

# FOCUS MARKING AND SIZE IN SOME MANDE AND ATLANTIC LANGUAGES

Izabela Jordanoska

LACITO, CNRS

izabela.jordanoska@cnrs.fr

This paper compares the focus marking systems and the focus size that can be expressed by the different focus markings in four Mande and three Atlantic languages and varieties, namely: Bambara, Dyula, Kakabe, Soninke (Mande), Wolof, Jóola Foñy and Jóola Karon (Atlantic). All of these languages are known to mark focus morphosyntactically, rather than prosodically, as the more well-studied Germanic languages do. However, the Mande languages under discussion use only morphology, in the form of a particle that follows the focus, while the Atlantic ones use a more complex morphosyntactic system in which focus is marked by morphology in the verbal complex and movement of the focused term. It is shown that while there are some syntactic restrictions to how many different focus sizes can be marked in a distinct way, there is also a certain degree of arbitrariness as to which focus sizes are marked in the same way as each other.

## 1. Introduction

When I was still a PhD candidate at the University of Vienna, Alexandra Vydrina came to give a talk at the *Stress-Free Focus Workshop* in 2019, where she presented the focus marking system of Kakabe. Her attention to detail and to the theoretical implications of the data for focus semantics and syntax has stayed with me ever since, and has been the inspiration for writing this paper.

It is known that in many West African languages information structure, specifically focus, is marked using morphosyntactic means. There is a wealth of work on the description of the focus marking systems for individual languages (some well-known examples include Watters (1979) for Aghem, Robert (1989) for Wolof and Green & Jaggard (2003) for Hausa). Sparsers are articles that give an overview of focus marking systems, or take a comparative view on them, such as Bearth (1999), Robert (2010), Kalinowski (2015) or Assmann et al. (2023). In the latter papers, many West African languages which employ either syntax or focus particles to mark focus, are put together in the category ‘morphosyntactic focus marking languages’. This paper attempts to dive deeper into the differences among this broad category of ‘morphosyntactic focus marking languages’. It examines the (micro)variation

when it comes to how different focus sizes are marked by studying the following convenience sample: the Mande languages Bambara, Dyula, Kakabe and Soninke, and the Atlantic languages Wolof, Jóola Karon and Jóola Foñy.<sup>1</sup>

One of the first papers to contrast the focus marking systems of African languages with those of European languages was Bearth (1999), saying that the former often have morphological means to mark focus, whereas the latter use prosody. Similarly, in Kalinowski's (2015) survey of the typology of focus marking in African languages, the Atlantic and the Mande languages are taken to be examples of one category: languages that mark focus morphologically. However, this does not mean that all 'morphologically focus marking languages' are the same. Bearth (1999: 124) refers to Manding as having "seemingly less complex, purely morphologically-marked focus systems", contrasting it with languages that use both syntax and morphology. Kalinowski (2015) also differentiates between several morphological strategies, among which adding a particle, such as in Mande, or changes in verbal or nominal morphology, such as in Atlantic. Building on this, Assmann et al. (2023) compare focus sizes in different morphosyntactic focus-marking languages. They also observe that there is variation among the languages that they all subsume under the label 'morphosyntactic focus marking languages': some languages use one focus-marking morpheme that can occur in multiple positions, others have several formally different focus markers that occur in the same position and yet others use both different markers and place them in different positions. While Assmann et al. (2023) leave it to future research what the consequences of these paradigms are for the way focal markings work in each language, this paper is an exploratory attempt at finding these consequences. The main question that is addressed is whether there is any systematic relation between how exactly focus is marked (particle or verbal morphology) and which focus sizes are marked in the same way.

In order to answer this question, I first of all look at *how* focus is marked and differentiate between i) languages with an invariant particle that can be placed in multiple positions within the clause (the Mande languages) and ii) languages in which focus is marked on the verb or verbal complex and focused terms are fronted (the Atlantic languages). I use the terms *free-placement*

---

<sup>1</sup> I will henceforth refer to the Mande languages under discussion in this paper, Bambara, Dyula, Kakabe and Soninke, as 'the Mande languages', and the Atlantic languages under discussion in this paper, Wolof, Jóola Foñy and Jóola Karon as 'the Atlantic languages'. This is simply for ease of reference, I do not attempt to make any claim about the Mande family or the Atlantic family in general.

*focus marker* and *fixed-position focus marker*, the definitions of which are given in (1).

- (1) Two types of morphosyntactic focus-markers:
  - a: **Free-placement focus marker:** an invariant particle that can be placed in multiple positions within the clause
  - b: **Fixed-position focus marker:** focus is morphologically marked on the verb or verbal complex and focused terms are fronted

Second of all, I look at *which focus sizes* are marked in the same way and whether this correlates to how focus is marked. I look at the following three broader focus sizes compared to smaller focus sizes: i) the marking of term focus when the term in question consists of multiple elements, such as possessor and possessee, ii) the marking of broad predicate focus in relation to the marking of elements in the predicate, namely the verb and the object and iii) the marking of sentence focus in relation to smaller constituents within the sentence, such as the subject or the predicate. These finer-grained distinctions between focus sizes are poorly described. Many descriptions, for example, do not cover sentence focus, or make a difference between predicate focus and verb focus. In addition, I also look at how verum or polarity focus is marked, as this is also something that is often left out of descriptions. As a consequence, this paper also identifies the gaps that need to be filled when describing focus paradigms.

The prediction is that free-placement focus marking languages would be able to mark more different focus sizes differently, due to the multiple positions in which the focus marker can be placed, whereas the fixed position markers are restricted to the verbal complex. However, it turns out that while it is true that in general the Mande languages mark more fine-grained differences in focus size, there is microvariation among the Mande languages under discussion as to which focus sizes are marked in the same way, despite them having similar syntactic means of focus marking.

The paper is structured as follows: In Section 2, I give more information about the languages, the theoretical background and terminology and the methodology. Then, I look at the differences in the marking of term focus vis-à-vis part-of-term focus in Section 3. In Section 4 I look at how broad predicate focus is marked in relation to narrow verb and narrow object focus. Section 5 is about sentence focus and Section 6 is about verum/polarity focus. In Section 7 I compare the different languages and findings and discuss the implications. Section 8 concludes.

## 2. The languages, the terminology and the methodology

First I will give some information about the languages that will be discussed in this paper. Mande languages in general have SOVX word order, in which X can be any adjunct. They mark focus with a particle. An example from Bambara is given in (2), which illustrates subject focus marked by the focus particle *dè* following the subject. The word order does not change for focus reasons, but remains canonical: the focus-marked subject is followed by an aspect marker *yé*, the object *sàgá* ‘sheep’ and the verb *fàga* ‘kill’.

- (2) *Ámadu dè yé sàgá fàga.*  
 A. FOC PFV.TR sheep:ART kill  
 ‘[Amadou]<sub>F</sub> slaughtered the sheep.’<sup>2</sup> (Prokhorov 2014: 63)

The Mande language family is divided into the West and Southeast branch. Bambara, Dyula, Kakabe and Soninke are all West Mande languages. Bambara and Dyula make up the Northeastern branch of the Manding languages, a dialect continuum with approximately 27 million speakers combined, including L2 speakers (Eberhard et al. 2023). They are often collectively referred to as Manding. In this paper, however, I will mostly talk about Bambara and Dyula separately, since, as we will see, there is microvariation between them in terms of how they differentiate focus sizes.

Unlike Bambara and Dyula, which are widely spoken *linguae francae* in Mali, Burkina Faso and Côte d’Ivoire, Kakabe is a lesser-known Mande language spoken in the Republic of Guinea by approximately 50,000 speakers (Vydrina 2017). Kakabe word order cannot be modified by information structure (Vydrina 2020a:13).

While Manding and Kakabe are Central West Mande languages, Soninke is a North West Mande language. It has around 2,100,000 speakers in Mali, Mauritania, Senegal, and The Gambia (Creissels 2017).

Atlantic word order is SVOX. Unlike in Mande, in Atlantic languages focus is often marked on the verb and the morphemes used to mark focus are often fused with those that mark person and aspect (Robert 2010). An example of subject focus in Wolof is given in (3).

- (3) ***Maa-y** lekk jën.*  
 SFOC.1SG-IPFV eat fish  
 ‘[I]<sub>F</sub> eat fish.’ (McLaughlin 2004: 247)

<sup>2</sup> I use boldface to indicate the focus maker in the example and square brackets and the subscript F to indicate focus size in the translation.

In (3) we see that the pre-verbal marker *maay* is coded for several things: focus, person and aspect, in this case indicating that the focus is the subject, that the subject is first person singular and that the verb is imperfective. This marker is referred to as *verbal conjugation* by Robert (1989) and it forms a tight syntactic bond with the verb. Wolof has several clause types (see Robert (1989) and Torrence (2013) i.a. for an overview) and every main clause obligatorily has one such conjugation, the form of which changes depending on whether the focus of a clause is the subject, another term, the predicate or the whole clause. I will provide more details on Wolof focus marking in the following sections where relevant. For a complete overview of the Wolof verbal conjugation paradigms, see Robert (1989 and beyond).

