

Evaluating the Immediate Postverbal Position as a Focus Position in Zulu

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For a number of Bantu languages, it has been claimed that the position immediately following the verb is a focus position. Consider the following evidence from Zulu (S42, South Africa):

- (1) U-theng-e ingubo entsha izolo.
2S-buy-PERF 9.dress 9.new yesterday
“You bought a new dress yesterday.” (out-of-the-blue context)
- (2) a. * U-theng-e ingubo entsha **nini**?]_{VP}
2S-buy-PERF 9.dress 9.new when
b. U-yi-theng-e **nini**]_{VP} ingubo entsha?
2S-9-buy-PERF when 9.dress 9.new
“When did you buy a new dress?”
c. Ngi-yi-theng-e izolo.]_{VP}
1S-9-buy-PERF yesterday
“I bought it/one yesterday.” (response to (2a))

In (1) we see that the declarative order is S V O Adv. However, it is not possible to question the temporal adverb in this order, as in (2a). Instead, the intervening indirect object must be extraposed, with concomitant obligatory object marking on the verb (here *yi-*), so that the questioned constituent can immediately follow the verb, as in (2b).

A growing body of literature on Bantu languages has been investigating the nature of this immediate postverbal position, which has come to be called by the abbreviation “IAV” (“Immediate After the Verb”, Watters (1979)). Facts like those in (1) and (2) have led some to conclude that the IAV linear position in these Bantu languages corresponds to the specifier of a sub-IP focus projection (henceforth “low FocP”), similar to that first proposed for Italian by Belletti (2002). The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the relation between focus and the immediate postverbal position in Zulu and to consider two syntactic accounts for IAV focus effects: the low FocP account and the focus in situ account. It will be found that the data is best explained by an analysis in which the focalised element receives its focus interpretation in situ, rather than by moving to a focus position.

1. IAV as a focus position in Zulu

In this section we explore different focal contexts and see whether or not the focal element must occur in the IAV position. Different types of focal contexts were tested with four native speakers. These contexts included, on the one hand, different contexts for what we will call “narrow focus”, such as in situ *Wh* questions and their answers, contrasts, and reason questions with focus, and, on the other hand, presentational focus. A wide variety of types of focused arguments and adjuncts were tested.

Like many Bantu languages, Zulu has a morphological distinction between conjoint and disjoint verb forms in a few tenses (Buell 2005, 2006, van der Spuy 1993). It is only after a conjoint verb form

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that the focus interpretation is available.² Furthermore, conjoint verb contexts are the only ones for which a postverbal focus position is claimed in other Bantu languages. Accordingly, we will only consider environments where the verb would require a conjoint verb form in a tense having the alternation.

1.1. *Narrow focus*

Intervenors. The notion of “immediately postverbal” is violated when something intervenes between the verb and the focalised element. Therefore, evaluation of the IAV-focus connection requires evaluating if and when an intervening element is tolerated. We will first consider in situ *Wh* questions. It was already shown in example (2) that a temporal adjunct cannot be questioned when an object intervenes. Similarly, (3) shows that a neutral question cannot be formed by questioning the direct object in this order, with an intervening indirect object, even though S V IO DO would be the word order in a statement:³

- (3) a. Ba-zi-fundis-e-**ni**]_{VP} izingane?
2-10-teach-PERF-what 10.children
b. # Ba-fundis-e izingane **ini**?]_{VP} (grammatical as echo question)
2-teach-PERF 10.children what
“What did they teach the children?”

Intervenors are generally judged ungrammatical as in (2a) or are deemed grammatical only as echo questions as in (3), but judgements are not entirely uniform. In some cases, as in (4), an intervening indirect object was consistently deemed grammatical, while in some other cases tested the intervenor resulted in only slightly degraded grammaticality:

- (4) Ba-nik-e uSipho **mali-ni**?
2-give-PERF 1.Sipho 9.money-what
“How much money did they give Sipho?”

No clear patterns could be found for cases where an intervenor preceding the questions constituent was deemed grammatical. The next context tested was questions and statements containing an explicit contrast, using formulas such as “A, not B”, “A or B”, and “A instead of B”. As with *Wh* phrases, evidence was found indicating that an element focused in this way has to follow the verb immediately:

- (5) * Ngi-phuz-is-e izivakashi **ikhofi**, hhayi itiye.
1S-drink-CAUS-PERF 8.guests 5.coffee, not 5.tea
“I served the guests coffee, not tea.”

