

Focus in Manding

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The Manding languages, spoken by some 10 million people in West Africa, express focus via a particle that is ordered among a string of up to five optional postnominal clitics, between the definite marker and the plural marker, as shown in 1.

- 1: sɛwɛ-ò- léé- lù- bɛ- à (Mawukakan)
book- DEF-FOC-PL-COLLECTIVE-Q
"(is it) the set of books? (as opposed to something else)?"

As suggested in 2, the basic phenomenon is similar on a morpheme-by-morpheme basis across the various Manding languages (of which Ethnologue lists 17).

- 2: Músà-dè yé sɛbɛn ! dí Búrahímá mǎ wà (Bambara)
Músà-lè bára sɛbɛ ! dí Búrahímá mǎ wà (Maninka)
Músà-ré bàrà sɛbɛ dì Búrahímá má bá (Odienne Jula)
Musa-FOC AUX book-DEF give Ibrahim to Q
"was it Musa that gave the book to Ibrahim?"

These languages provide a case sought in vain by Ladd (1996 and p.c.), where (some of) the functions of English intonational focus are performed by explicit and ordinary morphological marking. Ladd sought such a case as a point of reference for arguing against what he termed the "radical [Focus to Accent] view," in which "accents are directly signals of focus or discourse salience ... part of some universal (and possibly prelinguistic) highlighting function." There are many well-documented cases of *discourse configurational languages*, "the language type in which primary sentence articulation is motivated by discourse-semantic, rather than theta role or case, considerations" (Kiss 1995). However, previously documented cases of such languages move focused constituents to particular syntactic positions, rather than simply marking focused constituents in situ. Focus-marked constituents in Manding remain where they would otherwise have been, within the quite rigid Manding word order. The Manding focus particle is also (like English intonational focus) not restricted by syntactic islands, as the Mawukakan examples in 3 show:

- 3a: Músà yá kùndì+cɛ-ò-lé yá móbílí-ó wɛɛ cáán
Musa 's boss+man-DEF-FOC 's car-DEF AUX fail
"It's Musa's BOSS' car that has broken down" (e.g. not his friend's car)

- b: Músà-lé ní Búlámá wɛɛ kú-ó-lù lòn
Musa-FOC and Ibrahim AUX yam-DEF-PLUR eat
"MUSA and Ibrahim have eaten the yams." (e.g. not Seku and Ibrahim)

- c: Músà yé kú-ó-lù sán Búlámá-lè mà kà ì lòn
Musa AUX yam-DEF-PLUR buy Ibrahim-FOC from and them eat
"Musa bought the yams from IBRAHIM and ate them (as opposed to from Seku or anyone else)"

Relative to the distinction in Kiss (1998) between *identificational* (or contrastive) focus and *information* (or presentational) focus, Manding focus is identificational. It always has Kiss' contrastive semantics, "represent[ing] a subset of the set of contextually or situationally given elements for which the predicate phrase can potentially hold." Manding focus is not used simply to indicate that information is new to the discourse, or simply for emphasis; the notion of contrastive specification of a member of a set must also be present. As a result of this contrastive semantics, focus is normally obligatory on the nominal answer to a WH-question (@ used to indicate anomaly in the context – 4c is grammatical but unresponsive to 4a):

4a: yén nè yé nín?
 who be here
 "Who is this?" "Who is it that is here?"

b: Músà-lé yé nín.
 Musa-FOC be here.
 "It is Musa that is here."

c: @Músà yé nín
 Musa be here
 "Musa is here"

Kiss asserts that "syntactically, the constituent called identificational focus itself acts as an operator, moving into a scope position in the specifier of a functional projection, and binding a variable." Manding focus clearly does not do this in any overt way: the focused constituent always remains in situ. However, there are two general properties of the Manding focus marker that may suggest its status as a semantic operator: it can only be used in the context of a sentence, and only one focus marker is possible within a given sentential domain (though appropriately complex sentences may contain more than one).

As 4b indicates, the nominal answer to a WH-question must be focus-marked when it is presented as part of a sentence. However, when the nominal answer is presented alone, exactly the opposite is true. As indicated in 5, the focus marker is not grammatical on a noun in isolation, even when it is the answer to a Wh-question:

5a: *Músà-lé.
 Musa-FOC
 b: Músà.
 Musa

In the case of English intonational focus, it is easy to have paired foci within a single clause, as in "MUSA bought yams from IBRAHIM (... but SEKU bought yams from TENE). However, this is not possible in Manding:

6. *Músà-lè yé kú sán Búlámá-lè má ...
 Musa-FOC AUX yam buy Ibrahim-FOC from
 "MUSA bought yam(s)from IBRAHIM ..."