Wolof is a lingua franca in Senegal and the Gambia and has about 12 million speakers including L2 speakers (Eberhard et al. 2023). Jóola languages, on the other hand, are endangered. Jóola refers to a dialect continuum that consists of many varieties, many of which are not mutually intelligible. While the Atlantic language family is controversial (see Merrill (2021), Pozdniakov & Segerer, forthcoming), according to the latest classification by Pozdniakov & Segerer (2023), Wolof belongs to the Northern branch and Jóola belongs to the Bak branch (which was previously also taken to be part of the Northern branch by Sapir (1971)). In this paper I do not make claims about the Atlantic language family, nor about the relation between Wolof and Jóola; I simply use the term ‘Atlantic’ as a short-hand for Wolof, Jóola Karon and Jóola Foñy when contrasting them with Mande, as all three languages have a morphological focus marking system that is based on changes to verbal morphology. The two Jóola varieties I discuss, Foñy and Karon, are chosen out of convenience, as I was lucky enough to encounter speakers of those languages while doing fieldwork on Wolof in Senegal. These two varieties also have some documentation: Sapir (1965) and Gero & Levinsohn (1993) for Jóola Foñy, Galvagny (1984) and Sambou (2008) for Jóola Karon. However, work on these languages is rare and direly needed.

Regarding the terminology, I will partly use terminology coined by Dik (1989): ‘term focus’ to refer to focus on any non-verbal constituent (such as arguments and adjuncts), and ‘predicate focus’ to refer to focus on the verb or predicate. He furthermore uses the term ‘operator focus’ to refer to focus on the tense, aspect, modality or polarity of a clause. I will use the term ‘focus syncretism’, coined by Assmann et al. (2023), when referring to multiple focus sizes being marked in the same way. I use the term ‘focus size’ (Ladd 1980, Gussenhoven 1983) as a descriptive denominator for differentiating between

what is metaphorically referred to as ‘narrow’ focus, i.e., focus on only one constituent (such as the object), or ‘broad’ focus, i.e., focus on multiple terms (such as the verb + object). I furthermore use some terminology from the Questions under Discussion (QUD) framework (Roberts 1996/2012, Riester et al. 2018).

It is important to differentiate the pragmatic notion of focus from formal focus marking. The formal marking of focus refers to which element of a clause bears the focus marker, but, pragmatically, any element can be the focus, provided it corresponds to the appropriate Question under Discussion (Roberts 1996/2012). The assumption of this framework is that all discourse can be modelled as attempts to answer an implicit question: ‘What is the way things are?’ Since this question is too big to be answered at once, discourse participants break it down into smaller sub-questions which can be directly answered. An example of how this works is given in (4).

- (4) **Question:** ‘What is the way things are?’  
**Sub-question:** ‘What is happening right now?’  
**Sub-sub-question:** ‘What is Loulou doing?’  
**Answer:** ‘Loulou is [sleeping]<sub>F</sub>.’

In (4) we see that the smaller question ‘What is Loulou doing?’ can be directly answered with ‘Loulou is sleeping’. Crucially, the missing information in the question corresponds to the focus in the answer. Thus, such questions are often used as a diagnostic for focus. How big a focus is depends on the amount of missing information in the corresponding question. Note that these questions are often implicit in the discourse and do not have to be literally pronounced by the discourse participants. Other than using the theoretical notion of Questions under Discussion, this paper is largely descriptive.

A final thing that should be noted about focus terminology, is that in this paper I make no difference between contrastive focus and new-information focus (also known as assertive focus in Dik (1989)). These different focus ‘flavours’ are relevant in some languages which do not mark new-information focus, but rather contrast, exclusivity or exhaustivity (see for example Fominyam & Šimik (2017), who show that in Awing (Grassfields Bantu) focus is only marked when it is exhaustive). In all of the languages I discuss in this paper new-information and contrastive focus are both marked in the same way, hence I do not differentiate these terms here.

Lastly, a few words on the methodology. As data on focus marking is sparse, the sample used in this paper is a convenience sample constructed on

the basis of available data. Examples are taken from previous literature, which is not homogeneous. There are very few languages in which focus size is treated systematically: While it is well-described for Kakabe (Vydrina 2017, 2020a, 2020b) and Bambara (Vydrin, this volume), it is only partly described for Soninke (Diagana 1987, Creissels 217). Additional data come from the Bambara online reference corpus (Vydrin 2013). Moreover, this paper contains novel data from Dyula, Wolof, Jóola Foñy and Jóola Karon. Wolof and Jóola were collected during the author's fieldwork in Senegal and additional Jóola data were consulted with Pierre Sambou (personal communication) and collected by Abbie Hantgan-Sonko. Dyula data were consulted with Lacina Silué (personal communication).

### 3. Focus on and within terms

In this section I look at how term focus is marked and compare it to how smaller elements within a term are marked. Subject or object focus are examples of term focus. When the subject or object is a complex phrase, such as a possessor phrase, the separate elements can each individually be pragmatic foci. The question, however, is whether they are also individually marked as such, or are marked in the same way as the larger term focus.

While term focus is a staple when describing focus marking systems, the focus marking of parts of terms is rarely described. Possessor and possessee focus has been described for Kakabe (Vydrina 2020a), Bambara (Masiuk 1986), Soninke (Diagana 1987) and Wolof (Assmann et al. 2023). In this section I bring in additional data from Jóola Karon and Dyula and show that, remarkably, Dyula patterns in the same way as the Atlantic languages Wolof and Jóola Karon: in these languages possessor and possessee focus are formally indistinguishable.

Let us look at the pattern we find in the Atlantic languages first. The order of the elements in the Atlantic languages is POSSESSEE-POSSessor and the focus marker appears on the right of these elements. The focus marker cannot come in between any two nouns, as illustrated in (5).

- (5) A: 'Did Moussa see a picture of Fatou?'  
 B: *Déedéet, peentur-u Faatu la gis.*  
     no           painting-GEN F.      CFOC.3SG see  
     'No, he saw a [painting]<sub>F</sub> of Fatou' (Assmann et al. 2023: 42)  
 B': \**Peentur-u la Faatu gis.*

(5B) shows that in order to indicate focus on *peenturu* ‘painting’, the whole constituent *peenturu Faatu* ‘painting of Fatou’ needs to be followed by the complement focus form of the verbal conjugation *la*. In addition, the whole constituent is fronted. (5B’), in which the complement focus marker *la* is placed immediately after *peenturu* ‘painting’ in an attempt to indicate that only *peenturu* is the focus and not *Faatu*, is ungrammatical. This is because the possessee and possessor form a tight syntactic bond and nothing can intervene between them.

Thus, when a constituent consists of two nouns and only one of them is focused, the focus marking nonetheless goes to the edge of the whole constituent. Thus, (5B) is formally indistinguishable from object focus such as (6B).

- (6) A: ‘What did Moussa see?’  
 B: *Peentur-u Faatu la gis.*  
 painting-GEN F. CFOC.3SG see  
 ‘He saw [a painting of Fatou]<sub>F</sub>.’

When we look at possessee vs. possessor focus marking, we find the same pattern in Jóola Karon. In the prompt (7A) we see that the canonical word order is SVO, while in the targets we see that the word order has changed and the whole object has been fronted. In addition, the verb is marked with the focus suffix *-e*.<sup>3</sup>

- (7) A: *Á-yin-aŋ-a a-nom-en-a-nom-en-i-o í-síya-et Bintu*  
 NC-man-?-DEF NC-sell-CAUS-NC-sell-CAUS-?-MID NC-cow-DEF.3SG.POSS B.  
 ‘The man sold Bintou’s cow.’
- B: *Po-po-nit-um, ε-fil-et Bintu n-a-nom-an-e*  
 true-true-NEG-? NC-goat-DEF.3SG.POSS B. LOC-NC-sell-CAUS-FOC  
 ‘No, the man sold Bintou’s [goat]<sub>F</sub>.’
- B’: *Po-po-nit-um, í-síya-et Fatou n-a-nom-an-e*  
 true-true-NEG-? NC-cow-DEF.3SG.POSS F. LOC-NC-sell-CAUS-FOC  
 ‘No, the man sold [Fatou’s]<sub>F</sub> cow.’
- B’’: *Po-po-nit-um, ε-fil-et Fatou n-a-nom-an-e*  
 true-true-NEG-? NC-goat-DEF.3SG.POSS F. LOC-NC-sell-CAUS-FOC  
 ‘No, the man sold [Fatou’s goat]<sub>F</sub>.’

In (7), we see that the exact same construction — suffixing the verb with the *-e* and fronting the whole object to the left of the verb — is used for expressing possessee focus (7B), possessor focus (7B’) and the whole object (7B’’).

<sup>3</sup> Many thanks to Abbie Hantgan-Sonko and Bouba Sagna for these data. Some glosses are sadly unclear and therefore left as ‘?’.



Now, let us turn to the Mande languages. The order of the elements in the Mande languages, unlike in the Atlantic ones, is POSSESSOR-POSSESSEE, but interestingly the focus marker also appears on the right of the focused element. In (8a-b) we see that in Kakabe, there is a focus marker *lè*. It is placed after the possessee, *nìngéé* ‘cow’, when it indicates either focus on the whole constituent *Bíntù lá nìngéé* ‘Bintou’s cow’, or just on the right-most element, *nìngéé* ‘cow’, as in (8a).

