Focus Marking Crosslinguistically

Muriel Assmann   Daniel Büring
Izabela Jordanoska   Max Prüller

Studentische Tagung Sprachwissenschaft (StuTS), Wien, 19.11.2021

universität
wien

G.O.A.T.

FWF
Der Wissenschaftsfonds.

Goals

- Present 5 case studies of morphosyntactic focus marking languages (only in-situ)
    - 22 languages in total
    - Previous literature and own elicited data
- Propose a novel theory of formal focus marking, that can be used for prosodic focus marking as well as morphosyntactic focus (MorFoc) marking languages
    - Why? Because English-based focus theories are not able to capture the particularities of MorFoc
    - For instance: there is no "Focus Projection": focus on a bigger focus doesn't always coincide with focus on a smaller focus

The tenets of our approach

NO PROJECTION: Any morphological focal marking marks exactly one constituent as focal; this constituent may be non-terminal.

BLOCKING: Choose the most specific focal marking that is pragmatically appropriate.

Background: Traditional focus theories

- Traditional Focus Theories predict that any broad (i.e. multiword) focus is marked the same way as one or more smaller foci Selkirk (1984, 1995); Schwarzschild (1999)

    (1)   Mary bought a book about BATS.

    PP focus

Background: Traditional focus theories

- Traditional Focus Theories predict that any broad (i.e. multiword) focus is marked the same way as one or more smaller foci Selkirk (1984, 1995); Schwarzschild (1999)

  (1)   Mary bought a book about <u>BATS</u>.

  PP focus
  or Obj focus, VP focus, clausal focus

- This is standardly known in the literature as 'Focus Projection': focus on a smaller focus would project up to a bigger focus

  (Focus is marked by underlining in the examples throughout)

Gùrùntùm

Gùrùntùm

- West Chadic, Afro-Asiatic
- 15000 speakers in Bauchi State, Nigeria (census 1993, Eberhard et al. (2019))
- SVO
- focus marking morpheme: *a* (occurs in multiple positions)

Gùrùntùm focus paradigm

Subject focus: -*a* before Sbj

(2) **Á** fúrmáyò bà   wúm kwálíngálá
     FOC Fulani PROG chew colanut
     'The Fulani is chewing colanut.'   (H&Z 2009)

Clausal focus: -*a* clause final

(3)   (Discourse initial)
          Kóo vùr mɔ́ kãa Mài Dáwà sái tí   shí gànyáhú-**à**.
          every when   Mai Dawa then 3SG eat rice-FOC
          'Always, Mai Dawa used to eat rice'.   (H&Z 2009)

Gùrùntùm focus paradigm

VP, V and Obj focus: *-a* between V and Obj

(4)   Tí   bà   ròmb-**á**   g^{w}éì
      3SG PROG gather-FOC seeds.
      'He is <u>gathering</u> <u>the seeds</u>.'   (H&Z 2009)

- We say that clauses with *á* in Gùrùntùm have a **FOCAL MARKING**: *á*'s placement indicates which constituent is focally marked.

- A focal marking does not always coincide with the '**X FOCUS**' (e.g. 'object focus'), which we use in a pragmatic sense.

- in (4): VP is focally marked, but, depending on the context, the focus is either the Obj, V or VP.

Basic Focal Marking: No Projection

(5)

```
              S
            /   \
         Sbj     VP
               /    \
            V+a      Obj
```
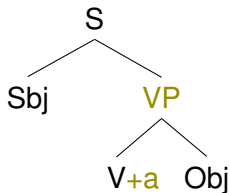
(6) Tí bà ròmb-**á** gʷéì
3SG PROG gather-FOC seeds.
'He is <u>gathering</u> <u>the seeds</u>.'

- For each focal marking, exactly one constituent is thereby **directly** FOCALLY MARKED.
- (5) may be used if **VP or something within it** is the focus

> (5) is SYNCRETIC for V, VP and Obj focus.

Recap: Terminology

FOCAL MARKING: form-related, which marker is used.

Focal:

- A terminal node is focal iff it introduces non-trivial alternatives.
- A non-terminal node is focal iff any of its daughters is.

