

# The Syntax of Verb Focus in Kabiye

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## 1. Introduction

In the Kewé dialect<sup>1</sup> of Kabiye (a Gur language spoken in Togo), a copy of the verb (in the infinitive) may be placed at the end of the verb phrase following the particle glossed *kí*. This construction has two main uses: a verb focus use, serving to create an interpretation of contrastive focus (1), and a temporal use (2).<sup>2</sup> We will often use either ‘just’, ‘only’ or capital letters (indicating focus intonation) in the English translations to convey the intended interpretation, or explicitly give a contrasting verb in a continuation (as in “I don’t speak it” in (1) below).

- (1) ma-ní-*u*                      kabiye kí    ní-*u*                      ma-a    yood-*u*                      kú  
1SG-understand-IMPF    Kabiye KI    understand-INF 1SG-NEG speak-IMPF    it  
‘I only understand Kabiye. I don’t speak it.’<sup>3</sup>
- (2) mɪŋ-kəm-á                      kú    kəm                      yɔ  
1SG-arrive-PERF    KI<sup>4</sup>    arrive-INF    PRT  
‘I have just arrived.’

In (2), if *yɔ* is deleted, there is no longer a temporal interpretation. Rather, the sentence would mean something like ‘I have just come to say hello (there is no other reason for my visit)’.

These examples often appear in natural speech, as the following examples from Essizewa (2007) show. Example (3) is from an interview with a 50-year old man in Pude, responding to a question about how much Ewe he spoke:

- (3) ma-ní-*u*                      ahoná kí    ní-*u*,                      ma-a    yood-*u*                      kú    siɪŋ ...  
1SG-understand-INF    Ewe    FOC understand-INF    I-NEG speak    it    well  
‘I only understand Ewe, I do not speak it well ...’

In the next example, a child was overheard yelling. When asked what was going on, a witness to the event replied:

- (4) ɛ-gɔɔ    ɛ-ɛ-makí-*ɪ*                      kí    mab-*u*,    ɛ-léyú    nɛ-*ɪ*                      kí    léyú-*ú*  
his-sister    3SG-NEG-beat-him    FOC beat-INF, she-play    with-him    FOC play-INF  
‘His sister is not BEATING him, she’s just playing with him.’

In this paper we will investigate the contrastive focus interpretation. Our basic proposal is that verb focus involves copying the verb and moving it into the specifier of a clause internal focus projection (FOCP) immediately dominating the verb phrase (VP).

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<sup>1</sup> The Kewé dialect of Kabiye is spoken in and around Piya. The feature of verb focus is understood by speakers of all dialects. All the data in this paper is from Komlan Essizewa and Kossivi Awui, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>2</sup> We are not assuming that there are two functions for *kí*. Rather, *kí* plays a role in verb copying, which can be used with a contrastive or temporal interpretation. How these different interpretations are derived is beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>3</sup> The abbreviations in this paper are as follows: IMPF imperfective, PRF perfective, INF infinitive, PRT particle, FOC focus, SG singular, PL plural, NEG negative, Q question, REL relative.

<sup>4</sup> *kí* becomes *kú* under vowel harmony (see Lébikaza 1999: 68).

## 2. Basic syntax

Kabiye is an SVO language, where the auxiliary comes between the subject and the verb, as in [S Aux V O]. The language has two tones, a high tone (marked by an acute accent), and a low tone (unmarked). The following example illustrates a sentence without focus:

- (5)      ma-ní-*u*                      kabiye  
           1SG-understand-IMPF      Kabiye  
           ‘I understand Kabiye.’

As Lébikaza (1999: 303) notes, the infinitive in Kabiye is formed with the suffix [-*u*] which has a high-low tone. Some examples from Lébikaza are given in (6). As shown in (6c), under some conditions the infinitival suffix is not realized phonetically.

- (6)      a. se                      séu                      ‘to run’  
           b. lub                      lúbu                      ‘to forge’  
           c. d̥ɔm                      d̥ɔm                      ‘to walk’  
           d. sidi                      sidúu                      ‘to mix’  
           e. pilimi                      pilimúu                      ‘to roll’

In the rest of this section, we present the basic syntax of the verb focus construction. As (7) shows, the verb copy in verb focus is formed with the infinitive suffix [-*u*].<sup>5</sup>

- (7)      εsó      yá-kɪ                      kékési      kí      yáb-*u*  
           Esso      buy-IMPF<sup>6</sup>      bean cakes      KI      buy-INF  
           ‘Esso is just buying bean cakes.’