- (8) a. *n̄ ká Bíntù lá nìngéé l̄è màyità*  
*n̄ ka Bíntu la n̄ngi-È l̄è mayità*  
 1SG PFV.TR Bintu POSS cow-ART FOC sell  
 ‘I sold [Bintu’s cow]<sub>F</sub>.’ or  
 ‘I sold Bintu’s [cow]<sub>F</sub>.’ (Vydrina 2020a:17)

In (8b), *lè* directly follows *Bíntù*, and in this case it can only indicate focus on the possessor, not on the possessee or on the whole constituent.

- (8) b. *n̄ ká Bíntù l̄è lá n̄ngéé màyità*  
*n̄ ka Bíntù l̄è la n̄ngi-È mayità*  
 1SG PFV.TR Bintu FOC POSS cow-ART sell  
 ‘I sold [Bintu’s]<sub>F</sub> cow.’ (Vydrina 2020a:17)

Vydrina (2020a) is the only work that shows a complete paradigm, i.e., possessor + possessee focus, possessor-only focus *and* possessee-only focus. We do, however, find similar patterns in Soninke (9a-b) and Bambara (10).

(9) Soninke

- a. *Umaru remne n̄ ya da lemine ke katu daaru*  
 U. son DET FOC TR child DEM hit yesterday  
 ‘C’est le fils d’Oumar qui a frappé l’enfant hier.’  
 ‘[Umar’s son]<sub>F</sub> beat the child yesterday’
- b. *Umaru ya remne n̄ da lemine ke katu daaru*  
 U. FOC son DET TR child DEM hit yesterday  
 ‘C’est Oumar dont le fils a frappé l’enfant hier.’  
 ‘[Umar’s]<sub>F</sub> son beat the child yesterday’ (Diagana 1987: 62)

(10) Bambara

- àle d̄è t̄ógɔ dòn*  
 3SG.EMPH FOC name COP  
 ‘C’est son nom.’  
 ‘It is [her/his]<sub>F</sub> name.’ (Masiuk 1986: 77)

In (9a), we see that the whole noun phrase *Umaru remne n* ‘Umar’s son’ is followed by the focus marker *ya*, which marks the whole noun phrase as the focus, whereas in (9b) *ya* is immediately adjacent to *Umaru*, indicating that only ‘Umar’ is the pragmatic focus.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, in (10), we see that the focus marker *dè* is immediately adjacent to the pronoun *àle*, indicating that only the possessor is the focus, and not the whole nominal complex.

In this case, therefore, we see a stark distinction between Wolof and Jóola Karon on the one hand, and the Mande languages on the other. This is because in Wolof and Jóola Karon, the focus marker is tightly connected to the verb. In the case of Jóola Karon, it is suffixed to the verb, and in the case of Wolof, it is fused with the pre-verbal TAM-complex. Thus, in this case there does seem to be a direct consequence of the free-placement focus markers and the sizes of foci a language can unambiguously mark: because in the Mande languages the focus particle is not restricted to the verbal complex, it can mark finer-grained distinctions.

However, there is a limit to how freely placeable this focus marker in Mande is. The mere fact of having the same syntax, is not enough reason for being able to place a focus marker between a possessor and a possessee. This brings us to Dyula, which in all the relevant aspects — e.g., its headedness, the way the possessive is constructed (NP + NP), the existence, placement and meaning of the verbal auxiliaries — has the same syntactic features as Bambara. Dyula also has a focus particle *lè* (Kiemtoré 2022). In (11) we see that the focus marker *lè*, unlike the focus markers in Bambara, Kakabe and Soninke, cannot come between the possessor and the possessee.

- (11) A: *cě kà Bítú já mìsí fjàrè*  
 man PFV.TR B. AL cow sell  
 ‘The man sold Bintu’s cow’  
 B: *ǰ-ǰ cě kà Bítú já bǎ lè fjàrè*  
 no man PFV.TR B. AL goat FOC sell  
 ‘No, the man sold Bintu’s [goat].’  
 B’: *ǰ-ǰ cě kà Fátúmátá já bǎ lè fjàrè*  
 no man PFV.TR F. AL goat FOC sell  
 ‘No, the man sold [Fatoumata’s goat].’

<sup>4</sup> Note that focus in Soninke is not just indicated by the marker *ya*, but also low tone on verbs and in the case of subjects, an enclitic *-n* (Diagne 2008). Tone was, however, not indicated in the original example from Diagona (1987: 62). Thanks to a reviewer for pointing this out.

B'':  $\acute{z}\text{-}\bar{z}$  cě kà Fátúmátá já mìsí lè fǰèrè  
 no man PFV.TR F. AL cow FOC sell  
 'No, the man sold [Fatoumata's] cow.'

(11B'') is the unexpected pattern here, as it is exactly the same construction as (11B'), with the focus marker placed after the whole constituent, even though the pragmatic focus is only on the possessor, *Fátúmátá*. When asked whether *lè* can be placed after *Fátúmátá* in (11B''), Lacina Silué (p.c.) responded that this sounds very unnatural. For completeness, it should be noted that L. Silué's variety of Dyula is from Côte d'Ivoire and that he is from a Kafire (Senufo, Gur) community. It is nonetheless unlikely that the pattern seen in (11) is influence from Kafire, as Senufo languages do not have a focus marker, but use word order changes to mark focus (Dombrowsky-Hahn 2006)<sup>5</sup>. While corroboration of these data with multiple speakers and naturalistic sources is definitely needed, already this shows that there is variation, if not between the languages or varieties, then at least between speakers.

Thus, in this case, Dyula patterns differently from the other Mande languages under discussion. It actually patterns in the same way as Wolof and Jóola Karon, languages which employ changes to verbal morphology.<sup>6</sup> This means that, even though we can distinguish between languages with a free-placement focus morpheme and languages with a fixed-position focus morpheme, this fact alone cannot explain the amount of variation.

Concluding this section, we can distinguish two groups of languages in terms of how they mark term focus vis-à-vis part-of-term focus, summarized in (12a-b).

- (12) a. Possessor and possessee focus marked in the same way: Wolof, Jóola Karon, Dyula

<sup>5</sup> See also the following example provided by Lacina Silué that illustrates object focus fronting in Kafire:

A: *nǰ=w*      *ń* *Bítù* *nǰ=w*      *péré*  
 man=DEF1.SG PST B. cow=DEF1.SG sell  
 'The man sold Bintu's cow'

B: *ówwó* *Bítù* *síkā=w*      *nǰ=w*      *péré*  
 no B. goat=DEF1.SG man=DEF1.SG sell  
 'No, the man sold [Bintu's goat]F.'

<sup>6</sup> Following the classification of Kalinowski (2015), I will refer to the pattern found in both the Jóola languages and Wolof as changes to 'verbal morphology', though note that in Wolof the focus markers are not agglutinative to the verb proper, but part of the larger verbal complex.

- b. Possessor and possessee focus marked differently: Kakabe, Soninke, Bambara.

#### 4. Focus on and within the predicate

In this section, we turn to the marking of broad predicate focus vis-à-vis the marking of smaller elements within the predicate, namely the object and the verb. We will see that when it comes to marking foci within the predicate, there is again variation among the Mande languages: Soninke and Bambara pattern similarly to Wolof, whereas Kakabe and Dyula do not. Again, this also shows micro-variation between Dyula and Bambara. First, consider the following examples from Kakabe in (13a-b):

- (13) a. *mùséè kà sòbéé 'lé tàbì*  
*mùsu-È ka sòbo-È le tàbì*  
 woman-ART PFV.TR meat-ART FOC prepare  
 'The woman prepared [the meat]<sub>F</sub>'  
 'The woman [prepared the meat]<sub>F</sub>'
- b. *mùséé kà sòbéé bàràbàrá lè*  
*mùsu-È ka sòbo-È bàrabara lè*  
 woman-ART PFV.TR meat-ART boil FOC  
 'The woman [boiled]<sub>F</sub> the meat.' (Vydrina 2020a: 518; gloss corrected, eds.)

In (13a), we see that in Kakabe, broad predicate focus and narrow object focus are marked in the same way: by placing the focus particle *lé* between the object *sòbéé* 'the meat' and the verb *tàbì* 'cut'.<sup>7</sup> Narrow verb focus, on the other hand, is marked by placing the focus marker after the verb, as in (13b), where it follows *bàràbàrá* 'boil'. We observe the same pattern in Dyula, illustrated in (14)–(15).

<sup>7</sup> Vydrina (2023) furthermore found that givenness influences the position of the focus particle in Kakabe. This is in stark contrast with, for example, Wolof, where Jordanoska et al. (2021:60) observed that there is no effect of givenness in the choice of focus marker. The role of givenness in morphologically focus marking languages deserves further exploration which is outside the scope of this paper. For more information, I point the reader to Vydrina (2023) for a detailed overview of the interaction of focus and givenness Kakabe and to Jordanoska et al. (2021) for some examples involving givenness in Wolof.