But grammatical instances of an intervenor before the focal element were also found:

- (6) Umninisitolo u-nik-e isisebenzi **imali**, hhayi impahla.
1.shopowner 1-give-PERF 7.worker 9.money not 9.goods
“The shopkeeper gave the worker money, not goods.”

The final context tested was reason questions with a narrow focus, which take the form of a cleft-like question. The preference to have the focused element in the immediately postverbal position is robust in this context:

² Except for postverbal *ngani* “why” in negative reason questions (Buell 2007b).

³ To save space, the grammatical counterparts of forms such as (2b) have been omitted. The grammatical form is generally constructed by extraposing the unfocused material, with concomitant object marking when possible, as in (2b).

- (7) a. Yi-n' indaba ku-hlal-a **uSipho** khona?
COP-what 9.story 17-stay-FV 1.Sipho there
b. * Yi-n' indaba ku-hlal-a khona **uSipho**?
COP-what 9.story 17-stay-FV there 1.Sipho
“Why does SIPHO live there?”

In the cases considered so far, the focused element has been a noun phrase or a non-locative adjunct. Interestingly, the placement of a focused locative phrase is much freer. The sentences in (8) and (9) show the direct object and the locative argument can appear in either order, both in a statement and when the locative is questioned.⁴

- (8) a. Ngi-leth-e izimpahla zami lapho.
1S-bring-PERF 10.stuff 10.my there
b. Ngi-leth-e lapho izimpahla zami.
1S-bring-PERF there 10.stuff 10.my
“I put my stuff there.”
- (9) a. U-leth-e izimpahla zami ku-liphi ikamelo?]_{VP}
2S-bring-PERF 10.stuff 10.my to-5.which 5.room
b. U-leth-e ku-liphi ikamelo izimpahla zami?]_{VP}
2S-bring-PERF to-5.which 5.room 10.stuff 10.my
“Which room did you take my stuff to?”

In some pairs tested, the version with the intervening direct object was actually deemed the better of the two.

Thus, for three narrow focus contexts tested, there is a strong preference, just short of being a requirement, for the focused noun phrase to immediately follow the verb. In contrast, focused lexical locative arguments can follow non-focal intervenors. In addition to this strong dislike of material intervening between the verb and the focused element, we will now consider two other properties of narrow focus: the no-crossing property and the dispreference for VP-internal postfocal material.

No crossing. A narrowly focused phrase cannot be moved to the left of an intervening argument to immediately follow the verb within the verb phrase. Doing so generally results in strong judgements of ungrammaticality:

- (10) * U-phek-el-a [**kudla kuni**]_i ubaba t_i?]_{VP}
2S-cook-APPL-FV 15.food 15.what.kind 1.father
“What kind of food are you cooking Father?”
- (11) * Ba-bhak-a **kanjani**_i isinkwa t_i?]_{VP}
2-bake-FV how 7.bread
“How do they bake bread?”

In (10) the direct object was moved over the applicative object, and in (11) the manner adjunct was moved over the direct object. This movement resulted in a strong ungrammatical judgement in both cases. As explained earlier, the postfocal phrase in both examples is inside the verb phrase, because extraposition would require an object marker on the verb. The ungrammaticality of (10) and (11) is due

⁴ The order in (8a) would be considered the unmarked order for a statement. The fact that the V DO Loc order is more basic is also reflected in the fact that a question analogous to (9b) cannot be formed by replacing the phrase *kuliphi ikamelo* “which room” with the postverbal clitic *-phi* “where”:

- (i) * U-leth-e-**phi** izimpahla zami?]_{VP}
2S-bring-PERF 10.stuff 10.my
“Where did you take my stuff?”

solely to the fact that the *Wh* phrase has moved over the intervening object, and not because these particular *Wh* phrases cannot generally occur postverbally. Both questions can be made grammatical with the same word order by doubling the object with an object marker, whereby the object is extraposed and sits outside of VP.

Postfocal elements. The presence of elements following the focused phrase within the verb phrase tends to degrade grammaticality considerably, even though these elements do not intervene between the verb and the focal element:

- (12) * U-zo-theng-el-a-ni amaqanda?]_{VP}
 2S-FUT-buy-APPL-FV-what 6.eggs
 “Why will you buy eggs?”

