

A dedicated topic position in Kipsigis

Introduction: Data from African languages have played an important role in the advancement of theories of information structure, with a number of West African languages displaying a variety of topic and focus markers (see [Güldemann et al. 2015](#) for an overview). Less attention has been given to East African languages, many of which lack such markers (but see [Abels and Muriungi 2008](#), [Asiimwe and van der Wal 2020](#)). In this talk, we provide an investigation of a dedicated topic marker in Kipsigis (Nilotic; Kenya), based on data from original fieldwork with 4 speakers. On the empirical side, we provide the first, to our knowledge, semantic study of marked topicalization in a Nilotic language, and we show that topic markers might be more widespread in East African languages than previously thought (see also [Asiimwe and van der Wal 2020](#) on Rukiga). On the theoretical side, we show that the Kipsigis data provide clear evidence *against* analyzing contrastive topics in terms of focus ([Wagner 2012](#)), and support the typology of topic and focus in [Neeleman et al. \(2009\)](#). Furthermore, by investigating the interaction of the topic marker with scalar particles in the language, we argue that Kipsigis provides empirical support for the claim that scalar additive particles associate to focus differently than exclusive particles (e.g. [Grubic and Zimmermann 2011](#), [Zimmermann 2017](#), [Greenberg 2018](#)). **Kipsigis clausal syntax:** The pragmatically neutral word order in Kipsigis is VSO, but the language displays extensive scrambling post-verbally ([Bossi and Diercks 2019](#)). Even though the language generally has a strong verb-initial requirement, there is also a pre-verbal position, marked by the particle *ko*. Thus, all word order possibilities in (1) are grammatical. We focus in this talk on the interpretation of phrases in the *ko*-position, and refer the reader to [Bossi and Diercks \(2019\)](#) for the interpretational differences between VSO and VOS orders.

(1) ‘Kibeet ate ugali.’

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|----|----------------------|------------|----|------------|----------------------|
| a. | Kà-∅-ám Kíbê:t | kímpé:t. | c. | Kíbê:t kó | kà-∅-ám kímpé:t. |
| | PST-3-eat Kibeet.NOM | ugali | | Kibeet TOP | PST-3-eat ugali |
| b. | Kà-∅-ám kímpé:t | Kíbê:t. | d. | Kímpé:t kó | kà-∅-ám Kíbê:t. |
| | PST-3-eat ugali | Kibeet.NOM | | ugali TOP | PST-3-eat Kibeet.NOM |

We briefly note the syntactic properties of the *ko*-position. Only nominals can occupy this position, and they bear unmarked case there. This leads to a case alternation for subjects: they bear marked nominative post-verbally, but unmarked case pre-verbally (this is a general property of Nilotic languages with marked nominative case; [König 2006](#), [van Urk 2015](#)). *Ko* is *not* a case marker: it is an independent word that in fast speech cliticizes on the verb, and not the noun, and case in Kipsigis is generally marked via tone, not affixes ([Kouneli and Nie 2020](#)).

Ko marks topics: The most salient interpretation of phrases in the *ko*-position is that of a contrastive topic ([Büring 2003](#)), illustrated in (2) with an object DP. However, aboutness topics are also licensed in the *ko*-position: all consultants offer the sentence in (3) as an answer to a ‘tell me about X’ question ([Reinhart 1981](#)).

(2) **Context:** *We were at an event with many other people attending, and multiple dishes such as beans were available. Who ate what? Who ate beans? Who ate meat?*

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|----|----------------------|----------------------|----|-----------------------|------------------------|
| a. | ɲé:ndé:k kó | kà-∅-ám Kíbê:t. | b. | Pè:ndá kó | kà-∅-ám Tʃé:bê:t. |
| | beans TOP | PST-3-eat Kibeet.NOM | | meat TOP | PST-3-eat Cheebeet.NOM |
| | ‘Beans, Kibeet ate.’ | | | ‘Meat, Cheebeet ate.’ | |

(3) **Context:** *We are talking, Samantha is mentioned, and I ask ‘Tell me about Samantha!:*

Samantha kó ∅-méɲ-è Nairobi.
 Samantha TOP 3-live-IPFV Nairobi
 ‘Samantha lives in Nairobi.’

Ko is incompatible with focus: Focused elements are consistently infelicitous in the *ko*-position: answers to *wh*-questions (4), inherently focused phrases like *wh*-words (5), phrases with exclusive adverbs (6), and corrective focus (8).