The verb following KI must be a copy of the main clause verb. This fact is illustrated in (8) through (10). The examples in (9) and (10) show that even a verb that is a close synonym of the main verb cannot be used as the verb copy in the focus construction:

- (8)      a. εsó                      yóɔd-*u*                      kí      yɔɔd-*ú*  
           Esso                      speak-IMPF                      KI      speak-INF  
           ‘Esso is just speaking.’  
           b. \*εsó                      yóɔd-*u*                      kí      kál-*u*  
           Esso                      speak-IMPF                      KI      yell-INF  
           c. \*εsó                      yóɔd-*u*                      kí      hóŋ-*u*  
           Esso                      speak-IMPF                      KI      laugh-INF
- (9)      a. cíca                      mab-á                      εsó      kí      máb-*u*      (\*kí      lú-*u*)  
           teacher                      hit-PERF      Esso      KI      hit-INF      KI      hit-INF  
           ‘The teacher only hit Esso.’  
           b. cíca                      lú                      εsó      kí      lú-*u*      (\*kí      máb-*u*)  
           teacher                      hit.PERF      Esso      KI      hit-INF      KI      hit-INF  
           ‘The teacher only hit Esso.’

<sup>5</sup> The tone of the verb copy is sometimes different from the tone of the infinitive, but the discussion of tone is beyond the scope of this paper. The [b] that appears with *yabu* ‘to buy’ in (7) is an underlying segment of the word that is deleted in various contexts (see Lébikaza 1999).

<sup>6</sup> *Kɪ* is an allomorph of the imperfective used when the verb has the form CVb (see Lébikaza 1999: 330).

- (10) a. εσό cét-υ kί cét-υ (\*kί fέb-υ)  
 Ezzo lie-IMPF KI lie-INF KI lie-INF  
 ‘He is just telling a lie.’
- b. εσό fε-kι kί fέb-υ (\*kί cét-υ)  
 Ezzo lie-IMPF KI lie-INF KI lie-INF  
 ‘He is just telling a lie.’

On the basis of these examples, we postulate that verb focus involves a copy operation, copying the main verb. The copy of the main verb moves to Spec FOC, as discussed in section 3. We assume that the reason the copy is put into the infinitive is because it is impossible (outside of the imperative) to have a bare verb in Kabiye (see Hiraiwa 2005 for a specific analysis of how copying works in predicate cleft sentences).

In other dialects of Kabiye (Lamatəm), verb focus can be expressed without a verb copy, by placing the focus particle *kené* following the verb phrase (see Lébikaza 1999: 508):

- (11) piya lééyi-ϣ kené  
 Children play-IMPF FOC  
 ‘The children are only playing.’

### 3. Subject focus and object focus

In this section, we will discuss object focus and subject focus, and show how they are different from verb focus. In object focus, the focused object may appear after the verb, as shown in (12a); or in the clause initial position, as shown in (12b). When the focused object is in clause initial position, it cannot be followed by *na*.

- (12) a. ma- ní-υ kabiye (deké) na  
 1SG-understand-IMPF Kabiye only FOC  
 ‘I understand (only) Kabiye.’
- b. kabiye-ε (\*na) má- ní-υ  
 Kabiye-FOC FOC 1SG-understand-IMPF  
 ‘I understand Kabiye.’  
 (reply to: ‘What language do you understand?’)
- c. kabiye deké (\*na) má-ní-υ  
 Kabiye only FOC 1SG-understand-IMPF  
 ‘Only Kabiye, I understand.’
- (13) a. mɔ-ɲɔ sulum  
 1SG-drink beverage (alcoholic)  
 ‘I am drinking (an alcoholic beverage).’
- b. sulum-m mɔ-ɲɔ  
 beverage (alcoholic)-FOC 1SG-drink  
 ‘I am drinking (an alcoholic beverage).’  
 (reply to: ‘What are you drinking?’)

