

Jonas Lau

Focusing of Interrogative Phrases in West African Languages

What happens when we require a piece of information? We ask for it!

When it is not the truth of a statement that needs to be determined, content questions (wh-questions) are used to ask for a missing piece of information. The most salient component of these constructions is the interrogative phrase (IP), which contains the interrogative pronoun. The IP determines the syntactic function and type of information that is asked for. If focusing is defined as the foregrounding of a constituent that contains new information, the constituent most likely to be focused is thus the interrogative phrase. Indeed, it is the IP which would be replaced by new information in the corresponding answer.

While there are various ways to focus, I discovered similar constructions for content questions in three major West African languages: Fula, Hausa and Yoruba. All three languages use constructions with copula-like particles, which are extremely suggestive of cleft-sentences. But can such particles – which also occur in copular sentences – really be analysed as copulas? This talk will examine the blurred line between left dislocation and cleft sentences, using typological comparisons of content questions in the three languages. This will be achieved by listing and comparing structural features, enabling the mapping of these constructions on a scale ranging from prototypical left dislocation to prototypical cleft sentences.