

Different Perspectives on Focus in Hausa

Katharina Hartmann & Malte Zimmermann

Humboldt University

k.hartmann@rz.hu-berlin.de,
malte.zimmermann@staff.hu-berlin.de

This paper deals with the analysis of focus-related phenomena in Hausa, a Western Chadic tone language. We show that the consideration of different kinds of linguistic evidence can lead the researcher to different interpretations of the observable facts. This highlights the need for the linguist to reflect on the chosen methodological tools, and to consider as many kinds of linguistic evidence as possible before drawing any conclusions.

The paper specifically looks at three phenomena in Hausa: (i.) the syntactic realisation of focus constituents as *ex situ* or *in situ*; (ii.) the relation between different syntactic realisations of focus constituents and their corresponding interpretations; (iii.) the presence or absence of prosodic marking of *in situ* focus.

(i.) *The Syntactic Realisation of Focus Constituents*: In Hausa textbooks and standard grammars (e.g. Newman 2000), it is commonly assumed that focused constituents must be realised *ex situ* by fronting them to a left-peripheral position. (1) illustrates for new-information focus in Q/A-pairs:

- (1) Q: *Mèe Audù ya sàyaa?*
what Audu 3sg.perf buy
'What did Audu buy?'
- A: *Littaafi (nee) Audù ya sàyaa.*
book PRT Audu 3sg.perf buy
'Audu bought a BOOK.'

In contrast to these claims in the literature, the results of direct elicitation, for instance by asking whether a given A is a felicitous answer to a particular Q, show that many speakers also accept *in situ* realisations of focus constituents, as shown in (2) (Jaggar 2001):

- (2) Q: *Mèe su-kà kaamàa?*
what 3pl-perf catch
'What did they catch?'
- A: *Sun kaamà dawaakii.*
3pl.perf catch horses
'They caught HORSES.'

This result, which is still based on single speakers' intuitions, is confirmed by a *quantitative corpus study* conducted in Hartmann & Zimmermann (to appear). Even more, the quantitative study clearly shows that the in situ strategy is not only frequently attested (about 1/3 of all foci are in situ foci), but that it is also by far the preferred option for new-information focus in Q/A-pairs (about 4/5 of all new-information foci are in situ foci). This goes to show that new kinds of linguistic evidence can serve to relativize hitherto largely undisputed claims concerning focus in Hausa.

(ii.) *Syntactic Realisation and Interpretation of Focus*: A cursory glance at the same Hausa corpus ('Hausar Baka' – a collection of everyday dialogues as spoken in Northern Nigeria) furthermore suggests a contradiction to another claim that is frequently found in the literature. Kiss (1998) and Vallduví & Vilkuna (1998) claim that a specific focus position (ex situ) corresponds to an exhaustive or kontrastive interpretation, while in situ foci represent new information. In contrast, it appears that ex situ foci in Hausa do not necessarily come with a specific interpretation (see also Green & Jaggard 2003). Instead, they occur with all different focus types, such as new information focus, contrastive, corrective, and selective focus. The same holds for instances of in situ focus (Hartmann & Zimmermann, to appear). A more careful *quantitative analysis* of the same corpus, however, reveals that in situ focus is indeed the predominant strategy for expressing new information (see above), while the ex situ strategy is predominantly used for encoding pragmatically or semantically more marked foci (more than 9/10 of all contrastive or corrective foci are ex situ foci).

In this case, then, the *quantitative corpus study* actually confirms a claim from the literature - albeit as a robust tendency rather than a categorical distinction. At the same time, the results of the quantitative study differ from the results gained by direct elicitation as well as from the results gained by a simple search for tokens of a particular kind in a corpus.

(iii.) *Prosodic Marking of In Situ Focus*: While the grammatical marking of ex situ focus has received quite a lot of attention in the literature, the same cannot be said for in situ focus. It is marked neither syntactically nor morphologically. Concerning its prosodic properties, we conducted a *phonetic experiment* in form of a reading test, the design of which was adopted from standard experiments on focus prosody in German (e.g. Uhmann 1991). Several native speakers read short discourse sequences, consisting mostly of question-answer pairs, where the focus constituent in the answer was pragmatically controlled for by the preceding question. A careful *phonetic analysis* of the recordings shows that prosodic marking is absent with in situ focus. In particular, there is no evidence for local High-tone raising on the focused constituent, as illustrated in (3) (where '↑H' indicates local High-tone raising):

- (3) Q: Mèè Háliimà ta yankàa?
 what Halima 3sg.perf cut
 'What did Halima cut?'

*↑H

A: *Hàliimà* *taa* *yankà* *naamàa*.
 Halima 3sg.perf cut meat
 ‘Halima cut MEAT.’

This result appears to be in conflict with existing claims in the literature, which assume local High-tone raising with in situ focus (Inkelas & Leben 1990; Green & Jaggard 2003). Unlike with corpus studies, which are robust in the sense that they document actual instantiations of natural language, phonetic experiments such as readings tests run the risk of being flawed in their experimental set-up, and therefore leading to wrong or irrelevant results. In the particular case at hand, the speakers may have felt inhibited by the recording situation. In order to find out whether in situ focus in Hausa is prosodically marked or not, we will apply the method of *guided elicitation*, for instance in form of a map task, in which speakers converse in natural dialogue on a controlled range of topics.

The foregoing observations show (i.) that the correct choice of the evidence used strongly depends on the phenomenon to be investigated; (ii.) that researchers need to be aware of what kind of evidence they use in formulating their linguistic hypotheses; and (iii.) that it is unavoidable to consult different kinds of evidence in order to come up with the right generalization.

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