Encoding varieties of topic and focus: The role of contrast and information status

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This talk introduces into the workshop topic. It examines morpho-syntactic and prosodic phenomena where the notions contrast and givenness seem to play a role. Both contrast and givenness (or newness) have been observed to correlate with certain syntactic positions and with certain phonological markings. For instance, contrastive focus has often been associated with a left peripheral position in the clause, whereas new information focus does not appear in the left periphery. Contrastive topics, on the other hand, seem to be differentiated from non-contrastive topics primarily by intonation. These observations give rise to several questions. For instance, what is the precise semantic-pragmatic contribution of contrast to contrastive foci and/ vs. contrastive topics, and why do languages choose different marking strategies for contrast in these two contexts? Are these observations generalizable across languages?

Similar questions can be asked for the information-structural category givenness. What morpho-syntactic and/or prosodic reflexes of (degrees of) givenness can be observed in relation to topicality or focus? Are there principled differences between givenness marking on topics vs. on foci? Furthermore, givenness also seems to impact morphosyntactic/prosodic aspects of the utterance that are not associated with information structure. For instance, it has been argued that givenness plays a role in apparently optional agreement processes, more specifically in object agreement (secondary topicality, Dalrymple & Nikolaev 2011). In Manyika, a Bantu language, the optional object marker on the verb occurs only when the object is interpreted as given (Bax & Diercks 2012). An interesting question that arises here is whether contrast can have a similar syntactic effect, i.e. whether it can induce the modification of an element that is not itself marked for contrast.