The lack of multiple foci also, perhaps surprisingly, applies to cases where a contrast is spelled out specifically in the form *X not Y*. In such cases, the positive clause must bear a focus marker in an appropriate place, whereas the negative one must not:

7a: lá+ bɛ́ɛ- ó-lé láká, í ká kwó+má+lá-ó láká
 door+good-DEF-FOC open you IRREALIS back+in+door-DEF open
 Open the FRONT DOOR, not the back door.

b: *lá+bɛ́ɛ- ó-lé láká, í ká kwó+má+lá- ó-lé láká
 door+good-DEF-FOC open you IRREALIS back+in+door-DEF-FOC open
 *Open the FRONT DOOR, not the BACK DOOR.

However, loosely associated adjacent clauses may have individual marked foci:

8: Búlámá-lè yé kú-ó sán, ò kósón àlè-lé kákán kà à lòn.
 Ibrahim-FOC AUX yam-DEF buy therefore he-FOC should to it eat
 "It's Ibrahim that bought the yam, therefore it's he that should eat it."

As 3a indicates, a noun phrase may be focused even if it is an inner part of a more complex noun phrase. However, nouns inside compound words – a category that includes simple noun-modifier constructions – may not be focused, just as they do not take other independent determiner marking. For the narrower scope of focus, it is necessary to use an appositional form of modification, in which other independent determiners are also possible:

9a: Músà wɛ́ɛ sò+ gbè-ó sán
 Musa PERF horse+white-DEF buy
 "Musa bought the white-horse."

b: Músà wɛ́ɛ sǒ-ò gbé+mán-ɲô sán
 Musa PERF horse-DEF white+one-DEF buy
 "Musa bought the horse, the white one"

c: *Músà wɛ́ɛ sò-lé+ gbè-ó sán
 Musa PERF horse-FOC+white-DEF buy
 "*Musa bought the white HORSE"

d: Músà wɛ́ɛ sǒ-ò-lé gbé+mán-ɲô sán
 Musa PERF horse-DEF-FOC white+one-DEF buy
 "Musa bought the white HORSE" (as opposed to the white cow or whatever)

e: Músà wɛ́ɛ sò+gbè-ó-lé sán
 Musa PERF horse+white-DEF-FOC buy
 "Musa bought the WHITE HORSE" (as opposed to anything else he might have bought)

In general, Manding focus marking appears to apply either to noun phrases or to sentences. When the sentence is marked, then the focus morpheme may either follow the entire sentence, or may follow the verb (if there are postverbal elements present). Thus as Haik (1989) points out, one may not focus an adverbial PP in Mawukakan by putting a focus marker after it. Her example (in her transcription system) follows.

H22: Tene ɲe ɓaa- o sii tabali-o- le kã \ *tabali-o kã ne
 Tene AUX rice-DEF put table-DEF-FOC on table-DEF on FOC
 "It's on the table that Tene put the rice."

In fact, both versions are grammatical, but the version with the focus marker in final position has whole-sentence scope, being a suitable answer to a question like "What's going on?"

There seem to be some differences among the Manding languages on this point. In the judgment of the first author, Maninka and Bambara allow narrow scope on a postpositional phrase to be marked by a focus morpheme following the postposition, while Mawukakan does not.

10a: What happened to the yam that was in the refrigerator?

b: When did Ibrahim eat the yam?

c: Búlámá yé à lòn sù ló lè [Mawukakan: answer to (a) only]

Ibrahim AUX it eat night at FOC
 "(It's that) Ibrahim ate it last night."

d: Búlámá yé à lòn sù-lè lò [Mawukakan: answer to (b) only]

Ibrahim AUX it eat night-FOC at
 "It's last night that Ibrahim ate it."

e: Búlámá yé à lòn-né sù lè [Mawukakan: answer to (a) only]

Ibrahim AUX it eat-FOC night at
 "It's that Ibrahim ate it last night"

f: Búrahí má kà à dómún sù ró lè [Maninka: answer to (a) or (b)]

Ibrahim AUX it eat night at FOC

g: Búrahí má kà à dómún sù-lè ró [Maninka: answer to (b) only]

Ibrahim AUX it eat night-FOC at

h: Búrahí má kà kú dómún-nè sù ró [Maninka: answer to (a) only]

Ibrahim AUX it eat-FOC night at

There are some cases in which the focus marker seems to be attached to a verb:

11: n gó í yé à lòn(-nè), í ká à lòn

I say you AUX it hide FOC you IRREALIS it eat

"I said HIDE it, not eat it."

