Morphological Focus Marking in Gùrùntùm (West Chadic)

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Abstract
The paper presents an in-depth study of focus marking in Gùrùntùm, a West Chadic language spoken in Bauchi State in Nigeria. Focus in Gùrùntùm is marked morphologically by means of a focus marker $a$, which typically precedes the focused constituent. Even though the morphological focus-marking system of Gùrùntùm allows for a lot of fine-grained distinctions in information structure (IS), the language is not entirely free of focus ambiguities that are the result of conflicting IS- and syntactic requirements governing the placement of focus markers. We show that morphological focus marking with $a$ applies across different types of focus, such as new-information, contrastive, selective and corrective focus, and that $a$ does not have a second function as a perfective marker, as is assumed in the literature. In contrast, we argue that sentence-final occurrences of $a$ in perfective sentences are markers of sentential focus and have additional functions at the level of discourse structure.

Keywords
focus; morphological focus marking; focus ambiguity; focus types; perfectivity; sentential focus

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1. Introduction

In this paper, we present an in-depth study of focus marking in Gùrùntùm, a West Chadic language spoken in Bauchi State in Northern Nigeria. In the introduction, we lay out our ideas on the notion of focus as an information-structural (IS) category, and present some background information on Gùrùntùm. In section 2, we present the basic pattern of focus marking in Gùrùntùm: Focus is marked by means of a morphological focus marker $a$, which usually precedes the focused constituent. Section 3 discusses predicate focus on V/VP and focus on parts of complex NPs. We show that focus marking is subject to at least two syntactic restrictions that sometimes give rise to focus ambiguity. Section 4 shows that various functionally motivated types of focus found in the literature (new-information, contrastive, selective, corrective) are marked alike by means of the focus marker $a$. Section 5 shows that $a$ does not have a secondary function as a perfective marker despite claims to the contrary in the literature. In section 6, we extend the discussion of focus marking to the clausal level. There, we analyse sentence-final occurrences of $a$ as markers of sentential focus. They serve to highlight bounded or completed events, which are typically expressed by perfective or presentational clauses, and which contribute to the main story line of a narrative sequence. In this function, the $a$-marker imposes structure on larger discourse sequences by combining individual sentences into larger informational units. Section 7 concludes.

1.1. Focus as an information-structural category

We adopt the following characterization of focus: Focus stands for that information component that is new or important in the sense that the speaker assumes it not to be shared by him and the hearer (Jackendoff 1972). We further assume, following Rooth (1985, 1992), that grammar assigns to a focused constituent $\alpha ([\alpha])$ a set $A$ of alternatives to $\alpha$ which includes $\alpha$ itself. Depending on the interaction of $\alpha$ with its alternatives, a focus can be used...
in different ways, giving rise to several focus types: (i.) a focus expresses new-information if 
\( \alpha \) introduces an element of A into the common ground and the alternatives to \( \alpha \) are not 
mentioned (1a); (ii.) a focus is corrective if \( \alpha \) replaces an element of A introduced into the 
common ground in the preceding context (1b); (iii.) a focus is selective if \( \alpha \) introduces an 
element of A into the common ground, and \( \alpha \) is chosen from a subset of A whose members 
have been explicitly mentioned in the preceding context (1c). Focus is called contrastive if \( \alpha \) 
 juxtaposes an element of A to one or more explicitly mentioned elements of A that belong to 
the same syntactic category and the same semantic word field (1d).

(1)  a.  (Which color did Peter paint his bicycle?) He painted it [blue]$_F$.
   \[ \alpha = \text{blue}, A = \{\text{blue, red, green, pink,\ldots}\} \]

   b.  (Peter painted his bicycle red.) No, he painted it [blue]$_F$.
   \[ \alpha = \text{blue}, A = \{\text{blue, red, green, pink,\ldots}\} \]

   c.  (Did Peter paint his bicycle red or blue?) He painted it [blue]$_F$.
   \[ \alpha = \text{blue}, A = \{\text{blue, red, green, pink,\ldots}\} \]

   \[ \alpha = \text{blue}, A = \{\text{blue, red, green, pink,\ldots}\} \]

1.2. **Background information on Gùrùntùm and methodology**

Gùrùntùm is a highly endangered language spoken by less than 10 000 people (in 1988) in the South West corner of Bauchi State in Nigeria. It belongs to the South Bauchi group of the West Chadic B-subbranch of the Chadic family (Afro-Asiatic phylum) (see Newman 1977). Linguistic information on Gùrùntùm is scarce. The two main sources are a grammatical sketch plus word list by Jaggar (1988), and a grammar by Haruna (2003).
The neutral word order in Gùrùntùm is SVO(X), as shown in (2) (Haruna 2003:121). There is no overt inflection for case on NPs whose grammatical role must be deduced from their positioning relative to the verb. Aspectual information is marked by independent morphemes preceding the verb, such as the progressive marker bà in (2) (Haruna 2003:83).1

(2) Tí bà wúm kwålingálá.

3SG PROG chew colanut

‘He is chewing colanut.’

At the phonological level, Gùrùntùm is a tone language with two level tones H (´) and L (´), plus a falling (^) and (very rarely) a rising tone combination (Haruna 2003:26).

Our data were mainly elicited from Al Haji Umaru Muhammed Gùrùntùm, an approximately 50-year old native speaker of the Gürdùŋ-Kùukù dialect, who uses Gùrùntùm on an everyday base in his local community. Some additional data were drawn from Andrew Haruna, now a resident of Maiduguri (Borno State), but also a speaker of Gùrùntùm. We are aware of the fact that working with only one or two consultants bears the danger of generalizing idiosyncrasies of certain speakers to characteristic traits of a language. Nonetheless, the internal consistency of the judgments given by our consultants, as well as their consistency with the data reported in Jaggar (1988) and Haruna (2003) makes us feel confident that the data presented in the present article constitute an integral part of the grammatical system of Gùrùntùm.

2. The Basic Pattern of Focus Marking in Gùrùntùm

This section presents the basic pattern of focus marking in Gùrùntùm. The central observation is that focus in Gùrùntùm is morphologically marked by a focus marker \( a \): With focused terms, such as arguments and adjuncts, \( a \) precedes the focused constituent. A second observation concerns the phonological behaviour of the focus marker \( a \): If \( a \) follows the main verb directly, for instance, if it marks the following object for focus, it phonologically cliticizes onto the preceding verb. In other environments, \( a \) forms a phonological phrase with the subsequent focused constituent.

In 2.1 we show that focus marking consistently occurs with all major constituents. In 2.2 it is shown that focus marking is consistent across various aspects (and tenses). In 2.3, we show that the focused constituent can occur *in situ* or *ex situ*, as long as it is preceded by the focus marker \( a \).

2.1. Consistent focus marking on all major constituents

The following data illustrate that morphological focus marking by means of \( a \) is consistent across categories in Gùrùntùm. Compare the all-new sentence in (2), with instances of narrow constituent focus in (3) and (4). (3a) and (4a) illustrate subject focus, (3b) and (4b) illustrate focus on the direct object. Throughout, we mark the focused constituent in the Gùrùntùm examples by italics, and narrow constituent focus in the English paraphrases by capitals.

(3) a. Q: Á kwá bà wúm kwálingálá-i?

   FOC who PROG chew colanut-DEF

   ‘WHO is chewing the colanut?’
A: Á ſũrmáyò bà wúm kwálingálá.
FOC fulani PROG chew colanut
‘THE FULANI is chewing colanut.’

b. Q: Á kãã mái tí bà wúm?  
FOC what REL 3SG PROG chew
‘WHAT is he chewing?’
A: Tí bà wúm-á kwálingálá.  
3SG PROG chew-FOC colanut
‘He is chewing COLANUT.’

(4) a. Q: Á kwá bà pán má-i?  
FOC who PROG carry water-DEF
‘WHO is carrying the water?’
A: Á Hàfsá bà pán má-i.  
FOC Hafsa PROG carry water-DEF
‘HAFSA is carrying the water.’

b. Q: Á kãã mái tí bà páni?  
FOC what REL 3SG PROG carry
‘WHAT is he carrying?’
A: Tí bà pán-á máa.  
3SG PROG carry-FOC water
‘He is carrying WATER.’

Notice that the focus marker prosodically cliticizes onto the immediately preceding verb in (3b) and (4b). There are two kinds of evidence for cliticization of the focus marker on the
preceding verb: First, verb and focus marker are prosodically phrased as one unit, and the following constituent as another. This means that if there is a pause in the clause, it will be located between focus marker and object, and not between verb and focus marker. Second, the final vowel of the verb is elided, as is normally the case before direct objects, and the focus marker is assigned the tone of the elided vowel, thus preserving the underlying tonal structure of the verb.\(^2\) In section 5.3, we will turn to the tonal behaviour of the focus marker \(a\) in more detail. It will be argued that the focus marker \(a\) is lexically unspecified for tone, and that its surface tone systematically follows from its syntactic and phonological context. For the moment, suffice it to say that the surface tonal shape of \(a\) is not fixed in Gùrùntùm. In some cases, \(a\) carries a low tone, in others it carries a high tone.

The examples in (5) and (6) illustrate constituent focus on indirect objects and on locative adjuncts, respectively. Compare (6a) with focus on the locative \(gáá\ shindí\ ‘on the stone’ with its all-new counterpart with wide sentential focus and no focus marker in (6b).

(5) Q: Tí bà wúr má-i à kwá?
3SG PROG bring water-DEF FOC who
‘TO WHOM is he bringing the water?’
A: Tí bà wúr má-i à bàa-sì.
3SG PROG bring water-DEF FOC father-his
‘He is bringing the water TO HIS FATHER.’

\(^2\) With some verbs, such as the LH verb \(nyòolí\ ‘to write’ in (i), vowel elision does not apply for reasons unclear to us.

