

INTRODUCTION	1
WOLOF VERBAL SYSTEM	1
FOCUS IN WOLOF.....	2
NON-FOCUSING CONJUGATIONS	3
FOCUSING CONJUGATIONS.....	4
Verb Focusing Conjugation	5
Subject Focus	6
Complement or Non-Subject Focus	6
PRAGMATIC CONSIDERATIONS	6
CONCLUSION	7
LIST OF STANDARD ABBREVIATIONS	8
REFERENCES	8

Introduction

This paper examines focus structures in Wolof. Except where noted otherwise, all examples are from data collected from Mr. Maamur Saar, a native speaker of Wolof who served as language consultant during the fall 2012 semester in Dr. Kevin Moore’s field methods class at San José State University.

Wolof Verbal System

According to the Wolof learner’s textbook *Aywa ci Wolof*, “verbs in Wolof are invariable: there are separate markers indicating person, aspect, conjugation, and tense,” and “two aspects (or moods) in Wolof: imperfective and perfective... [with] “imperfective aspect ... used ...[for] incompleted or on-going action... [and] perfective is used [for] completed action.” (Bokamba, Ka, and Sarr 1985; vii-viii)

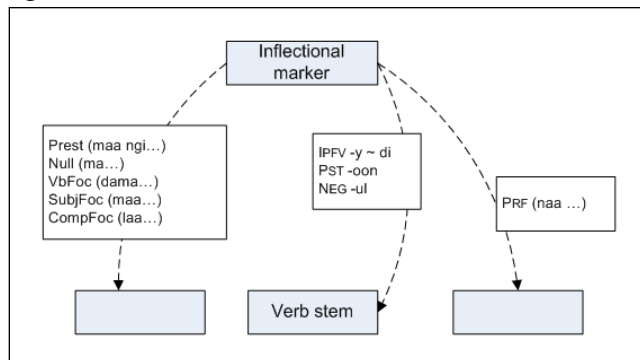
Stéphane Robert describes the organization of Wolof verbs in some detail, specifically, as a system of “ten paradigms of conjugations: Perfect, Presentative, Null tense¹ (or Narrative), Verb Focus, Subject Focus, Complement Focus, Negative, Emphatic Negative, Obligative, Imperative, and its negative counterpart, Prohibitive.” (Robert 2010) This categorization includes only the “indicative affirmative conjugations in Wolof.” (Robert 2010)

In short, this is a complex system that is able to make fine distinctions in language. As we saw this semester (but which is only becoming clearer with the benefit of additional research), the inflectional markers are separate from the verb, the verb is “invariable,” and “the inflectional marker is preposed, postposed, or suffixed to the lexical stem.” (Robert 2010)

¹ I believe the Null tense is also referred to as “zero inflection” (Moore, 2012)

Figure 1 shows a simple graphic that summarizes the relationships among the various conjugations (only 1sg inflection is shown as an example for each) and the verb stem.

Figure 1: Inflectional verb markers for affirmative indicative mood²



Wolof has more verb suffixes than those shown in the figure. For example, we observed an imperative suffix, among others; for example, the verb “jege” which means “to be close, to be nearby” with the verb suffix –si (which means “come and, come to”) then becomes a verb that means “to approach, to come close to” (Munro and Gaye 1997; 78, 175, and 78, respectively). We became familiar with the imperative form of this word, *jegesileen*, in which *-leen* (a verb suffix marking the imperative plural (Munro and Gaye 1997; 101)) results in the imperative “Come closer (you all).”

According to Robert, “in the absence of the imperfective suffix (-y), these conjugations or verb inflections have a present perfective value: action verbs refer to a past event, while stative verbs refer to a present state, except for the Presentative which refers to the current process with all verb types.” (Robert, 2010; 3) However, in terms of discussing focus compared to non-focusing conjugations in Wolof, I don’t think the suffixes play a role. The main points to examine are the focusing conjugations (Verb Focus, Subject Focus, and Complement or Non-subject Focus) and see how they differ from the non-focusing conjugations using examples from class elicitations.

Focus in Wolof

The inflectional markers in Wolof not only convey the “grammatical specifications of the verb (person, number, tense, aspect, and mood)” but also “the information structure of the sentence (focus)” (Robert, 2010; 2). The discussion of focus by Stéphane Robert is a lot more granular than what I was cursorily familiar with through role and reference grammar (RRG) and its adaptation of Lambrecht’s information structure conceptual framework.

Specifically, beyond a fairly straightforward split between “topic” (“old information) and “focus” (“new information”) (Van Valin 2005), Robert defines focus in Wolof “as a specific mode of identification: in a focused sentence, assertion consists in the qualitative designation of an element whose existence is presupposed.” (Robert 2010; 6) He further explains that “the focused proposition consists of a ‘split assertion’ involving a temporal presupposition [aka, ‘pre-constructed assertion’ or ‘pre-assertion’ because by using focus markers, the speaker “indicates that the predicative relation already holds true”]...“and a qualitative designation (of the focused constituent) (Robert 2010; 6 FN 14)

² Adapted from Robert (2010; 2) about the Wolof verbal system.