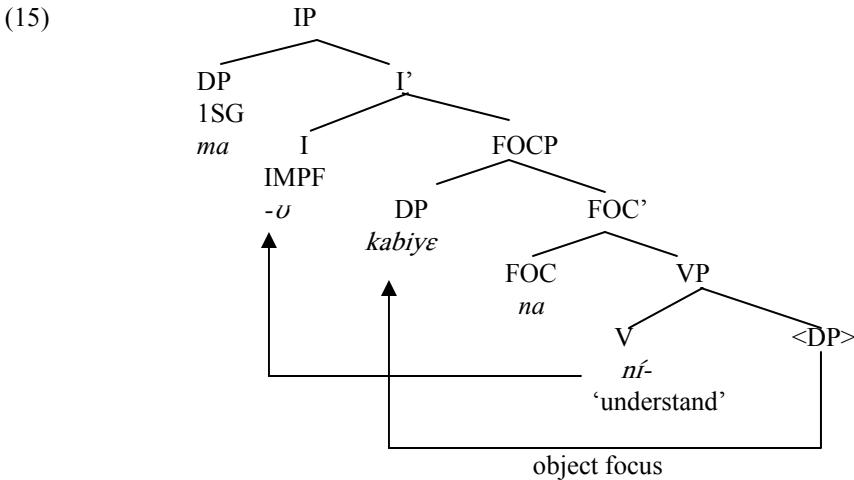
We propose that the final lengthening found in focus in (12b) and (13b) is due to the presence of a focus head following the initial constituent. The only word final consonants in Kabiye are nasal, and these are lengthened in focus contexts as well. In some Kabiye dialects, this lengthening alternates

with the morpheme *kε* (Lébékaza 1999: 505)<sup>7</sup>, which we take to be the head of a focus phrase (FOCP).<sup>8</sup> Therefore, the example in (12b) would have the following structure, where FOC is responsible for the lengthening of the final vowel of the DP in Spec FOCP.

(14) [<sub>FoCP</sub> [<sub>DP</sub> *kabiye*] [<sub>FoC'</sub> FOC IP ]]

The focus marker *na* is excluded from (12b) because the focus head is already realized as lengthening. In other words, *Kabiye* has two realizations of the focus head: lengthening (or *kε* for some dialects) clause initially, and *na* otherwise.

The FOCP that is headed by *na* must be low enough in the structure that it follows the main verb (see Belletti 2004, Jayaseelen 2001, and Kayne 1998 for low focus positions). We propose that the clause internal FOCP immediately dominates VP. Therefore, a partial structure of (12a) is given below:



In this structure, the DP *kabiye* is in the Spec of FOCP headed by *na*. We assume that the verb comes to occupy a position to the left of the focused phrase by verb movement to I (also called INFL), which is higher than the clause internal FOCP.

In subject focus, illustrated below, the verb is followed by the particle *na*:

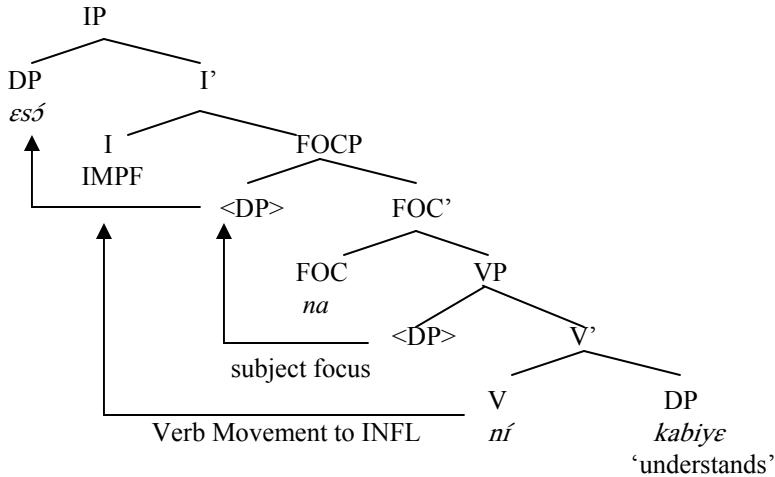
- (16) a. εsó    ní-υ                    na    kabiye  
 Eso    understand-IMPF    FOC    Kabiye  
 'Eso understands Kabiye.' (reply to 'Who understands Kabiye?')
- b. εsó    ɖéké    ní-υ                    na    kabiye  
 Eso    only    understand-IMPF    FOC    Kabiye  
 'Only Eso understands Kabiye.'

