

# Degrees of underspecification to express verum in Bantu

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Appendix with supporting data available online



<https://bantusyntaxinformationstructure.com/news-2/>

The truth about truth

# (Emphatic) Truth focus

- (1) Karl      **HAT**    den    Hund   gefüttert.  
Carl      has    the    dog    fed

‘Carl DID feed the dog.’

(pitch accent, German; Höhle, cited in Lohnstein 2016:290)

- (2) (You can’t be in Leuven right now.)

Ik ben WEL    in    Leuven!

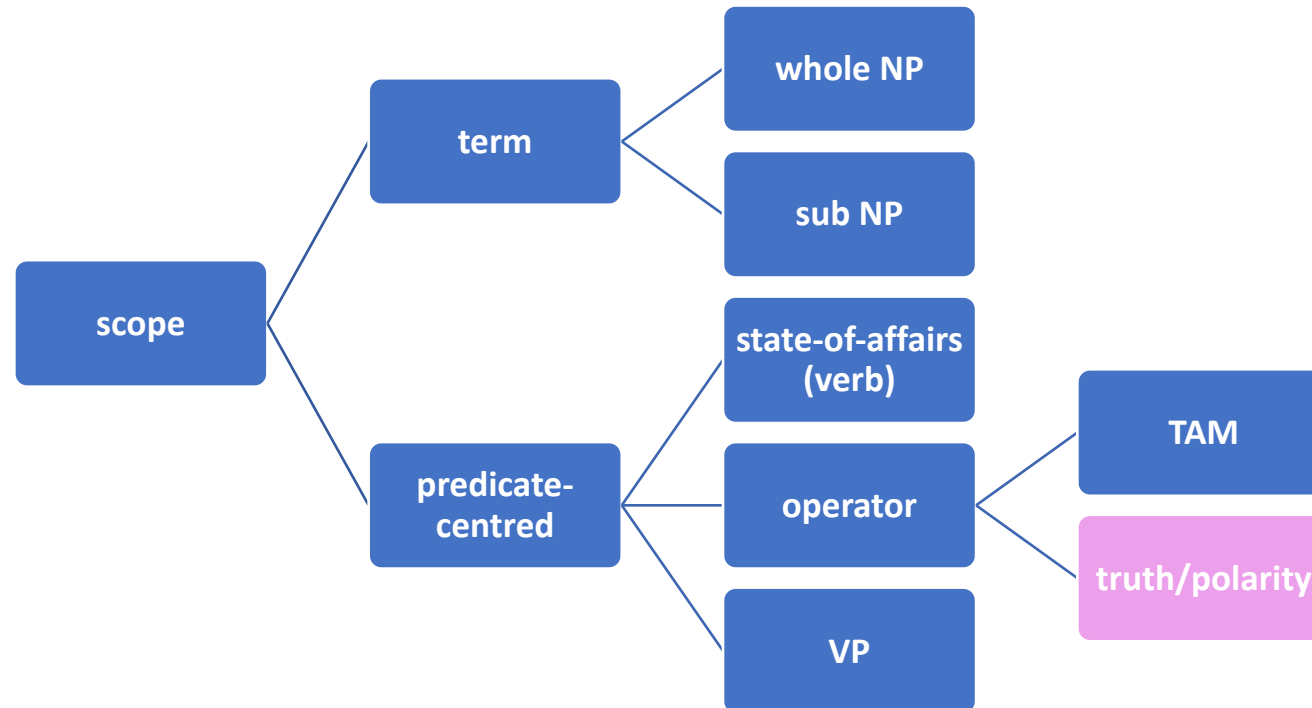
I   am   POS.POL   in   Leuven

‘I AM in Leuven.’

(particle, Dutch)

# Truth focus as part of information structure

Traditional view: truth focus (also: 'polarity focus'; 'verum focus') = subtype of focus (predicate-centred focus (PCF); Güldemann 2003, 2009)



# Verum

- Gutzmann et al. (2020): **verum is not focus**; it is a separate notion
- Pitch accent in Germanic is not an instance of focus marking, but functions to downgrade a proposition from the QUD (= VERUM)
- In some languages (Gitksan, Chadic), these two functions have distinct markings