(i) Q: À kwá bà nyòolí gíbo-ì?
FOC who PROG write message-DEF
‘WHO is writing the message?’
A: À Háfsá bà nyòolí gíbo-ì.
FOC Háfsá PROG write message-DEF
‘HAFSA IS writing the message.’
(6) a. Q: Ti bà dáan-à yâu?
   3SG PROG sit-FOC where
   ‘WHERE is he sitting?’
   A: Ti bà dáan-à gãã̀ shìndí.
   3SG PROG sit-FOC head stone
   ‘He is sitting ON THE STONE.’

b. Ti bà dàa gãã̀ shìndí.
   3SG PROG sit head stone
   ‘He is sitting on the stone.’

So far, we have restricted our attention to focus marking on nominal categories such as arguments and adjuncts. In section 3, we will see that focus marking is also possible on predicative expressions, such as VP and V, with one additional complication.

2.2. **Consistent focus marking across aspects/tenses**

Focus in Gùrùntùm is consistently marked across aspects and tenses by means of the focus marker *a*. Focus marking in the progressive aspect has already been illustrated in (3) to (6). (7a-c) illustrate morphological focus marking in the perfective aspect. In (7ab), focus is on the direct object. In (7c), focus is on the temporal adjunct.³ Again, *a* cliticizes onto the immediately preceding verb.

(7) a. Q: Á kâã màì ti wùmì?
   FOC what REL 3SG chew
   ‘WHAT did he chew?’
   A: Ti wùm-à kwâlingàlá.
   3SG chew-FOC colanut
   ‘He chewed COLANUT.’

FOC what REL 3SG wash yesterday 3SG wash-FOC clothes

‘WHAT did she wash yesterday?’ ‘She washed CLOTHES.’


3SG wash clothes-DEF when 3SG wash-FOC yesterday

‘WHEN did she wash the clothes?’ ‘She washed them YESTERDAY.’

Finally, (8ab) show focus marking in future clauses. In (8a), focus is on the direct object. In (8b), focus is on the subject.4

(8) a. Q: Á kāā mài Ædâmū à pání?

FOC what REL Adamu FUT carry

‘WHAT will Adamu carry?’

A: Á máa mài Ædâmū à pání.

FOC water REL Adamu FUT carry

‘Adamu will carry WATER.’

3 The temporal wh-expression vùr múkãèã ‘when’ constitutes an exception to the rule in that it is not preceded by the a-marker.

4 We have found no evidence for focus marking in subjunctive clauses, e.g. in complements to intensional predicates, cf. (i):

(i) Q: A kāā mai ti ba baa Hawwa ti pani?

FOC what REL 3SG PROG want H. 3SG carry

‘WHAT does he want Hawwa to carry?’

A: Ti baa Hawwa si ti pan maa.

3SG want H. C 3SG carry water

‘He wants Hawwa to carry WATER.’

Possibly, the absence of the a-marker has to do with a general impossibility of focus marking in intensional contexts. A similar situation obtains in Hausa, where (syntactic) focus marking is also blocked in subjunctive clauses, see e.g. Tuller (1986) and Jaggar (2006ab).
b. Q: Á kwá à pân má-i?

FOC who FUT carry water-DEF

‘WHO will carry the water?’

A: Á Àdàmú à pân má-i.

FOC Adamu FUT carry water-DEF

‘ADAMU will carry the water.’

2.3. Realising focus in situ or ex situ

In addition to the focus marker a, a focused non-subject can be realized ex situ in a left-peripheral position. More frequently, though, the focused constituent remains in its base position (in situ). Both options are also attested for inherently focused wh-expressions in wh-questions (see also Haruna 2003:126ff.).

In (9a), the focused object is realised ex situ in the wh-question and in situ in the corresponding answer. In (9b), we have the same wh-question, but this time the focused wh-expression and the focused constituent in the answer appear in situ.6


FOC what REL 3SG sell out 3SG sell-FOC goat out

‘WHAT did he sell?’ ‘He sold a GOAT.’

b. Q: Ti yáb-à kãã ngwái? A: Ti yáb-à g′uuri ngwái.

3SG sell-FOC what out 3SG sell-FOC millet out

‘WHAT did he sell?’ ‘He sold (THE) MILLET.’

5 Exceptions are the wh-expressions yàu ‘where’ and kãmã ‘how’, which can only occur in their base position at the end of the clause (cf. Haruna 2003:130ff.).

6 Other examples with in situ wh-expressions are found in (5), (6a), and (7c).
In (10), the focused constituent is realised *ex situ* both in the *wh*-question and in the corresponding answer:

(10) Q: Á kã̀á màí tì náa wálì?

FOC what REL 3SG catch farm

‘WHAT did he catch on the farm?’

A: Á fúl màí tì náa wálì.

FOC cow REL 3SG catch farm

‘It is a COW that he caught on the farm.’

The *ex situ* realization of non-subject foci employs a relative structure containing the relative marker *mài* (Jaggar 1988:181, Haruna 2003:121).

(11) Tì tùu már màí wúr mólán-ý-à.⁷

3PL pay man REL bring fish-DEF-FOC

‘They paid the man that brought the fish.’

The presence of relative syntax argues for a cleft-structure for the *ex situ* focus-construction. For concreteness, we assume a reversed cleft-structure as in (10’) for the answer in (10). In (10’), the focused constituent functions as the underlying predicate of a predicative construction, the subject of which is an empty-headed free relative clause. The predicate is moved to sentence-initial position by means of predicate inversion. This analysis is consistent with the discussion of predicative constructions in section 4.5.

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⁷ The occurrence of sentence-final *a* will be discussed in section 6.
Interestingly, the relative marker cannot occur with focused subjects, indicating that this construction is impossible with (focused) subjects in Gùrùntùm. In (12) the relative marker mai must be absent both in the *wh*-question and in the corresponding answer.


‘WHO read the book?’ ‘HAFSA read the book.’

It is worth pointing out that the absence of mai in (12) does not follow from a general impossibility of subject relativization, as witnessed by the subject relative clause in (13):

(13) Gumar [mai pan daabii] ti ba maa bavuli.

‘The boy that carried the basket is going to the market.’

Notice that the *ex situ* focused constituent always has to be accompanied by the morphological focus marker *a*. In this respect, Gùrùntùm resembles intonation languages such as German or English, in which the obligatory focus marking by means of pitch accent in (14a) can also be accompanied by additional clefting in (14b).

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8 Parallel facts are reported for Marghi (Hoffmann 1963). The reverse pattern is found in Hdi, where focused preverbal subjects are followed by a comment marker *ta*, whereas this marker is absent with all other fronted constituents (Frajzyngier 2002).
Context: What did Peter sell?

a. He sold A CAT.

b. It was A CAT that he sold (and not A DOG).

We conclude that the primary means of focus marking in Gūrūntūm is the morphological focus marker $a$, which would make it the formal counterpart to pitch accent in intonation languages. Concerning the motivation for realizing focus ex situ, this may have to do with pragmatic notions such as surprise, or the degree of (un)expectedness of a focused constituent in a particular discourse context: The more unexpected or surprising a focused constituent is in a particular context, the more likely is it to be realised ex situ. This explanation follows Hartmann and Zimmermann (2007b) and Zimmermann (2008), who argue that the ex situ realisation of focused constituents (or parts thereof) in Hausa, another West Chadic language, is best accounted for using the pragmatic notions of surprise or unexpectedness. The data in (15) suggest that this pragmatic explanation may also be correct for Gūrūntūm. In an elicitation study, our informant was asked to provide spontaneous answers to wh-questions of the form What did Audu catch? Interestingly, he chose the in situ variant with domestic animals, such as dog and horse (cf. 15a). With rare wild animals such as crocodile and leopard, in contrast, he chose the ex situ variant (cf. 15b).

(15) a. Q: Á kāā māi Audu nāa?

FOC what REL Audu catch

‘WHAT did Audu catch?’

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9 The idea that material which is more surprising, more important, or more relevant is marked in a special way is already present in Gundel’s (1988) First Things First Principle, Givón’s (1988) principle Attend to the most urgent task first, or in Legendre’s (2001) constraint Align Noteworthy.
A: Ti ná-a dììu / dàa.  

3SG catch-FOC horse / dog

‘Audu caught A HORSE / DOG.’

b. Q: Á kãã mái Áudù náa?

FOC what REL Audu catch

‘WHAT did Audu catch?’

A: Á gàmshi / gúù mái Áudù náa.  

FOC crocodile / leopard REL Audu catch

‘Audu caught A CROCODILE / LEOPARD.’

Summing up, in addition to being marked by the focus marker $a$, non-subject foci can also be realised ex situ. The obligatory presence of the morphological focus marker indicates the focus status of the constituent, whereas the trigger for movement seems to be more pragmatic in nature and may have to do with the status of a non-subject focused constituent as surprising, noteworthy, or unexpected in a particular discourse situation.

2.4. Summary

The main observations of section 2 can be summarised as follows: First, constituent focus on arguments or adjuncts in Gùrùntùm is marked morphologically by a focus marker $a$, which precedes the focused constituent. Second, the focus marker $a$ occurs in all aspects. Third, focused constituents can occur in situ or ex situ (in a cleft-like structure).

3. Focus Ambiguity and Syntactic Restrictions on Focus Marking

In this section, we consider how focus is marked on VP- or V-predicates and on parts of complex NPs. The central observation is that even though the morphological focus-marking
system of Guruntum allows for a lot of fine-grained distinctions in the focus structure, the language is not entirely free of focus ambiguities. In particular, predicate focus on VP or V and object (OBJ-) focus are marked alike by placing the focus marker before the object. Likewise, focus on subparts of a complex NP and focus on the entire NP are marked alike by putting the focus marker before the complex NP. We argue that the two instances of focus- ambiguity in Guruntum follow from syntactic restrictions on the placement of the focus marker a.