- (14) A: *Mísí kà mǔ nè ké?*  
 cow PFV.TR what FOC do  
 ‘What did the cow do?’  
 B: *Mísí kà cèdèn nè tǎ*  
 cow PFV.TR man\_small FOC kick  
 ‘The cow [kicked a boy]<sub>F</sub>.’
- (15) A: *Mísí kà j́ nè tá?*  
 cow PFV.TR who FOC kick  
 ‘Who did the cow kick?’  
 B: *Mísí kà cèdèn nè tǎ*  
 cow PFV.TR man\_small FOC kick  
 ‘The cow kicked a [boy]<sub>F</sub>.’

We see that (14) and (15) are realized in exactly the same way — by placing the focus marker *nè* between the object and the verb — despite denoting different focus sizes. In (14), the question elicits a broad predicate focus and in (15) the question elicits a narrow object focus. Compare this to (16), which shows that narrow verb focus is marked differently, namely by placing the focus marker after the verb, as in the Kakabe example in (13b).

- (16) A: *Mùsò kà wésé bélégé*  
 woman PFV.TR potato boil  
 ‘The woman boiled the potatoes.’  
 B: *ǎ-ǎ mùsò kà wésé jírǎ nè*  
 no woman PFV.TR potato fry FOC  
 ‘No, the woman [fried]<sub>F</sub> the potatoes.’

Thus, the pattern is the same in both Kakabe and Dyula: both narrow object and broad predicate focus are marked by placing the focus marker between object and verb, while narrow verb focus is marked by placing the focus marker after the verb. Now consider the Soninke examples in (17a-c):

- (17) a. *Umaru remne n da lemine ke ya katu daaru*  
 U. son DET TR child DEM FOC hit yesterday  
 ‘C’est l’enfant que le fils de Oumar a frappé hier.’  
 ‘Umar’s son beat [the child]<sub>F</sub> yesterday.’  
 b. *Umaru remne n da lemine ke katu ya daaru*  
 U. son DET TR child DEM hit FOC yesterday  
 ‘C’est frapper l’enfant qu’a fait le fils d’Oumar hier.’  
 ‘Umar’s son [beat the child]<sub>F</sub> yesterday’ (Diagana 1987: 62)

- c. *À nà hàrê-n gáagà-ná yà.*  
 3SG ICPL donkey-DET sell-GER FOC  
 'He is [selling]<sub>F</sub> the donkey'. (Creissels 2017: 30)

In (17a) we see that narrow object focus is marked in the same way as it is in Kakabe and Dyula: by placing the focus marker after the object. However, in (17b), things start to look different. What is translated as a broad predicate focus is marked by placing the focus marker *ya* after the verb *katu* 'hit'. Diagana (1987) does not show an example of narrow verb focus, but we do find such an example in (Creissels 2017), shown here as (17c). Like in (17b), in (17c) the focus marker follows the verb. Therefore, we can assume that (17b) also has the narrow verb focus reading. Thus, predicate focus in Soninke is not syncretic with object focus. Rather, as (17b-c) show, it is syncretic with narrow verb focus.

Bambara lines up with Soninke (and again not with its closest neighbour Dyula). This is shown in the examples from Masiuk (1994) in (18) and from Prokhorov (2014) in (19)–(20):

- (18) A: *À y' í mùsò nènì wà?*  
 3SG PFV.TR 2SG woman insult Q  
 'Did he insult your wife?'  
 B: *Àyí, à yé n kòròké bùgò dè sísàn*  
 no 3SG PFV.TR 1SG big\_brother hit FOC now  
 'No, he [hit my big brother]<sub>F</sub>.' (Masiuk 1994: 12)
- (19) A: 'What is he going to do with the sheep?'  
 B: *À beñà à fàga dè.*  
 3SG FUT 3SG kill FOC  
 'He is going to [slaughter]<sub>F</sub> it.'
- (20) A: 'What did Amadou slaughter?'  
 B: *À yé sàgá dè fàga.*  
 3SG PFV.TR sheep:ART FOC kill  
 'He slaughtered the [sheep]<sub>F</sub>.' (Prokhorov 2014: 63)

All of these languages have the same SOVX word order and a free-placement focus particle. When it comes to marking the whole predicate, however, there is an arbitrariness whether it is marked syncretically with the object, as Kakabe and Dyula do, or whether it is marked syncretically with the verb, as Soninke and Bambara do. The latter marks predicate focus in the same way as Wolof, shown in (21), and Jóola Karon, shown in (22).

- (21) A: 'What is he doing?'  
 A': 'Is he buying fish?'  
 B: *Dafa-y lekk jën.*  
 FOC.3SG-IPFV eat fish  
 'He is [eating]<sub>F</sub> fish]<sub>F</sub>.' (Assmann et al. 2023: 13)

In (21) we see that the verb focus conjugation *dafay* is used both in an answer to a question that elicits broad predicate focus (21A) and a question that elicits narrow verb focus (21A'). Compare this to example (5) in Section 3, where we saw that object focus in Wolof is marked by fronting the object and using the object focus aspect form *la*. We find the same pattern in Jóola Karon.

- (22) A: 'What did Kodie eat?'  
 B: *Uli Kodie na: li-ε*  
 rice kodie he eat-FOC.PFV  
 'Kodie ate [rice]<sub>F</sub>.' (Galvagny 1984, as cited in Robert 2010: 242)

In (22) we see that the object is fronted and that the verb is marked with the suffix *-ε* (*-e* in (7)), the suffix which indicates that the focus is not on the verb itself, but on the term that is fronted.

- (23) A: 'What did Kodie do?'  
 B: *Kodie a li-a:li uli.*  
 kodie he eat-PFV-eat rice  
 'Kodie [ate rice]<sub>F</sub>.' (Galvagny 1984, as cited in Robert 2010: 242)

In (23) we see that broad predicate focus is marked differently from narrow object focus. The word order in (23) remains canonical, but the verb *li* 'eat' is reduplicated. The elicited example in (24) shows that narrow predicate focus is marked in the same way as broad verb focus, by reduplicating the verb.

- (24) A: 'What did the bee do to you?'  
 B: *Y-aac-ya e-lif-am-lif.*  
 NC-bee-DEF NC-sting-1SG-sting  
 'The bee [stung]<sub>F</sub> me.'

The Atlantic languages in this study thus do pattern in the same way: narrow verb focus is syncretic with predicate focus. This could be because in those languages the object has to move when it is focused, whereas in the Mande languages the object always remains in-situ. Thus, we can conclude that i) predicate focus always needs to be syncretic with some smaller focus, be it object or verb, ii) when the object needs to move it cannot be syncretic

with anything and predicate focus thus has to be syncretic with verb focus and iii) when the object does not have to move for focus reasons, it is arbitrary whether it is syncretic with verb or object focus.

Concluding this section, we can divide the languages into two groups based on how they mark broad predicate focus vis-à-vis narrow verb or narrow object focus, summarized in (25a-b).

- (25) a. Narrow verb same as predicate focus: Wolof, Jóola Karon, Soninke, Bambara  
b. Narrow object same as predicate focus: Kakabe, Dyula

### 5. All-new sentence focus

Sentence focus, like part-of-term focus and broad predicate focus, is another type of focus that is rarely featured in focus marking descriptions. To make matters more complicated, the term ‘sentence focus’ is often used interchangeably with the terms ‘thetic’ and ‘all new’ (Sasse 1996). Thetic sentences are often contrasted with categorical sentences, which have a topic-comment structure. Thetics lack this internal structure and are defined by Sasse (1996: 3) as cases in which “a new situation is presented as a whole”. These are often sentences in which there is no given element, hence the additional use of the term ‘all new’. The term ‘sentence focus’ is often used because the pragmatic focus is on the whole sentence, rather than on some subpart of it. In order to avoid confusion, in this paper I specifically only use the term ‘all-new sentence focus’ when discussing examples of sentence focus. This is because ‘sentence focus’ can also refer to situations which are not all-new. For example, sentence focus can also refer to situations in which every element of the sentence is given, such as (26).

- (26) A: ‘Did you do the dishes?’  
B: ‘Yes, [I did the dishes]<sub>F</sub>.’ **all-given sentence focus**
- (27) A: ‘What’s that noise?’  
B: ‘[Someone’s doing the dishes]<sub>F</sub>.’ **all-new sentence focus**

Thus, in this paper, I only look at examples that correspond to (27).

When attempting to identify the exact discourse conditions for sentence focus marking, Sasse (1987, 1996) recognizes the following types of events that give rise to sentence focus marking in several languages: disruptive events, explanations, announcements, introductions and descriptions. Of these sub-



types, disruptive events and announcements are often all-new, as they occur at beginnings of stories, out of the blue or as an answer to ‘What happened?’ or ‘What’s happening?’. Thus, these are the types of questions I will use to identify all-new sentence focus in this paper.

Another factor that should be kept in mind is that there is variation in how all-new sentence focus is marked even in English. Compare (28a) to (28b).