X FOCUS: pragmatic, which focus is expressed (marked with underlining in translations)

FOCUS SYNCRETISM: the same sentence/focal marking can express different foci
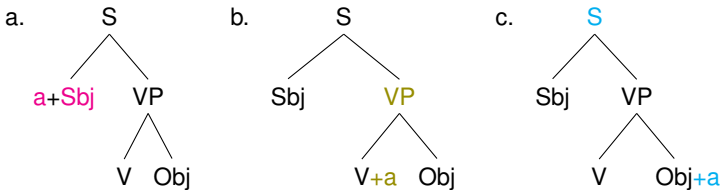
Focus paradigm in Gùrùntùm summarized

(7)
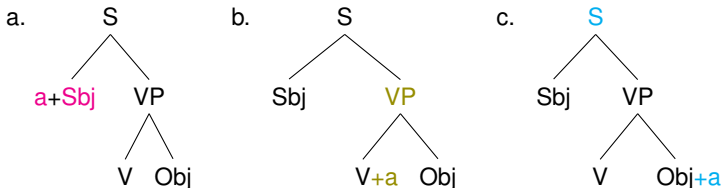
- No Projection: constituents are directly focally marked
- Broad foci do not project from narrow foci, they are directly licensed by morphological focal marking.
- A focally marked node can be used to mark the node itself or anything within it as focus.

So why can't you mark S as focal to express VP focus?!

Blocking

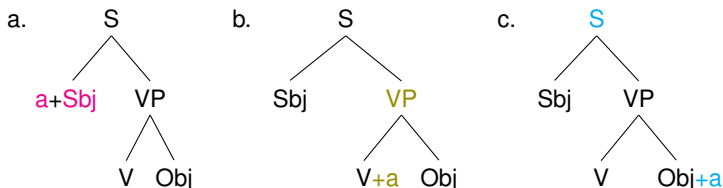**BLOCKING**: Choose the most specific focal marking that is pragmatically appropriate.

(8)

Blocking

BLOCKING: Choose the most specific focal marking that is pragmatically appropriate.

(8)

a.
```
      S
    /   \
a+Sbj   VP
       /  \
      V   Obj
```

b.
```
      S
    /   \
  Sbj    VP
       /   \
    V+a    Obj
```

c.
```
      S
    /   \
  Sbj    VP
       /   \
      V   Obj+a
```

- Gùrùntùm has **specialized** focal markings to realize Sbj and VP focus.
- So those specialized focal markings the language has block the use of a more general focal marking.

Buli

Buli - Basic information

- Central Gur/Mabia language (Oti-Volta, Niger-Congo)
- Spoken in Northern Ghana
- Around 150.000 speakers Eberhard et al. (2019)
- SVO
- Morphemes related to focus:
    - *ká* - object, VP;
    - *kámā* - V;
    - *(a)lē* - subject and sentence.

Buli focus paradigm

Sbj and clause focus: *(à)lē* follows Sbj

(9) (ká) Àtìm **alè** dè mángó.
     FOC Atim FOC ate mango
     'Atim ate a mango.'

Buli focus paradigm

VP and Obj focus: *ká* follows verb

(10)   wá dè **ká** mángó.
        3SG ate FOC mango
        'He ate a mango.'
        <u>   </u>

V focus: *kámā* follows Obj
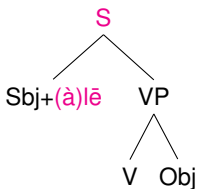
(11)   Aáya, Atim a   lɛ   Amoak **kámā**.
        no   Atim IPFV insult Amok FOC
        'No, Atim <u>insulted</u> Amok.'

Our system: No Projection

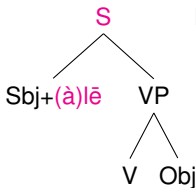Assign to each focal marking exactly one constituent thereby
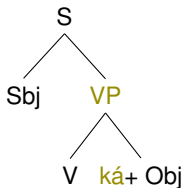focally marked:

(12)   a.

Our system: No Projection

Assign to each focal marking exactly one constituent thereby
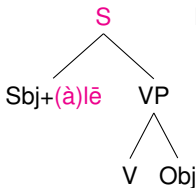focally marked:

(12)   a.   S   b.   S
              Sbj+(à)lē   VP   Sbj   VP
                        V   Obj   V   ká+ Obj

Our system: No Projection

Assign to each focal marking exactly one constituent thereby focally marked:
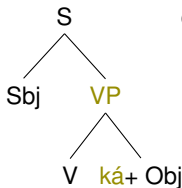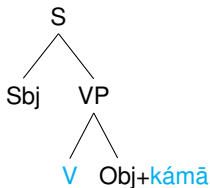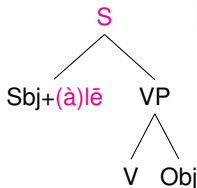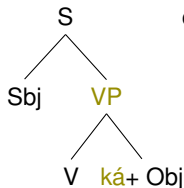
(12)   a.