3.1. Predicate focus on V and VP

Turning to predicate focus first, (16a-c) show that V-, and VP-focus are marked in identical fashion to OBJ-focus, resulting in focus ambiguity. Even though the focused constituent is the VP in (16a) and the main verb in (16b), the focus marker does not precede the verb (phrase) as we would expect given the generalization from section 2.1. Instead, the focus marker follows the verb and precedes the direct object.\(^\text{10}\) The resulting structures are ambiguous to sentences with constituent focus on the direct object, as in (16c).

\[ (16) \quad \text{a. Q: } \text{Á } k\text{"a} \text{ mài } \text{tí } \text{bà } \text{pi?} \]

FOC what REL 3SG PROG do

‘WHAT is he doing?’

A: Ti bà ròmb-á g"èi. \hspace{0.5cm} VP

3SG PROG gather-FOC seeds

‘He is GATHERING THE SEEDS.’

\(^{10}\) A reviewer points out that the more natural answer to (16b-Q) and (17b-Q) would contain an object pronoun (He is gathering them), which in this variety of Guruntum is realized as zero in the 3rd person. We discuss such cases in (19) and (20) below.
b. Q: Á kãá mái tí bà pi náa gʷei?

FOC what REL 3SG PROG do with seeds

‘WHAT is he doing with the seeds?’

A: Tí bà ròmb-á gʷei. V

3SG PROG gather-FOC seeds

‘He is GATHERING the seeds.’

c. Q: Á kãá mái tí bà rómbi?

FOC what REL 3SG PROG gather

‘WHAT is he gathering?’

A: Tí bà ròmb-á gwéì. OBJ

3SG PROG gather-FOC seeds

‘He is gathering THE SEEDS.’

(17a-c) illustrate the same focus ambiguity with another example:

(17) a. Q: Á kãá mái tí bà pi?

FOC what REL 3SG PROG do

‘WHAT is he doing?’

A: Tí bà wùm-á kwálingálá. VP

3SG PROG chew-FOC colanut

‘He is CHEWING (A) COLANUT.’

b. Q: Á kãá mái tí bà pi náa kwálingálá-lí?

FOC what REL 3SG PROG do to colanut-DEF

‘WHAT is he doing with the colanut?’
Interestingly, a parallel focus ambiguity between VP-, V-, and OBJ-focus is found in Tangale, a West Chadic cousin of Gùrùntùm, see Hartmann and Zimmermann (2007a).

The ambiguity between VP-focus and OBJ-focus is found in a wide variety of languages and can be accounted for in terms of focus projection, that is the expansion of the focus domain from the focus-marked constituent (i.e. the object) to a larger constituent that constitutes the domain of focus (i.e. the VP) and which contains the grammatically marked constituent (see Selkirk 1984, 1995). The ambiguity between narrow focus on the verb and OBJ-focus, however, is a case that has – to the best of our knowledge – never been observed or discussed in the literature. Nor is it accounted for by standard theories of focus (projection), such as Selkirk’s (1984, 1995). The main question is why narrow focus on the verb should be marked on the following object, or alternatively why the focus marker cannot precede the verb in (16b) and (17b), as well as in the VP-focus cases in (16a) and (17a).

A potential solution, suggested by Büring (to appear), is that the focus marker does indeed precede the verb or the VP at an earlier stage of the derivation. In the course of the
derivation, the verb moves to a higher functional head F, leaving the focus marker behind in a position preceding the object. This potential derivation is sketched schematically in (18ab):

(18) a. underlying structure:

\[ [FP \text{ SUBJ } F \ a \ [VP \ V \ OBJ]] \]

b. surface structure:

\[ [FP \text{ SUBJ } V+F \ a \ [VP tV \ OBJ]] \]

A parallel analysis that assumes verb movement to the functional projection *Infl* has been proposed by Tuller (1992) for Tangale.

Tempting as the analysis in (18ab) may be, there are good arguments against it. First, verb movement to *Infl* in Tangale is argued to take place only in the perfective aspect because this is the only aspect without a preverbal aspectual marker. As a result, the verb has to move to *Infl* in order to enter into a checking relation with this functional head and pick up the required aspectual specification (Tuller 1992:311). In contrast, the *Infl*-position in (16) and (17) is lexically filled by the progressive auxiliary *bà*. Thus, if there were head movement of the verb in (16) and (17), leaving behind the focus marker as in (18), this movement would have to target a functional projection lower than *Infl*. We would need to stipulate this functional projection only for the sake of the movement account, somewhat reducing its appeal.

There is also a strong empirical argument against the movement account, which comes from the behaviour of sentences with narrow verb focus and a 3sg inanimate object pronoun. In Gùrùntùm, object pronouns cliticize onto the verb. Furthermore, 3sg object pronouns are covert, at least in the variant of Gùrùntùm that we investigated. Interestingly, focus marking

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11 See e.g. Selkirk (1984, 1995) for English, Uhmann (1991) for German, Schwarz (2007) for Kikuyu, and
on the verb is absent with zero 3sg object pronouns, as shown in (19) and (20). Compare (19b) and (20b) with a full lexical object NP and the focus marker preceding the object NP, with (19a) and (20a), which contain a zero object pronoun and no focus marker:

(19)  

(a) Context: What is he doing with the car?  

a. Tí bà  kró.  

3SG PROG repair  

‘He is REPAIRING (it).’  

b. Tí bà  kr-á  dúso-i.  

3SG PROG repair-FOC car-DEF  

‘He is REPAIRING the car.’

(20)  

(a)  

3SG NEG fry meat-DEF-FOC NEG 3SG cook  

‘She did not fry the meat, she COOKED it.’

b. Ti da wasar laam-i-a da, ti kur-a laam-i.  

3SG NEG fry meat-DEF-FOC NEG 3SG cook-FOC meat-DEF  

‘She did not fry the meat, she COOKED the meat.’

The empirical generalization is that focused verbs without a following overt nominal object cannot be focus-marked by a. The movement account does not capture this generalization

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12 The preverbal negation marker in (20ab) appears not to be genuine to Gürüntüm, but is probably a structural borrowing from Hausa, in which negation is marked by the negative parenthesis ba … bá. As for the VP-final focus marker in the negated first clause in (20ab), as well as in (31ab) below, it does not mark narrow focus on the verb. In section 6, we show that the a-marker can also be used to focus on the meaning of entire clauses, or rather on the events denoted by these clauses, when it occurs in sentence-final position. As for (20ab), we assume that the a-marker fulfils the same function: It marks focus on the affirmative part of the
because it would predict the focus marker to follow the verb in (19a) and (20a), as it does in (19b) and (20b). Instead, we propose the following categorial restriction on focus marking in Gùrùntùm:

\[(21) \quad ^{*}\text{FocV:}\]

No Focus Marking on verbal categories.

According to (21), the focus marker \(a\) must not precede Vs and VPs. Instead, it will typically occur before NPs. Notice that a similar bias for focus marking on non-verbal constituents is found in several other Chadic languages, see Hartmann and Zimmermann (2007a,b) for details.15

The restriction in (21) accounts for the absence of the focus marker in (19a) and (20a). Furthermore, it also accounts for the focus ambiguity between VP-, V-, and OBJ-focus with clause, or the event expressed by this clause, which is in the scope of the negation operator. We will have to leave a thorough discussion of the interaction of focus marking and negation for another occasion.

Another possible way of accounting for the absence of the \(a\) marker in (19a) and (20a) would be to assume that the morphological focus marker is blocked from preceding pronominal expressions. The example in (i), where the the \(a\) marker precedes an independent pronoun, seems to provide evidence against this alternative explanation (no tones available).

\[(i) \quad \text{A kadi pani yuŋsu gi}(i) ŋəŋ gari.\]

‘SHE went to the left.’

Notice that the independent form, which must be used whenever the pronoun is focused, is the same for subjects and objects; cf. Haruna (2003: 55, 139) for additional examples. Although we lack the counterparts to (19a) and (20a) with focused in situ pronouns in our data, we tentatively conclude that it is not the pronominal status of the direct object that prevents the \(a\) marker from occurring in (19a) and (20a).

The absence of the focus marker in (19a) and (20a) does not follow from independent phonological reasons. In section 6, we show that the \(a\)-marker can occur in sentence-final position in principle, where it follows the transitive verb and a zero object pronoun (see also fn. 12). Indeed, sentences such as (i) from Haruna (2003:78) are grammatical on a neutral interpretation with sentential focus.

\[(i) \quad \text{Tí yil-à.}\]

‘He took (it) there.’

Section 6 discusses such sentence-final occurrences of \(a\) in perfective sentences in more detail.

(21) is not violated by instances of focus marking on locative adverbials either, such as \(gāa\) shindi ‘on the stone’ in (6a). As in other Chadic languages, Gùrùntùm has few prepositions proper. Locative and temporal relations are typically expressed by means of nominal expressions such as \(gāa\), which literally translates as ‘head’. Consequently, the occurrence of the \(a\)-marker before the relational noun in locative adverbials is expected.
lexical object NPs, illustrated in (16) and (17). Because of (21), the focus marker a must precede the object in transitive VPs no matter whether object, verb, or VP is in focus.\footnote{All by itself, (21) does not explain why the focus marker a cannot occur before the subject NP with V- or VP-focus. Its obligatory occurrence before the object NP with V- and VP-focus follows from an additional locality principle, which requires a focus to be marked on, or as close as possible to the focus constituent, see Zimmermann (2006).}

3.2. Complex NPs

A second instance of focus ambiguity is found with complex NPs of the form $N_1$ of $N_2$. It shows that narrow focus on the $N_2$-part and wider focus on the entire complex NP are marked in the same way: The focus-marker must precede the complex NP, no matter whether the complex expression $N_1$ of $N_2$ is focused (22-Q1), or just $N_2$ (22-Q2). Again, the same ambiguity is found in Tangale (Kenstowicz 1985).

(22) Q1: Á [dòoré-i kwâ] mái ti bà pi méérè?
FOC goat-DEF who REL 3SG PROG do theft
‘WHOSE goat is he stealing?’
Q2: Á kâá mái ti bà pi méérè?
FOC what REL 3SG PROG do theft
‘WHAT is he stealing?’
FOC goat-DEF king (REL 3SG PROG do theft)
‘He is stealing THE KING’S GOAT. / He is stealing THE KING’S goat.’

