

Focus/New, Contrast and Exhaustiveness in West African Languages: Insights from Chadic, Kwa and Grassfield Bantu

In this talk, I will address the question of how semantic and information-structural concepts such as focus, newness, contrast and exhaustiveness are expressed in a range of West African languages from different families and phylums. Based on a number of case studies, it will be argued (i.) that pure answer focus (= new information) on non-subjects does not require explicit morphosyntactic (or prosodic) marking; (ii.) that explicit focus marking by morphosyntactic means is correlated with the notion of focus of contrast, i.e. with the presence of salient focus alternatives in the context (Rooth 1992, Kratzer & Selkirk 2007, Krifka 2008, Selkirk & Katz 2011); that non-canonical focus marking does not automatically come with exhaustiveness effects, which are frequently tied to additional morpho-syntactic markers; (iv.) that some languages mark the established background rather than the focus of an utterance. The empirical findings contribute to theoretical models of information structure by providing additional evidence for two distinct layers of newness and focus (sensu Halliday 1967, Selkirk & Katz 2011); by disentangling the grammatical phenomenon of focus fronting from semantic exhaustiveness effects (pace É. Kiss 1998); and by highlighting the importance of some notion of background, which is intimately tied to the topic situation of a clause (Schwarz 2009).