Not only ‘only’, but ‘too’, too

Focus- and topic-sensitive particles in Bura

The presentation discusses the syntactic and semantic behaviour of what appear to be focus-sensitive particles in Bura, a Central Chadic language spoken in Nigeria. On the basis of newly elicited data we discuss (i.) the inventory of focus-sensitive particles in Bura; (ii.) their syntactic distribution and structural restrictions on association with focus; (iii.) association into focus islands; (iv.) the question whether some particles associate with contrastive topics rather than focus (Krifka 1999); (v.) the semantic interaction of focus particles with each other and with negation, respectively. The discussion serves to evaluate claims on the semantic nature of focus particles that have been made largely on the basis of European languages.

Inventory: Like English and many (if not all) other languages (König 1991), Bura exhibits essentially three kinds of focus-sensitive particles: exclusive dací ‘only’ (1a), inclusive or additive ma, tsuwa ‘also/too’ (1b), and scalar wala ‘even’ (1c):

(1) a. Mtaku dací an liha Biu. b. Ladi ma thlikawhada ni. c. Wala Kubili ma tsà si.
   ‘Only Mtaku went to Biu.’ ‘Ladi, too, plants peanuts.’ ‘Even Kubili appeared.’

Notice that wala cooccurs together with additive ma in (1c). This suggests that the only meaning component of wala is scalarity, unlike E. even and Germ. sogar, which are argued to combine additivity and scalarity in their meaning (König 1991).

Syntax: With the exception of tsuwa ‘also’ and wala ‘even’, focus-sensitive particles in Bura generally follow the constituent they associate with, similar to English too, but unlike other focus particles in German and English (Büring & Hartmann 2001). While particle and associate are adjacent in (1ab), this is not an absolute requirement, cf. (2ab), where dací and ma associate with the subject from sentence-final position. If the focus marker an in (2a) is dropped, though, final dací must associate with the constituent immediately to its left, cf. (3):

(2) a. Mtaku an liha Biu dací. b. Ladi (*an) thlikawhada ma.
   M. only FM go Biu only L. FM plant peanut too
   ‘Only Mtaku went to Biu.’ ‘Ladi too/ as well plants peanuts.’

(3) Mtaku liha Biu dací.
   M. go Biu only
   ‘Mtaku went only to Biu.’

Analysis: Based on the data in (1)-(3), we propose the following analysis for Bura dací ‘only’:
(i.) dací always follows a focus constituent; (ii.) dací is focus-functional in the sense of Beaver & Clark (2003): Its focus associate must be clearly identifiable, which can be achieved either by means of formal focus marking with the particle an (1a, 2a), or by means of adjacency (3). Notice that non-subjects like the locative object Biu in (3) need not be formally marked for focus in Bura; (iii.) the semantic type of dací is flexible and hence it can combine both with NPs (1a, 3) and with sentences (2a) (Rooth 1985). In the latter case, dací associates with the set of alternative propositions induced by focus-marking on the subject (Rooth 1985). The syntactic structure of (2a) and its semantic representation are shown in (4ab):

(4) a. [TP [TP Mtaku an lihaBiu] dací ]
   b. [[dací]] (λw.x went to Biu in w| x ∈ {Mtaku, Kubili, Magira, Pindar, …}) = 1 iff
      ∀p∈{λw.x went to Biu in w| x∈ALT(Mtaku)}: p → p = λw. Mtaku went to Biu in w.

The assumption of a high structural position for dací in (4) is confirmed by the behaviour of the negation marker wa, which can also take scope over overtly marked focus constituents from sentence-final position:
The assumption of focus association at a distance mediated through the projection of focus alternatives also accounts for the possibility of association with *daci* into focus islands, cf. (6):

(6)  Iya bara [DP [NP su [CP ti Magira an naa aka Kubili]] ni ] daci
     ISG want thing REL M. FM give to K. DEF only
     ‘[Context: Various people gave things to Kubili, but …] I want only the thing that MAGIRA gave to Kubili.’

Structural differences between particles: Like *daci*, the particle *ma* occurs either adjacent (1b) or at a distance (2b) to the constituent it associates with. Unlike *daci*, though, the associate subject NP is not marked for focus by the focus marker *an* in (1b). Given that focus marking on subjects is obligatory in Bura, it follows that *ma* does not associate with a focus in (1b). Similarly, if the subject in (2b) is grammatically marked for focus by *an*, *ma* will no longer be able to associate with it. Instead, it must associate with the adjacent object, cf. (7):

(7)  Ladi an thlika *ma*.
     L. FM plant peanut too
     ‘It is Ladi that plants *whada* ma.
     Ladi, too, plants only peanuts.’     ‘It’s only Ladi that planted peanuts as well.’

We account for the data in (1b) and (7) by assuming that *ma* does not associate with focus, but with contrastive topics, as argued for stressed ‘*auch* ‘too’’ in Krifka (1999). Notice that contrastive topics induce alternatives, too (cf. Büring 1997). The account is based on the observation that formally unmarked subjects, such as *Ladi* in (1b), function as default topics in many languages of the world (Givón 1976). Having shown that *daci* and *ma* differ in their semantic status, we will explore whether the same argument can be extended to the second additive particle *tsuwa*, and whether the scalar particle *wala* has a semantic status of its own, as argued for *even, sogar* by Krifka (1992).

Particle combinations: Combinations of particles instantiate multiple association with focus (or contrastive topic) as discussed in Krifka (1991). The resulting readings depend in a compositional way on the relative structural position of the particles, cf. (8ab):

(8) a. [Ladi an thlika *daci* ma].  b. [Ladi an thlika *whada* ma] daci.
     L. HAB plant peanut only too L. FM plant peanut too only
     Ladi, too, plants *only* peanuts.’     ‘It’s only Ladi that planted peanuts as well.’

Similar effects are observable with combinations of *daci/ma* and negation, respectively. In sum, despite the fact that Bura differs typologically from the Indo-Germanic languages of Europe, the behaviour of focus/topic-sensitive particles is surprisingly similar: They serve to evaluate the meaning of a clause relative to a set of alternatives, they are subject to strict licensing conditions, and they interact with each other in a principled compositional way. This similarity makes these particles good candidates for a functional class with universal traits.