Referentiality also plays a role in whether material trailing after the focal element is tolerated. Note the contrast between (13a), in which the trailing direct object can be interpreted as indefinite, and (13b), where it has been made highly referential with a demonstrative:

- (13) a. U-zo-thwal-is-a bani itafula?]_{VP}
 2S-FUT-carry-CAUS-FV 1.who 5.table
 “Who will you help carry a table?”
 b. * U-zo-thwal-is-a bani leli tafula?]_{VP}
 2S-FUT-carry-CAUS-FV 1.who 5.that 5.table
 “Who will you help carry that table?”

But again, judgements are not entirely uniform. This becomes apparent even by comparing (12) and (13a). The direct object in both sentences is an indefinite, but (13a) was judged grammatical, while (12) was judged ungrammatical.

We now turn our attention briefly to presentational focus.

1.2. Presentational focus

What could be argued to be “presentational focus” does not behave like the narrow focus just considered. Light adverbials preferably intervene between the verb and the presentationally focused element. Note how the prepositional phrase *kuwe* “from you” precedes the putatively focused element in (14):

- (14) ... ku-yaku-vel-a ku-we umbusi.
 17-FUT-originate-FV from-you 1.ruler
 “... out of thee shall come a Governor.” (Matthew 2:6, Bible Society of South Africa 1959)

This contrasts sharply with narrow focus example in (7), where the locative pronoun *khona* has to follow the focused element. Presentationally focused logical subjects, then, behave like logical subjects in other non-focal expletive subject constructions, such as the locative relative in (15), in which the locative pronoun *khona* “there” preferably precedes the logical subject:

- (15) indawo lapho ku-hlal-a khona uSipho
 9.place where 17-stay-fv there 1.Sipho
 “the place where Sipho lives”

The clauses in (7), (14), and (15) are all expletive subject constructions (Buell 2007a). The verb exhibits expletive class 17 subject agreement, while the logical subject remains in a sub-inflectional (possibly vP-internal) position. Narrow and presentational focus thus share the ability of being expressed in an expletive subject construction. However, given the discrepancy between them with regards to locative intervenors, it should not be assumed that the postverbal logical subject necessarily

occupies the same position in both constructions. This being the case, we will assume that a presentationally focused element is not a candidate to occupy the specifier of the putative low FocP, and we will henceforth limit our discussion to narrow focus.

2. Analysis

Narrow focus constructions were found to show a clear preference for the focused element to appear in the immediate postverbal position. The IAV position for the focused element is not an absolute requirement, though. When the focused element was a DP we saw some degree of variability in judgements, while when the focused element was a (non-clitic) locative phrase, an intervenor is readily tolerated. An element may not cross over an intervenor to reach the IAV position, and there is a dislike for any postfocal material within the verb phrase. We will now consider these facts in light of two types of proposals for postverbal focus in Bantu languages.

Low focus structural positions for various Bantu languages are argued for in Sabel and Zeller (2006), Aboh (2007), Ndayiragije (1999), and van der Wal (2006). Typically, a FocP projection is assumed to be available between the inflectional domain and the verb phrase and a constituent is assumed to receive its focal interpretation by moving to the specifier of this position. Hyman and Polinsky (henceforth H&P) (2006) argue at length against a low FocP as an analysis for Aghem's well-known IAV focus effects. Four of their arguments can be transferred directly into Zulu. First, there is no clear evidence for V-to-T movement (Buell 2005), while such movement would be necessary for the verb to precede an element in the specifier of FocP above the verb phrase. In Zulu, this argument depends on morphosyntactic assumptions concerning the verb's final suffix, which is dependent on tense, aspect, mood, and polarity. Second, the element in the immediate postverbal position is not always in focus, as shown by the fact that sentences with and without narrow focus can have the same word order (Buell 2005, 2006):

- (16) Ngi-cul-a ingoma.
 1S-sing-FV 9.song
 "I'm singing a song." OR "I'm singing a SONG."

Third, the focus interpretation depends on the category of the constituent in that position. Relevant categories in Zulu are a class of adverbs and resumptive pronouns. Example (17) show that *kahle* "well" can (and in fact usually must) appear in the IAV position and fail to receive a focus interpretation:

- (17) A-ngi-dans-i kahle, kodwa ngi-cul-a kahle.
 NEG-1S-dance-FV well but 1S-sing-FV well
 "I don't dance well, but I sing well."