- (28) a. ‘John **PROTESTED**.’<sup>8</sup>    **neutral**  
      b. ‘**JOHN** died.’    **misfortune**  
          (Allerton & Cruttenden 1979: 50)

Allerton & Cruttenden (1979) have observed that while normally all-new sentence focus in English is marked by putting the nuclear pitch accent on the right-most lexical item, in the case of (28a) the verb *protested*, in certain cases the subject can also bear the nuclear pitch accent in all-new focus situations, as in (28b). Both (28a) and (28b) can be answers to ‘What happened?’ It is still unclear what the exact conditions for this variation are in English, but one of the situations that Allerton & Cruttenden (1979) describe in which the subject is marked as focus in all-new sentence focus situations is when the verb denotes a misfortunate event, such as *died* in (28b). Other situations in which the subject is marked for all-new sentence focus are verbs of appearance or disappearance or weather verbs, and later studies have also pointed out that surprise or unexpectedness could play a role in the distribution of focus marking in all-new situations (Hartmann & Zimmermann 2007, Bianchi et al. 2016, Jordanoska 2020). For the purposes of this paper, I will use *misfortune* and *unexpectedness* examples as prompts for non-neutral sentence foci. We will see that this distinction between neutral and non-neutral events also plays a role in how all-new sentence focus is marked in the Atlantic languages.

The languages I look at in this section are Kakabe, Dyula, Bambara, Jóola Karon, Jóola Foñy and Wolof. Of these languages, sentence focus has only been described for Kakabe (Vydrina 2020a) and Wolof (Robert 1989, Russel 2006, Assmann et al. 2023). The additional data come from elicitation. Again, there is variation among the languages in how all-new sentence focus is marked, but this time the three Mande languages pattern together in marking all-new sentence focus the same way as they mark subject focus across the board. In Wolof we find that all-new sentence focus can *either* be marked by

---

<sup>8</sup> All caps indicates prosodic prominence.

focus-marking the subject (thus in the same way as the Mande languages) *or* by a sentence-focus aspect marker. In Jóola, again, there is variation: sentence focus is marked in the same way as *either* subject focus *or* as predicate focus.

Let's first look at the Mande languages Dyula, Kakabe and Bambara, in which all-new sentence focus is expressed syncretically with subject focus. Kakabe data come from Vydrina (2020a), Dyula data from Lacina Silué (p.c.) and Bambara data from (Vydrin, this volume). First, consider Dyula. In (29A) the question 'What happened?' elicits an all-new answer. In (29B-B') we see two variations of this answer: in (29b) we see an example that would fall under what Allerton & Cruttenden (1979: 52) call 'verbs denoting misfortune' (subsumed under the category 'disruptive events' by Sasse (1987)), while in (29b') we see a neutral example.

(29) A: *Mǔ nè ké-rá?*

what FOC do-PFV.ITR

'What happened?'

B: *Mísí dó lè kà cèdèn dó tú*

cow INDF FOC PFV.TR man\_small INDF kick

'[A cow kicked a boy]<sub>F</sub>'

**misfortune**

B': *Fátúmátá lè kà lívrú dó sébé*

F. FOC PFV.TR book INDF write

'[Fatoumata wrote a book]<sub>F</sub>'

**neutral**

Crucially, both the misfortune example (29B) and the neutral example (29B') are marked in the same way: by placing the focus marker *lè* after the subject (*mísí dó* 'a cow' in (29B) and *Fátúmátá* in (29B')). For completeness, the example in (30) shows that we get the same construction — *lè* following the subject — when using a contrastive prompt rather than an information-seeking one to elicit all-new sentence focus. In (30) every element in B's answer is contrasted with those in A's question.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Moreover, subject focus marking is also used when only the subject and verb are the new information. This is illustrated in (ii). Subject + verb is another under-described focus construction, see Assmann et al. (2023) for more information on this construction.

(ii) A: *Mǔ nè kà jǎǎ sǒrò*

what FOC PFV.TR J. find

'What happened to Jean?'

B: *Pòlísí-w lè kà à minà*

police-PL FOC PFV.TR 3SG catch

'The police arrested him.'

(30) A: *Sújí bé bèn-á á*  
 rain COP fall-PROG Q  
 'Is it raining?'

B: *ǰ-ǰ sìgǰnǰgǰ-w lè bé mìná-w kòr-á*  
 no neighbour-PL FOC COP dishware-PL wash-PROG  
 'No, [the neighbours are doing the dishes]<sub>F</sub>.'

If we compare the Dyula examples to Kakabe (31), we see the same pattern: all-new sentence focus is marked by placing the focus marker after the subject.

(31) *Túlâ-n dè ká jààrèè-nù súbé tólópè là*  
 mouse.ART-PL FOC PFV.TR cat.ART-PL choose game-ART OBL  
 '[The mice chose the cats to have a party]<sub>F</sub>.' (Vydrina 2020a: 502; glosses are given according to the source, eds.)

The Kakabe sentence in (31) occurs at the beginning of a story, thus it can be considered to be an all-new focus sentence. The focus marker *dè* is placed after the subject *túlân* 'the mice'. This is the case for all sentence focus examples from Vydrina (2020a) which are all-new. So far, the generalizations of these data jibe well with the observation that across languages, sentence focus is often expressed by de-topicalizing the subject (Sasse 1987, 1996).

The Kakabe data, however, also shows us why it is important to make a distinction between all-new sentence focus and sentence focus that is not all-new. First of all, all-new and all-given sentence focus are marked differently in this language. While all-new sentence focus is marked by placing *lè* after the subject, in all-given sentence focus *lè* appears on the right-edge of the clause, as in (32):

(32) A: *Má lè lúú tígènú mà ì súnná lè*  
*mà lè lúú tígi-È-nù mà bi sún-la lè*  
 1PL LG yard owner-ART-PL 1PL be fast-GER FOC  
 'Us, the heads of the family, do we fast?'

B: *éy lúú tígènú ì súnná lè*  
*éy lúú tígi-È bi sún-la lè*  
 yes yard owner-ART be fast-GER FOC  
 'Yes, [the heads of the family do fast]<sub>F</sub>.' (Vydrina 2017: 61)

Furthermore, Vydrina (2020a) observes that when applying Sasse's (1987, 1996) criteria for identifying sentence focus to narratives, one also comes across sentences which fulfil these criteria, but are not all-new. One such ex-

ample is (33), which fits Sasse's criterion of an 'explanation', but in which the focus marker is placed after the adjunct.

- (33) *Kòtéé si i bi sùtùrà lè fɛ, kòtéé báyi sùtùrà bì nínlámá m̀ògèénu dè là.*  
*kòtéé si i bi sùtùrà lè fɛ kòtéé báyi*  
 now if 2SG be loyalty.ART FOC with now as  
*sùtura-È bi jini-la-ma m̀ògò-È-nu lè la*  
 loyalty-ART be look.for-GER-PASS man-ART-PL FOC OBL  
 'Now, if you are looking for loyalty, it is that loyalty is to be looked for [from people]<sub>F</sub>.' (Vydrina 2020a: 30)

In the second clause in (33), *sùtùrà* 'the loyalty', despite being a subject, and despite the clause being an explanation of the previous clause, is not marked with the focus marker *lè*. According to Vydrina (2020a), this is because *sùtùrà* is already activated in the preceding clause and a given element cannot bear the focus marker. Thus, the focus marker goes to the next least topical element: *m̀ògèénu* 'people'. Nonetheless, she still considers (33) an instance of sentence focus because of the explanatory function of the second clause.

In Bambara, we see the same pattern: all-new sentence focus is marked in the same way as subject focus, illustrated by (34):

- (34) *Ń t̀ùn hákili lá kó síra-ba-kan-kasara dè y' à s̀òrɔ*  
 1SG PST reason\ART at QUOT road-AUGM-on-accident FOC PFV.TR 3SG get  
 'I think, [he had a traffic accident]<sub>F</sub>.' (Vydrin, this volume)

Turning to Wolof, we see that all-new sentence focus can be expressed in two different ways: either with subject focus, like Dyula or Kakabe, or with the perfective marking, which in Russel (2006) is referred to as 'sentence focus' marking and in Jordanoska (2020) as 'clausal focus' marking, to make it on par with the other focus conjugations (see also Kalinowski 2015, Robert 1989, Russel 2006). An example on par with the Dyula example in (29b) is given in (35).

- (35) A: *Lu xew?*  
 what happen  
 'What happened?'  
 B: *Benn yamb moo màtt benn xale*  
 one bee SFOC.3SG bite one child  
 '[A bee stung a child]<sub>F</sub>.' (Assmann et al. 2023: 42)

(35) is parallel to the out-of-the-blue focus examples observed by Robert (1989, 1993), which are also marked with subject focus. However, in Wolof we

do see a similar difference as in English: it is only for certain events that sentence focus is syncretic with subject focus. Consider (36), in which we see that all-new sentence focus can also be marked with the perfective aspect marker *na* instead of the subject focus marker *moo*.

- (36) A: 'What happened?'  
 B: *Fatou bind na téére.*  
 F. write FOC.3SG book  
 '[Fatou wrote a book]<sub>F</sub>.' (Assmann et al. 2023: 13)

In Jóola Karon, we see the same pattern as in Wolof. First, (37), a 'misfortune' event, is marked in the same way as subject focus (38).

- (37) A: 'What happened?'  
 B: *Y-aac e-lif-e-am*  
 NC-bee NC-sting-FOC-1SG  
 '[A bee stung me!]<sub>F</sub>'
- (38) *Sana a-cuk-e pi-saalikoon-pa*  
 S. NC-see-FOC NC-cat-DEF  
 'C'est Sana qui a vu les chats.'  
 '[Sana]<sub>F</sub> saw the cats.' (Sambou 2008: 37)

Both (37) and (38) are marked by suffixing the verb with *-e*. In (39) I show an additional example which shows that the same also holds for a 'fortune' event. Both (37) and (39), however, can be considered 'disruptive' according to Sasse's classification.