## RESEARCH

### Verum focus is verum, not focus: Cross-linguistic evidence

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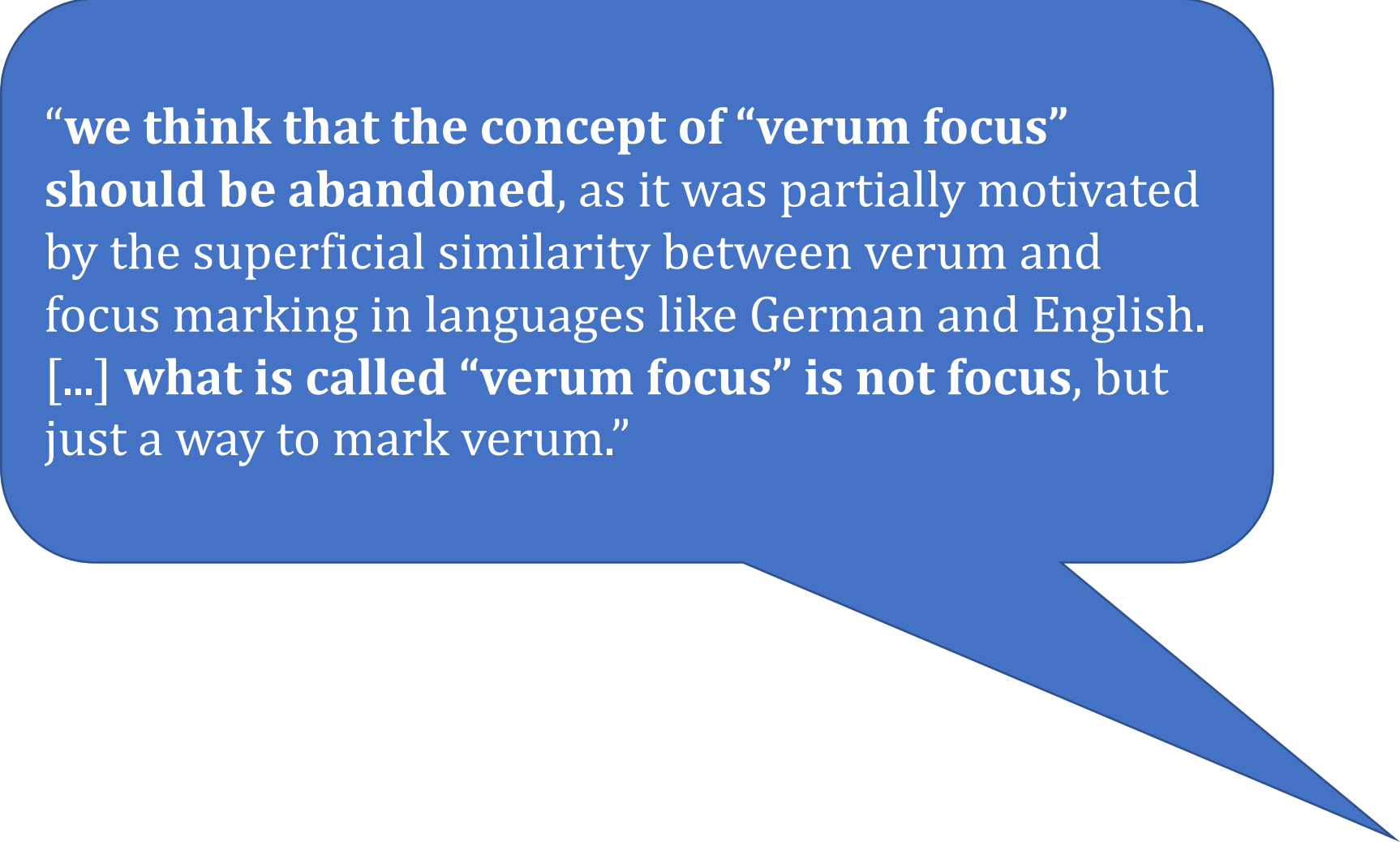
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The accent pattern known as verum focus is commonly understood as an ordinary alternative focus on the truth of a proposition. This standard view, which we call the focus accent thesis (FAT), can be contrasted with the lexical operator thesis (LOT), according to which the accent pattern that looks like focus in languages like German or English is actually not an instance of focus marking, but realizes a lexical verum predicate, whose function is to relate the current proposition to a question under discussion. Although it is hard to distinguish between the FAT and the LOT on the basis of German or English, a broader cross-linguistic perspective seems to favor the LOT. Drawing from fieldwork on Tsimshianic (Gitksan) and Chadic (Bura, South Marghi), we first show that in none of these languages is verum realized in the same way that ordinary alternative focus is marked. This sheds initial doubt on the unity of verum and focus. Secondly, the FAT predicts that a language cannot have co-occurring verum and focus, if it does not allow multiple foci, and that a language should allow them to co-occur if it allows for multiple foci. Again, while it is hard to find counterexamples in German or English, some of the data from our cross-linguistic investigation favor the LOT.