These two facts can be collapsed into the generalisation that appearing in the immediate postverbal position does not guarantee a focused interpretation. This generalisation is more properly an argument against a claim that the postverbal element *always* occupies the specifier of a putative FocP rather than against the *availability* of this projection (Buell 2005, 2006). And finally, the fourth argument which can be taken from H&P (2006) is the availability of multiple *Wh* questions in which multiple questioned elements appear in postverbal positions:

- (18) U-zo-nik-a **bani ini?**]_{VP}
 2S-FUT-give-FV 1.who 9.what
 "Who will you give what?"

This constitutes a substantial argument against a low FocP projection. If there is only one low FocP and a questioned element is required to occupy its specifier, the possibility of having a second *Wh* phrase in the verb phrase remains unexplained.

In addition to these four arguments from H&P (2006) against a low FocP, let's consider the no-crossing problem: a focused element cannot move across an overt non-focal element to reach the IAV position: $*[V [YP_{Foc}]_i XP t_i]_{VP}$. This fact is difficult to account for in the low FocP analysis. It is not clear what linguistic principle could rule out this crossing, especially since, in a cleft construction, the same focal element YP needs to move across the same intervening XP to reach its left-peripheral surface position. That the problem is not one of an adjacency requirement for the verb and XP (typically an object), can be seen in the locative example in (9a), in which the locative phrase intervenes between the verb and the direct object. The low FocP analysis thus faces at least two substantial problems in Zulu. And furthermore, it does not explain why postfocal material in the VP should ever result in ungrammaticality, as in (12).

In light of these problems, let us consider a different proposal. H&P (2007) and Cheng and Downing (2006) (henceforth Ch&D) have argued that elements can receive their focal interpretation within the verb phrase in Aghem and Zulu, respectively. One clear advantage of this proposal, is that the no-crossing property no longer poses a problem: if no FocP exists, then it's hardly surprising that the focused element can't move to its specifier.

H&P (2007) propose that a focus operator in CP (or ForceP) unselectively binds the lowest XP in the clause, resulting in a focused interpretation for that XP. This alone doesn't seem to be enough for Zulu, because it doesn't explain why intervenors should be bad between the verb and the focused element ("prefocal material") as in (2b) above. Thus, the focus operator analysis alone explains only certain cases in Zulu (assuming focus projection (Selkirk 1984) for the last case):

(19) $[VP V], [VP V XP_{Foc}], [VP V XP]_{Foc}$

It cannot explain cases like (8b), (13a), and (20), where material follows the focused element within the verb phrase:

(20) U-zo-nik-a **uSipho noma uThandi** imali?]_{VP}
 2S-FUT-give-FV 1.Sipho or 1.Thandi 9.money
 "Will you give money to Sipho or Thandi?"

Ch&D address the issue directly concerning pre- and postfocal elements within the verb phrase by assuming that elements that are "given" (old information) must be extraposed in Zulu, independent of focus considerations. This appears to be on the right track, considering the referentiality-related contrast above in (13). Requiring given elements to be extraposed accounts for all the cases in (21), if it is assumed that in a constituent question all elements are given except for the questioned element:

(21) $[VP V], [VP V XP_{Foc}], [VP V XP]_{Foc}, * [VP V XP_{Foc} YP], *[VP V XP YP_{Foc}], *[VP V_{Foc} XP YP]$

But is generalised extraposition of given elements enough? If it were, we would expect intervening *khona* to be equally bad in the narrow focus case in (7a) and the unfocused case in (15). *Khona* would seem to be equally "given" in both cases, yet only in (7), where narrow focus is involved, is *khona* not allowed to intervene between the verb and the postverbal argument. This suggests that an explicit connection needs to be made between extraposition and focus.

Building upon Ch&D, I propose that this connection be made explicit with a constraint such as this one:

(22) **Focus-Induced Extraposition.** When a focused element appears in the verb phrase, no other elements appear in the verb phrase.

Elements that can possibly be interpreted as given will be extraposed as a way of maximally satisfying this constraint. Implementing the constraint as a sort of violable output filter would allow for the variability observed and also allow it to interact with other violable considerations, such as semantically-based restrictions on extraposition and topicalisation, and inviolable ones, such as the fact

that certain elements, such as the verb, necessarily remain in the verb phrase for syntactic reasons (if that is indeed its position).

A problem remains with the focused locative arguments as in (8), which tolerate a non-focal intervening object. None of the analyses discussed here, including the extraposition constraint, offer an explanation for this anomaly. Assuming that focus-induced extraposition is the correct approach, the solution would seem to be to nuance the constraint to make it refer to both grammatical category and argumenthood, but the precise formulation must be left to further research.

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