

Focus Expressions in Foodo*

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This paper aims at presenting different ways of expressing focus in Foodo, a Guang language. We can differentiate between marked and unmarked focus strategies. The marked focus expressions are first syntactically characterized: the focused constituent is in sentence-initial position and is second always marked obligatorily by a focus marker, which is *m* for non-subjects and *N* for subjects. Complementary to these structures, Foodo knows an elliptic form consisting of the focused constituent and a predication marker *gɛ́*. It will be shown that the two focus markers can be analyzed as having developed out of the homophone conjunction *m* and that the constraints on the use of the focus markers can be best explained by this fact.

Keywords: focus constructions, scope of focus, focus types, Foodo

1 Introduction

In my paper I would like to point out the various possibilities of expressing the pragmatic category of focus in Foodo. Foodo is spoken in a relatively small area within the province of Donga in the Northeast of Benin close to the border to Togo. The number of Foodo speakers is about 20 – 25,000 (cf. Plunkett 1990,

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Gordon 2005). The Foodo area is a linguistic island surrounded by various different Gur languages such as Kabiye, Lokpa and Tem. In the region, Dendi, Hausa and Fulfulde are also spoken.

First, let us provide some basic typological properties of Foodo. The basic sentence structure is SVO. The language has a productive noun class system, in which the noun is marked with prefixes as well as some suffixes¹, and adjectives, determiners and pronouns show concord to the noun prefixes. The phonological system of Foodo differentiates between two distinct phonological tones, which have mainly lexical but also grammatical functions. Apart from this, there is a downstepped high tone as well as several downdrift phenomena.

Genetically, Foodo is one of the Guang languages within the Kwa language family. Within Guang, Foodo belongs to the Northern group with Gonja as its most prominent member. The great majority of Guang languages are spoken in Ghana; Foodo, besides Tchumbuli, therefore represents a Guang exclave in Benin.

The paper aims at presenting different ways of expressing the pragmatic category focus in Foodo. This entails that my primary object has been to observe formal means used to mark information which according to the seminal definition of Dik is “the most important or salient in the given communicative setting” (Dik 1997: 326).

First, we can account for the fact that focus is not obligatorily marked in any case. Rather, we observe a number of instances in which focus is expressed without any formal marking. In such cases, we speak of an unmarked focus strategy. Example (1)² presents such an unmarked SVO sentence in the perfective, here the first sentence of a narrative, in order to introduce to you the canonical sentence structure.

¹ Foodo is one of the rare Kwa languages if not the only one showing also noun suffixes in addition of prefixes. But as Plunkett (2006: 2) pointed out “... these suffixes are much less developed than the prefixes, and agreement is based on the prefixes not the suffixes.”

² The data was elicited on the basis of the “*Questionnaire on information structure*” developed by the SFB (cf. Skopeteas et al. 2006).

- (1) mí cànṅá à náá lòkòtòlô.
 1sg.poss friend PF go hospital
 ‘My neighbour went to the hospital.’

Besides, there are a number of strategies to mark new or important information in a sentence in Foodo, and these strategies, above all, will be subject of investigation here. The most widely applied strategy to express focus involves syntactic movement to the sentence-initial position plus an additional morphological marking after the constituent, which is *m* for non-subjects and *N* for subjects. The structure with the subject marked by the focus marker *N* does not only serve to express focus on the subject itself but also to mark focus on the whole sentence. These syntactically marked structures serve to denote new information as well as contrastive focus. The paper will focus on the structural constraints governing its use. Complementary to these structures, Foodo knows another form which is constructed using an elliptic form consisting of the focused constituent and a predication marker *g'é* which follows it. After presenting the different structures, it will be shown that the two focus markers can be analyzed as having developed out of the same element, the homophone conjunction *m*, and that the constraints on the use of the focus markers can be best explained by this fact.

2 Marked vs. Unmarked Focus

2.1 Marked focus

2.1.1 Sentence initial position + focus marker *m*

The first strategy to mark focus has two characteristics, a syntactic one and a morphological one. The focused element, be it a complement of the verb or an adjunct, is placed in sentence-initial position whereby its canonical position in the clause remains unfilled. Additionally, the focused element has to be followed by the focus marker *m* which carries a tone polar to the preceding one.

This structure is viable in all forms of tense and aspect, with the exception of the future tense.