In view of the data in (22), we propose the following descriptive restriction on focus marking in Gùrùntùm in (23):
(23) \[ \text{FOCNP}_{\text{MAX}}: \]

If the focused constituent is part of a complex NP, focus must be marked on the complex NP.

We can see at least two possible reasons for why (23) should hold, remaining neutral on which one is more adequate in the absence of further empirical evidence. First, it could be that the nominal parts of the complex NP are not NPs, but nominal heads. An N-N structure for structurally analogous complex NPs has been proposed for Bole by Schuh and Gimba (2004). If this is the right analysis for this type of complex NPs, \( \text{FOCNP}_{\text{MAX}} \) in (23) would generalize to a syntactic constraint \( \text{FOCXP} \), which says that focus can only be marked on maximal projections. The assumption of \( \text{FOCXP} \) is motivated by the fact that there is no evidence for focus marking on sub-phrasal constituents, for instance on aspectual markers, in our corpus, nor is focus on sub-constituents attested in other Chadic languages (see Hartmann and Zimmermann 2007b).

Alternatively, the restriction in (23) could be the direct effect of more general prosodic constraints on the placement of the focus marker \( a \): As has been observed for other West Chadic languages, complex NPs are mapped onto single phonological phrases. Evidence for this comes from the fact that certain tonal processes that are typically blocked at prosodic boundaries can apply across the two nominal subparts of complex NPs; see Kenstowicz (1985) for Tangale and Schuh and Gimba (2004) for Bole. If the same holds for Gùrùntùm, the complex NPs in (22) would form a single phonological phrase. Assuming that the \( a \)-marker can only occur at the edge of such phonological phrases, its position preceding the entire NP follows.
3.3. *On the interaction of IS-constraints and structural constraints in focus marking*

In the preceding two sub-sections, we have encountered two facts about the distribution of the Gùrùntùm focus marker *a*, which are surprising when seen from the perspective of European intonation languages. First, the focus marker *a* sometimes does not precede the focused constituent. This happens with instances of V- and VP-focus. Second, the focus marker is sometimes completely absent. This happens with instances of narrow verb focus in the presence of a pronominalized (zero) object.

As a solution to these puzzles, we suggested that the distribution of the focus marker *a* is not only subject to *information-structural*, but also to general *structural* constraints with sometimes conflicting requirements. A likely candidate for an information-structural constraint is Focus Prominence (*FP*, see e.g. Jackendoff 1972, Truckenbrodt 1995, Schwarzschild 1999, Büring 2001, Selkirk 2004), which is satisfied by the focus marker *a* on the focused constituent in Gùrùntùm.

(24) \[
\text{FP:}
\]

The focused constituent must be prominent.

Notice that on this account FP is directly satisfied by the presence of the morphological marker on the focus constituent, and not by prosodic prominence, setting aside from earlier implementations of FP. Alternatively, one could speculate that the *a*-marker marks the focus domain as prosodically prominent, see Büring (to appear) for relevant discussion. In addition to FP, there are the two structural constraints *\text{FocV in (21) and FocNP}_{\text{MAX in (23)}}*, where the latter is a descriptively convenient specific instantiation of the more general syntactic or prosodic constraints discussed below (23), which interact with FP in determining the position of the focus marker.
This is reminiscent of intonation languages where the placement of the focus-marking pitch accent is also subject to interacting, and sometimes conflicting information-structural, phonological, and syntactic constraints (cf. Büring 2001, Büring and Gutiérrez-Bravo 2001). The main difference between Gùrùntùm on the one hand, and intonation languages like German (as explicated by Büring) on the other, is that the focus marker need not be located directly on the focused constituent in Gùrùntùm, but that it can shift to the following nominal constituent, e.g. with predicate focus. In extreme cases, focus marking may even be completely absent. This happens with narrow verb focus when there is no overt object NP to serve as the carrier of the focus marker $a$ in accordance with *FocV in (21). The cross-linguistic differences follow directly if we assume a different ranking of the IS-constraint FP and the structural constraints in the two languages. In intonation languages, the IS-constraint FP in (24) is undominated, hence never violated (Schwarzschild 1999, Büring 2001), and outranks all structural constraints that govern the placement of pitch accent. As a result, a focused constituent will always be prosodically marked by means of a pitch accent somewhere on the constituent. In Gùrùntùm, in contrast, the structural constraints *FocV and FocNP$_{MAX}$ outrank the IS-constraint FP. The cross-linguistic differences in ranking are illustrated schematically in (25):

(25) a. Ranking in Gùrùntùm: structural constraints $>$ FP
    b. Ranking in intonation languages: FP $>$ structural constraints
Summing up, the dislocation or absence of the focus marker *a* in Gùrùntùm follows from the fact that structural constraints outrank the IS-constraint FP, which requires that focus must be marked on the focused constituent.\(^{17}\)

4. Focus Marking and Focus Types

This section discusses the grammatical realisation of various focus types, as introduced in section 1. It is shown that the focus marker *a* marks all types of constituent focus, such as new information focus, selective focus, corrective focus, and contrastive focus. Furthermore, *a* occurs in predicative constructions. In sum, Gùrùntùm provides evidence for a uniform category of constituent focus that is uniformly marked by the focus marker *a*. Moreover, the discussion shows that there is no 1:1-correlation between a specific focus type and its syntactic realisation as *ex situ* or *in situ*. Instead, most focus types can be realised either *ex situ* or *in situ*, depending on the pragmatic goals of the speaker (see section 2.3 above). Finally, we will turn to instances of presentational focus, which also involve an *a*-marker, but which differ from the other focus types in two important respects.

4.1. New information focus

As shown in section 2.3, new-information foci can be realised either *in situ* or *ex situ*, as long as they are preceded by the focus marker *a*. (26ab) are repeated from (15ab) for convenience:

\[(26) \text{a. Q: } \text{Á kâà màì Áudù nàà? A: Tì ná-} \text{a dìu. } \text{in situ} \]

\[\text{FOC what REL Audu catch 3SG catch-FOC horse} \]

‘WHAT did Audu catch?’ ‘Audu caught A HORSE.’

\(^{17}\) In practice, the matter is of course more complicated than sketched here. See Zimmermann (2006) for a more articulate OT-style analysis of focus marking in West Chadic.
b. Q: Á kāã mài Àudù náa? A: Á gàmshi mài Àudù náa. ex situ
   FOC what REL Audu catch FOC crocodile REL Audu catch
   ‘WHAT did Audu catch?’ ‘Audu caught a CROCODILE.’

4.2. Selective focus

Instances of selective focus, which are used to choose from an explicitly given list of
alternatives, are likewise preceded by the focus marker a. Again, the focused constituent is
realised either in situ (cf. 27) or ex situ (cf. 28):

(27) Q: Nvúrí á kāã mài Mài Dáwà shí? Yáà kóó á mólāŋ?
   yesterday FOC what REL Mai Dawa eat chicken or FOC fish
   ‘Yesterday, WHAT did Mai Dawa eat? CHICKEN or FISH?’
A: Nvúrí Mài Dáwà sh-á yáà, bà á mólāŋ dà. in situ
   yesterday Mai Dawa eat-FOC chicken, NEG FOC fish NEG
   ‘Yesterday Mai Dawa ate CHICKEN, not FISH.’

(28) Q: Mài Dáwà bà sh-á yáà kóó á mólāŋ?
   Mai Dawa PROG eat-FOC chicken or FOC fish
   ‘Is Mai Dawa eating CHICKEN or FISH?’
A: Á yáà mài Mài Dáwà bà shí. ex situ
   FOC chicken REL Mai Dawa PROG eat
   ‘Mai Dawa is eating CHICKEN.’
4.3. Corrective focus

Instances of corrective focus, which are used to correct a previous speaker’s statement, are also preceded by the focus marker “. Again, the focused constituent is realised either in situ (cf. 29) or ex situ (cf. 30):¹⁸

(29) A: Músiá yáb fúl-á nvùrì.
   Musa buy cow-FOC yesterday
   ‘Yesterday, Musa bought a cow.’
B: Á’à, tí yáb-á mbóóró, bà á fúl dá. in situ
   no 3SG buy-FOC sheep NEG(Ha.) FOC cow NEG
   ‘No, he bought A SHEEP, not A COW.’

(30) A: Háwwá pán yáŋsi îsh-á.
   Hawwa carry wood fire-FOC
   ‘Hawwa carried fire wood.’
B: Á’à, bà á yáŋsi îshi mái tí pán dá, ...
   no NEG(Ha.) FOC wood fire REL 3SG carry NEG, ...
   ‘No, it is not FIREWOOD that she carried, ...
   ... á máa mái tí páñí. ex situ
   ... FOC water REL 3SG carry.
   ... it is WATER that she carried.’

¹⁸ As already mentioned in fn. 12, the VP- or sentence-final occurrence of the focus marker in (29A) and (30A) does not indicate narrow focus, but rather seems to express focus on the perfective event that is denoted by the clause as a whole. See section 6 for more discussion.
4.4. Contrastive focus

Instances of contrastive focus, in which two elements of the same syntactic category and semantic word field are juxtaposed, are likewise preceded by the focus marker a, as shown in (31) (no tones recorded):

(31) Ti da yab ful-a da, ti yab-a duu.

3SG NEG buy cow-FOC NEG 3SG buy-FOC horse

‘He did not buy a cow, he bought a horse.’

4.5. Predicative constructions

The focus marker a also shows up in verbless predicative constructions, where it precedes the predicate:\19


house-DEF FOC old lion-DEF FOC of red

‘The house is OLD.’ ‘The lion is RED.’