We propose that the subject rises from Spec VP (the predicate internal subject) to Spec FOCP (headed by *na*) and from there moves onto Spec IP. This gives rise to a stranded FOC head following the verb. The verb moves to I (INFL) placing it to the left of the focus head. The resulting structure is shown below:

<sup>7</sup> Note the similarity between *kε* (immediately following the clause initial focused constituent) and *kené* (as a clause final verbal focus particle, see (11)). We leave this for further research.

<sup>8</sup> See Essizewa (2007) on Ewe and Kabiye, Aboh (2004) who analyzes Gungbe in Rizzi's (1997) system, and also Cattaneo (2005) for an extensive investigation of questions in Kabiye. See also Collins (1994).

(17)



The vowel lengthening type of focus is not available for subject focus, as shown below. This indicates that subjects do not move to the specifier of the focus phrase dominating IP in focus constructions.

- (18) \*εσό ní-υ (na) kabiye  
 Ezzo understand-IMPF FOC Kabiye

An alternative analysis of the focus marker *na* would be that it forms a constituent with the focused element: [DP *na*], where *na* would be a focus determiner. There are a number of reasons to reject this. First, for clause initial focused elements, the standard analysis (Rizzi 1997) is that they head a FOCp projection, and that the focused element moves into the specifier of that projection. The minimal assumption is that such an analysis would hold for clause internal focus as well. Second, if [DP *na*] were the correct constituent structure, it is unclear why [DP *na*] would not be permitted in clause initial position (see (12b)). The constituent [DP *na*] would simply move to the clause initial position. Under our analysis, *na* and vowel lengthening are in complementary distribution, both heading FOCp. *Na* is used with clause internal focus (FOCP takes a VP complement), and vowel lengthening is used with clause initial focus (FOCP takes an IP complement). Third, the constituent structure [DP *na*] would be difficult to reconcile with the fact that the focus marker *na* appears post-verbally in subject focus (see (16)). There is no other case of a DP moving away from a determiner in Kabiye. Under our analysis, (16) is simply a case of successive cyclic movement from one specifier (SPEC FOCp) to another (SPEC IP).

#### 4. Syntactic analysis of verb focus

In verb focus, we have seen that the verb copy must appear at the end of the verb phrase. It is impossible for it to appear clause initially, as shown in (19) and (20).

- (19) a. \*kí ní-υ ma-ní-υ kabiye  
 KI understand-INF 1SG-understand-IMPF Kabiye  
 ‘I only understand Kabiye.’
- b. \*ní-υ ma-ní-υ kabiye  
 understand-INF 1SG-understand-IMPF Kabiye
- (20) a. \*kí yóod-ύ εσό yóod-υ  
 KI speak-INF Ezzo speak-IMPF

- b. \*yɔɔdú      ɛsɔ      yɔɔd-u  
       speak-INF    Ezzo      speak-IMPF

The examples are not made better if the final vowel of the fronted verb is lengthened. These examples show that the clause initial focus position is not available for verb focus. In this way, verb focus is like subject focus (where clause initial focus with vowel lengthening is not possible) and unlike object focus (where both clause initial and clause internal focus are possible).

It is possible (sometimes marginally) for the verb copy to be followed by *na* (note that *na* is obligatory for subject and object focus, but optional for verb focus):

- (21) a. ma-ní-u                      kabiye      kí      ní-u                      (?na)  
       1SG-understand-IMPF    Kabiye    KI      understand-inf    FOC  
       ‘I only understand Kabiye.’
- b. píya      lééy-u      kí      leey-ú      (na)  
       children    play-IMPF    KI    play-INF    FOC  
       ‘The children are only playing.’

Therefore, we postulate that once the verb is copied (and put into the infinitive) it moves into the low Spec FOC, the head of which is optionally realized as *na*. Note that in the temporal verb copy construction, no *na* is possible, which supports our claim that *na* is a focus particle. Sentence (22) below is repeated from (2) above.

- (22) mɪŋ-kɔm-á                      kú    kɔm                      (\*na)    yɔ  
       1SG-arrive-PERF    KI    arrive-INF    FOC    PRT  
       ‘I have just arrived.’