Our system: No Projection + Blocking

(13) a.
```
        S
       / \
 Sbj+(à)lē  VP
            / \
           V  Obj
```
b.
```
        S
       / \
     Sbj  VP
          / \
         V ká+ Obj
```
c.
```
        S
       / \
     Sbj  VP
          / \
         V  Obj+kámā
```
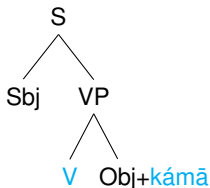
- Sbj focus is marked by focally marking the clause, as there is no more specific marker for Sbj focus (13-a) – not like English;

- Obj, but not V focus, is marked by focally marking the VP (13-b) – like English;

- There is a more specific marker for V focus (13-c) – not like Gùrùntùm.
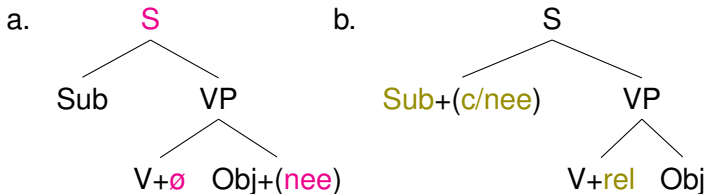
Hausa

Hausa

- West Chadic (Afro-Asiatic) language
- Most spoken in Nigeria, Ghana, Niger and Chad
- 35 million speakers (Eberhard et al., 2019)
- SVO
- Relative form of the verb marks subject focus
- Absolute form of the verb signals any kind of broad or narrow focus – **except** subject focus

The Focus Paradigm

Sbj focus: relative form of the verb

(14)   Kandè (**cèe**) ta-**kèe**   dafà   kiifii.
       Kande FOC 3SG.F-REL.IPFV cooking fish
       <u>Kande</u> is cooking fish.'   (H&Z 2007)

Clause, VP, V and Obj: absolute form of the verb

(15)   Kànde ta-nàa   dafà kiifii (**nèe**).
       Kande 3SG.F-IPFV cook fish   FOC
       'Kande is cooking fish'   (H&Z 2007)

Our system: No Projection + Blocking

(16)

- (16-a) may express clausal focus, and also any non-subject focus.
- Since the language has a focal marking for Sbj focus (16-b), Blocking prevents the clausal focal marking from expressing narrow Sbj focus.

Wolof/Awing

Wolof

- North-Atlantic, Niger-Congo
- 4-10 million speakers
- Senegal, the Gambia, Mauritania.
- SVO
- Focus marked morpho-syntactically on Person-Aspect-Mood marker. (Rialland and Robert, 2001)

Wolof focus paradigm

(17) Fatou bind **na**   téére.
      F.   write PFV.3SG book
      'Fatou wrote a book.'

(18) **Maa-y**   lekk jën.
      FOC.1SG-IPFV eat fish
      'I eat fish.'   (McLaughlin, 2004, 247)

(19) Jën **laa-y**   lekk.
      fish FOC.1SG-IPFV eat
      'I eat fish.'   (McLaughlin, 2004, 247)

Wolof focus paradigm cont'd

(20)   Q: 'What is Omar doing?'
      Q': 'Is he buying fish?'
      A: **Dafa-y**   lekk jën.
        FOC.3SG-IPFV eat   fish
        'He is eating fish.'

No specific marker for V, so V is syncretic with VP!

Awing

- Ngembaic (Grassfields Bantu, Niger-Congo)
- Spoken in the North West region of Cameroon
- 19.000 speakers (Eberhard et al., 2019)
- SVO
- Focal marker: *lə́* only used in exhaustive focus, otherwise unmarked

Awing focus paradigm

(21) Q: 'What did Alombah cook?'
'What did Alombah do with the maize?'
'What did Alombah do?'
'Who cooked the maize?'
'What happened?'

A: Alombah a-pe'-náŋnə   ŋgəsáŋə̀.
A.   SM-PST-cook maize
'<u>Alombah</u> <u>cooked</u> <u>maize</u>'.
(Fominyam and Šimík, 2017, 1038)

No Blocking! Everything is syncretic with clausal focus.

Patterns

Recap

- Each focal marking marks one constituent as focal;
- This node is the <u>maximal size</u> of the focus that can be realized by the marking in question;
- Blocking: if the language has a specialized focal marking for a lower node, <u>use it</u>;
- The minimal size of a focus is determined by the maximal size of the other foci of the language.

Patterns of focus syncretisms differ widely

Example: minimal size of clausal focal marking

- In Gùrùntùm: the entire clause
- In Buli: the subject
- Why? Because in Gùrùntùm everything else is blocked by more specialized markings, but in Buli there is no specialized marking for subject focus.

