

Peripheral prominence

Katharina Hartmann (Invited speaker)

Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main

k.hartmann@lingua.uni-frankfurt.de

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The universal claim I will be concerned with in this talk is known as iconicity of complexity (e.g. Haiman 1980; 2000), which states that more complex meanings are expressed by more complex forms. In this talk, I investigate iconicity of complexity wrt focus interpretation. It has been argued that focus may be interpreted as either filling in some informational gap (new information focus, NIF) or expressing a contrast to a previously mentioned or contextually implied alternative (contrastive focus, CF, e.g. Krifka 2008). CF is informationally more complex than NIF and typically requires more complex structures. This provides a nice example of the iconic relation between the complexity of meaning and form.

In this talk, I discuss the formal expression of these two focus types in tone and intonation languages. Starting with the latter, it is well known that intonation languages use prosodic cues to express focus in general, typically in form of pitch accents on the focused constituent. With CF it has been argued that the increase of the fundamental frequency is stronger than in NIF. However, given the gradient nature of pitch, an unmistakable CF interpretation may be achieved only by syntactic fronting of the CF to the clausal left periphery as can be observed in many intonation languages. In tone languages, on the other hand, the modulation of tonal pitch for information-structural purposes is naturally reduced. Instead, tone languages to a greater extent use syntactic strategies to express CF. Thus, many languages exhibit an asymmetry between formally unmarked *in situ* focus expressing NIF, and marked word orders expressing CF. I will discuss evidence from various West African languages that exhibit this dichotomy. In many of these languages, the syntactic distribution of *in situ* NIF and *ex situ* CF can be considered a strong tendency, but not a strict correlation in that CF may also be realized *in situ*. This finding represents a challenge to the iconicity claim. I will also present hitherto unknown data from Eton, a Bantu language from Cameroon that exhibits an unexpectedly clearcut distinction between wh-phrases and NIF, which must be always realized *in situ*, and CF, which may appear sentence initially. Thus, even in a language with very few fronting options, the clausal left periphery represents a preferred position for prominent constituents.

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