Analyzing verb focus as movement to a low focus position also allows us to distinguish Kabiye from languages such as Vata (Koopman 1984), Buli (Hiraiwa 2005), and Gungbe (Aboh 2004) that have predicate cleft constructions where the focused verb appears in the clause initial position. These languages use a clause initial focus position rather than a clause internal focus position.

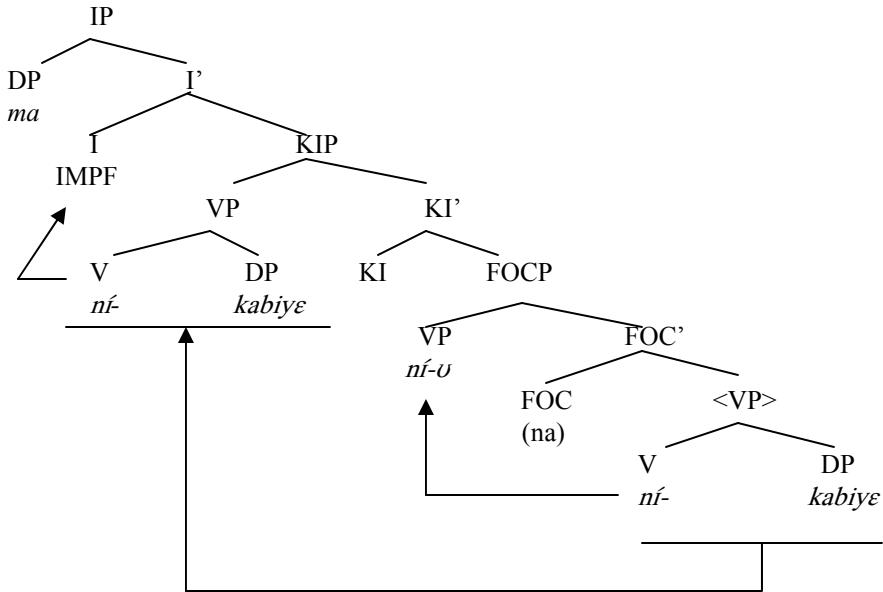
Why is verb focus the only type of focus that involves copying? Following Chomsky (1995), we assume that all types of movement involve copying. Copying results in two occurrences of the moved element, a higher one and a lower one. We assume the following economy condition: Spell-Out the fewest number of occurrences possible. We furthermore assume that if some element has phonetic features it must be spelled-out (at least once). Putting these constraints together, after movement, only one occurrence is spelled-out. We do not discuss why the highest occurrence (rather than the lowest) is normally spelled-out. We indicate the lower occurrence with the <...> notation. Therefore, movement in the passive has the following analysis:

- (23) a. was read the book  
       b. the book was read <the book>                      (by Movement/Internal Merge)  
       c. the book was read <del>the book>                      (Spell-Out at PF-interface)

The difference between verb focus and other types of focus is that once the verb is copied, the lower occurrence (as well as the highest occurrence) is spelled-out. Koopman (1984: 171) refers to the lower occurrence as a resumptive verb, and proposes that it is realized overtly because of the Empty Category Principle (ECP): ‘An empty verbal category is subject to the ECP.’ We retain from Koopman the idea that the lower occurrence is a resumptive verb, but we propose that it is spelled-out in the case of verb focus because the lower occurrence is needed to satisfy the morphological requirements of INFL (which is affixal in Kabiye). In other words, INFL is a bound morpheme that needs to be attached to a phonologically overt verb. In the case of object and subject focus, the lower occurrence does not need to be overt in order to satisfy the morphological requirements of any functional head. In



(28)



Lastly, in verb focus the verb copy cannot be followed by *ɖeké* ‘only’, as shown in (29).

- (29) a. ma-ní-u                      kabiye      kí      ní-u                      (\* ɖeké)  
 1SG-understand-IMPf      Kabiye      KI      understand-INF      only
- b. ma-ní-u                      kabiye      kí      ní-u                      (\* ɖeké na)  
 1SG-understand-IMPf      Kabiye      KI      understand-INF      only      FOC

We suggest that this fact follows from a restriction on *ɖeké* ‘only’ that it only modify DPs, and not verbs or other grammatical categories. Evidently the infinitive in verb focus is not acting as a noun, and therefore it cannot be modified by *ɖeké* ‘only’.