Patterns and Strange Projections

Syncretisms	English	Buli	Gùrùntùm	Hausa	Wolof
S focus =	VP, Obj	Sbj	–	VP, V, Obj	–
VP focus =	Obj	Obj	V, Obj	V, Obj	V

Table: Patterns of focus syncretisms differ widely.

- Note that there is no universal default as to what is minimal and maximal. It is specific per language.
- Even if, for some reason, we'd assume that foci can project in MorFoc, how to explain then that a focal marking on subject can project in Buli (clause), but cannot project in Hausa?

Additional point of variation

To what extent do focal markings of different constituents resemble each other within a language?

- Gùrùntùm: one focus marking morpheme in different positions
- Buli: different morphemes, different positions
- Hausa: same morpheme in the same position is present/absent
- Wolof: different morphemes in the same position

Syncretisms

Prediction

Allowing a focal marking to directly focally mark a complex
constituent allows for two things which are not found in
English-type languages:

- Exocentric foci
- Disjunctive focus syncretism

Exocentric focus

Recall clausal focus in Gùrùntùm:

(22) Tí vún lúurìn nvùrì-**à**.
      3SG wash clothes yesterday-FOC
      <u>'She washed clothes yesterday.'</u>   (H&Z 2009)

We call this EXOCENTRIC FOCUS:

- only a **complex** constituent is focally marked
- it is not syncretic with any one-word focus

In English-type languages any broad focus is syncretic to one or more smaller focus.

Disjunctive Syncretism

- Recall Gùrùntùm VP/V/O focus:

  (23) Tí   bà   ròmb-**á**   g^wêì
        3SG PROG gather-FOC seeds.
        'He is gathering the seeds.'

- Either V or Obj may be the focus when the marker occurs between them

- This form of syncretism is not familiar from English-tye languages: foci on two disjoint constituents (e.g. verb vs. direct object) are never realized by the same form.

- We call this a DISJUNCTIVE SYNCRETISM: the same form may express focus on either constituent A or constituent B, where A and B are disjoint from one another

Disjunctive Syncretism

- This type of syncretism is common across languages in DP and part-of-DP focus.
- Focus marking morphemes tend to attach to immediate constituents of the clause.

(24) A: 'The boy is riding a red moped'.
  B: Aáya, wá a do **ká** puupuk sogluk.
     No, 3SG IPFV ride FOC moto dark
     'No, he is riding a <u>black</u> moped.'

(25) A: 'The boy is riding a blue moped.'
  A': 'The boy is riding a red moped.'
  B: Aaya, nidoa-bini a do **ká**
     no male-small.DEF IPFV ride FOC
     kutug-wusum sogluk.
     iron-horse dark
     'No, the boy is riding a <u>blue bicycle</u>.' (Buli)

Marking constituent v. marking words

- The problem for English-type theories (ie Selkirk (1995), Schwarzschild (1999)) in both cases, lies with the assumption that the 'original' focal marking would need to be on a **word**.

- Once we allow a focal marking to directly mark a complex **constituent**, both disjunctive syncretisms and exocentric foci are analyzed straightforwardly.

Further predictions

- If two disjoint constituents can be focally marked by the same focal marking (disjunctive syncretism), they must both be subconstitutents of a larger constituents that can be focally marked in that same way, too.

- Each constituent can be focally marked in exactly one way (or none). No two markings can ever be interchangeably used to mark the same constituent.

These seem born out, but neither follows from focus projection theories.

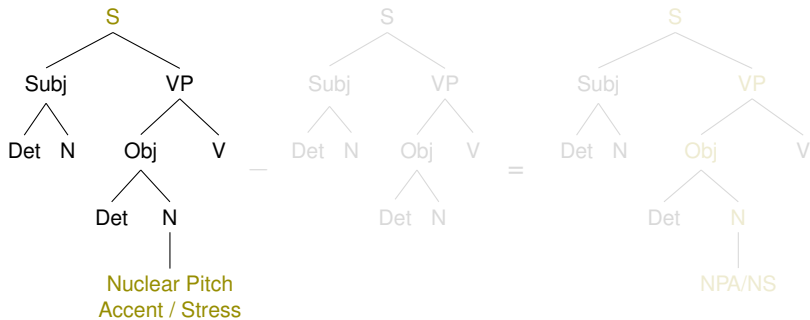# Conclusion

Conclusion

Our theory in two slogans:

- No Projection: Any morphological focus marker marks exactly one constituent as focal; this constituent may be non-terminal.
- Blocking: Choose the most specific focus marker that is pragmatically appropriate.

