forms indicate the **syntactic** status of the focused constituent (contrary to the conjoint *vs.* disjoint forms in Bantu, *cf.* Creissels & Robert 1998), (2) these verb forms often **merge** focus, aspect, and voice features. By contrast, cross-linguistically, the “split assertion” involved in focus is often explicitly marked by an analytic strategy of clefting, as in French or English (“c’est Pierre qui l’a pris”, “it is Peter who took it”), with one clause for the identification and another for the presupposed proposition. This kind of structure is noticeably absent from Atlantic languages.

Grammatical abbreviations

1, 2, 3	first, second, third person
ANTER	anterior suffix <i>-ee</i>
AOR	Aorist conjugation
AUX	auxiliary
C or CL	class marker
COMPFOC	Emphatic complement-focusing conjugation
CONN	connective suffix
CONJ	conjunctive verb affix <i>-a</i>
DEFOC.PERF	perfective form indicating defocusing of the verb (losing its rhematic status)
DEM	demonstrative
DEF	definite suffix
<i>di ~ d-</i>	imperfective predicative nexus marker

DIR	deictic directional suffix
EMPH.PR	emphatic pronoun
FOC	focus particle or suffix
IMPF	imperfective suffix
IMPF.ARG.FOC	imperfective argument-focusing (active) suffix
IMPF.FOC	imperfective focusing suffix
IMPF.PRED	imperfective predicative nexus marker
MOD	modality marker
NOM.PRED	nominal predicate morpheme
NEG 3SG	negative perfective conjugation (3SG)
OPR	object pronoun
PAST	past suffix
PERF	perfective
PERFNEG	perfective negative suffix
PERF.VB.FOC	perfective verb-focusing (active) suffix
PERS.PR.	personal pronoun
PROGR	progressive aspect
PFT	Perfect conjugation
PTC	particle
PL	plural
PREST	Presentative conjugation (discontinuous morpheme)
PRON	pronoun
PROSP	prospective
PTCL	particle
RED	reduplication
SG	singular
SUFF	verb suffix
SUBJFOC	Emphatic subject-focusing conjugation
TRANS	transitive suffix
VBFOC	Emphatic verb-focusing conjugation

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