**Keywords:** verum; focus; emphasis; accent; question under discussion



**“we think that the concept of “verum focus” should be abandoned,** as it was partially motivated by the superficial similarity between verum and focus marking in languages like German and English. [...] **what is called “verum focus” is not focus,** but just a way to mark verum.”

Gutzmann et al. (2020:42; emph added)



## **1. Polarity focus contexts**

- a. Discourse-initially
- b. Neutral answers to questions

## **2. Verum contexts**

- a. Biased y/n question
- b. Correction of a previous utterance
- c. Correction of negative expectations
- d. Emphatic agreement
- e. Confirmation of expected path of events
- f. Answers to questions (with emphatic effect)
- g. Answers to indirect questions
- h. In the antecedent of conditionals ('stressing the conditionality')
- i. Inside yes-no questions (with an 'Is it really?' effect)

(Matthewson and Glougie 2018:14-15)

# Verum as an operator

- Focus accent thesis (FAT)
- Lexical operator thesis (LOT)

$\llbracket \text{VERUM} \rrbracket^{u,c}(p) = 1$ , if the speaker  $c_s$  wants to prevent that  $\text{QUD}(c)$  is downdated with  $\neg p$ .  
(Gutzmann et al. 2020:9)

# Verum and focus

## **Gutzmann et al. (2020)'s two-way typology of languages**

Type I. verum marking = focus marking (earlier motivation for FAT)

Type II. verum marking  $\neq$  focus marking (new motivation for LOT)

We “have to look at languages that do not use accents as their means to mark focus”  
(Gutzmann et al. 2020: 15)

## **Bantu languages!**

RQ1: How is verum expressed in Bantu? Is there a dedicated strategy for marking it?

RQ2: Is verum part of IS or is it a separate notion?

⇒ Need to have data on verum marking in context of the broader system of IS-marking in Bantu...