The occurrence of a in these contexts is not unexpected given that - in the unmarked case - the predicate in predicative constructions constitutes the new-information of the clause. After all, the predicate specifies a hitherto unknown property of a known entity, which is already established in the common ground. In Gùrùntùm, then, the focus status of the predicate is

\19 The occurrence of the focus marker before the PP-predicate gi mbàli in (32b) is in accordance with *FOCV, given that prepositions have the feature specification [-N, -V]. In (32a), however, the focus marker appears to precede an adjectival predicate, which are often treated as [+V] elements, in apparent violation of *FOCV. It is not at all clear, though, whether adjectives are present as a lexical category in Gùrùntùm. Adjectives are not commonly found throughout the Chadic language family. Furthermore, they are morphologically indistinguishable from nouns (Haruna 2003:53). In light of this, we propose that the apparent adjectival predicate gàarì in (32a) is actually nominal in nature.
consistently marked by \( a \); see Green (2004) for a parallel claim that the particle \textit{nee/cee} in Hausa predicative constructions indicates focus on the predicate.

Summing up so far, Gùrûntûm provides ample evidence for a uniform category of constituent focus: All types of constituent focus are marked alike by means of the focus marker \( a \). The next subsection deals with a slightly different type of focus, namely with presentational focus in all-new sentences, which is marked in a slightly different way.

4.6. \textit{Presentational focus}

Presentational focus is a special sub-type of all-new sentential focus that is instantiated by verbless sentences depicting a temporally or spatially bounded scene or situation as a whole. Interestingly, such presentational sentences also feature an \( a \)-marker in Gùrûntûm.

(33)  Zí gí màì tì wáani dà tì vùl bà wùun-à.
\hspace{1cm} \text{PL of REL 3PL healthy NEG 3PL many place medicine-FOC}
\hspace{1cm} ‘There are many patients in the hospital.’
\hspace{1cm} (lit.: Those that are not healthy, they are many in the hospital.)

Instances of presentational focus differ in two important respects from the other instances of focus that we have encountered so far. First, the \( a \)-marker does not precede the focused constituent, but it occurs in sentence-final position instead. Second, presentational sentences do not involve narrow focus on a single constituent, but rather wide focus over the entire clause. In section 6, we show that these differences follow from an analysis of the sentence-final \( a \)-marker in (33) as a marker of sentential focus, or rather of focus on the locally bounded situation denoted by (33). In particular, we argue that the focus marker \( a \) can attach at different syntactic levels: At the sub-sentential level, it indicates narrow focus on whatever constituent it precedes. At the sentential level, it indicates sentential focus on the entire
clause, in the sense that the event or situation described by the clause is more prominent, or more relevant, relative to foregoing or subsequent parts of the discourse; cf. Hopper (1979).

5. **On a’s Double Role as a Marker of Focus and Perfectivity**

Before we turn to the analysis of sentence-final a-markers as markers of sentential focus in section 6, let us look at another purported function of the a-marker. Jaggar (1988) and Haruna (2003:86) analyze the a-marker in perfective clauses not as a focus marker, but as a perfective marker (section 5.1). In the absence of further elaborations, this claim is subject to two possible interpretations, which we refer to as *Strong Perfectivity Hypothesis* (SPH) and *Weak Perfectivity Hypothesis* (WPH), respectively.

According to the SPH, the a-markers in perfective sentences are always aspectual markers of perfectivity. It follows that there is no focus marker a in perfective clauses at all. According to the WPH, there are two kinds of a-markers in Gùrùntùm, one of which marks perfectivity, and the other narrow constituent focus, and for some reason the two a-markers are blocked from occurring together. It follows that there will be only one instance of the a-marker in perfective sentence with constituent focus.

In this section, we first argue against the SPH by showing that there are clear instances of focus marking a in perfective sentences. We present syntactic and semantic evidence to this effect in section 5.2. We show, first, that the syntactic distribution of a-markers in perfective sentences is governed by the focus-background structure, same as with all other aspects. Second, it is shown that the different placement of the a-marker in perfective sentences with adverbial quantifiers has a truth-conditional effect on their interpretation in ways that fall out directly if the a-marker is treated as a focus marker. Section 5.3 adds a discussion of the tonal properties of the focus marker a, which are shown to vary depending on its phonological context. In particular, the a-marker is not always low-toned when it occurs in perfective
clauses, contradicting claims in Jaggar (1988) and Haruna (2003). Based on these findings, we conclude that the a-marker in perfective sentences with narrow constituent focus is indeed a focus marker, contrary to the SPH.

In section 6, we go on to argue against the weaker WPH by looking at instances of perfective clauses with sentential focus and an a-marker in sentence-final position, which we analyse as a marker of sentential focus. The overall result is that the a-marker in Gùrùntùm is not used as a perfective marker ever, contrary to the WPH, but uniformly as a marker of focus.

5.1. A as a perfective marker

Jaggar (1988) and Haruna (2003) claim that perfective aspect is marked by a low-toned suffix -à in Gùrùntùm. Consequently, they would analyse the a-suffixes in the perfective examples in (7) and (9) above, two of which are repeated as (34ab), as perfective markers, rather than as focus markers:


FOC what REL 3SG chew 3SG chew-FOC colanut

‘WHAT did he chew?’  ‘He chewed COLANUT.’


3SG wash clothes-DEF when 3SG wash-FOC yesterday

‘WHEN did she wash the clothes?’  ‘She washed them YESTERDAY.’

The paradigm in (35) shows, though, that a would be a peculiar aspectual marker in that it would be the only one that is suffixed to the verb (Haruna 2003:86), see (35d). In contrast,
the markers of progressive (bà), future (á) and habitual (á ì) aspect, respectively, all precede the verb (cf. (35a-c)):

(35) a. Tí bà wùmì. ‘He is chewing.’
    b. Tá á wùmì. ‘He will chew.’
    (tá < tí before á, see Haruna 2003:84)
    c. Tá á ì wùmì. ‘He usually chews.’
    d. Tí wúm-à. ‘He chewed.’

A second peculiar property of the purported perfective marker a is that it can be suffixed ‘either to the verb stem or to a VP-final constituent’ (Haruna 2003:86, see also Jaggar 1988). The different possibilities for the distribution of a in perfective contexts according to Haruna and Jaggar are schematized in (36):

(36) a. SUBJ [VP V-a (OBJ) ]
    b. SUBJ [VP V OBJ-a ]
    c. SUBJ [VP V ADJ-a ]

In the following, we provide evidence against this analysis of the a-marker in perfective clauses. Rather, we argue that a is a focus marker in perfective contexts, too.

5.2. A as a focus marker in perfective contexts

There are two kinds of evidence, syntactic and semantic, against the analysis of a as a perfective marker, and for the analysis of a as a focus marker in perfective sentences. Before we turn to this evidence, the reader should recall that there are many undisputed instances of
the focus marker \( a \) in in non-perfective sentences, which were thoroughly discussed in section 2. Given that there is a focus marker \( a \) in other aspects, it would be all the more surprising if the \( a \)-marker could not occur in this function in perfective sentences.

5.2.1. Syntactic evidence

A closer look at \( a \) in perfective clauses shows that its syntactic distribution depends directly on information-structure, namely on focus. The \( a \)-marker must precede the focused constituent in the perfective, as it does in all other aspects. In (37a-A) and (38a-A), the \( a \)-marker precedes the focused direct object, cliticizing onto the preceding verb. This corresponds to the configuration in (36a). In (37b) and (38b), in contrast, \( a \) precedes the focused locative phrase and (optionally) cliticizes onto the preceding direct object.

(37) a. Q: Á káá mái ti vúní nvùrì?

   FOC what REL 3SG wash yesterday

   ‘WHAT did she wash yesterday?’

   A: Tí vún-á lúurin.

   3SG wash-FOC clothes

   ‘She washed CLOTHES.’

b. Q: Ti vún lúurin-i-à yáù?

   3SG wash clothes-DEF-FOC where

   ‘WHERE did she wash the clothes?’

   A: Tí vún lúurin-i-à biŋ.

   3SG wash clothes-DEF-FOC home

   ‘She washed the clothes AT HOME.’
The analysis of a as a perfective marker does not account for the different placement of a in the a- and b-sentences. The analysis of a as a focus marker, on the other hand, directly accounts for these distributional differences.

An even stronger argument for the analysis of a as a focus marker in perfective clauses comes from the realization of subject focus in (39). It shows that, whenever the subject is focused, a appears sentence-initially and not as a suffix on V or VP. That is, in perfective sentences with subject focus there is no a-suffix on verb or VP at all.

   FOC who chew colanut-DEF FOC king chew colanut-DEF
   ‘WHO chewed the colanut?’ ‘THE KING chewed the colanut.’
   FOC who gather seeds  FOC PL child gather seed
   ‘WHO gathered the seeds?’  ‘THE CHILDREN gathered the seeds.’

The same can be observed for non-subject foci when these are realized ex situ; see, for instance, the *wh*-questions in (37a) and (38a). Again, the analysis of *a* as an aspectual marker does not account for the absence of an *a*-suffix in perfective clauses with subject focus, whereas it follows directly on the analysis of *a* as a focus marker.20

5.2.2. Semantic evidence

The semantic evidence for analysing *a* as a focus marker in perfective sentences comes from the interpretation of perfective sentences containing adverbial quantifiers, such as *always* or *usually*, the interpretation of which is known to be sensitive to the focus/background structure of a clause (see Lewis 1975, Rooth 1985, 1992, Partee 1991, von Fintel 1994, Herburger 2000 among many others). We show that the position of the *a*-marker affects the truth-conditions of clauses with adverbial quantifiers in Gùrùntùm in line with what semantic theories would predict if *a* were indeed a focus marker.

The sentences in (40) illustrate the sensitivity of adverbial quantifiers to the placement of focus accent for English:

(40) a. John always ate RICEFOC.
   ‘Always, if John ate something, he ate RICE.’