If I understand Robert correctly, it seems he's saying that "the grammaticalization of focus marking" plays a key role in the semantics of Wolof and its ability to convey differences in temporal aspect despite "having no simple present conjugation." (Robert 2010, 6). At any rate, let's explore some of the differences based on our data.

Non-focusing Conjugations

In the scenario that Mr. Saar translated into Wolof from English (the short story about Daam going fishing for dinner), I see in looking again at all the data that the narrative (as written in English) changed from the present moment into the past. In the Wolof translation, I think we see that the story starts in the Presentative conjugation (but with the added marker for imperfective), and then moves to the Perfect conjugation, and finally, goes to the Null (zero conjugation) (Moore, 2012). Here are representative transcriptions and glosses for excerpts from that narrative.

- (1) Mungi-y guddi-si.
 PREST3sg-IMPF 'to.be.night'-'come.to'
 "it" becoming.night
 "Night time is coming our way."

In (1), we see how the verb suffix (-y) changes the aspect of the conjugation from having happened already to imperfect, although Robert points out that Presentative conjugation "refers to a process with all verb types" (Robert 2010; 2) so Mr. Saar's translation of the English "Nighttime is coming our way" as *Mungiy guddisi* does seem to conform to that distinction.

I think according to how I'm reading Robert and his examples, these examples (1) would be showing a "process," while in (2) and (3), the temporal aspect is "present state" (since these are both stative verbs which do not have the imperfective marker, they are interpreted as present state).

- (2) Daam, suma xarit, xiif na.
 daam 'my' friend 'to.be.hungry' PRF.3sg
 "Daam, my friend, is hungry."

As with so many other words we've observed in class elicitation, "suma" is a variation of "sama" (Munro and Gaye, 1997).

- (3) Bëgg na jën y-u bari ndawal.
 'to.want' PRF.3sg fish pl-rel "to be many" rice.dish
 wants he fish lots of rice
 "He wants a lot of fish to add to his rice."

With the gloss of "rice dish" in the above, I'm simplifying what I found described as "meat, fish, and vegetables, put on top of the rice in the eating bowl" (Munro and Gaye, 1997; 138), and I think that's what Mr. Saar called simply "his rice."

Because sentence (4) has an action verb ("to go and fish" (Munro and Gaye 1997), the semantics of the conjugation are interpreted as a past event.

(4) Kon boog fas na yééné dem tefes nappi.
 'then in that case . PRF.3sg 'to.decide to' 'to.go' beach 'to.go.and.fish' (intr)
 "Therefore he decided to go to the beach and fish."

...

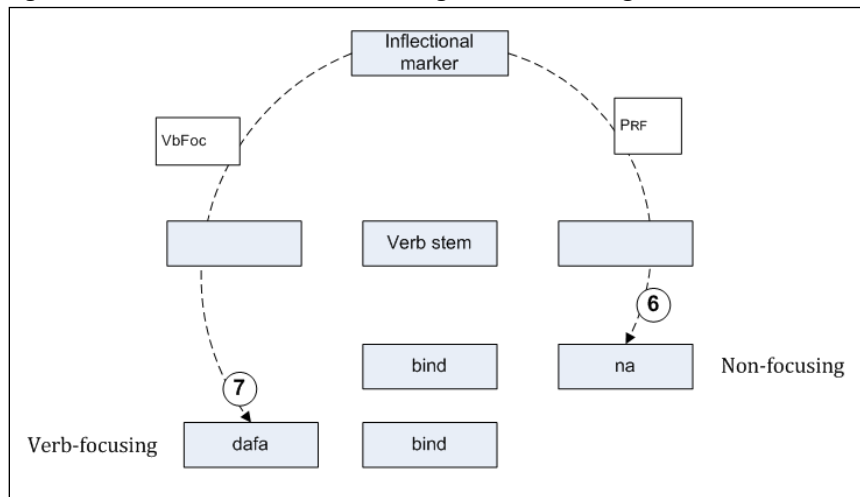
As you pointed out in your squib (Moore, 2012), the Null conjugation can be used when the referent has been identified in the previous sentence(s) in the narrative. In the case of this narrative, the Wolof translation use several different non-focusing conjugations as it goes along, with the associated change in temporal aspect.

(5) Mu dem ba gisatul tefes gi.
 NULL.3sg 'to.go' up.to (loc) 'not.to.be.able.to.see' beach Def-i (prox)
 "He got to a point where he could no longer see the beach."