- (39) A: 'Why is everybody cheering?'  
 B: *Senegal ka-kañe-e kup-ya*  
 senegal NC-win-FOC cup-DEF  
 '[Senegal won the world cup]<sub>F</sub>.'

A neutral event, such as (40), however, does not elicit the *-e* suffix on the verb. The neutral all-new sentence focus in (40) is marked by verb doubling. Recall from Section 3 that this is also how predicate focus is marked.

- (40) A: 'What happened?'  
 B: *Esamay a-kiic-a-kiic pukoo.*  
 E. NC-write-PVF-write book  
 '[Esamay wrote a book]<sub>F</sub>.'

Thus, both in Wolof and Jóola Karon non-neutral all-new sentence foci are marked syncretically with subject focus. In Wolof, neutral all-new sen-

tence focus is marked with the perfective sentence focus aspect marker and in Jóola Karon, neutral sentence focus is marked in the same way as predicate focus, by verb doubling. Additional data from Joola Foñy shows that in fact the same sentence can have either: both options are fine, as illustrated in (41).

- (41) A: ‘Why is everybody happy?’  
 B: *Senegal ba-ngar-e coupe du monde.*  
 S. NC-win-FOC world\_cup  
 B’: *Senegal a-nga-nga coupe du monde.*  
 S. NC-win-win world\_cup  
 ‘[Senegal won the world cup]<sub>F</sub>.’

The all-new sentence can be marked either syncretically as subject focus (41B) or as predicate focus (41B’), depending on multiple factors. According to Pierre Sambou (p.c.), uttering 41B instead of 41B’ can be because the speaker did not expect Senegal to win the world cup, and thus found it surprising, whereas in 41B’ this is not the case. But the different verb forms are also tied to aspectual differences, which at this stage are still unclear to me. In general, the rendering of focus in the Atlantic languages is related to aspect, as both are often conglomerated in the same verbal markings (Robert 2010). The details of the exact functioning and semantics of this focus-aspect relation, however, are outside of the scope of this paper.

Thus, we have seen that it is important to differentiate between the terms ‘all new’ and ‘sentence focus’, and that the marking of sentence focus is also subject to pragmatic factors such as unexpectedness. While in the Mande languages all-new sentence focus is always marked on par with subject focus, in the Atlantic languages this depends on whether something can be seen as a disruptive event or a neutral event. Summarizing:

- (42) a. Only subject focus same as sentence focus: Kakabe, Dyula, Bambara  
 b. Subject focus or predicate focus same as sentence focus: Jóola Karon, Jóola Foñy  
 c. Subject focus same as sentence focus, or separate sentence focus marker: Wolof

## 6. Polarity focus and verum

The final underrepresented focus type I want to consider is what is known as polarity, truth or verum focus. It is most simply defined as ‘focus on the truth

value' (Höhle 1992) or 'focus on the polarity' (Dik 1989) of a sentence. The term 'verum' as used by Gutzmann et al. (2020), on the other hand, refers to a pragmatic notion in which the speaker wants to prevent a proposition from entering the common ground. It is contested whether verum focus is a subtype of focus, or a discourse category of its own (see Goodhue 2018, Gutzmann et al. 2020, Jordanoska 2020 i.a. for discussion). For the Mande languages for which we have such data, namely Bambara (Prokhorov 2014, Vydrin, this volume) and Kakabe (Vydrina 2020b), the analysis is done according to the tradition that refers to such utterances as 'polarity focus', which is subsumed under the wider term 'operator focus', which also includes TAM-focus (Dik 1989, Güldemann 2003, 2009). The Wolof data are analysed in the framework which considers verum a separate category from focus. The crucial overlap between both of these traditions, however, is in the way that the phenomenon is diagnosed: the contexts for eliciting both 'verum' and 'polarity focus' are, a.o. countering previous assertions or inferences, responses to biased questions, responses to alternative questions and emphatic agreement (see Matthewson & Glougie (2018) for a full list of contexts). An example of a countering assertion in English is given in (43).

- (43) A: 'The cat didn't jump on the table.'  
B: 'The cat DID jump on the table! I saw her!'

Furthermore, disallowed contexts are out-of-the blue contexts and answers to neutral polar questions. Note that these are exactly the contexts for eliciting all-new (27) and all-given (26) sentence focus respectively, as was shown in Section 5. Thus, I will use this context-based diagnosis in order to make generalizations about polarity focus and verum.

The languages for which data on polarity focus and/or verum marking are available are Kakabe (Vydrina 2020b), Bambara (Prokhorov 2014), Dyula (Jordanoska & Silué 2021) and Wolof (Jordanoska 2020).

This time, it is Wolof — a language that uses verbal morphology to mark focus — that uses a particle to express verum, whereas Kakabe — a focus-particle language—makes changes to the verbal morphology. Surprisingly, or given the amount of arbitrariness in the variety we have seen so far perhaps unsurprisingly, the Manding varieties pattern together with Wolof and not with their fellow Mande language Kakabe.

However, one thing all languages have in common is that verum is not expressed syncretically with any other type of focus that we have seen so far, in each language it is marked in a distinct way from other foci.

Let's start with the outlier language: Kakabe. Vydrina (2020b) shows that Kakabe marks polarity focus with the perfective TAM-marker *bati*. An example is given in (44), which is a response to an alternative question and therefore a verum context.

- (44) A: 'Has he prepared the meat or hasn't he?'  
 B: À *báti sòbéé tàbí*  
 3SG PFV.OF meat.ART prepare  
 'He HAS prepared the meat.' (Vydrina 2020b: 2)

In an unmarked context, the form of the perfective aspect marker in (44) would be *ká* rather than *báti*, which we have seen in the Kakabe examples throughout this paper. One of them, (13b), is repeated here as (45) for comparison.

- (45) *mùséé kà sòbéé bàràbàrá lè*  
*mùsu-È ka sòbo-È bàrabara lè*  
 woman-ART PFV.TR meat-ART boil FOC  
 'The woman [boiled]<sub>F</sub> the meat.' (Vydrina 2020a: 518; gloss corrected, eds.)

Vydrina (2020b) also notes that while changing the aspect marker is obligatory to mark polarity focus, *in addition* to this change in verbal morphology a particle can be used, as shown in (46), a response that counters an inference:

- (46) *éy à báti dónđen nàati dè ànu yen*  
 yes 3SG PFV.OF a.little bring EMPH 3PL BNF  
 'Yes, they DID bring a little bit [of money] for them. (You shouldn't think that they didn't).' (Vydrina 2020b:18)

In (46), the particle *dè* is added for additional emphasis. Vydrina (2020b) notes, however, that the exact discourse conditions for the particle are unclear. Interestingly, the related Bambara and Dyula have a formally very similar particle: *dé*, which has been analyzed as a marker of operator focus for Bambara by Prokhorov (2014) and as a verum marker for Dyula by Jordanoska & Silué (2021). Consider (47)–(50) from Bambara and Dyula:

- (47) Bambara  
 A: 'Amadou didn't come.'  
 B: À *nà-nà dé.*  
 3SG come-PFV.ITR OF  
 'He DID come.' (Prokhorov 2014: 64)



(48) Bambara

A: 'Younger brother, did you not hear the chief?'

B: *O ko k' ale ye kuma men kè!*

this QUOT QUOT 3SG.EMPH PFV.TR word hear indeed

'I (certainly) did hear him!' (Bambara Corpus, Vydrin 2013)

(47) shows that in Bambara the counter-assertion is marked with the clause-final particle *dé*, while the perfective intransitive aspect marker *nà* is not specified for information structure. (48) shows another verum context: a response to a biased question. In (48) another particle, namely *kè*, is used, but again the perfective transitive aspect marker *ye* is the same as a non-verum marked sentence, as in example (2), repeated here as (49) for reference.

(49) *Ámadu dè yé sàgâ fàga.*

A. FOC PFV.TR sheep:ART kill

'[Amadou]<sub>F</sub> slaughtered the sheep.' (Prokhorov 2014: 63)

Dyula shows the same pattern as Bambara: verum can be marked either with the particle *dé* as in (50B) or *kè* as in (50B'), but without changes to the aspectual morphology.<sup>10</sup> Thus, in this case the two Manding varieties pattern exactly alike.

(50) A: *í má nà d̀̀k̀̀éj̀̀ró lá!*

2SG NEG come dancing\_place POST

'You did not come to the party!'

B: *ń nà nà d̀̀k̀̀éj̀̀ró lá dé!*

1SG come PFV.ITR dancing\_place POST OF

'I really did come to the party!'