20 Interestingly, Jaggar (1988:181) cites an example of the same form as (39ab). In his example, presented as (i), there is no postverbal *a*-suffix in the presence of subject focus. Instead, the *a*-marker precedes the focused subject as predicted by the focus marker analysis:

   FOC who carry hoe into room  FOC father-his carried-it
   ‘WHO (sg.) carried the hoe in the room?’  ‘HIS FATHER carried it (in).’
b. John always $\text{ATE}_{\text{FOC}}$ rice.

‘Always, if John did something with rice, he $\text{ATE}$ it.’

c. [John always ate $\text{RICE}_{\text{FOC}}$.

‘On all (contextually) relevant occasions, John ate rice.’

Simplifying somewhat, the empirical generalization is that the focused material, which is marked by a nuclear accent, must not occur in the restrictor, but in the nuclear scope of the adverbial quantifier.21

The sentences in (41) show that a different position of $a$ in perfective clauses has an analogous effect on the interpretation of adverbial quantifiers in Gùrùntùm.22 In (41a), $a$ precedes the direct object and the latter is interpreted in the nuclear scope of the adverbial quantifier, as witnessed by the consultant’s comment in brackets. In (41b), $a$ precedes the subject, and the subject is interpreted in the nuclear scope of the quantifier. Finally, in (41c), $a$ attaches to a full (core) sentence, $\text{tí shí gányáhúà}$, which is consequently mapped onto the nuclear scope in its entirety.

\begin{enumerate}
\item a. Kóo vùr mákáa Mái Dáwà sh-á gányáhú. \hspace{1cm} \textit{OBJ}
\end{enumerate}

every when Mai Dawa eat-FOC rice

‘Always Mai Dawa used to eat $\text{RICE}$. (“this is about what Mai Dawa ate”)’

= Always, if Mai Dawa ate something, it was rice.

\begin{enumerate}
\item [21] This is an oversimplification. See, e.g., von Fintel (1994) and Beaver and Clark (2003) for a much more fine-grained analysis of the indirect interaction of adverbial quantifiers with the focus-background structure.
\item [22] The first line of the paraphrases cites the paraphrase/translation provided by our native speaker.
\end{enumerate}
b. Kóo vùr mákâá á Mài Dáwà shí gányáhú. SUBJ

every when FOC Mai Dawa eat rice

‘It is only MAI DAWA that always used to eat rice.’

= Always, if somebody ate rice, it was Mai Dawa.

c. Kóo vùr-mâkâá Mài Dáwà sáí tí shí gányáhú-à. Clause

every when Mai Dawa then 3SG eat rice-FOC

‘Always, Mai Dawa used to eat RICE.’

= Always, in a given (contextually-specified) situation, Mai Dawa ate rice.’

The perfective clauses in (41), including (41c) with a sentence-final occurrence of a (see section 6), show that all instances of a behave alike in that the syntactic position has an effect on semantic interpretation. The a-marked constituent is interpreted in the nuclear scope of the adverbial quantifier. Given the parallel facts observed for English, the differences in interpretation between (41a-c) will follow directly if a is treated as a focus marker.

5.3. Tonal properties of a

Before going on, we briefly turn to the tonal properties of a in perfective clauses. Even though a comprehensive study of the prosodic system of Gùruntùm is still lacking, the evidence concerning the tonal shape of a is sufficiently robust to warrant a few conclusions. In particular, we show that a does not always carry low tone when it appears on V or VP in perfective clauses, contrary to claims in Jaggar (1988) and Haruna (2003). This shows at least that there is no low-toned perfective suffix -à. The varying tones on a do not argue against an analysis as an aspectual marker per se. However, the a-marker in perfective clauses resembles the focus marker a in other contexts in that both have no fixed tonal appearance.
Given this similarity in tonal behaviour, the varying tonal shape of \( \tilde{a} \) constitutes indirect phonological evidence for the analysis of \( \tilde{a} \) as a focus marker in perfective contexts, too.

The relevant generalisations concerning the tonal appearance of \( \tilde{a} \) in perfective clauses can be summarised as follows. First, with bisyllabic HH-verbs (two H tones) such as \( \text{vùnì} \) ‘wash’, and LH-verbs (bisyllabic, L tone followed by H tone) such as \( \text{ròmbì} \) ‘gather’, \( \tilde{a} \) carries H tone if a complement follows the verb.

\[
(42) \quad \text{a. } \text{tí } \text{vùn- \( \tilde{a} \) lùurùn. } \quad \text{b. } \text{tí } \text{ròmb- \( \tilde{a} \) g\text{"e}ì.}
\]

\( 3\text{SG wash-FOC clothes} \quad 3\text{SG gather-FOC seeds} \)

‘He washed CLOTHES.’ \quad ‘He gathered SEEDS.’

Second, with monosyllabic H verbs, such as \( \text{shì} \) ‘eat’, \( \tilde{a} \) also carries H tone.

\[
(43) \quad \text{nvùrì } \text{mái dáwà sh- \( \tilde{a} \) yàà, bà á mòlányà dà.}
\]

\( \text{yesterday Mai Dawa eat-FOC chicken, NEG(Ha.) FOC fish NEG} \)

‘Yesterday Mai Dawa ate CHICKEN, not FISH.’

Third, \( \tilde{a} \) carries an L tone with HL verbs, such as \( \text{wùmì} \) ‘chew’ or \( \text{yábì} \) ‘sell’.

\[
(44) \quad \text{tí } \text{wùm- \( \tilde{a} \) kwálìngálá.}
\]

\( 3\text{SG chew-FOC colanut} \)

‘He chewed COLANUT.’

---

\[23\] The tonal pattern HL on the perfective verb \( \text{wùm- \( \tilde{a} \) } \) is different from the HH pattern of the verbal stem in the progressive aspect in (3b). According to Haruna (2003:78f.), the HL pattern found in (44) is found with all bisyllabic verbs in the perfective aspect, irrespective of their lexical tonal specification, see also section 5.2.
Fourth, *a* is always realized with an L tone when it occurs at the right edge of VP, i.e. when it occurs on verbs without overt complements, or when it occurs on the last constituent within the VP:

(45) a.  Tí vún lúurín-i-à]\_{VP} biïŋ.  
   3SG wash clothes-DEF-FOC house
   ‘She washed the clothes AT HOME.’

b.  Tí yâb g^ùùurì ng^wái-à]\_{VP}.  
   3SG sell millet out-FOC
   ‘He sold the millet.’

Based on evidence from other West Chadic languages\(^{24}\), we tentatively assume that the right edge of VP constitutes a prosodic phrase boundary in Gùrùntùm, thus separating the VP from any optional locative or temporal adjuncts.

Finally, in phrase-initial position, *a* carries a H tone before focused non-*wh* NPs (46a). In contrast, *a*’s tonal realization (although still quite high) is not as high as that of following *wh*-expressions, which are always realized at a very high pitch level. There are at least two possible phonological explanations for this. Either *a* realizes an initial boundary tone H\%, which is phonetically realized lower than the ideophonic extra high tone of the *wh*-expression. Or *a* carries no phonological tone whatsoever, and its medium to high phonetic realization follows from its integration into the general intonational contour on the way to the extra high tone. In the absence of the required data for an evaluation of these possibilities, we mark all phrase-initial occurrences of *a* with a H tone (46b).

\(^{24}\) See e.g. Tuller (1992:312) for Tangale and Gimba (2000:19) for Bole.
Setting aside phrase-initial occurrences of \(\textit{a}\), the different tonal realization of the \(\textit{a}\)-marker in non-initial position seems to follow from a number of general prosodic processes that are operative in the language. First, the focus marker \(\textit{a}\) does not carry inherent lexical tone. Second, in VP-final or sentence-final position (cf. (45)), an L%-boundary tone (Pierrehumbert 1980, Beckman and Pierrehumbert 1986) associates with the toneless focus marker \(\textit{a}\), as illustrated in (47):

(47)  \[\ldots \ - \textit{à}\] \(\Phi\)  
      L% 

Third, if \(\textit{a}\) cliticizes onto the verb and is not located in phrase-final position, it associates with the tone of the final vowel of the verb, which it replaces after vowel elision. This is illustrated schematically in (48) for four different tonal patterns. Recall from section 2.1 that the final vowel of the verb is typically elided before a following object, while the tone of the vowel is preserved.

(48)  a. \(\text{shí} + \textit{a} \rightarrow \text{shá}\)  ‘eat’ 
      \(\text{H} \quad \text{H}\)  

b. \(\text{ròmbí} + \textit{a} \rightarrow \text{ròmbá}\)  ‘gather’ 
   \(\text{L} \quad \text{H} \quad \text{L} \quad \text{H}\)  

c. \(\text{vúní} + \textit{a} \rightarrow \text{vúná}\)  ‘wash’ 
   \(\text{H} \quad \text{H} \quad \text{H} \quad \text{H}\)
That tone is indeed preserved under vowel elision can be seen, e.g., in the verbal forms \( p\,\text{ân} \) in (38b), \( w\,\text{ûm} \) in (39b) and \( y\,\text{âb} \) in (45b), where the H tone on the remaining vowel combines with the L-tone of the elided vowel to form a falling HL-sequence.

Summing up, although many questions remain, we have shown that the tone of the \( a \)-marker in perfective contexts is not constant, but varies depending on its tonal context. Since the focus marker \( a \) also varies in tone, we take this as additional evidence in favour of our analysis of \( a \) as a focus marker in all aspects, including the perfective.

5.4. Conclusion

In this section, we have shown that the distribution of \( a \) in perfective clauses and its interpretive effects follow directly on an analysis of \( a \) as a focus marker. These findings provide strong evidence for the claim that the focus marker \( a \) shows up in perfective clauses, too, in contradiction to the SPH. It follows from our analysis that the perfective aspect in Gûrûntûm is not marked by means of a perfective suffix. Instead, it is expressed by zero marking, i.e. by the absence of an overt aspecual marker on the verb, which is accompanied by a tonal change in the stem vowel of the verb from L to H tone with certain verb classes (Haruna 2003:77). From a cross-linguistic perspective, the marking of perfectivity by the absence of overt morphological markers is not restricted to Gûrûntûm, see e.g. Hyman et al. (2002) on zero perfective marking in Leggbô.