The following examples are presented to illustrate this strategy. First, its use within a sentence in the imperfective is displayed in example (2). Here, the out-of-focus part does not show any differences to non-focus-marked sentences, i.e. it is not characterized by a dependent or relative verbal morphology as it is known for example from different Gur languages or from Hausa. This would be utterly impossible because the required functionally and morphologically differentiated verb paradigms do not exist in Foodo.

- (2) ‘For whom do you wash the car?’
 mí sí n̄ n̄ néé f’ólí sà.
 1sg.poss father FM 1sg IPF wash PREP
 ‘I wash them for MY FATHER.’

Example (3a) is a *wh*-question asking for the object. The interrogative pronoun *mìné* ‘what’ opens the sentence, the focus marker follows it. This is the only way to formulate questions about a complement. The related answer in example (3b) shows the same *ex-situ* construction. In both cases, the focused element leaves a gap at its canonical position. Furthermore, another property is important here: after focus marker *m̄* no perfective marker *a* is allowed. Both markers are mutually exclusive, as Idrissou Seriki already pointed out (1993: 33). Compare for instance example (1), where the preverbal perfective marker is present, with the question in (3a)³, which lacks it.

- (3a) question: mìné n̄ ðcír̄m wî?
 what FM woman eat
 ‘What did the woman eat?’

- (3b) reply: àcéé n̄ ð wî.
 beans FM 3sg eat
 ‘She ate BEANS.’

³ For an explanation of the pronominal forms in (3b) compare section 3.

Example (4) is the *ex-situ* answer to the question for the directional complement of the verb ‘go’. It is fronted and marked by use of the focus marker. Apart from objects and locative complements, this strategy can also be used with temporal and modal adverbs.

- (4) ‘Where did the woman go?’
 túúlé nì ò náá.
 Europe FM 3sg go
 ‘She went to EUROPE.’

To sum up this section, we can conclude that by employing the focus marker *ni* following the focused sentence-initial element, non-subject focus is expressed and this again is used to express new-information focus as well as contrastive focus, i.e. corrective, selective and restrictive focus, but not the expansive one though.

2.1.2 Sentence initial position + focus marker *N*

The second strategy to mark focus differs from the first one by the use of another focus marker, namely *N*, which is put after the subject and assimilates to the following consonant. This is shown in the examples by adding the phonetic value of the focus marker. Concerning another feature of *N*, namely the tonal behavior of it, we follow the observations made by Gray Plunkett. According to him, the homorganic nasal has a lexical high tone, which is subject to changes when the word preceding it ends with a high tone⁴. Furthermore, it seems that the high tone of the focus marker spreads when the following verb has a low tone. These two observations are subject to future research (Plunkett 2007, p.c.).

Apart from the focus marker, we find the normal SVO structure of the sentence. Because there are no apparent other properties of this construction in

⁴ The examples follow the orthographic conventions of the Foodo orthography developed in Benin on the basis of the “Practical Orthography of African Languages” (Westermann 1927, ²1930). The focus marker in the examples is therefore always given as velar nasal. The tone marking is as follows: (ˊ) high tone, (ˋ) low tone, (ˆ) falling tone, (˗) downstep.

simple clauses, the focus marker *N* has to be used obligatorily. Example (5) is the answer to the question “Among them, who is not coming quickly?”. It is thus representing new information focus on the subject. The focus marker is following the subject and the out-of-focus part of the sentence is identical to a non-focus-marked sentence in the imperfective.

- (5) ‘Among them, who is not coming quickly?’
 ðnyúm 'ń [m] 'mé néé bà mánám.
 man FM NEG IPF come quickly
 ‘THE MAN is not coming quickly.’

Whereas there are no changes to the out-of-focus part in the imperfective, as in example (5), the same restrictions as with the first strategy can be observed, i.e. it is not allowed to use the perfective marker *a* and the focus marker in one and the same sentence. Example (6) displays this lack of the perfective marker. It is taken from a discussion about which one of two possible suspects, man or woman, has stolen the watch that is missing. The speaker disagrees with his dialogue partner who claims that the woman has stolen the watch. Thus the context imposes contrastive focus on the subject.

- (6) ‘THE WOMAN has stolen the watch!’
 ðnyúm 'ń [n] cúú wáácì.
 man FM take watch
 ‘THE MAN has taken the watch.’

Furthermore, focusing the subject with the use of the focus marker *N* is generally not possible in the future tense and demands a different structure (cf. 2.1.3.).

In example (7), the speaker is disagreeing to the claim that a third person has eaten the beans and is correcting it such that it becomes clear that the speaker himself ate the beans. If the focused subject is realized as pronoun, this is always done so in its emphatic form.