Conclusion

Unlike focus theories based on English, this allows us to directly focally mark complex constituents, which then allows us to capture patterns that are unfamiliar in English-type languages, such as:

- Subject and clausal focus syncretism
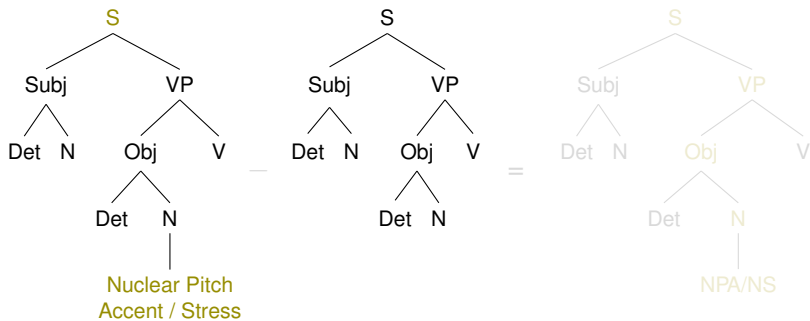- Exocentric focus
- Disjunctive focus syncretism

Relation to German (Dutch, English. . .)

- Each narrow focal marking (Det, Subj, V) **blocks** applicability of sentential focus marking.

- (in fact, non-default *relative stress* marks a sister as focal. cf. Williams (1997); Reinhart (2006); Büring (2015, 2016); Büring et al. (submitted))

- So Wolof doesn't work the English way, but perhaps English works the Wolof way. . .
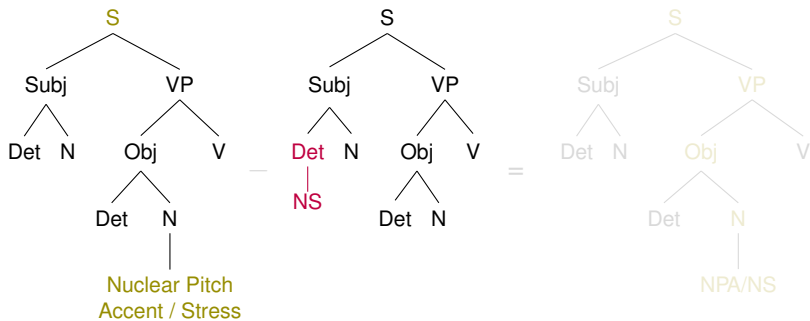
Relation to German (Dutch, English. . .)

S

Subj   VP

Det   N   Obj   V

Det   N

Nuclear Pitch
Accent / Stress

S

Subj   VP

Det   N   Obj   V

Det   N

S

Subj   VP

Det   N   Obj   V

Det   N

NPA/NS

- Each narrow focal marking (Det, Subj, V) **blocks** applicability of sentential focus marking.

- (in fact, non-default *relative stress* marks a sister as focal. cf. Williams (1997); Reinhart (2006); Büring (2015, 2016); Büring et al. (submitted))

- So Wolof doesn't work the English way, but perhaps English works the Wolof way. . .
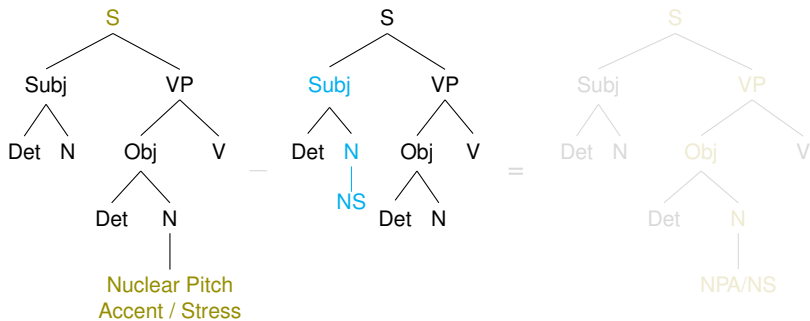
Relation to German (Dutch, English. . .)

- Each narrow focal marking (Det, Subj, V) **blocks** applicability of sentential locus marking.

- (in fact, non-default *relative stress* marks a sister as focal. cf. Williams (1997); Reinhart (2006); Büring (2015, 2016); Büring et al. (submitted))

- So Wolof doesn't work the English way, but perhaps English works the Wolof way. . .
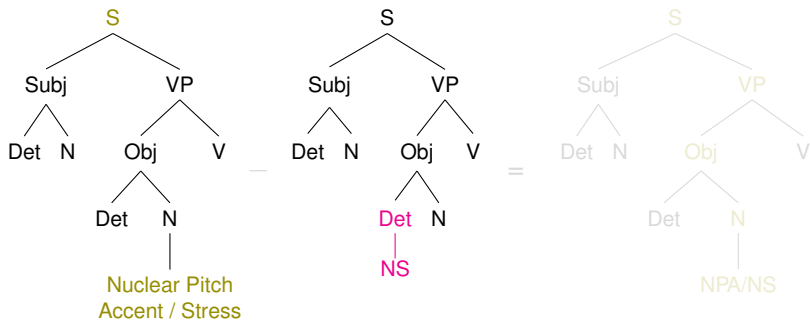
Relation to German (Dutch, English. . .)