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| <p>(4) Q: Kà-∅-ám n̄à: n̄é:ndé:k?
 PST-3-eat who.NOM beans
 ‘Who ate beans?’</p> <p>A: #Kìbê:t kó kà-∅-ám n̄é:ndé:k
 Kibeet TOP PST-3-eat beans
 Intended: ‘Kibeet ate beans.’</p> | <p>(5) *n̄â: kó kà-∅-ám pè:ndú?
 who TOP PST-3-eat meat
 Intended: ‘Who ate meat?’</p> <p>(6) *Kìbê:t ín̄é:ké:n kó kà-∅-só:màn kítàbú:t.
 Kibeet only TOP PST-3-read book
 Intended: ‘Only Kibeet read the book.’</p> |
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In line with the licensing of contrastive topics, the *ko*-position also resists exhaustive answers (9), and answers to maximal element contexts (10), see Constant (2014) for discussion.

Contrastive topic is not Focus: Due to the fact that both focus and contrastive topics invoke alternatives, Wagner (2012) analyzes contrastive topics in terms of nested focus operators. The Kipsigis data argue against such a theory: phrases in the *ko*-position are usually interpreted as contrastive topics, yet focus, including focus-sensitive *ín̄é:ké:n* ‘only’ (6), is never tolerated in that position (see also Zimmermann 2017 on Vietnamese). Furthermore, aboutness topics are also felicitous (see (3)), indicating that it is the notion of topichood and not the presence of alternatives that correctly predicts the possible readings of phrases in that position. The distribution of *ko*, therefore, supports theories in which the notion of contrast is dissociated from focus, such as Neeleman et al. (2009), where a typology of three semantic notions [topic], [focus], and [contrast] is proposed.

Scalar additive particles and ko: We focus on scalar meanings of subject-DPs. Interestingly, the equivalent of the English *even Peter* in (7) must appear in the *ko*-position, as shown by the infelicity of post-verbal orders (7-b). *Even* consists of two parts: obligatory *ogot*, which we gloss as *even* (though it may have non-scalar additive interpretations for non-subjects) and the optional, additive *àk ín̄ê:* ‘and him’, which follows the noun, but can also be ‘stranded’ at the end of the sentence (7-a) without an obvious semantic difference.

- (7) **Context:** *Although we know that Peter doesn’t like ugali, everyone at the party ate it. Even Peter ate ugali.* (van der Wal 2020: 82)
- a. Ógòt Peter (àk ín̄ê:) kó k̄i:-∅-ám kím̄pé:t (àk ín̄ê:).
 even Peter and 3SG TOP PST-3-eat ugali and 3SG
 ‘Even Peter ate ugali.’
- b. #k̄i:-∅-ám kím̄pé:t ógòt Peter (àk ín̄ê:)/ ógòt Peter (àk ín̄ê:) kím̄pé:t.
 PST-3-eat ugali even Peter and 3SG even Peter and 3SG ugali
 Intended: ‘Even Peter ate ugali.’

The fact that exclusives are illicit in the *ko*-position (6) whereas additives are licensed (7) calls for an analysis which allows for at least two kinds of association with alternatives (Rooth 1992, Beaver and Clark 2008) – one where focus adverbs associate with focus alternatives directly and one where they associate with a contextually bound variable. Additives seem to require the latter kind whereas exclusives require the former. Grubic and Zimmermann (2011) make a similar observation for Ngamo, where (scalar) additives are not licensed in dedicated focus positions. The data in Kipsigis, however, indicate that scalar additives do not only pattern differently from exclusives, but they also seem to be drawn to a dedicated topic position. This property of Kipsigis scalar additives does not straightforwardly follow from existing analyses, including those that make a connection between scalar additives and contrastive topics (Zimmermann 2017, Greenberg 2018).

- (8) **Context:** *I tell you that Kibeet is sleeping. But you know that Kibeet is awake, and Cheebeet is sleeping instead. We have this exchange:.*

A: Ø-rú-è Kíbê:t. B: #Â:tjà, Tʃè:bê:t kó Ø-rú-è.
 3-sleep-IPFV Kibeet.NOM no Cheebeet TOP 3-sleep-IPFV
 ‘Kibeet is sleeping.’ ‘No, Cheebeet is sleeping.’

- (9) **Exhaustive answer context**

Q: Kà-Ø-sí:ndàn ɲà: ɲwàê:k? A: #Kíbê:t kó kà-Ø-sí:ndàn ɲwàê:k.
 PST-3-win who.NOM race Kibeet TOP PST-3-win race
 ‘Who won the race?’ ‘Kibeet won the race.’

- (10) **Maximal element context**

Q: Kà-Ø-bún kàrí:t-à:p má:t àjní:n?
 PST-3-take car-POSS fire which
 ‘Which train did they take?’
 A: (Pí:k) àlák/ #túyòl kó kà-Ø-bún kàrí:t-à:p má:t né tà:j.
 people some/ all TOP PST-3-take car-POSS fire REL.SG first
 ‘Some/all (people) took the first train.’

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