6. Sentential Focus Marking

In this section, we extend our analysis of the morpheme \( a \) as a general focus marking device in Gûrûntûm to instances of sentential focus. The observable data provide evidence against
the WPH from section 5, according to which Gùrùntùm features a perfective a-marker next to the focus-marking a. The section starts with some puzzling facts concerning the occurrence of a-marker in clauses with sentential focus: In section 6.1, we show that the overt marking of sentential focus marking only occurs in perfective all-new sentences. In these sentences, sentential focus is marked by the a-marker in sentence-final position. Crucially, the sentence-final a-marker is not attested in other aspects, which probably motivated the analysis of a as a perfective marker in 5.1. A closer look at the distribution of sentence-final a with all-new sentences will reveal, however, that the data are more complex than that. First, instances of sentence-final a with all-new sentences are also found in presentational sentences, as shown in section 4.6, which do not describe an event or situation that was completed before the utterance time. Second, not every all-new perfective sentence is marked by sentence-final a. While the final a-marker seems obligatory with sentences uttered (or elicited) in isolation, it is often absent from perfective clauses in longer discourse sequences. All this suggests, then, that sentence-final a is not a perfective marker, thus confirming the conclusions of section 5. In the remainder of the section, we put forward an analysis of sentence-final a in Gùrùntùm as a marker of sentential focus.

Section 6.2 provides the basis for the analysis by introducing some relevant facts from Malay, which show a surprising similarity to the Gùrùntùm facts, and their analysis in Hopper (1979). Based on the Malay facts, we analyse sentence-final a as a sentential focus marker over the event or situation expressed by the clause in section 6.3. Same as in Malay, events and situations must be bounded, or complete, in order to be focused by sentence-final a. This boundedness requirement accounts for the distributional restriction on sentence-final a to perfective and presentational sentences, and it also explains its non-occurrence in sentences with other aspects. Moreover, the analysis of sentence-final a as a focus marker also accounts for its frequent absence in perfective sentences, especially in narrative
sequences, given one additional assumption. In our view, sentence-final \( a \) is restricted to only those perfective sentences that relate to events which are of more importance relative other events in a discourse sequence, such as e.g. culminating events. Following Hopper (1979), we assume that only such sentences are in need of overt focus-marking in Gùùntùm. Section 6.4 concludes with some tentative remarks on why the sentential focus marker is realized sentence-finally, and not in initial position.

6.1. The puzzle: The distribution of sentence-final \( a \)

The first observation concerning the distribution of the sentence-final \( a \)-marker is that it typically occurs in perfective sentences expressing sentential focus. If such sentences occur in isolation, i.e. not as part of larger discourse sequences, sentential focus must be explicitly marked by sentence-final \( a \). This is shown in (49a-d), which were elicited as answers to \( wh \)-questions.

\[(49) \begin{align*}
a. & \quad \text{Tí vùn lùurì nùùri-à.} \\
& \quad 3SG \text{ wash clothes yesterday-FOC} \\
& \quad \text{‘She washed clothes yesterday.’} \\
b. & \quad \text{Tí pàn sùùri gàà dìngà-à.} \\
& \quad 3SG \text{ took knife on dinga-FOC} \\
& \quad \text{‘He took the knife from the shelf.’} \\
c. & \quad \text{Tí nàà fùùl à wàl-à.} \\
& \quad 3SG \text{ catch cow at farm-FOC} \\
& \quad \text{‘He caught a cow at the farm.’} \\
d. & \quad \text{Tì yàb gùùrì ngùàài-à.} \\
& \quad 3SG \text{ sell millet out-FOC} \\
& \quad \text{‘He sold the millet.’}
\end{align*}\]
Please observe that the final position of the *a*-marker in (49) poses a problem for its analysis as a focus marker. As elaborated in section 2, the focus marker *precedes* the focused constituent in Gùrùntùm with all instances of constituent focus. Its post-focal occurrence in all-new sentences thus calls for an explanation, which will be offered in section 6.4.

The unusual position of the focus marker in (49) could be taken as *prima facie* evidence in favour of the WPH from section 5, according to which at least some instances of the *a*-marker, i.e. sentence-final *a*, are perfective markers. This hypothesis would seem to receive additional support from the fact that sentence-final *a* appears to be restricted to perfective sentences. As illustrated in (50), all-new sentences are unmarked for focus in all other aspects, for instance in the progressive (50a), the future (50b) and the habitual (50c).

(50) a. Tí bà nyóoli góobilishi.

3SG PROG write letter

‘He is writing a letter.’

b. Tá-a mà iyá tšu-gânâ gâb. (Haruna 2003:91)

3SG-FUT go after moment small

‘She will go after a short while.’

c. Tá-a dî wári. (Haruna 2003:89)

3SG HAB come

‘She usually comes.’

In what follows, we show that the WPH does not withstand closer scrutiny even if we restrict our attention to instances of sentential focus. The first evidence against the analysis of sentence-final *a* as a perfective marker comes from presentational sentences. Recall from
section 4.6 that sentence-final *a* also occurs in presentational sentences, which are non-verbal clauses expressing situations as a whole, see (51ab). If the *a*-marker appears in non-final position, cf. (51c), or if it is absent altogether, cf. (51d), presentational sentences are judged as ungrammatical. Since the interpretation of (51ab) is clearly imperfective, sentence-final *a* cannot be taken to mark perfectivity in these sentences.

(51) a. Zì dùusó vùl  gâa nỳûngsù kwàr-à.
    PL car many on street today-FOC
    ‘There are many cars on the road today.’

b. Kwârì zì dûusó vùl  gâa nỳûngsù-à.
    today PL car many on street-FOC
    ‘There are many cars on the road today.’

c. * Kwar-a zì duuso vul gâ nỳúngsu.

d. * Kwari zì duuso vul gâ nỳungi.

A second argument against the WPH is based on the fact that sentence-final *a* is by no means obligatory in perfective sentences: Although it always appears in elicited perfective sentences, cf. (49), it is frequently absent from clauses that form part of longer narrative sequences and refer to completed events in the past, for which reason they receive a perfective interpretation. An example is given in (52) from Haruna (2003:139), where the final *a*-marker is missing in all clauses but the last one (our glosses):
If sentence-final *a* were a perfective marker, one would expect it to occur in each of the sentences in (52), contrary to fact. Given this, we conclude that the WPH does not hold and that sentence-final *a* in all-new sentences should not be treated as a perfective marker.

Nonetheless, having refuted the WPH does not release us from the burden of giving an account for the puzzling behaviour of the sentence-final focus marker *a*, which is summarized in form of the following three questions:

(i.) Why is the marking of sentential focus restricted to perfective and presentational sentences?

(ii.) Why are focused sentences in the perfective not generally followed by the focus marker *a*?

(iii.) Why does the focus marker follow the focused clause, while it precedes all other focused constituents?

Before we give answers to these questions in sections 6.3 and 6.4, we briefly discuss some facts from Malay, which has a morphological focus marker that resembles the *a*-marker in Gùrùntùm in intriguing ways.

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25 The form *da* results from the phonologically-based contraction of the 3sg pronoun *di* and the focus marker *a*: *da < di+a*. This contraction process seems to apply quite regularly, see, e.g. the contractions *kra < kri+a* in (19b) and *kwàrà < kwàrì+a* in (51a).
6.2. Focus and perfectivity in Malay

Malay, a Malayo-Polynesian language from the Austronesian phylum that is spoken mainly in Malaysia and Indonesia, has a morpheme *lah*, which is traditionally described as a marker of focus and perfectivity. In his insightful article, Hopper (1979) derives this at first sight puzzling connection from a unified analysis of *lah* as a so-called *foregrounding* device. In this section, we present the relevant facts and Hopper’s analysis in some detail, as it will shed some light on the nature of the *a*-marker in Guruntum.

First, the particle *lah* is used for marking narrow focus on *ex situ* focused constituents, as in (53) (Hopper’s ex. (1)) with object focus, where fronting of the focused direct object gives rise to a relative or cleft construction.

(53) Anjing-lah yang hilang, bukan kuching.
    dog-PRT which lost NEG cat
    ‘It was a dog I lost, not a cat.’

Second, the particle *lah* appears as a suffix on verbs in perfective sentences, which has led grammarians to assume that *lah* is an aspectual marker of perfectivity.

(54) Pergi-lah ia.
    go 3SG
    ‘He went.’

Hopper (1979) proposes a relation between these two at first sight unrelated functions of *lah*: According to him, *lah* marks the informational prominence of a constituent in relation to another (= *foregrounding* in Hopper’s terms), in both (53) and (54): In (53), it marks narrow
focus on the focused constituent. In (54), it marks sentential focus. More precisely, the presence of *lah* on the verb in the perfective sentence (54) follows from the fact that the whole event expressed by the clause is focused.

According to Hopper, there is a tight connection between focus and perfectivity, which follows from a universal implicational relation: First, in order to be focused, an event must be bounded or completed. Second, a typical, though not the only, way of presenting an event as bounded or completed is to present it as anterior to subsequent events. Third, anteriority is typically expressed by perfective marking. In contrast, ongoing or overlapping events are unbounded, hence unsuitable for being focused (Hopper 1979: 39,47). Consequently, since *lah* is a focus marker, it will only occur in sentences denoting completed events. This is illustrated by the following examples from Hopper (1979:48).

(55) a. Maka apabila *masok-lah* kedalam hutan, maka *bertemu* dengan a Jakun.
   ‘And when they *entered* the forest, they *met* a Jakun.’

   b. Maka apabila ia *melihat* orang datang, maka *lari-lah* ia masok hutan.
   ‘And when he *saw* the men coming, he *ran* into the forest.