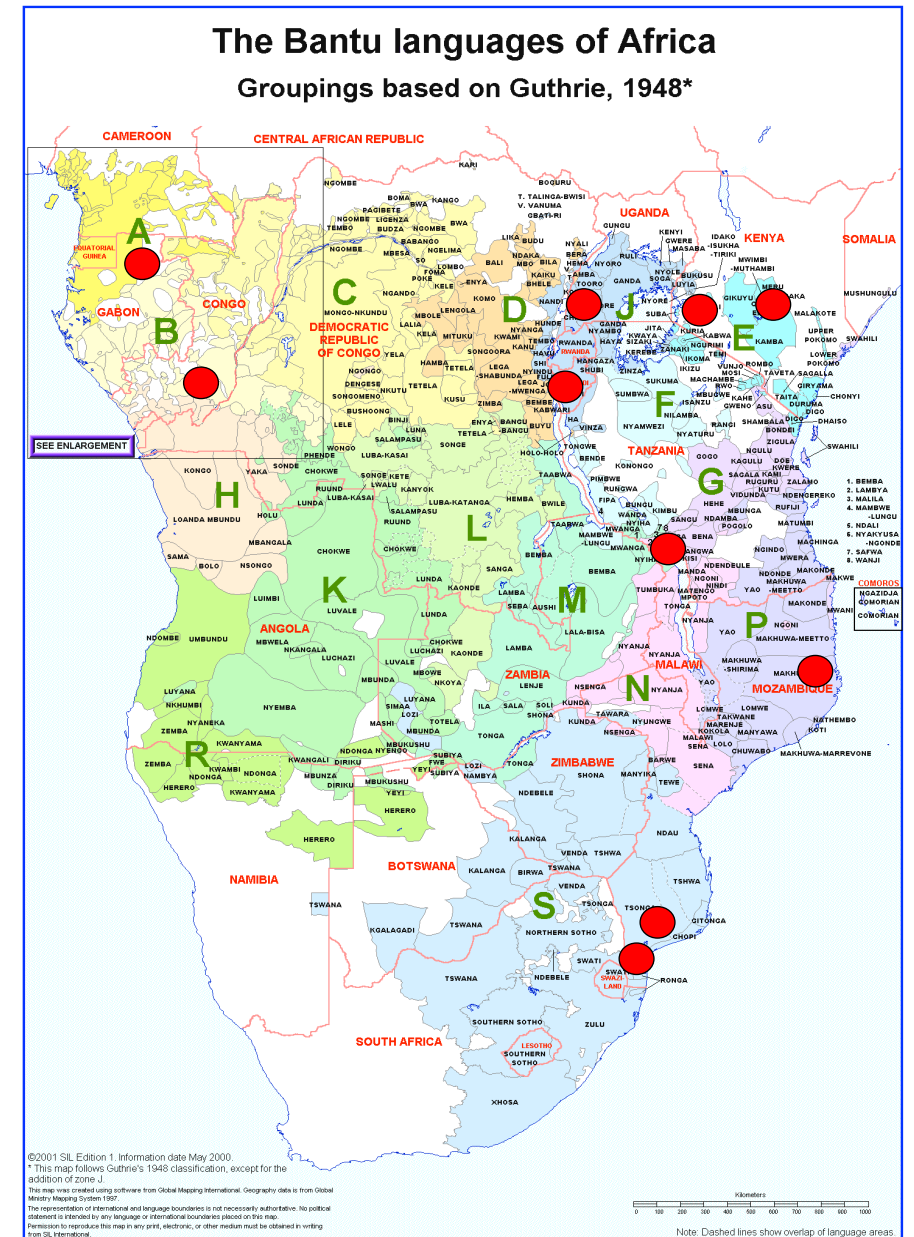
# BaSIS project

- Bantu Syntax and Information Structure (BaSIS) project, 2017-2023, Leiden University
- Investigating syntax and IS for 10 Bantu languages



# Bantu

- Large expansion across sub-Saharan Africa approx. 4000 years ago
- Approx. 550 closely related languages (Hammarström 2019); many understudied
- Known to mark IS morphosyntactically (Van der Wal 2015, Downing & Hyman 2016, Downing & Marten 2019, a.o)
- BaSIS project: Tunen, Teke-Kukuya, Kîtharaka, Kirundi, Rukiga, Gusii, Kinyakyusa, Makhuwa-Enahara, Changana, Cicopi



# Methodology

- BaSIS project methodology document (inspired by QUIS; Skopeteas et al. 2006)
- Investigates syntax and information structure
- Elicitation in a controlled discourse context; picture stimuli; recording of natural speech
- ⇒ Available online:  
<https://bantusyntaxinformationstructure.com/methodology/>
- Not all the truth diagnostics

The BaSIS basics of information structure

Jenneke van der Wal  
August 2021



# Today's plan

- Show all strategies for verum encountered in our sample
- Propose how these strategies are about de-focusing and increasingly narrow degrees of underspecification
- Discuss what this shows us about the relation between verum and focus (they're not independent!)

Strategies for verum in Bantu



# Results

- 7 different strategies for expressing verum, ranging from fully lexical (periphrasis, particles) to fully grammatical (verbal morphology)
- Verum can be unmarked
- No strategy is unique to verum - they are found elsewhere in the IS system
- Verum is not uniquely expressed by one strategy, intra- or interlinguistically
- Strategies may be combined

⇒ No 1-to-1 mapping between verum and a particular strategy

(See also work by Eva-Marie Bloom-Ström and Jochen Zeller on Nguni verum)

	lexical	unmarked V	pred. doubling	dislocation	marked V	OM double
Tunen	✓	✓	N/A	?	N/A	N/A
Teke	✓	✓	N	N	N/A	N/A
Kirundi	✓	?	✓	✓	✓	?
Rukiga	✓	✓	✓	✓	N/A	✓
Gusii	✓	?	N/A	?	✓	?
Kĩĩtharaka	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	?
Kinyakyusa	✓	✓	✓	✓	N/A	N/A
Makhuwa	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	N/A
Changana	✓	?	N	✓	✓	?
Cicopi	✓	?	✓	✓	✓	?

# Lexical strategies

## Particle (Kinyakyusa)

- (3) I don't believe he went to Malawi.  
A-a-buuk-ire     **nalooli.**  
1SM-PST-go-PFV   truly  
'He really went!'

