

Indirect truth marking via backgrounding: Evidence from Bantu

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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 Storrs right now.)

Ik ben WEL in Storrs!

I am POS.POL in Storrs

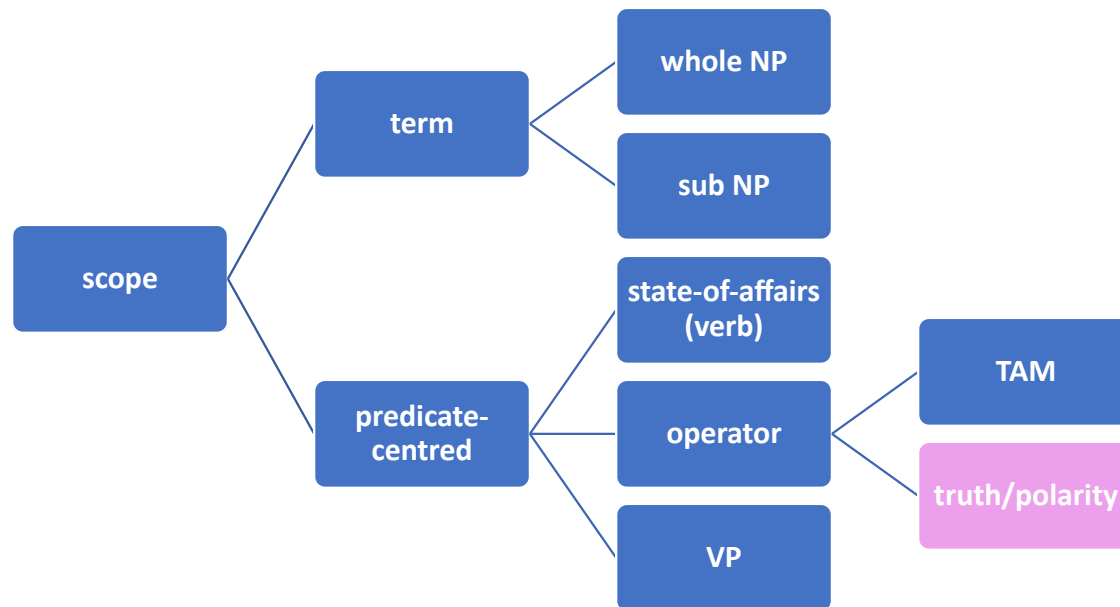
‘I AM in Storrs.’

(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

“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.”

Glossa a journal of
general linguistics

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RESEARCH

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

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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

Verum and focus

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

Type I. verum marking = focus marking (German, English)

Type II. verum marking \neq focus marking (Gitksan, Bura)

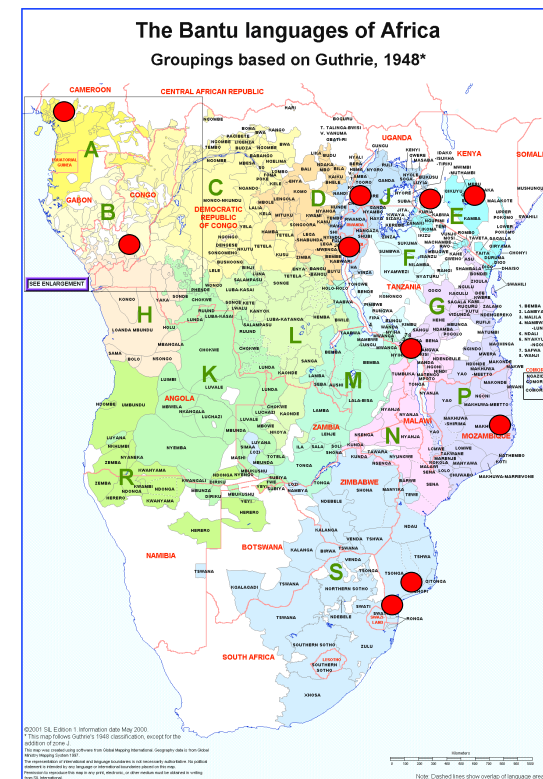
We “have to look at languages that do not use accents as their means to mark focus”
(Gutzmann et al. 2020: 15)

Bantu languages!

⇒ 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



RQ1: How do Bantu languages express truth?

RQ2: What does that tell us about the relation with focus?

1. Strategies for truth expression in Bantu
2. Degrees of underspecification
3. Relation between truth and focus

Strategies for truth in Bantu

Preliminaries

- Which strategies are used in a **verum** context?
 - correction: I don't believe they made pancakes – They HAVE made pancakes!
- Which strategies are used for **polarity** focus?
 - yes/no: Have they made pancakes? – They have/HAVE made pancakes.
- In which other contexts can the strategy be used?

