

## Indirect truth marking via backgrounding: Evidence from Bantu

ACAL54 abstract

Verum focus (e.g. ‘Tess DID get her diploma’) has long been analysed as part of information structure (Höhle 1992), specifically as focus alternatives on a polarity value (cf. Rooth 1992). Recently, however, this view has been challenged, with Gutzmann et al. (2020) claiming that verum is a universal use-conditional operator VERUM (Romero & Han 2004, Gutzmann & Castoviejo-Miró 2011) that is distinct from focus. On the basis of data from Bura (Chadic) and Gitksan (Tsimshianic), which have a dedicated grammaticalised markers for verum in this pragmatic sense, they argue that the overlap between verum and focus marking in languages like English is only “superficial” (ibid:42), calling for the separation of verum from focus.

In this talk we challenge these conclusions on the basis of evidence from 11 Bantu languages. We present new field data on the expression of truth marking within the broader information structural systems of Tunen, Teke-Kukuya, Kirundi, Rukiga, Ékegusií, Kîitharaka, Kinyakyusa, Makuwa, Cicopi, Changana, and Cinyungwe. Aside from lexical means (particles ‘really’, periphrasis ‘I saw it’), these languages show a range of linguistic strategies in truth contexts, which are underspecified in their range of expression (cf. Güldemann’s 2016 ‘maximal backgrounding’). We propose an analysis in 4 degrees of underspecification:

1. **Complete underspecification.** A simple, unmarked verb form used in a verum context (identical in form to other contexts, e.g. thetics)
2. **Restriction to PCF.** Truth expression via defocusing of terms (arguments and adverbs), e.g. through dislocation, leaving an underspecified predicate-centred focus (PCF):

- (1) (You’re accused of not bathing the child, which was one of your tasks.)

**Ka-ană,** i tû-ka-thaamb-iir-i-e.  
12-child FOC 1PL.SM-12OM-wash-PFV-IC-FV  
‘The child, we did bathe him/her.’

[Kîitharaka]

3. **Restriction to polarity.** Defocusing not just terms but also the predicate, as in predicate doubling where the predicate is topicalised, which can be used in a simple yes/no context and in a dispute:

- (2) (Do you want to eat sugarcane?)

U-ku-londa tu-ku-lond-a.  
AUG-15-want 1PL.SM-PRS-want-FV  
‘We do want it.’

[Kinyakyusa]

4. **Restriction to verum.** A marker that can only be used in the dispute context, taken as the core diagnostic for pragmatic verum (instead of broader polarity focus; Matthewson & Glougie 2018):

- (3) A: He didn’t arrive.

B: (Ndi-ku-ku-wuz-a) a-fik-a=**di**  
1SG.SM-PRS-2SG.OM-say-FV 1SM-arrive-FV=VERUM  
‘(I’m telling you), he DID arrive!’

- (4) A: ‘Have you eaten?’

B: Nd-a-dy-a(=**di**).  
1SG.SM-PST-eat-FV=VERUM  
‘I have eaten.’

[Cinyungwe]

Considering these degrees of underspecification, we conclude that there are **three types of languages**:

- I. those where verum is marked as focus (German, English),
- II. those where verum is marked directly by a dedicated marker (Gitksan, Bura, Cinyungwe),
- III. those where verum is marked indirectly as one of the possible interpretations of backgrounding strategies (Kîitharaka, Kinyakyusa, etc.)

These types show that there is a non-superficial link between verum, polarity, and PCF. Moreover, while a (covert) VERUM operator could still be assumed to be universal, there is no evidence for its existence in types I and III. Finally, the Bantu type III data show that truth can be marked indirectly via backgrounding strategies, to variable degrees of underspecification.

## References

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