- (7) ‘HE ate the beans.’
 ààyí, mí 'ń [ŋ] wî.
 no, 1sg.emph FM eat
 ‘No, it’s me who has eaten (them).’

Additionally, the same construction with focus marker *N* is used to mark sentence focus as well. Consider example (8) which is the answer to the question “What happened?”. It is therefore a case of all-focus sentence. The same kind of marking also occurs in text initial sentences, cf. (9).

- (8) ‘What happened?’
 mí lóólî ń [ŋ] nyáńdâ.
 1sg.poss car FM break
 ‘MY CAR BROKE DOWN.’

- (9) óbíléléé 'ókú 'ń [ŋ] cínâ, mù wùlî ópî.
 old.man INDEF FM stay, 3sg alone house
 ‘Once there was an old man, he lived alone in his house.’

As the examples show, marking the subject with the focus marker *N* first fulfils the function of expressing all types of focus on the subject, new information focus as well as contrastive focus. Second, it serves to establish sentence focus, for example in text-initial sequences as in (9) above.

2.1.3 Focussing of the sentence-initial element in the future

As I already pointed out, it is not possible to focus the subject using the strategy with focus marker *N* or to focus the non-subject using the ex-situ strategy presented in 2.1.1. Focusing a constituent in future clauses is only possible with a sub-strategy of the latter one, i.e. the focused element has sentence-initial position and is followed by focus marker *m*; additionally, the morpheme *yè* is introducing the out-of-focus-part of the clause, as is exemplified in (10) for non-subject focus and in (11) for subject focus.

- (10) ‘What do you need the bricks for?’
 òbóó nì yè á 'pólí là.
 hut FM COMPL 1pl.FUT construct PREP
 ‘For the HUT we are going to build.’
- (11) ‘It’s the man who will eat the yams.’
 òcúúń nì yè ó 'wí 'kújódò.
 woman FM COMPL 3sg.FUT eat yams
 ‘It’s the WOMAN who will eat the yams.’

In non-focal contexts, this additional morpheme *yè* can best be analyzed as some sort of conjunction or complementizer. It can be found following *verba dicendi* et *sentendi* (12), as such introducing complement clauses. It is also present in clauses expressing an intention (13) or in relative clauses in the future (14).

- (12) ‘What did she say?’
 ò káń yè bàá kùù kúyùù
 3sgsay COMPL 3pl.PF cut tree
 ‘She said that they cut a tree.’
- (13) ò dé táamáà yè ó kùù ìnúń.
 3sg have intention COMPL 3sg.FUT cut meat
 ‘He is going to cut the meat.’
- (14) òcúúń mán yè ó 'wí 'kújódò, ...
 woman REL COMPL 3sg.FUT eat yams
 ‘The woman who will eat the yams ...’

From these examples, one can probably conclude that the core meaning of *yè* is to introduce sentences expressing events the realization of which is intentional and somehow uncertain.

But *yè* is not part of simple clauses in the future. These clauses are built with the future auxiliary which is realized after nominal subjects as *i* with high tone, and is in case of a pronominal subject only expressed by a high tone on the pronoun (15).

The scope of *gɛ́* can be the whole of the sentence as in the answer to the question “What happened?” seen in example (18). This structure is ambiguous insofar as the answer could also possibly well be given in reply to a question about the verb, like “What did they do?”, which according to my data is the preferred structure for verb focus.

- (18) ‘What happened?’
 bàá yúúlí 'mí sàndèé gɛ́.
 3sg.PF steal 1sg.poss sheep PRED
 ‘THEY HAVE STOLEN MY SHEEP.’ ~ ‘They HAVE STOLEN MY SHEEP.’

I have analyzed *gɛ́* here as predicator, i.e. as copula-like element, because it can also be found in an identifying context, as for instance as reply to the question “What's that over there?” (19).

- (19) ‘What's that over there?’
 òbóó gɛ́.
 house PRED
 ‘It's a house.’

In such a context, the use of *gɛ́* is obligatory, it cannot be dropped. But in the focus examples just presented, its use is optional. It is also quite common to reply to a question for the object, like in (17), in a very short form, only mentioning the object which was asked for. *gɛ́* can therefore not be seen as genuine focus marker but rather as element which further emphasizes the element in question.