## Periphrasis (Tunen)

- (4) ɔ **taka**, Nóa ándɔ na.  
ɔ     taka   Nóa     a-<sup>H</sup>ndɔ   na  
PREP truth 1.Noah 1SM-PRS be.sick  
'Truly, Noah is sick.'

# Unmarked verb

Teke-Kukuya

- (5) Q: Ndé ka-ká-bvúúr-í we mi-pará ni?  
1.PRO NEG-1SM.PST-return-PST 2SG.PRO 4-money NEG  
'He did not return you the money?'

A: Ndé á-bvúur-i me mi-pará.  
1.PRO 1SM.PST-return-PST 1SG.PRO 4-money  
'He did return me the money'

Also inthetic context:

- (6) What happened?  
Mpúku súruk-i kulá nzó.  
1.rat fall-PST PREP.from.above 9.house  
'A rat fell from the house.'

# Marked verb: *ni-V*

Gusii

- (7) Is the man hitting the ball? (+ QUIS picture)

Ee, **ngoákaare** (omopiira).

ee **ni**-ko-ak-a a-re o-mo-piira.

yes **ni**-15-hit-FV 1SM-be AUG-3-ball

‘Yes, he is hitting the ball.’

- (8) The girl didn’t cook the beans.

Ó-mo-íséké **ni**-á-iyetege chí-nyeende.

AUG-1-girl **ni**-1SM-cook.PFV 10-bean

‘The girl DID cook beans.’

# Marked verb: conjoint/disjoint

Makhuwa

- |   |                          |
|---|--------------------------|
| Q1: Are you grilling the fish?                            | (polarity focus)         |
| Q2: I don't believe you are grilling the fish.            | (verum)                  |
| Q3: What are you doing with the fish? Frying or grilling? | (state-of-affairs focus) |
| Q4: Have you grilled fish already?                        | (TAM focus)              |
| Q5: What are you grilling?                                | (term focus on object)   |

- |      |   |          |
|------|---|----------|
| (9)  | (Ehóp' éela) Kinámwáaneéla (ehópa).             | disjoint |
|      | ehopa ela ki-na-aaneel-a ehopa                  |          |
|      | 9.fish 9.DEM.PROX 1SG.SM-PRS.DJ-grill-FV 9.fish |          |
|      | ‘(This fish) I'm grilling (it).’                |          |
| (10) | Kinaánéélá ehopá.                               | conjoint |
|      | ki-n-aaneel-a ehopa                             |          |
|      | 1SG.SM-PRS.CJ-grill-FV 9.fish                   |          |
|      | ‘I'm grilling a fish.’                          |          |

# Dislocation

Kîîtharaka

(11) Context: You're accused of not bathing the child, which was one of your tasks.

**Kaană**, i tûkathaambiirie.

ka-ana ni tû-ka-thaamb-ir-i-e

12-child FOC 1PL.SM-12OM-wash-PFV-IC-FV

'The child, we did bathe him/her.'

Regular topicalisation:

(12) Can I buy bananas here?

**Ndígû** nwa úgûre.

n-digu nwa û-gur-e

10-banana can 2SG.SM-buy-SBJV

'Bananas you can buy.'

# Predicate doubling

## Topic doubling (Rukiga)

- (13) Context: Mother doubts whether I have eaten.

Yéég' **ó-ku-ry-a**      **n-áá-ry-a.**

yes    AUG-15-eat-FV   1SM-N.PST-eat-FV

'Yes, I have truly eaten.'

## In-situ doubling (Kirundi)

- (14) Have you eaten a snake??

Yeemwe **n-aa-ra-rii-ye**                      **bu-ry-e.**

DP                      1SG.SM-PST-DJ-eat-PFV   14-eat-SBJV

'Sure, I've really eaten (it)!'



# Predicate doubling

Contrastive topic (Kirundi)

- (15) Context: You're going out for dinner and you're asked what you want to eat and what you want to drink.

(U)kurya, ndy' inyama, kunywa nywá ifanta.

**u-ku-ryá** n-rí-a i-nyama **ku-nywa** n-nyo-a i-fanta  
AUG-15-eat 1SG.SM-eat-FV AUG-10.meat 15-drink 1SG.SM-drink-FV AUG-9.fanta  
'For eating, I eat meat, for drinking, I drink fanta.'