## 5. Restrictions on verb focus

Verb focus can occur in a wide variety of contexts, including with negation (as shown in (30)), in the imperative (as shown in (31) and (32)), with yes-no questions (as shown in (33) and (34)), and in relative clauses (as shown in (35) and (36)).

- (30) εσό      εε-γῶδ-υ                      kí      γῶδ-ύ  
 Esso      NEG-speak-IMPf      KI      speak-INF  
 ‘Esso is not speaking.’ (...he is laughing)
- (31) ɖε      kí      ɖέ-υ                      mε      síŋ      da  
 leave      KI      leave-INF      1SG      face      in  
 ‘Get out of my face!’
- (32) la                      tῶmíye                      kí      láb-υ  
 work(Verb)      work(Noun)      KI      work-INF  
 ‘Instead of playing, talking, do the work!’
- (33) a. εσό      lá-κí                      tῶmíye                      kí      láb-υ                      yawé  
 Esso      work-IMPf      work                      KI      work-INF      Q  
 ‘Is Esso working?’ (as opposed to playing)

- b. \*εσό λά-κί τωμίε yawé kí láb-υ  
 Esso work-IMPF work Q KI work-INF
- (34) a. εσό yábí kékési kí yáb-υ yawé  
 Esso bought-PERF<sup>9</sup> bean.cakes KI buy-INF Q  
 ‘Did Esso buy bean cakes?’ (instead of being given them)
- b. \*εσό yábí kékési yawé kí yáb-υ  
 Esso bought bean.cakes Q KI buy-INF
- (35) éyú wéi ε-yabá kékési kí yáb-υ yɔ  
 person who 3SG-buy bean cakes KI buy-INF REL  
 ‘the person who bought bean cakes’  
 (\*... yɔ kí yáb-υ)
- (36) kékési ηzí εσό yab-á kí yáb-υ yɔ  
 bean cakes which Esso bought-PERF KI buy-INF REL  
 ‘the bean cakes Esso bought’  
 (\*... yɔ kí yáb-υ)

Note in particular that the verb copy must precede the clause final question marker *yawé* and the clause final relative clause marker *yɔ*. If the clause final question marker and relative clause marker take as sisters the IP ([IP *yáwé*]), the fact that verb focus must precede these markers follows from the assumption that verb focus is internal to the IP.

Consider more closely the fact that verb focus can appear with the imperative. Clause internal object focus can also appear with the imperative, as shown below:

- (37) a. ya kékési ɖéké na!  
 buy bean.cakes only FOC  
 ‘Buy only bean cakes!’
- b. ya kékési kí yáb-υ!  
 buy bean.cakes KI buy-INF  
 ‘BUY bean cakes.’ (as opposed to stealing them)

However, it is impossible for the left peripheral focus position to be used in the imperative, as the following example of object focus shows:

- (38) a. \*kékési ɖéké ya!  
 bean.cakes only buy
- b. \*kékési-ι ya!  
 bean.cakes-FOC buy

These facts strongly distinguish clause initial focus from clause internal focus. We can explain them in the following way. Imperatives are reduced in many ways, for example, there are no temporal distinctions in the imperative. Suppose, furthermore, that imperatives simply lack most of the left periphery (in the sense of Rizzi 1997). In other words, imperatives do not have the functional projections dominating IP that other clause types have. It follows that there will be no FOCP in the left periphery (dominating IP) and so focus movement to a clause initial position will not be possible. On

<sup>9</sup> *Yábí* ‘bought’ is the “linked” form of the perfective, which means that it appears before a direct object. The *-a* suffix is deleted, and an epenthetic vowel *ɪ* is inserted (see Lébikaza 1999).

the other hand, there is no reason to expect the clause internal focus position to be absent in imperatives.

