

**Two reasons to be suspicious of surface form-meaning mapping in focus constructions**  
**Jenneke van der Wal**

It is often noted that languages differ in how they express information structure, with descriptive grammars stating for example that ‘a postverbal position encodes focus’. The description is then used as a basis for constructing a grammatical model of the language or the phenomenon. However, as critical linguists we should be suspicious of these statements: the only thing we observe is a certain linguistic strategy that pairs up with an interpretation in a certain context. But it is well known that correlation does not equal causation; i.e. the focus interpretation may not be present because of the postverbal position.

In this talk I argue that we need to be more careful in establishing which aspects of information structure are of direct influence in the grammar. On the one hand this means finding out more precisely what sort of focus is present (simple alternatives, implied contrast, presupposition & identification, exhaustivity), and on the other hand establishing whether the form-meaning mapping is direct or indirect. Only when we know these aspects of focus can we build an appropriate model of grammar.

I provide two case studies from Bantu languages of how to look beyond the surface. The first is Luganda, where I show that a more elaborate semantic-pragmatic toolbox can better specify a focus marker’s meaning as ‘exclusivity’ rather than an underspecified ‘focus’. The second is a typology of Bantu languages that on the surface have the same verbal focus alternation (conjoint/disjoint) but on closer examination turn out to be two classes: one directly determined by focus and the other only indirectly. These cases highlight the necessity to look beyond the surface and the essential role of appropriate methodology in comparative research.