

The interpretation of syntactic focus variation

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In many West-African languages, non-subject focus in questions and answers is expressed in two varying syntactic forms, an *ex situ* form, and an *in situ* form. *Ex situ* focus is syntactically marked in one or several respects involving at least fronting of the focused constituent. *In situ* focus shows the canonical word order and usually no formal indication of focus. This asymmetry has been taken to indicate an information structural split between two types of focus relating *in situ* order to new information, and *ex situ* order to contrastive focus. Whether this semantic distinction is categorical or not, is a matter of controversial debate. Critics of the view that form and interpretation vary along the same coordinates have argued that the correlation between *ex situ* vs. *in situ* focus and contrastive vs. non-contrastive interpretation is only a tendency, and not a 1:1 correlation, e.g. Hartmann & Zimmermann (2007), Zimmermann (2008) and Zimmermann & Onea (2011) propose to derive the 'contrastive' effect of *ex situ* focus from a discourse-semantic strategy that allows the speaker to indicate unexpected discourse moves.

In this talk, I first discuss new data from Dagbani (Mabia), which support the claim in Titov (t.a.) on Akan that the alternative set represented by an *ex situ* focus is interpreted as discourse-salient but not exhaustively. *Ex situ* and *in situ* focus differ wrt. the discourse-salience of the elements from the focus alternative sets. *In situ* focus refers to an open set not expressing any expectation from the part of the speaker wrt. to the state of mind of the hearer. *Ex situ* focus on the other hand, refers to discourse-salient alternatives, which, according to Titov (t.a.), are D-linked. This interpretation is naturally compatible with a uniqueness interpretation of the focus constituent. Exhaustivity is syntactically coded by a cleft structure not regularly used in focus contexts.

Second, I will fathom the possibility of non-matching pairs of *ex situ* and *in situ* questions and answers in some Niger-Congo languages. I show that the sequence *Q in situ* - *A ex situ* is often blocked. Departing from the assumption that the alternative sets of *in situ* and *ex situ* focus differ in size, I claim that the set denoted by the question must be equal to or contained in the set denoted by the answer. This accounts for the unavailability of the mentioned sequence. I suggest that this may be derived from a presupposition failure.

References: • Hartmann, K. & M. Zimmermann. 2007. Place – out of place: Focus in Hausa. In K. Schwabe & S. Winkler (eds.), *On information structure: Meaning and form*, 365–403. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
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