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AG 9 “Focus marking strategies and focus interpretation”

Focus markers that link topic and comment

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This talk deals with the interdependence between the pragmatic categories topic and focus as displayed by certain alleged focus marking particles of some West African languages. The particles (*la* in Moore, Dagaare, Dagbani, Gurene, Konkomba, particle *ká* in Buli, particle *wa/wo* in Kɔnni, and others in further Gur languages of the Oti-Volta branch) occur under several focus conditions. Most researches have come to the conclusion that – even though the particles reveal certain polar, aspectual and modal preferences – they serve pragmatic functions and they have often analyzed them as “focus marker” (Bodomo 2000, Dakubu and Saanchi 1997, Olawsky 1999, Schwarz 2007).

Recent research, however, suggests that the particles are actually linking topic and comment rather than functioning as focus markers. Recognizing the particles’ close relation with the pragmatically unmarked topic-comment structure (Lambrecht 1994), I will argue that these languages have no structurally relevant focus-background layer independent of the topic-comment organization. Thorough data exploration leads to an analysis that underlines the importance of the pragmatic topic notion and the often underestimated thetic/categorical-distinction (Güldemann 1996, Krifka 2007, Sasse 1987, 1995, 2006, Ulrich 1988, Wehr 1984) linked to it: I will discuss the major problems with the existing focus marker analysis and bring forth arguments in favour of a more basic topic-linking function that these particles exert by occurring in the comment of most categorical utterances.

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