B': *ń nà nà d̀̀k̀̀éj̀̀ró lá k̀̀è!*

1SG come PFV.ITR dancing\_place POST indeed

'I indeed did come to the party!' (Jordanoska & Silué 2021)

Moreover, novel data from (Vydrin, this volume) shows that in addition to these particles, Bambara, like Kakabe, can also use a different predicative marker, namely the certain future marker, to mark operator focus. This suggests that Kakabe and Bambara have a hybrid system of changes to the predicative markers and additional particles to mark operator focus and verum. It could well be that the different predicative markers are used for operator focus in the broader

<sup>10</sup> The two particles *dé* and *kè* do have different discourse conditions and are not only used for marking verum (hence the gloss 'indeed' for *kè*). The exact discourse conditions of these particles are described in Jordanoska & Silué (2021).

sense, while the additional particles are used for the pragmatic notion of verum specifically. The interplay between these two remains to be explored in detail.

For now, let us turn to Wolof, which marks verum using clause-final particles. There are four different particles that can be used to this extent: *de*, *kat*, *kay* and *gaa*. They can appear in a verum context such as a counter-assertion (51B) or emphatic agreement (51B'). Jordanoska (2020) describes the discourse conditions of these particles in more detail, but for the purpose of this paper, it suffices to show that particles are used for verum marking, and not a special verbal conjugation coded for verum or operator focus. The sentence focus conjugation *na* is used in (51B) and the negation *-ul* in (51B').

(51) A: 'Today Fatou doesn't look good.'

B: (*Anxkay*,) *rafet na de | kat | kay | #gaa!*  
 yes.REV be.pretty 3SG.CLFOC INTS DIS VER AGR  
 '(Yes), she DOES look good!'

B: (*Waaw*,) *rafet-ul ?de | #kat | kay | gaa.*  
 yes pretty-NEG.3SG INTS DIS VER AGR  
 '(Indeed,) she DOESN'T look good.' (Jordanoska 2020:102)

Finally, while it is not clear how verum is marked in Jóola, I want to show some previously unpublished Jóola Foñy data here for completeness, since Jóola languages do use formally similar particles to Wolof and Manding. However, it seems that these particles are not used in the same way. Compare, for example, the Wolof sentence (52) with the Jóola Foñy sentence in (53):

(52) Wolof

A: *Xam nga Musa tedu?*  
 know CLFOC.2SG M. Q.TAG  
 'You know Moussa, don't you?'

B: *Xam naa ko kay!*  
 know CLFOC.1SG M. VER  
 'I sure do know him!' (P. Sambou p.c.)

In (52) we see that a response to a biased question in Wolof is marked with *kay*. Similarly, a polar question in Jóola Foñy that is interpreted as redundant<sup>11</sup> does not elicit a response with a clause-final particle, but rather with the emphatic response particle *ee* 'yes', as in (53):

<sup>11</sup> (53) is not a biased question, but in some situations, seemingly neutral polar questions can be interpreted as biased. For example, if the addressee considers the ques-

(53) Jóola Foñy

A: *Nu man-manj Musa?*

2SG know-know M.

'Do you know Moussa?'

B: *Ee! Ni manj-oo-man!*

yes.EMPH 1SG know-3SG-know

'Yes of course I know him!' (P. Sambou p.c.)

We do not find the particle *de* in verum contexts in Jóola Foñy (P. Sambou p.c.), while it does exist in the language, for example in warnings such as (54a). The particle *de* in Wolof is polyfunctional, and is also used outside of verum, for example in warnings, such as (54b), on par with the Jóola Foñy example in (54a).

(54a) a. Jóola Foñy

*Pan i-nag-i de!*

FUT 1S-beat-2O EMPH

'I will beat you!' (P. Sambou p.c.)

b. Wolof

*Moytu-l de!*

be.careful-IMP INTS

'Be careful!' (Jordanoska 2020: 191)

A datapoint from Jóola Karon (55) moreover suggests, that verum could be marked in the same way as predicate focus in this language, namely by verbal reduplication, as was shown in Section 4. This puts Jóola Karon on par with some of the Gur languages (Schwarz 2010), for example, in which verum is also marked in the same way as predicate focus.

(55) Jóola Karon

A: *U-ɲaw-ut wa-ɲuw-a.*

2SG-wash-NEG NC-clothes-DEF

'You didn't wash the clothes!'

B: *N-ci-ɲaw-o-ɲaw-o wa-ɲuw-a*

LOC-1SG-wash-MID-wash-MID NC-clothes-DEF

'I did wash the clothes!'

---

tion posed to already be in the common ground, i.e., redundant (see Gutzmann et al. 2020).

Concluding this section, we can divide the languages we have looked at into two groups on the basis of how they express verum, as in (56).

- (56) a. Polarity/Verum marked on verbal complex: Kakabe, Bambara  
 b. Polarity/Verum marked with particle: Kakabe, Bambara, Dyula, Wolof  
 c. Polarity/Verum marked the same as predicate focus: Jóola Karon

However, much more work is needed on verum, as it is still both poorly described, and poorly understood.

## 7. Discussion and comparison

We have seen that there is a substantial amount of variation in how focus (and verum) are marked in the languages under discussion. The findings are summarized in Table 1. The thick line represents a cut-off between Mande and Atlantic languages.

*Table 1.* Summary of findings in focus-marking across languages

	Kakabe	Dyula	Bambara	Soninke	Wolof	Jóola
focus marked how?	particle	particle	particle	particle	verbal morphology	verbal morphology
polarity/verum marked how?	verbal morphology (+particle)	particle	particle (+verbal morphology)	no data	particle	same as predicate focus?
broad predicate focus marked the same as	narrow object	narrow object	narrow verb	narrow verb	narrow verb	narrow verb
all-new sentence focus marked the same as	narrow subject	narrow subject	narrow subject	no data	narrow subject or nothing	narrow subject or predicate
difference between possessor and possessee focus marking?	yes	no	yes	yes	no	no

In the table we see that the Mande languages mark focus using a particle and the Atlantic ones using changes to the verbal morphology. We see that for verum, most languages use a particle, while Kakabe uses changes to the verbal morphology. Comparing the way different focus sizes are marked, we see that the Mande languages under discussion, despite similar syntax, do not behave as one group. Broad predicate focus is marked in the same way as narrow object focus in Kakabe and Dyula, but the same as verb focus in Bambara and Soninke. All-new sentence focus is marked the same way as narrow subject focus in Kakabe and Dyula. For Bambara and Soninke, data on this focus size are unavailable. Kakabe, Bambara and Soninke can disambiguate possessee focus from possessor focus, but Dyula cannot. Thus, there is (micro)variation, and due to the scarcity of data at this point, it is not clear whether this variation is due to speaker preferences or differences in dialects and language variants.

We can, however, make the following generalizations (57)-(60):

(57) **Generalizations about predicate focus**

- a. Regardless of the focus marking system a language uses, broad predicate focus needs to be marked syncretically with some smaller focus within the predicate.
- b. When a language uses changes to the verbal morphology to mark focus, broad predicate focus is marked syncretically with narrow verb focus.
- c. When a language uses a particle to mark focus, there is no systematic correspondence to whether predicate focus is marked the same as verb or as object focus.

(58) **Generalizations about sentence focus**

- a. Regardless of the focus marking system a language uses, narrow subject focus marking can always be used to express all-new sentence focus.
- b. In Kakabe, Bambara and Dyula, this is the only way to express all-new sentence focus. Thus, subject focus constructions and all-new sentence focus constructions will always look the same.
- c. In Wolof and Jóola, subject focus can be used to express all-new sentences, but only when there is an additional pragmatic import. In the examples in this paper, that pragmatic import was related to unexpectedness, as the examples concerned disruptive events. When there is no additional pragmatic import, there are other ways of marking all-new sentence focus.

(59) **Generalizations about part-of-term focus**

- a. When a language uses a particle to mark focus, it can differentiate in complex nominals between focus on the possessor and focus on the possesee. However, this correspondence is not systematic, as Dyula marks the whole term when only a part of the term is the focus.
- b. When a language uses verbal morphology to mark focus, it marks the whole term when only a part of the term is the focus. This is the case at least for Wolof, and needs to be checked for the Jóola languages.

(60) **Generalizations about verum**

- a. Verum can be marked using either particles or verbal morphology, but this does not hinge on which of these strategies the language in question uses for focus marking.
- b. Verum is not marked in the same way as term focus, predicate focus or sentence focus in any of the languages examined.

## 8. Conclusion

Looking closely at the focus marking systems of Kakabe, Dyula, Bambara, Soninke, Wolof, Jóola Karon and Jóola Foñy, this paper has shown that not all morphosyntactic focus languages are the same: Kakabe, Dyula, Bambara and Soninke use an invariant particle that can occur in multiple positions in the clause, whereas Wolof, Jóola Karon and Jóola Foñy employ changes to the verbal morphology and fronting of constituents. Furthermore, it was shown that there is variation as to which larger focus sizes get marked in the same way as which smaller focus sizes, but that the amount of variation is not always related to the type of focus marking system. Furthermore, this paper has identified gaps in the literature on focus marking in African languages: often paradigms are missing data on part-of-term focus and sentence focus and do not differentiate between predicate and verb focus. Specifically, we need more papers such as Vydrina (2020a), which show complete paradigms of focus marking systems, including part-of-term focus, differentiated narrow verb and broad predicate focus, and sentence focus.