* Each narrow focal marking (Det, Subj, V) **blocks** applicability of sentential locus marking.

* (in fact, non-default *relative stress* marks a sister as focal. cf. Williams (1997); Reinhart (2006); Büring (2015, 2016); Büring et al. (submitted))

* So Wolof doesn't work the English way, but perhaps English works the Wolof way. . .
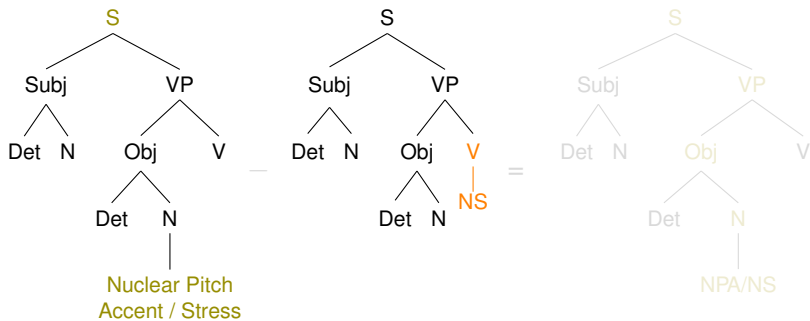
Relation to German (Dutch, English. . .)

- Each narrow focal marking (Det, Subj, V) **blocks** applicability of sentential focus marking.

- (in fact, non-default *relative stress* marks a sister as focal. cf. Williams (1997); Reinhart (2006); Büring (2015, 2016); Büring et al. (submitted))

- So Wolof doesn't work the English way, but perhaps English works the Wolof way. . .
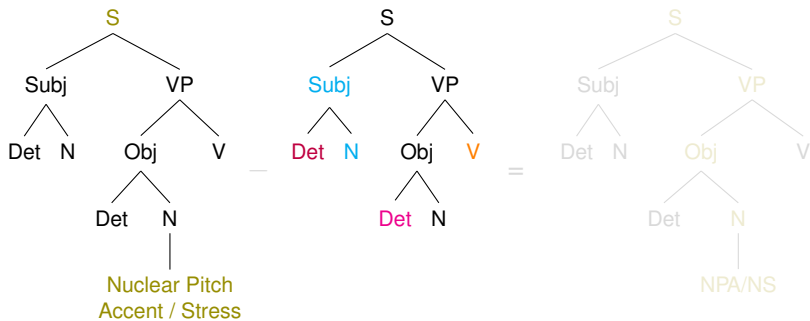
Relation to German (Dutch, English. . .)

- Each narrow focal marking (Det, Subj, V) **blocks** applicability of sentential focus marking.

- (in fact, non-default *relative stress* marks a sister as focal. cf. Williams (1997); Reinhart (2006); Büring (2015, 2016); Büring et al. (submitted))

- So Wolof doesn't work the English way, but perhaps English works the Wolof way. . .

Relation to German (Dutch, English. . .)

- Each narrow focal marking (Det, Subj, V) **blocks** applicability of sentential focus marking.

- (in fact, non-default *relative stress* marks a sister as focal. cf. Williams (1997); Reinhart (2006); Büring (2015, 2016); Büring et al. (submitted))

- So Wolof doesn't work the English way, but perhaps English works the Wolof way. . .
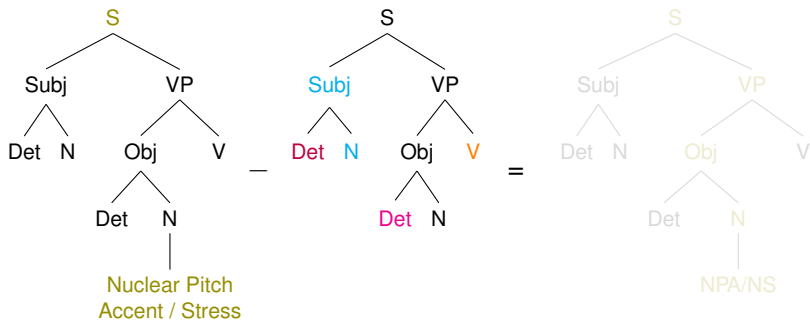
Relation to German (Dutch, English. . .)