	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-^Hndɔ 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.'

Dislocation

Kîitharaka

- (7) 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:

- (8) Context: Kîmathi feeds the goats grass, sometimes the cows, but not other animals.
However, yesterday...

Wana ing'oi n'áárûmíírie.

wana î-ng'oi ni a-ra-rûm-ir-i-e

even 5-donkey FOC 1SM-YPST-bite-PFV-IC-FV

'Even the donkey he fed.'

Marked verb: conjoint/disjoint

Makhuwa

- (9) I don't believe you're grilling the fish. disjoint
(Ehóp' éela) Ki**ná**mwáaneéla (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).'
- (10) What are you grilling? conjoint
Ki**na**áneélá ehopá.
ki-**n**-aaneel-a ehopa
1SG.SM-**PRS.CJ**-grill-FV 9.fish
'I'm grilling (a) fish.'

Predicate doubling

Topic doubling (Rukiga)

- (11) 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)

- (12) 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)!'

Doubling object marking

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

(13) a. *Píta y-aa-**ka**-teek-a **a-ka-húúnga** e-ri-zóoba.
1.Peter 1SM-N.PST-12OM-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-12OM-cook AUG-5-day AUG-12-posho
'Peter cooked it today, posho.'

(14) 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-áa-**ka**-téek-a **a-ka-húúnga** e-ri-zóoba.
1.Peter 1SM-N.PST-12OM-cook-FV AUG-12-posho AUG-5-day
'Peter did cook posho today.'

Verum clitic

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

(15) He didn't arrive.

[verum]

(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!'

(16) Have you eaten?

[polarity]

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

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

'I have eaten.'

Interim summary

- Truth can be unmarked
- Truth is not uniquely expressed by one strategy, intra- or interlinguistically
- All grammatical strategies (except Cinyungwe =*di*) are found elsewhere in the IS system
- Lexical strategies and =*di* mark verum directly, the other strategies are multifunctional and mark truth **indirectly**
- Overlap with focus marking, but more so with **backgrounding**

Degrees of underspecification

Backgrounding and focus

- Güldemann (2016): **maximal backgrounding** as a focus strategy
- We can identify different degrees of backgrounding - “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? (polarity focus/verum)
Q7: #Who bought her father shoes? (#term focus on subject)

- (17) (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

Focus cannot be on an argument or adjunct

- dislocation
- doubling object marking
- marked verb form

Q1: What are you doing with the fish? Frying or grilling? (state-of-affairs focus)

Q2: Have you grilled fish already? (TAM focus)

Q3: Are you grilling the fish? (polarity focus)

Q4: I don't believe you are grilling the fish. (verum)

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 a referential value (referent, time, location, event)

Rukiga (Asiimwe and Van der Wal ms.)

1. Contrast: I was expected to swim and play baseball.
2. Verum: Pool attendant sees me walking away from the pool area showing no sign that I entered the water.
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!

- (18) 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.)

(19) He didn't arrive. [verum]

(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!'

(20) Have you eaten? [polarity]

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

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

'I have eaten.'

Interim summary

- The Bantu languages in our sample use strategies that 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.

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

How does truth relate to focus?

The truth about verum

- Verum and polarity *can* be distinguished empirically
 - verum is a separate notion
- But 4 out of 6 grammatical strategies in our sample of Bantu languages use *defocusing*
 - verum and focus are not independent

So what's going on?

- Verum can only apply when QUD is *?p* (conceptual prerequisite)
- This is possible when focus is neither on a term nor the lexical value of the predicate
- Bantu shows that the main motivation for verum marking is backgrounding other potential targets of focus, so that *?p* is the main QUD
- The use-conditional verum interpretation then builds on the information-structurally restricted set of potential focus targets

Typology of languages wrt verum

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

Type I. verum marking = focus marking > Focus Accent Thesis (FAT)

Type II. verum marking \neq focus marking > Lexical Operator Thesis (LOT)

LOT: 'Speaker wants to prevent that the QUD is updated with not-p.' (Gutzmann et al. 2020:9)

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 (Kîîtharaka, Kinyakyusa, etc.)

→ We propose the **Backgrounding and Underspecification Thesis (BUT)**

Conclusions

- 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 (to varying degrees)
- Verum is a separate notion but is 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 (*contra* Gutzmann et al. 2020).



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Nibongile / I bwega / Kooshukhuru / Urakoze / Yeebare /
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