In (55a), it is evident that entering the forest is completed before the meeting of the Jakun takes place and the two events do not overlap. As a result, the first verb can be followed by *lah*. No such connotation of anteriority is present in the temporal *when*-clause in (55b) where the events denoted by main and subordinate clause are construed as simultaneous, or overlapping, and thus not complete, see Hopper (1979:48). This explains the absence of *lah* in (55b).

The analysis proposed explains why *lah* has traditionally been analysed as a perfective marker: In order to mark an event expressed by an all-new clause as focused, this event must
be bounded or completed, and completion is typically associated with the perfective aspect. To sum up, the morpheme *lah* in Malay operates at two different structural levels with different information-structural effects: (i.) at the intra-sentential level, it sets off narrowly focused constituents from backgrounded information in the rest of the clause; (ii.) at the cross-sentential level, it sets off focused events from backgrounded events in the neighbouring parts of the discourse. As Hopper (1979:47) says: “These two functions - foregrounding and focusing - are not separable, but are aspects of one and the same principle” (p. 47).

6.3. *Sentential focus marking in Gùrùntùm*

Coming back to Gùrùntùm, we propose that the final *a*-marker in Gùrùntùm works just the same way as Malay *lah*: The function of sentence-final *a* is to express sentential focus, just like sentence-internal *a* serves to express focus on smaller constituents. In this section, we address two of the questions raised at the end of section 6.1., namely (i.) the restriction of sentence-final *a* to presentational and perfective sentences, and (ii.) its non-obligatory occurrence in the latter.

Extending the analysis of Malay *lah* to Gùrùntùm, we assume that sentential focus marking in Gùrùntùm is restricted to the two proto-typical constructions that present situations or events as completed or whole entities, namely presentational and perfective sentences; see also Comrie (1976:18). Turning to the first question, this assumption explains why sentence-final *a* is incompatible with progressive, future and habitual sentences. These aspects do not relate to completed or whole events, explaining the absence of *a* in (50a-c).²⁶ Presentational constructions as in (56), repeated from (33), typically present a situation as

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²⁶ This restriction of focus to bounded/whole events in Gùrùntùm raises interesting questions for cross-linguistic variation, as sentential focus on progressive, future and habitual sentences can be marked in other languages, notably in intonation languages like German. We will have to leave this issue open for future research.
complete, or whole, or bounded, which is a precondition for the occurrence of the sentence-final *a*-marker.

(56) Zi gi mài ti wáani dà ti vùl bà wùun-à.

*PL of REL 3PL healthy NEG 3PL many place medicine-FOC*

‘There are many patients in the hospital.’

(lit.: Those that are not healthy, they are many in the hospital.)

Having resolved the first part of the puzzle presented in section 6.1, we now turn to the second question: Why is the *a*-marker not obligatory in perfective sentences? As mentioned above, one can observe an interesting asymmetry with respect to the distribution of sentence-final *a*. The marker is obligatory after perfective sentences elicited in isolation as in (49). In contrast, its presence is not required in past time narrative sequences, where it is mostly absent, as shown in (52), repeated as (57).

(57) Zi mùuzii kàram ba pàn yañsi, ti *yu* wùshù bán yaahu,

*PL woman go PROG carry wood 3PL see snake in grass*

ti pàn yañsi ti gù d-a.

*3PL carry wood 3PL kill 3SG-FOC*

‘The women went to carry firewood and they saw a snake in the grass and they took a firewood and killed it.’

According to Haruna (2003:139, our italics), the sequential construction “imparts unity to the actions depicted, and conversely, it enables these actions to be described without giving them unwanted prominence.” In other words, the events in (57) are presented as subparts of a
complex event, all of which are of equal importance to the main story line. That is, even though the individual sub-events are completed and receive a perfective interpretation, they do not constitute isolated units and hence cannot be focus-marked by sentence-final a. Why is the focus marker present on the final clause of the sequence, then? We can think of two possible answers to this question. Either, the final a-marker is present in order to focus on the complex event that is formed by sub-events denoted by the individual sentences, as indicated in (58).

(58) \[[S_1 \text{the women went }] [S_2 \text{ they saw a snake }] [S_3 \text{ they took wood}] [S_4 \text{ they killed it}]\]-a

Alternatively, it could be that the a-marker occurs on the final clause since this clause denotes the culminating, and hence most important event of the sequence. This may also be the case in (59), a sequence taken from a larger story, where final a occurs on the final clause, which denotes the culminating event of this part of the story.


3SG too then 3SG go market 3SG return 3SG err on way-FOC

‘She too, she went to(wards) the market, she returned, she got lost on her way.’

The behaviour of sentence-final a is reminiscent of the facts reported from Malay, which also uses the focusing function of lah in order to impose structure on narrative texts. According to Hopper (1979:46), lah appears on verbs describing events that constitute the main story line. Typically, these are events that are new and highly relevant to the story. Events that are not marked with lah are used to set the scene. These typically constitute side-episodes of minor narrative relevance, or they form sub-parts of the event that are considered as not so
important. Coming back to the Gùrùntùm example in (59), the episode ends with the girl
(kadɔ ‘she’) getting lost, which is the culminating point of this narrative sequence and
consequently marked by the focus marker a.

Summing up, the focus marker a operates at two different structural levels in Gùrùntùm:
At the intra-sentential level, it indicates the focus-background structure of the clause. At the
cross-sentential level, it serves to structure the information at the discourse level. It does so
either by presenting groups of subevents as a complex whole, or by highlighting those
sentences expressing events or situations that are of (relative) importance to the overall
discourse sequence.

To conclude, please observe that Gùrùntùm is not the only Chadic language that uses
sentential focus marking as a means of structuring discourse sequences. For instance, Hausa
(also West Chadic) marks focus syntactically by fronting the focused constituent to the
Such focus fronting triggers a different form of the person-aspect complex in the perfective
and progressive aspects, which is referred to as the relative or focus form in the literature.
Crucially, this focus form of the perfective PA-complex also appears in past time narrative
sequences, showing a similar distribution to sentence-final a in Gùrùntùm. According to
Jaggar (2006a:118), the PA-complex appears in the non-focus perfective if the sentence in
which it occurs belongs to the background or describes a marginal event. If a sentence is “one
in a series of foregrounded events in a narrative sequence”, however, the focus form is used.
This asymmetry is illustrated in (60ab), from Jaggar (2006a, ex. (38), (39)), see also Wolff
(2003:423). The non-focus form of the (feminine) perfective PA-complex is taa, whereas the
focus form is ta:
We thus conclude that the relation between formal focus marking, perfectivity or boundedness, and discourse-structure is not a specific feature of Gùrùntùm, but a more general phenomenon across the Chadic languages and beyond (Malay).

6.4. The sentence-final placement of the a-marker

Having explained the restrictions on the distribution of the sentential focus marker $a$, we are left with the question of the unusual position of this focus marker (post-focal) as opposed to its typical pre-focal position with all instances of constituent focus (see section 2). We do not have a conclusive answer to this question, but two possible solution come to mind and should be investigated in future research.

First, the sentence-final occurrence of the $a$-marker could be triggered by the need to avoid a focus ambiguity with subject focus: If $a$ were to occur sentence-initially and precede the focus constituent, as with all other instances of argument or adjunct focus, this would result in an ambiguity between sentential focus and subject focus. This would go against a preference for unambiguous marking of subject focus that is exhibited by many West Chadic languages; see Zimmermann (2006), Fiedler et al. (to appear). This proposal meets with two
immediate problems, however: First, as shown in section 3, focus ambiguities are attested elsewhere in Gùrùntùm, e.g. in case of predicate focus and focus on complex NPs. Second, the proposed ban on identical marking of subject and sentence focus is not observed in other African languages, such as the Central Chadic (Marghi) and some Gur-languages (Fiedler et al., to appear), which mark subject focus and sentence focus alike.

A more promising line of investigation would be to follow recent work on a sub-type of it-clefts by den Dikken (2008) and on nominalised thetic clauses in the East Papuan language Savosavo by Wegener (to appear), and treat all-new sentences with sentence-final a as underlyingly predicative constructions with a covert predicate as sketched in (61):

(61) [SVO] a PRED∅

The predicate in (61) will receive a very general meaning, such as ‘holds of’ or ‘is the case’, such that the structure in (61) would literally translate as ‘the state of affairs expressed by the core SVO-sentence holds/is the case’. Two attractive features of this - admittedly vague - predicative analysis are (i.) that predicates in predicative constructions are generally preceded by the focus marker a, as shown in section 4.5; and (ii.) that this way it would be ensured that the focus marker precede the (covert) focus constituent after all. On the negative side, the representation in (61) stands in contradiction to the generalization from section 3.1 that the a-marker must be followed by overt non-verbal material. We will leave this issue open for future research.

7. Conclusion

In this article, we presented an in-depth analysis of focus marking in the West Chadic language Gùrùntùm. Focus in Gùrùntùm is marked morphologically by means of the pre-
focal marker *a*. It is marked uniformly and consistently across all syntactic constituents, including (some) sentences, and across all aspects and tenses. It marks new information focus as well as other kinds of focus, such as selective, corrective or contrastive focus. It also appears in predicative and presentational constructions. The focused constituent can be either realised in its base-position, or it can be fronted. We speculated that the choice of position is dependent on the notion of noteworthiness, but this assumption has to be corroborated by future research. We also showed that Gùrùntùm exhibits focus ambiguity when it comes to predicate focus and complex NPs: Predicate focus is realised on the direct object even if the verb or the VP is focused; focus on subparts of complex NPs is always realised on the larger NP. We proposed that this focus ambiguity can be traced back to a structural restriction: Gùrùntùm has a bias for nominal focus marking, same as many other Chadic languages.

Based on syntactic and semantic evidence, we defended our analysis against a claim from the literature that *a* in perfective clauses is an aspectual marker of perfectivity. In contrast, we argued that sentence-final occurrences of *a* in perfective clauses are focus markers as well: they mark focus on the entire clause whenever this clause relates to a completed or otherwise bounded event. It is this event-focusing nature of sentence-final *a* that is responsible for its discourse-structuring function.

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