## Abbreviations

1, 2, 3 — first, second, third person; AGR — agreement particle; AL — alienable possession marker; ART — article; BNF — benefactive; CFOC — complement focus; CLFOC — clausal focus; DEF — definite; DIS — disagreement particle; EMPH — emphatic particle;

F — pragmatic focus; FOC — focus marker; FUT — future; GEN — genitive linker; GER — gerund; INDF — indefinite; INTS — intensification particle; ITR — intransitive; LG — long form of pronoun; MID — middle voice; NC — noun class; OF — operator focus; PFV — perfective; PL — plural; POSS — possessive; PROG — progressive; PST — past tense; Q — question particle; Q.TAG — question tag; QUD — question under discussion; SFOC — subject focus; SG — singular; TR — transitive; VFOC — verb/predicate focus; VER — verum.

## References

- Allerton, David & Alan Cruttenden. 1979. Three reasons for accenting a definite subject. *Journal of Linguistics* 15(1), 49–53.
- Assmann, Muriel, Daniel Büring, Izabela Jordanoska & Max Prüller. 2023. Towards a theory of morphosyntactic focus marking. *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11049-023-09567-4>
- Bianchi, Valentina, Giuliano Bocci & Silvio Cruschina. 2016. Focus fronting, unexpectedness, and evaluative implicatures. *Semantics and Pragmatics* 9.3. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3765/sp.9.3>
- Creissels, Denis. 2017. Atypical objects in Soninke (West Mande). *Italian Journal of Linguistics* 29(1), 25–52.
- Diagana, Yakouba. 1987. La focalisation en soninké. *Mandenkan. Bulletin semestriel d'études linguistiques mandé*, 13, 61–72.
- Diagne, Anna Marie. 2008. *Le marquage de la focalisation en soninké*. Mandekan 44.
- Dik, Simon C. 1989. *The Theory of Functional Grammar, Part I: The Structure of the Clause*. Dordrecht: Foris Publications.
- Dombrowsky-Hahn, Klaudia. 2006. Argument focus in Kar (Senufo). *ZAS Papers in Linguistics*, 46, 83–103.
- Eberhard, David M., Gary F. Simons & Charles D. Fennig (eds.). 2023. *Ethnologue: Languages of the World. Twenty-sixth edition*. Dallas, Texas: SIL International. Online version: <http://www.ethnologue.com>.
- Fominyam, Henry & Radek Šimík. 2017. The morphosyntax of exhaustive focus. *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory* 35(4), 1027–1077.
- Galvagny, Marie-Hélène. 1984. L'organisation syntaxique et énonciative de la phrase en diola karon. *Bulletin de la Société de Linguistique de Paris* LXXIX, 427–455.
- Gero, Marcia L. & Stephen H. Levinsohn. 1993. The *-mi* and *-e* morphemes in Joola-Fony. *Journal of West African Languages* XXIII-1, 79–90.
- Goodhue, Daniel. 2018. *On asking and answering biased polar questions*. PhD thesis. Montreal: McGill University.
- Green, Melanie & Philip J. Jaggard. 2003. Ex-situ and in-situ focus in Hausa: Syntax, semantics and discourse. In: J. Lecarme, J. Lowenstamm & U. Shlonsky (eds.). *Research in Afroasiatic Grammar 2* (Current Issues in Linguistic Theory), 187–213. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

- Güldemann, Tom. 2003. Present progressive vis-à-vis predication focus in Bantu. *Studies in Language* 27(2), 323–360.
- Güldemann, Tom. 2009. Predicate-centered focus types: A sample-based typological study in African languages. *Description of project B7 SFB 632*. Berlin.
- Gutzmann, Daniel, Katharina Hartmann & Lisa Matthewson. 2020. Verum focus is verum, not focus: Crosslinguistic evidence. *Glossa: a journal of general linguistics* 5(1). <https://doi.org/10.5334/gjgl.347>
- Hartmann, Katharina & Malte Zimmermann. 2007. In place — out of place: Focus in Hausa. In K. Schwabe & S. Winkler (eds.), *Information structure and the architecture of grammar: A typological perspective*, 365–403. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Höhle, Tilman N. 1992. Über verum-fokus im Deutschen. In: J. Jacobs (ed.), *Informationsstruktur und Grammatik*. Linguistische Berichte Sonderhefte, vol. 4, 112–141. Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden GmbH.
- Jordanoska, Izabela. 2020. *The pragmatics of sentence final and second position particles in Wolof*. PhD thesis. Vienna: University of Vienna.
- Jordanoska, Izabela, Daniel Büring, Max Prüller & Muriel Assmann. 2021. Second Occurrence Focus in Wolof: Patterns and consequences. In: Neil Banerjee and Verena Hehl (Eds.) *MIT Working Papers in Linguistics 91, Proceedings of TripleA 6*, 51–67.
- Jordanoska, Izabela & Lacina Silué. 2021. The *d*- and *k*-particles in Manding and Wolof. Paper presented at *LAGB Annual Meeting*, online.
- Kalinowski, Cristin. 2015. *A typology of morphosyntactic encoding of focus in African languages*. PhD thesis. Buffalo, NY: State University of New York at Buffalo.
- Kiemtoré, Alassane. 2022. *Issues in Jula complementation: Structures, relations and matters of interpretation*. PhD thesis. Stuttgart: University of Stuttgart.
- Matthewson, Lisa & Jennifer Glougie. 2018. Justification and Truth. In: S. Stich, M. Mizumoto & E. McCready (eds.), *Epistemology for the Rest of the World*, 149–186. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Masiuk, Nadine. 1986. La particule de focalisation de du bambara. *Mandenkan. Bulletin semestriel d'études linguistiques mandé*, (11), 75–88.
- Masiuk, Nadine. 1994. L'emploi des particules, des formes pronominales fortes, et de l'extraposition en Bambara, parler de Bamako: approche sémiotique et pragmatique de description. *Mandenkan. Bulletin semestriel d'études linguistiques mandé*, (27), 1–110.
- Mc Laughlin, Fiona. 2004. Is there an adjective class in Wolof? In: R. M. W. Dixon & A. Y. Aikhenvald (eds.), *Adjective classes: A cross-linguistic typology*, 242–262. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Merrill, John T. M. 2021. Atlantic groups as primary branches of Niger-Congo. Paper presented at Westermann Workshop, Humboldt University, Berlin.
- Prokhorov, Kirill. 2014. Focalization particles in Bambara. *Mandenkan. Bulletin semestriel d'études linguistiques mandé*, (52), 60–72.



- Pozdniakov, Konstantin & Guillaume Segerer. Forthcoming. A Genealogical classification of Atlantic languages. In: F. Luepke (ed.). *The Oxford guide to the Atlantic languages of West Africa*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Robert, Stéphane. 1989. *Système verbal et énonciation en wolof*. PhD thesis. Paris: Paris 7 university.
- Robert, Stéphane. 1993. Structure et sémantique de la focalisation. *Bulletin de la Société de Linguistique de Paris* LXXXVIII: 25–47.
- Robert, Stéphane. 2010. Focus in Atlantic languages. In: I. Fiedler & A. Schwarz (eds.). *The expression of information structure. A documentation of its diversity across Africa*, 233–260. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Roberts, Craige. 1996/2012. Information structure: Towards an integrated formal theory of pragmatics. *Semantics and pragmatics*, 5, 6. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3765/sp.5.6>
- Riester, Arndt, Lisa Brunetti & Kordula De Kuthy. 2018. Annotation guidelines for Questions under Discussion and information structure. In: E. Adamou, K. Haude & M. Vanhove (eds.). *Information structure in lesser-described languages: Studies in prosody and syntax*, 403–443. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Russell, Margaret A. 2006. *The syntax and placement of Wolof clitics*. PhD thesis. Champaign: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.
- Sambou, Pierre. 2008. Topicalisation et focalisation en joola karon. *Revue électronique Internationale de Sciences du Langage Sudlangues* (10): 34–48.
- Sapir, David. 1965. *A grammar of Diola-Fogny*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sasse, Hans-Jürgen. 1987. The thematic/categorical distinction revisited. *Linguistics* 25, 511–580.
- Sasse, Hans-Jürgen. 1996. Thematicity. [Arbeitspapiere, Neue Folge 27]. Köln: Institut für Sprachwissenschaft, Universität zu Köln.
- Schwarz, Anne. 2010. Verb-and-predication focus markers in Gur. In: I. Fiedler & A. Schwarz (eds.). *The expression of information structure: A documentation of its diversity across Africa*, 287–314. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Vydrin, Valentin. 2013. Bamana reference corpus (BRC). *Procedia — Social and Behavioral Sciences* 95, 75–80.
- Vydrina, Alexandra. 2017. *A corpus-based description of Kakabe, a Western Mande language: Prosody in grammar*. PhD thesis. Paris: INALCO.
- Vydrina, Alexandra. 2020a. Topicality in sentence focus utterances. *Studies in Language*, 44(3), 501–547.
- Vydrina, Alexandra. 2020b. Operator focus in discourse and grammar: The two perfectives in Kakabe. *Journal of African Languages and Linguistics*, 41(1), 99–145.
- Vydrina, Alexandra. (2023). Morphological focus and its agreement features in Kakabe. *Mandekan* 69, 30–86
- Watters, John R. 1979. *Focus in Aghem: A study of its formal correlates and typology*. PhD thesis. Los Angeles: University of Los Angeles.