2.2 Unmarked focus

Apart from the marked constructions above, there are cases where neither syntactic nor morphological nor phonological means⁵ are employed to express focus. This is above all the case with non-subject focus, especially if new information focus is concerned. The structure is ambiguous insofar as it serves to express focus in dependence to the context either on the object/adjunct or on the whole predicate, i.e. the verb plus complement. But also focus on the whole sentence does not need to be marked by postposing the focus marker to the subject (as is shown in example (5)) and is not even allowed in case of underspecified subjects (18) or future events. Finally, the unmarked strategy is the preferred one in order to focus the predicate.

While the object *wh*-phrase has to be placed *ex-situ* (cf. (3a)), the object phrase in the corresponding answer can be both *in-situ* and *ex-situ*, cf. (20) vs. (4) as two possible replies to the question “Where did the woman go?”. The fact that in Foodo complements which represent new information do not have to be fronted but may stay in their canonical position fits well into the picture obtained for other SVO languages investigated in our project (i.e. Gur and Kwa languages) where the postverbal position is the default (non-subject) focus position.

- (20) ‘Where did the woman go?’
 òó náá túúlé. cf. (4) túúlé nì ò náá.
 3sg.PF go Europe Europe FM 3sg go
 ‘She went to EUROPE.’

Apart from this, sentence focus can be unmarked as well, e.g. as a reply to the question “What will happen?” as shown in example (21). An answer to questions about possible events in the future is always unmarked in my restricted data, what could have to do with the special restrictions for focusing in

⁵ As far as I know until now, prosodic means alone do not play any role in focus marking in Foodo. Nevertheless, this is still a matter of future research.

future clauses. This can be accounted for by defining the events whose actual occurrence is not sure or dubitable.

- (21) ‘What will happen?’
 kpídéeé 'í yíláá 'dófólí.
 dog FUT catch boy
 ‘THE DOG WILL CATCH THE BOY.’

When the subject of a sentence is a non-referential, expletive expression, as in (22), the focus can not be realized with the usual subject focus construction but stays either unmarked or is marked with *gé* which serves to additionally emphasize the focused element, here the whole sentence. In all of these unmarked cases, the interpretation of the sentence is determined only by the context.

- (22) ‘What happened?’
 bàá kúlí 'óbéè.
 3pl.PF give_birth child
 ‘A CHILD HAS BEEN BORN.’

Also, expressions with focus on the verb (23) or the auxiliary (24) do not have to be marked, as the examples show, and are in most cases not marked at all according to my data. (23) is a reply to the question “What did Gbanaa do?”, (24) on the other hand is contrasting the statement that the beating will happen in the future by stating that it has already happened.

- (23) ‘What did Gbanaa do?’
 Gbá'náá à sòò mótô.
 Gbanaa PF buy motorbike
 ‘Gbanaa HAS BOUGHT A MOTORBIKE.’⁶

⁶ The context of elicitation is quite unclear concerning the question whether contrast is involved in this structure or not.

- (24) ‘The woman hit the boy.’
 ààyí, ó bèé 'dá ùṅ.
 no, 3sg FUT hit 3sg.OBJ
 ‘No, she WILL hit him.’ (focus on auxiliary)

3 Analysis

To sum up, I would like to address the focus markers *N* and *ni* and their exceptional deviation in the perfective I have mentioned before. In Foodo two homophones exist in addition to the focus marker *ni*. First, *ni* is a sentence connecting conjunction, and second, it is used as a predicator comparable to *gɛ́* but with the meaning of “here is”, i.e. with an additional deictic component in its meaning.

I would like to concentrate on the usage of *ni*⁷ as a conjunction. In example (25) – again taken from a discussion about a stolen watch – the act of coming is connected with the act of taking the watch forming a sequence of events. Both actions are perceived as being finished and real, which is the same case as in example (26) where the act of coming and the act of eating are marked in the perfective as two consecutive actions. In both sentences, the second clause displays the same deviation from the “normal” perfective form (which is instantiated in the first part of sentence (26)) as we can observe in marked focus constructions (cf. example (25)). The perfective in simple clauses is built up using a perfective morpheme *a-* preposed to the verb (cf. example (1) and (23)). In case of pronominal subjects, this morpheme gets assimilated to the pronoun that precedes it in terms of its vocal quality, *ǎǎ* in example (26). In the second part of the coordinated sentences (25) and (26) – i. e. after the conjunction *ni*, the perfective is not marked again but the subject has to be indicated to show subject identity or non-identity⁸ with the one in the first part of the sentence. Using the conjunction *ni* is constrained to the contexts shown in the examples

⁷ The tone of the conjunction behaves similarly to that of the focus marker, i.e. it is polar to what precedes it when there is no pause before the conjunction. When there is a pause before it, the tone is always high.