These cases are problematic for two reasons. First, it is hard to distinguish possible sentence-level focus from verbal focus when everything else in the phrase is a pronoun or other redundant material (as in 11). In sentences with full noun phrases in the argument positions, clearly verbal (as opposed to sentential) focus seems impossible:

12. Músà yé kú sán-né Búlámá mà

Musa AUX yam buy-FOC Ibrahim from

“*Musa BOUGHT yams from Ibrahim (... he didn't steal them)

“It's that Musa bought yams from Ibrahim (...and therefore ...)

Second, there is an existential verb that is homophonous with the focus marker in Mawukakan, though not in e.g. Maninka:

13a: Mìndèè-lé yé d'yén-ńó lè? [Mawukakan]

what-FOC AUX child-DEF BE

"what is (the nature of) the child?"

b: Mùsò-lé yé (à) lè [Mawukakan]

female-FOC AUX PRO BE

"It's a girl."

c: Mùn yé dén dí? [Maninka]

what AUX child-DEF BE

d: Mùsò-lè yé à dí? [Maninka]

female-FOC AUX PRO BE

This homophony may not be an accident. The apparent examples of sentence-level focus marking generally seem to have a pragmatic force consistent with an existential predication applied to the sentence, which might become a sort of proto-cleft. Whether this is a historical connection or an accident, and whether there is any further connection to the nominal focus marker, remains a topic for further research.

Whatever the nature of the sentential focus-marker, it behaves in a syntactically interesting way in combination with particle-verb compounds. The particle can optionally occur before the AUX rather than before the verb; in this case, the (sentential) focus-marker can optionally occur on the particle rather than on the verb. No change in meaning seems to be associated with any of these options. The focus marker may not be put on the AUX (or on postpositions/particles in other constructions), and when the particle remains adjacent to the verb, it cannot bear the focus marking.

14a: yùù-ó wéé í ló+byá
 rope-DEF PERF REFL in+let_go
 "The rope has loosened (itself) up (=has come loose)"

b: yùù-ó wéé í ló+byá lé
 rope-DEF PERF REFL in+let_go FOC
 "It's that the rope has come loose"

c: yùù-ó ló wéé byá
 rope-DEF in PERF let_go
 "The rope has come loose"

d: yùù-ó ló wéé byá lé
 rope-DEF in PERF let_go FOC
 "It's that the rope has come loose"

e: yùù-ó ló lé wéé byá
 rope-DEF in FOC PERF let_go
 "It's that the rope has come loose"

f: *yùù-ó ló lé wéé byá lé
 rope-DEF in FOC PERF let_go FOC

g: *yùù-ó wéé ló-lé+byá
 rope-DEF PERF in-FOC+let_go

Another construction involving the focus marker is worth noting. In copular sentences involving evaluative predicates, focusing the predicate creates a meaning something like “a real X”. This is a plausible extension of the intrinsic meaning: of all relevant predicates, that of being an X is picked out; thus the subject must have the characteristics of an X to an especially salient extent.

15: à yè bándí-lè lè
 PRO AUX bandit-FOC BE
 "He's a real bandit!"

No paper on focus would be complete with a discussion of effects on coreference. We have not been able to find any Manding examples where focus modifies coreference conditions. In particular, in the standard "weak crossover" examples, no coreference is possible regardless of focus:

16a: Músà má yé à cầ
Musa mother AUX him spoil
"Musa's mother spoils him" (him=Musa).

b: à mǎ yé Músà cầ
his mother AUX Musa spoil
"His mother spoils Musa" (his ≠ Musa)

c: à mǎ yé Músà-lé cầ
he mother AUX Musa-FOC spoil
"It's Musa that his mother spoils" (his ≠ Musa)

d: àlè-lé má yé Músà cầ
he-FOC mother AUX Musa spoil
"He's the one whose mother spoils Musa" (he ≠ Musa)

e: *àlè-lé má yé Músà-lé cầ
he-FOC mother AUX Musa-FOC spoil
"*He's the one such that it's Musa that his mother spoils" [two focus markers in a clause not allowed]