While verb focus can appear in the above contexts, there are two general environments where it is impossible: in a sentence involving a constituent question, and in a sentence involving some other focus. Subject questions are illustrated in (39) and (40), object questions in (41) and (42), object focus in (43) and subject focus in (44):

- (39) a. *á yáb-á kékésɪ (\*kí yáb-u)*  
 who bought-PERF bean.cakes KI buy-INF  
 ‘Who bought the bean cakes?’
- b. *ání yáb-á kékésɪ (\*kí yáb-u)*  
 who bought-PERF bean.cakes KI buy-INF
- (40) a. *á lá-kɪ tɔmíyɛ (\*kɪ láb-u)*  
 who work-IMPF work KI work-INF  
 ‘Who is working?’
- b. *ání lá-kɪ tɔmíyɛ (\*kɪ láb-u)*  
 who work-IMPF work KI work-INF  
 ‘Who is working?’
- (41) *abɛ(ɛ) esó yáb-á (\*kí yáb-u)*  
 what Esso bought-PERF KI buy-INF  
 ‘What did Esso buy?’
- (42) *abɛ(ɛ) ŋ-lá-kɪ (\*kí láb-u)*  
 what 2SG-do-IMPF KI do-INF  
 ‘What are you doing?’
- (43) a. *kabiyɛɛ má ní-u (\*kí ní-u)*  
 Kabiye 1SG understand-IMPF KI understand-INF
- b. *kabiyɛ ɖéké má ní-u (\*kí ní-u)*  
 Kabiye only 1SG understand-IMPF KI understand-INF  
 ‘I understand only Kabiye.’
- (44) *esó (ɖéké) ya-na-m (\*kí yá-u)*  
 Esso only call-FOC-1SG KI call-INF  
 ‘(Only) Esso called me.’

The impossibility of subject focus and verb focus in (44) follows naturally if we assume that there is only one clause internal focus position. In other words, there is one FOCP dominating VP. The uniqueness of FOCP dominating VP is identical to the uniqueness of FOCP dominating IP discussed by Rizzi (1997).

The impossibility of object focus with verb focus in (43) would follow if there can only be one FOCP per clause. Therefore, either FOCP dominates IP (in left periphery), or FOCP dominates VP, but not both.

The impossibility of subject and object questions with verb focus (39-42) follows on the assumption that questions involve focus, and therefore question words land in SPEC FOCP. Even though question formation does not require *na* or vowel lengthening, vowel lengthening is possible in the case of object questions, as shown in (41) and (42), indicating movement to SPEC FOCP. We assume that when there is no *na* or vowel lengthening in object questions, there has still been movement to SPEC FOCP (on questions and focus see Rizzi 1997: 298).



- (48) \*esó yá-ki kékési kí yáb-ú kékési  
 Esso buy-IMPf bean.cakes KI buy-INF bean.cakes  
 ‘Esso is just buying bean cakes.’

We assume the reason for this is due to the principle discussed above: Spell-Out the fewest number of occurrences possible, and minimize spell-out of each occurrence. Since the occurrence in SPEC FOCp (following KI) contains the overtly spelled out object, there is no reason to spell-out the object in the other occurrence (immediately following the finite verb).

Although the judgments in (45) and (46) are clear, much more investigation is needed to be sure that the contrast should be described in terms of V-focus versus VP-focus. We look forward to furthering our investigation of this contrast in future work.

## 7. Conclusion

We have discussed the basic syntax and semantics of the verb focus construction in Kabiye, and sketched a syntactic analysis. The analysis is summarized below:

- (49) a. A copy of the verb, in infinitival form, is created.  
 b. V-INF does not move to a clause initial focus position, rather to a clause internal position. The clause internal focus position is the specifier of a FOCp dominating VP.  
 c. Because of the morphological requirements of INFL, the lower occurrence of the verb is spelled-out overtly.  
 d. The head of the lower FOCp is realized as *na*.  
 e. The VP moves to the specifier of KI.

The only other example that we have found of verb focus where the verb copy follows the verb phrase was described in Koopman (2000) for Nweh, a Grassfield Bantu language spoken in Cameroon. Due to limitations of space, we will not be able to discuss the differences between Kabiye and Nweh. For example, in Nweh, as opposed to Kabiye, subject questions are compatible with verb focus.<sup>10</sup>

Theoretically, our proposal provides support for Chomsky’s (1995) copy theory of movement. Our proposal also provides support for the idea that there are two different focus positions in the clause, a clause initial position (high focus) and a clause internal position (low focus) (Belletti 2004, Jayaseelen 2001). Our data provides direct evidence for a lower focus head, since the head is realized overtly in Kabiye as *na*.

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<sup>10</sup> Kandybowicz (2006) describes a verbal repetition construction in Nupe that bears some resemblance to verb focus in Kabiye.

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