⁸ In case of different subjects, a special demonstrative pronoun is used.

above, i.e. sequences of real, finished actions in the indicative. It cannot possibly be used with non-finished or unreal actions where another conjunction, namely *là* has to be used (27).

(25) ðcím 'ŋ [m] bá nì ò cúú wáácì.
 woman FM come CNJ 3sg take watch
 'THE WOMAN came and took the watch.'

(26) òó bà ní ò jì bìŋjáà.
 3sg.PF come CNJ 3sg eat dough
 'He came and ate the dough.' (Plunkett 2005: 1)

(27) ó bà là ó jì bìŋjáà.
 3sg.FUT come CNJ 3sg.FUT eat dough
 'He will come and eat the dough.' (Plunkett 2005: 2)

* ó bà ní ó jì bìŋjáà.

As I have shown, the same restrictions for marking the perfective after the conjunction *ní* apply to the marked focusing strategies with focus marker *N* or *m*. Idrissou Seriki in her description of the Foodo verbal system thus concludes that the focus marker *N*⁹ and the predicative marker of the perfective are mutually exclusive. (1993:33)

This is pointing towards the conclusion that the similarity between focus marker and (sequential) conjunction in the perfective *m* is not just a homophonic occurrence but rather that the conjunction as well as the entire sequential structure is a possible source for the development of marked focus structures in Foodo, as Anne Schwarz and I have shown to be the case for other languages such as the Kwa languages Ewe, Akan and Lelemi, and the Gur languages Buli and Dagbani (Fiedler & Schwarz 2005; Fiedler & Schwarz, to appear).

⁹ Idrissou Seriki only mentions this mutual exclusion for the focus marker *N*, but regarding her examples, the same exclusion can be seen for *m*.

This analysis that the focus marker could be developed out of the conjunction is further supported by Hansford (1990) who describes the morpheme *ne* which follows the focused constituent in Chumburung, a closely related Guang language, as a “clause introducer” (1990: 88).

The uniform behavior of *N* and *ni* concerning the perfective and the fact that subjects and non-subjects of sentences in the future demand the focus marker *ni* both suggest tracing back both focus markers to the same morpheme, namely *ni*. The form *N* that is used for subject focus therefore represents a grammaticalized, reduced form of *ni* whereby the exact conditions for this reduction of the focus marker in the subject focus case have to remain unclear for the moment.

Tracing back both focus markers to the conjunction *ni* and perhaps to the whole sequential construction also means that we analyze the focus constructions in Foodo as bisected structures, the first part of the sentence represented by the focused element and the second part introduced by the conjunction. As this conjunction is only allowed in the perfective (in imperfective clauses no such conjunction seems to be used) and is excluded from sequences of events in the future (conjunction *l'à*), it cannot occur in focus constructions expressing future events. But because of already being grammaticalized into a focus marker, *ni* has to be used in this function as morphological focusing device in the future as well. On the other hand, it cannot fulfill the function of a sentence conjunction here; it is a mere focus marker. In order to maintain the bisected structure it is therefore necessary to include another sentence conjunction or complementizer. For this, *yè* is a good candidate because of its inherent meaning of introducing clauses expressing intentional und uncertain events.

4 Conclusion

The findings in Foodo assert the observations in different Gur and Kwa languages we made in our project “Focus in Gur and Kwa languages”. First, this concerns the fact that focus in Foodo does not have to be marked. If it is marked,

then it is expressed by syntactic as well as morphological means. The focus markers *N* and *m* as well as the fact that subject focus in contrast to non-subject focus has to be marked obligatorily, manifest a subject/non-subject-asymmetry. The fact that the same construction can be used to express subject as well as sentence focus including stage setting is an interesting observation because this feature is constitutive to Gur languages of the Oti-Volta branch which we have so far been working on. It has been observed among the Kwa languages only in Lelemi, a Ghana-Togo-Mountain language while it seems to be less viable in Akan and Gbe.

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Abbreviations

CNJ	conjunction
COMPL	complementizer
DEM	demonstrative pronoun
emph	emphatic pronoun
FM	focus marker
FUT	future
INDEF	indefinit
INF	infinitive
IPF	imperfective
NEG	negation
OBJ	object
PF	perfective
pl	plural
poss	possessive pronoun
PRED	predicator
PREP	pre-/postposition
REL	relative pronoun
SF	subject focus
sg	singular
SUB	subordinator / complementizer

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