Focusing Conjugations

As a point of contrast to Focusing conjugations, I'd like to return to the Perfect (non-focusing) conjugation for a minute. Figure 2 shows how the inflections referenced in Figure 1 would be implemented differently in two different contexts, one for non-focusing Perfect and one for Verb Focus.

Figure 2: Inflectional markers in focusing vs. non-focusing constructions



In both cases, a loose translation is "Ali wrote the book," with (6) showing the non-focusing (neutral) Perfect conjugation which is just a simple statement of fact.

(6) Aali bind na benn teere. (7) Aali dafa bind benn teere.
 Ali 'to.write' PRF.3sg QNT book Ali VbFoc3sg 'to.write' QNT book
 "Ali wrote a book." "Ali wrote a book."

On the other hand, (7) states the same proposition (Ali wrote a book), but it does so using the Verb Focusing conjugation of Wolof.

Verb Focusing Conjugation

According to Robert, the Wolof Verb Focusing conjugation serves about about four different purposes, starting with the most basic, “focusing on the lexical content” of the verb as one might in “parallel focus” constructions. Another use of Verb focusing conjugation is “explanation” (Robert 2010; 5).

Taken from the dialog between “Daam and Tom,” example (6) was Mr. Saar’s initial reply (spoken as “Daam” to “Tom”), which he quickly followed up with (7) to clarify the fact that Ali had written the book under discussion. So in (7), the focus is on the verb that follows the conjugation dafa:

(7) Aali dafa **bind** benn teere.

Another use of Verb Focus is as “simple predication” of stative verbs in which there is “qualitative definition of the subject or situation.” (Robert 2010; 5).

(8) Daam dafa njoool.
Daam VbFoc.3sg ‘to.be.tall’ [stative verb]
“Daam is tall.”

(9) Dafa tənq.
VbFoc.3sg ‘to.be.hot’ [stative verb]
“It is hot.”

Examples (8) and (9) are examples of “verbs expressing a quality or property” that are being used with “this focusing conjugation as mere statements serving for the predication of that property” (Robert 2010; 5) In other words, the verb focus conjugation is used simply to highlight the stative verb’s role as a predicate in (8) and (9).

Other uses of the Verb Focusing conjugation are as “explanation” and for “intensive predication or focus on the truth value or assessment of the predicate.” (Robert 2010; 5) Examples (10), (11), and (12) may be examples of Verb Focusing conjugation being used in the “explanation” sense, or possibly it’s clarifying the proposition. (The shading indicates different speakers in the dialog):

(10) Oto Aali dafa paan, du ñew [var: ñów] tay ci guddi.
car Ali VbFoc.3sg broke.down Neg NO “to.come” “tonight” (literally, “today.of.night”)
“Ali’s car broke down, he’s not coming tonight.

(11) Dafa feebar?
VbFoc.3sg ‘to.be.sick’
“He’s sick?”

(12) Déedéet, oto moom paan të dafa sore ci dox.
No car he.Obj.poss “broke.down” “difficult.to.deal.with” VbFoc 3.sg ‘to.be.far.away’ ‘to’PREP. ‘to.walk’
“No, his car broke down and it is too far to walk [to here]”

Subject Focus

Subject focus is obligatory in questions and in the replies to those questions. Asking a question puts the focus on the Subject of the sentence. Examples (13) and (14) demonstrate common Subject Focus conjugations in action.

(13) Kan moo moom dàll yi-i?
who SUBFOC.3sg 'to.belong.to' shoe DEF.pl-prox
"Who is it that owns these shoes?"

(14) Maa leen moom.
SUBFOC.1sg 3.pl.Obj 'to.belong.to'
"I am the one who owns them."

Complement or Non-Subject Focus

This focusing conjugation seems to be variously called "complement focus" (Robert 2010; Bokamba, Ka, and Sarr 1985), or "non-subject focus" (UCLA Wolof Course; Moore 2012), also "object focus," or simply, the "la- conjugation (UCLA Wolof Course). Regardless of its name, this conjugation focuses on an element in the discourse that's neither the subject nor the verb.

This was only one of two conjugations that I was able to identify in the morphosyntax squib, so now with the benefit of additional research, it makes much more sense. Thanks to Mr. Saar's glosses, we were able to discern that the focus shifted to the object of the sentence, as in this example:

Ceeb laa lekk "It was rice that I ate."

But I think the "It was ... that..." construction was used for our benefit, as English speakers, and I'd guess that the more literal paraphrase might simply be "RICE I ate" (emphasis on RICE). (Actually, I believe Mr. Saar told us this early in the elicitation sessions.)

With the non-subject focus conjugation, the focus is on the word that precedes the inflection, so in this example, ceeb precedes the inflection (1sg "laa"), putting the focus on what would be the object of the sentence.