Depreciative interpretation (Cicopi)

- (16) Context: You're talking with your friends and someone else is further away; he comes towards you and you change the topic of conversation and he asks why you're laughing at him, but you say no, we're just happy.

Kuseka hasê:ka.

**ku-seka hi-a-sek-a**

15-laugh 1PL.SM-DJ-laugh-FV

'We're merely laughing.'

# Doubling object marking

Rukiga (adapted from Van der Wal and Asiimwe 2020: 52, Allen Asiimwe p.c.)

(17) a. \*Píta y-aa-ka-teek-a a-ka-húúnga e-ri-zóoba.  
1.Peter 1SM-N.PST-120M-cook-FV AUG-12-posho AUG-5-day  
int. 'Peter cooked posho today.'

b. Píta y-aa-ka-teek' é-ri-zóob' a-ka-húúnga.  
1.Peter 1SM-N.PST-120M-cook AUG-5-day AUG-12-posho  
'Peter cooked it today, posho.'

(18) Context 1: # 'What did Peter do today?'

Context 2: # 'What did Peter cook today?'

Context 3: 'I don't believe that Peter cooked posho today!'

Píta y-áá-**ka**-téek-a **a-ka-húúnga** e-ri-zóoba.

1.Peter 1SM-N.PST-120M-cook-FV AUG-12-posho AUG-5-day

int. 'Peter cooked posho today.'

# Doubling object marking

Mirative interpretation (Rukiga)

(19) Context: It was expected that the sorghum would be ground well, which was not the case.

W-áá-**gu**-s-a                      **o-mu-gúsha**    (báasi)!  
2SG.SM-N.PST-3OM-grind-FV AUG-3-sorghum (really)  
'You have ground the sorghum!'  
(What happened? It is not fine-ground!)

(20) Context: The sorghum is so fine-ground.

W-áá-**gu**-s-a                      **o-mu-gúsha**    (buzima)!  
2SG.SM-N.PST-3OM-grind-FV AUG-3-sorghum (really)  
'You have ground the sorghum.'  
(It is fine!)

# Verum clitic

Cinyungwe (Crisófia Langa da Câmara, p.c.)

(21) He didn't arrive.

(Ndikukuuza,) afikadi!

ndi-ku-ku-wuz-a                      a-fik-a=**di**

1SG.SM-PRS-2SG.OM-say-FV 1SM-arrive-FV=VERUM

'I'm telling you, he did arrive!'

(22) Have you eaten?

Nd-a-dy-a(**\*=di**).

1SG.SM-PST-eat-FV=VERUM

'I have eaten.'

# Interim summary

- Verum can be unmarked
- No strategy is unique to verum - they are found elsewhere in the IS system
- Verum is not uniquely expressed by one strategy, intra- or interlinguistically
- Apart from lexical strategies and =di, all are multifunctional
- Overlap with focus marking, but more so with backgrounding

Degrees of underspecification

# Backgrounding and focus

- Güldemann (2016): maximal backgrounding as a focus strategy
- Here we see “non-maximal” backgrounding
- Aside from lexical strategies, there are 6 other strategies for marking truth, varying in degree of underspecification:
  1. unrestricted/fully underspecified
  2. restricted to predicate (backgrounding)
  3. restricted to operator (backgrounding)
  4. restricted to verum/fully specified

1	comment				
2	term	predicate			
3	term	SoA	operator		
4	term	SoA	TAM	polarity	verum

# 1. Full underspecification

Kinyakyusa (database Lusekelo, Msovela, Van der Wal, and Amani Lusekelo p.c.)

- Q1: What happened? / Why is Suzan's mother happy? (thetic)
- Q2: What did Suzan buy her father? (term focus on theme)
- Q3: Who did Suzan buy shoes for? (term focus on recipient)
- Q4: What did Suzan do with the shoes? (state-of-affairs focus)
- Q5: What did Suzan do? (VP focus)
- Q6: Did Suzan (really) buy her father shoes? (truth focus)
- Q7: #Who bought her father shoes? (#term focus on subject)

- (23) A: (Ee) Suzani amuuliire ugwiise ifirato.  
ee Suzani a-m-ul-il-ile u-gwiise i-fi-lato  
yes 1.Suzan 1SM-1OM-buy-APPL-PFV AUG-father AUG-8-shoe  
'(Yes,) Suzan bought her father shoes.'