- Each narrow focal marking (Det, Subj, V) **blocks** applicability of sentential locus marking.

- (in fact, non-default *relative stress* marks a sister as focal. cf. Williams (1997); Reinhart (2006); Büring (2015, 2016); Büring et al. (submitted))

- So Wolof doesn't work the English way, but perhaps English works the Wolof way. . .
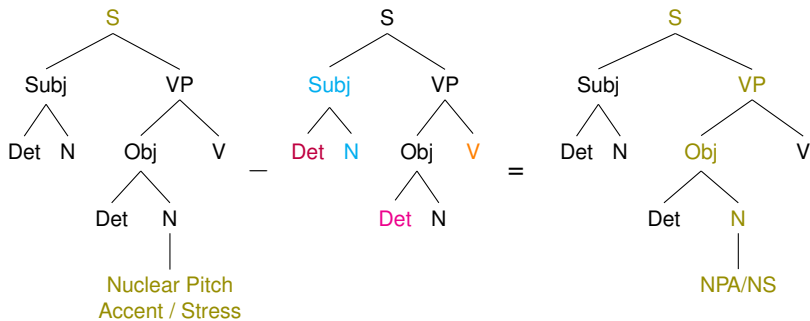
Relation to German (Dutch, English. . .)

- Each narrow focal marking (Det, Subj, V) **blocks** applicability of sentential focus marking.

- (in fact, non-default *relative stress* marks a sister as focal. cf. Williams (1997); Reinhart (2006); Büring (2015, 2016); Büring et al. (submitted))

- So Wolof doesn't work the English way, but perhaps English works the Wolof way. . .

Relation to German (Dutch, English. . .)

- Each narrow focal marking (Det, Subj, V) **blocks** applicability of sentential focus marking.
- (in fact, non-default *relative stress* marks a sister as focal, cf. Williams (1997); Reinhart (2006); Büring (2015, 2016); Büring et al. (submitted))
- So Wolof doesn't work the English way, but perhaps English works the Wolof way. . .
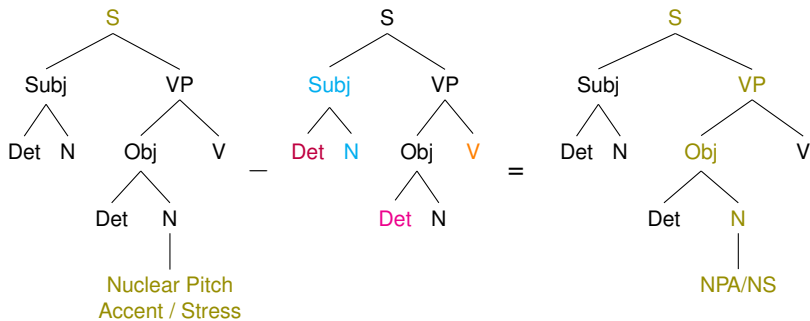
Relation to German (Dutch, English. . .)

Nuclear Pitch
Accent / Stress

NPA/NS

- Each narrow focal marking (Det, Subj, V) **blocks** applicability of sentential focus marking.

- (in fact, non-default *relative stress* marks a sister as focal, cf. Williams (1997); Reinhart (2006); Büring (2015, 2016); Büring et al. (submitted))

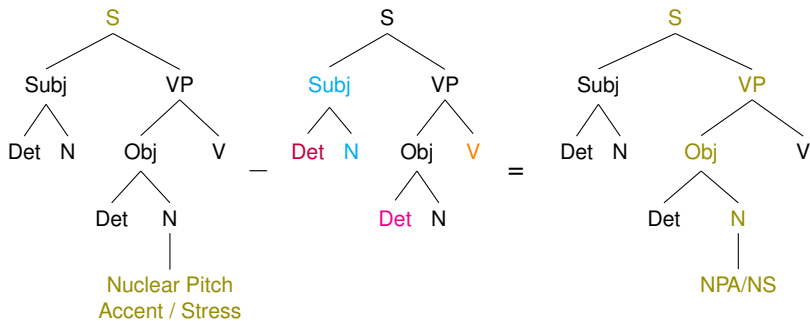- So Wolof doesn't work the English way, but perhaps English works the Wolof way. . .
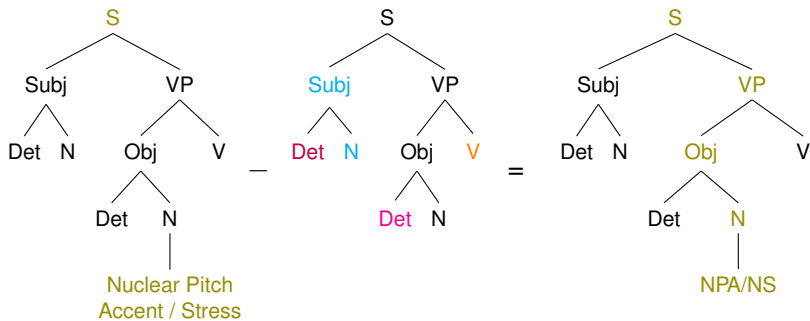
Relation to German (Dutch, English. . .)