Pragmatic Considerations

The focusing conjugations in Wolof have a syntactic function that supports the communication needs of the speaker, in some cases (as we've seen with Subject focus in questions and answers), the use of a particular conjugation is obligatory. Beyond the syntax and semantics, however, as we learned through the numerous options often provided by Mr. Saar in his elicitations, Wolof pragmatics play an important role in the communication system.

Just as a short example, Mr. Saar provide three different possible utterances for the following scenario. It seems that none of the examples use any special focusing constructions, they are simply presentative, but Mr. Saar described the responses on a scale from "most tactful" to "least tactful."

Scene: Man having dinner with a friend. The friend orders (yet again) his usual fish and rice. Man wants to cajole the friend into perhaps ordering something else for a change of pace.

This first example (15) Mr. Saar offered as a tactful, respectful comment on the friend's choice:

- (15) A! ceebu jën-ati?
ah! rice.and fish-still(-ati)
"Oh! Fish and rice again?"

The *-ati* is a verb suffix that means "still; again (Munro and Gaye; 1997), so I think (but I'm not sure) this is an example of a noun being used predicatively. I also make a note that Mr. Saar's first elicitation was "A! ceebati?" (without the "jën"), but on all subsequent utterances, he offered the response as shown in (15) above. I didn't observe this until listening again to the recording, so I did not find out if "ceeabati" is actually a felicitous response.

This next example (16) Mr. Saar offered as less respectful than (15), less tactful (but not downright rude):

- (16) Ceeb ceeb ceeb rekk! Xanaa mën-ul loo lekk leneen?
rice rice rice only prtcl 'to be able'-NEG CONT.'what'.2sg. 'to eat' something.else
"Rice rice rice only! [I wonder] unable what you eat anything else?"
"Rice rice rice only! Is it because you can't eat anything else?"

Mr. Saar offered the gloss as shown in the last line above. In researching some of the words further (particularly because Mr. Saar made a comment about "xanaa" to another student, so I wanted to understand better the context), I find that "xanaa" is a particle meaning "I wonder," or "maybe" and that it's a "sentence-initial particle used at the beginning of a question" and that it can "indicate the speaker's doubts" (Munro and Gaye, 1997), which concerns the pragmatics of the sentence.

For (16), Mr. Saar on first utterance used what sounded like 'jël' (rather than 'lekk'), but all other words were the same. Again, I did not catch this until listening again to the recording, and I'm not sure I'm hearing correctly. If I'm correct and it was 'jël,' then the meaning would only change slightly, from "you are not able to eat anything else" to "you are not able to take anything else?" ("jël-to take, to select; transitive verb (Munro and Gaye 1997).

In this last example (17), the speaker has a certain amount of frustration with his friend's ordering the same dish. Mr. Saar added the "waay" after several repeat elicitations without it, as an afterthought, suggested it would translate to "basta" (from the Italian, "enough").

- (17) Ey, bàyyil ceeb yii nga laaj saa y(s?)u nekk... (waay).
ey 'let.go.of'.IMP rice det.pl you 'to.ask' all.the.time (already!)
"Eh, let go of these rice dishes that you're asking for all the time, every single time?"

Conclusion

Given the rich conjugation system of Wolof, it seems that speakers can convey subtle nuances of meaning. Unlike English, which has wide potential focus domain (the entire core of a clause) but which depends a great deal on stress to focus on a specific element in an utterance, Wolof provides grammatical means, through its focusing conjugations, to narrow the focus on a particular element.

List of Standard Abbreviations³

1	First person (I, me, we, us, etc.)
2	Second person (you, y'all, etc.)
3	Third person (he, him, she, her, they, them, it, etc.)
ART	Article
ASP	Aspect
BEN	Benefactive
CL	Classifier
COMPFOC	Complement Focusing
CONJ	Conjunction
DEF	Definite
DIST	Distal deixis
DTRNS	Ditransitive
FOC	Focus
I, INTRNS	Intransitive
IMP	Imperative mode
IMPERF	Imperfective aspect
LOC	Locative
NEG	Negative
NOM	Nominative
OBJ	Object
OPR	Object pronoun
PAST, PT	Past tense
PERF	Perfective aspect
PL	Plural (several things)
PN	Pronoun
POS	Possessed
PREST	Presentative conjugation
PROG	Progressive aspect
PROX	Proximal deixis
SG	Singular (1 thing)
STAT	Stative
SUBJ	Subject
SUBJFOC	Subject Focusing
TOP	Topic
TRNS	Transitive
CONJ	Conjunction
N	Noun
NP	Noun Phrase
PP	Prepositional or Postpositional Phrase
V	Verb
VBFOC	Verb Focusing
VP	Verb Phrase

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³ From Payne (2006). This list has been augmented by abbreviations from the reference by Robert (2010) for focus identifiers (SMALLCAPS).

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