## 2. Restriction to predicate

### Defocus terms

- dislocation
- doubling object marking
- marked verb form

Q1: Are you grilling the fish?	(polarity focus)
Q2: I don't believe you are grilling the fish.	(verum)
Q3: What are you doing with the fish? Frying or grilling?	(state-of-affairs focus)
Q4: Have you grilled fish already?	(TAM focus)
Q5: #What are you grilling?	(term focus on object)

- (9) (Ehóp' éela) Kinámwáneéla (ehópa).  
ehopa ela ki-na-aaneel-a ehopa  
9.fish 9.DEM.PROX 1SG.SM-PRS.DJ-grill-FV 9.fish  
'(This fish) I'm grilling (it).'

### 3. Restriction to operator

#### **Defocus terms AND predicate**

Focus cannot be on referential value (referent, time/location, event)

Kinyakyusa (database Lusekelo et al., and Amani Lusekelo p.c.)

(24) Do you want to eat sugarcane? (as insistent question, not as innocent question)

U-ku-londa tu-ku-lond-a.

AUG-15-want 1PL.SM-PRS-want-FV

‘We do want it.’

### 3. Restriction to operator

Rukiga (Asiimwe and Van der Wal ms.)

1. Verum: Pool attendant sees me walking away from the pool area showing no sign that I entered the water.
2. Contrast: I was expected to swim and play baseball.
3. Intensity: I went into the pool and swam for a long time with lots of energy.
4. Depreciative: The water was too cold but I went ahead and swam anyway.
5. Mirative: I have always feared to get into the water but hey I can swim!

(25) O-kw-óg-a            kw-é    n-áá-yog-a.  
AUG-15-swim-FV    15-CM    1SG.SM-N.PST-swim-FV  
'I have (really) swum (, but...).'

## 4. No underspecification

Cinyungwe (Crisófia Langa da Câmara, p.c.)

(26) Context: we are travelling far and becoming tired.

A: Ti-m-fik-a                      lini?  
1PL.SM-PRS-arrive-FV when  
'When will we arrive?' (Are we there yet?)

B: Ku-fika,    t-a-fik-a(=di).  
15-arrive 1PL.SM-PST-arrive-FV=VERUM  
'To arrive we arrived.'

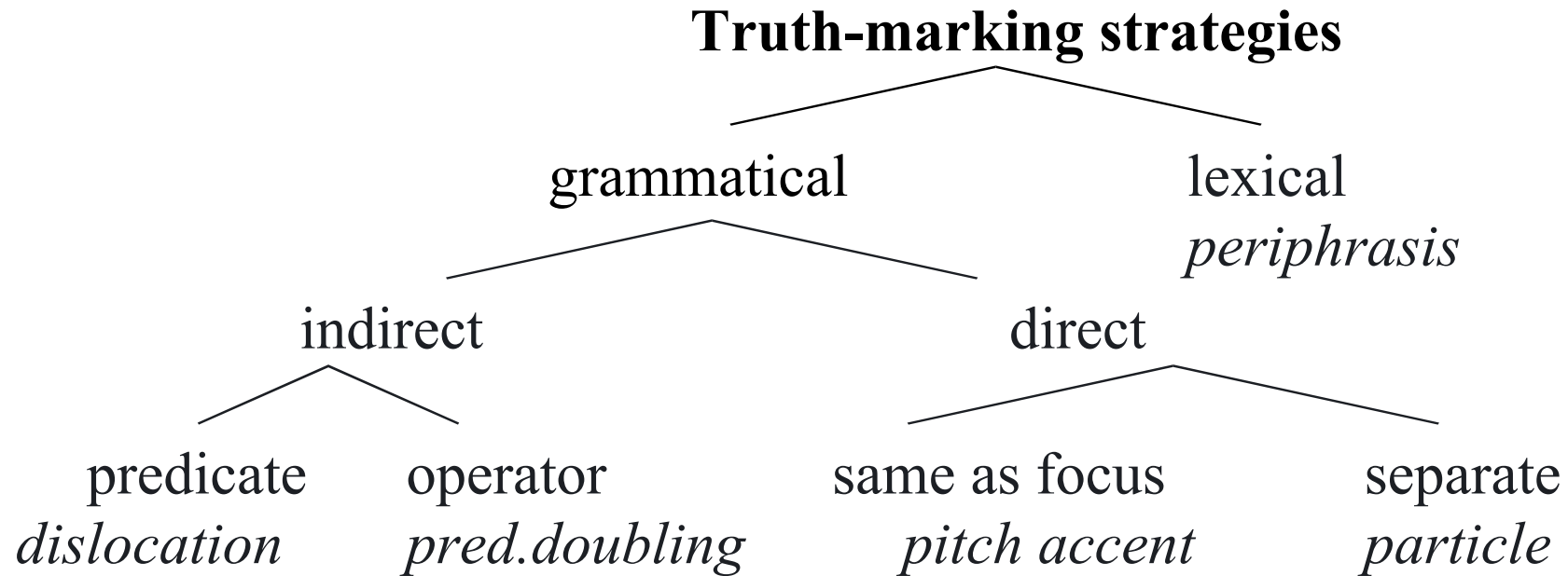
A: Aah, t-a-fik-a=di.  
yes 1PL.SM-PST-arrive- FV=VERUM  
'(I see) we have indeed arrived.'