- Each narrow focal marking (Det, Subj, V) **blocks** applicability of sentential focus marking.
- (in fact, non-default *relative stress* marks a sister as focal, cf. Williams (1997); Reinhart (2006); Büring (2015, 2016); Büring et al. (submitted))
- So Wolof doesn't work the English way, but perhaps English works the Wolof way. . .

Future research

We saw that there is a lot of variation in how focus is marked in MorFoc languages

- Is there any consequence of the form and the placement of the focus marking morphemes?
- Are there more patterns to be found as we study more languages?

Thank you for your attention!

Bibliography I

Büring, Daniel (2015). "Unalternative Semantics." In Sarah D'Antonio, Mary Moroney, and Carol Rose Little, eds., *Proceedings of SALT 25*, 550–575. Linguistic Society of America.

Büring, Daniel (2016). *A Beginner's Guide To Unalternative Semantics*. manuscript University of Vienna. http://homepage.univie.ac.at/daniel.buring/phpsite/index.php?page=

Büring, Daniel, Muriel Assmann, Izabela Jordanoska, and Max Prüller (submitted). "Relational Focus Semantics." *ms. Vienna University* .

Eberhard, David M., Gary F. Simons, and Charles D. Fennig (2019). *Ethnologue: Languages of the world*, vol. 22. Dallas, Texas: SIL international Dallas, TX.

Bibliography II

Fominyam, Henry and Radek Šimík (2017). "The morphosyntax of exhaustive focus." *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory* 35(4):1027–1077.

Hartmann, Katharina and Malte Zimmermann (2007). "In Place—Out of Place: Focus in Hausa." In Kerstin Schwabe and Susanne Winkler, eds., *Information Structure and the Architecture of Grammar: A Typological Perspective*, 365–403. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Hartmann, Katharina and Malte Zimmermann (2009). "Morphological Focus Marking in Gùrùntùm (West Chadic)." *Lingua* 119(9):1340–1365.

McLaughlin, Fiona (2004). "Is there an adjective class in Wolof." In *Adjective Classes: A Cross-Linguistic Typology*, vol. 1, 242–262. Oxford University Press.

Bibliography III

Reinhart, Tanya (2006). *Interface Strategies: Optimal and Costly Computations*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Rialland, Annie and Stéphane Robert (2001). "The intonational system of Wolof." *Linguistics* 39(5; ISSU 375):893–940.

Schwarzschild, Roger (1999). "GIVENness, AvoidF and Other Constraints on the Placement of Accent." *Natural Language Semantics* 7(2):141–177.

Selkirk, Elisabeth (1995). "Sentence Prosody: Intonation, Stress, and Phrasing." In John A. Goldsmith, ed., *The Handbook of Phonological Theory*, 550–569. London: Blackwell.

Selkirk, Elisabeth O. (1984). *Phonology and Syntax: The Relation between Sound and Structure*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Bibliography IV

Williams, Edwin (1997). "Blocking and Anaphora." *Linguistics Inquiry* 28:577–628.

Table of focus syncretisms

Syncretisms / Languages	S, V, VP, O	S, V, VP	S, Sbj	VP, V, O	VP, V	VP, O	everything	DP, part-of-DP
Hausa	x							x
Wolof					x			x
Buli			x			x		x
Kɔnni			x			x		x
Gùrùntùm				x				x
Ewe					x			x
Joola (Foñy and Karon)					x			x
South Marghi			x					no information
Dagbani			x		x			x
Tangale (perfective)				x				no information
Tangale (progressive)	x							no information
Soninke					x			x
Efik		x						x
Ngamo (marked)					x			x
Ngamo (unmarked)							x	x
Awing (marked)						x		x
Awing (unmarked)							x	x
Akan (unmarked)							x	x
Ga (unmarked)							x	x
Somali (transitive)			x					no information
Somali (intransitive)		x						no information
Cuzco Quechua			x					x
Even			x					no information
Aymara		x						x
Tar B'arma	x							no information