# Interim summary

1	comment				
2	term	predicate			
3	term	SoA	operator		
4	term	SoA	TAM	polarity	verum

- The Bantu languages in our sample use strategies are underspecified to various degrees with respect to focus, and these strategies may also be used with a verum interpretation in the right context.
- The context by itself can be sufficient to trigger a verum interpretation, and further restrictions (to the predicate, more narrowly to operators, or even more narrowly to verum), are “extra” indications to help the addressee identify the intended interpretation.

# Typology of truth-marking strategies



# Typology of languages wrt verum

## **Gutzmann et al. (2020)'s two-way typology of languages**

Type I. verum marking = focus marking (earlier motivation for FAT)

Type II. verum marking  $\neq$  focus marking (new motivation for LOT)

## **Our updated typology of languages with respect to the expression of verum**

Type I. Verum is marked as focus (German, English),

Type II. Verum is marked directly by a dedicated marker (Gitksan, Bura, Cinyungwe),

Type III. Verum is marked indirectly as one of the possible interpretations of backgrounding strategies (Kîtharaka, Kinyakyusa, etc.)

How does verum relate to focus?



# The truth about verum

- Verum and polarity can be distinguished
  - verum is a separate notion
- But 4 out of 6 grammatical strategies use defocusing
  - verum and focus are not independent
- Verum can only apply when QUD is  $?p$  (conceptual prerequisite)
- Possible when focus is neither on a term nor the lexical value of the predicate
- Generalisation type I (German) and type III (Bantu): both indicate what is NOT focus

the parallel realisation [between focus and verum in English and German, EK&JW] may be due to more general constraints on the prosodic systems of the languages.

Suppose that (i) there must be a nuclear pitch accent in every utterance; (ii) this pitch accent must not be realised on given material (Schwarzschild 1999); and (iii) the core proposition is always given under verum and may therefore not carry accent. **A similar idea, suitably adapted, could extend to non-accent languages, and could account for the parallel realisation of verum and focus in some languages without resorting to accidental homonymy.** Confirmation of this idea, and further cross-linguistic investigation of this important question, will have to await future research.

(Gutzmann et al. 2020:43 [emphasis added])

# The truth about verum

- Our Bantu investigation shows that the main motivation for verum marking is the backgrounding/deaccenting/defocussing of other potential targets of focus, so that *?p* is the main question under discussion
- The use-conditional verum interpretation then builds on the information-structurally restricted set of potential focus targets
- Implementation as operator?  
=di could be direct spell-out; when not visible it depends on preference
- Next to the the FAT and the LOT, should we have the BUT?  
(Backgrounding and Underspecification Thesis)

# Conclusions

RQ1: How is verum expressed in Bantu? Is there a dedicated strategy for marking it?

RQ2: Is verum part of IS or is it a separate notion?

- In our 10+1 Bantu languages
  - there is no one dedicated strategy
  - all languages have more than one strategy
  - almost all strategies are multifunctional => degrees of underspecification
- We extend the typology to a third type of language: indirect marking via backgrounding
- Verum is a separate notion but not independent of focus
  - The emphatic verum reading, whether or not dependent on the presence of a VERUM operator, *is* dependent on having an information-structural context in which nothing other than the polarity value of the verb (i.e., ?p) is the QUD and therefore available to be interpreted as the focus.
  - The overlap in marking between focus and backgrounding in many languages is therefore non-superficial.

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