

Is verum focus? Evidence from Luhya object markers

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Abstract

There is an ongoing debate in the literature over whether *verum* should be considered a type of focus or a separate kind of meaning. In this squib we discuss object marker doubling (OM-doubling) constructions in Lubukusu and Llogoori that encourage analyzing *verum* as separate from focus. Both emphatic focus and *verum* license OM-doubling in Lubukusu, while only emphatic focus licenses OM-doubling in Llogoori. While Bantuist scholars have argued for associating *verum* and focus more closely from their shared object marking-related morphosyntax, the Llogoori pattern shows focus licensing OM-doubling does not entail *verum* licenses OM-doubling, providing a counterexample to this reasoning.

Keywords: *verum*, focus, Bantu, Luhya, OM-doubling, emphasis

1 Introduction

Verum is a kind of meaning that emphatically asserts the truth of a proposition, used for example to address an interlocutor's doubt, deny an interlocutor's assertion, or emphatically agree with an interlocutor's assertion. English marks *verum* by placing nuclear pitch accent on T^0 , inserting auxiliary *do* if needed.

- (1) a. Did Jaime really lock the door last night?
- b. Jaime did lock the door last night.¹

The term *verum* is a theory-neutral alternative to the more traditional term *verum focus*, coined by Höhle (1992). Höhle observed that *verum* and focus

are both marked by Nuclear Pitch Accent in German and concluded *verum* is a type of focus. Subsequent research extended the analysis to English and other languages. One common way of concretizing *verum*-as-focus treats *verum* as focus on the polarity of a proposition (i.e., whether the proposition is true or false). In these analyses, just as focus highlights one option from a set of contextually salient alternatives, *verum* highlights the truth of a proposition from the set of alternatives consisting of that proposition and its negation.

As the study of *verum* has expanded to a broader range of languages and language families, *verum*-as-focus has come under increased scrutiny. Gutzmann and Castroviejo Miró (2011), working in a QUD framework (Engdahl 2006, Ginzburg 1996), characterize *verum* not as polarity focus but as a use-conditional operator that downdates a proposition from the Question Under Discussion. They argue, largely on evidence from German and English, that this analysis better captures the distribution and discourse contribution of *verum*. Drawing from fieldwork in Tsimshianic and Chadic, Gutzmann et al. (2020) outright reject the *verum*-as-focus analysis, which they term the “Focus Accent Thesis” (FAT). They argue instead for a “Lexical Operator Thesis” (LOT) in which *verum* is a lexical operator independent from focus, taking as evidence morphosyntactic differences in the realization of *verum* and focus, the apparent independence of whether multiple foci are allowed in a language and whether focus and *verum* may cooccur in a language, and the optionality of *verum* in response to alternative polar questions.

These challenges to *verum*-as-focus have elicited responses in the Bantuist literature defending the traditional connection between *verum* and focus. Kerr and Van der Wal (2023) reinterpret Gutzmann et al.’s (2020) FAT

and LOT as a typological distinction in verum-marking strategies. They propose that the FAT corresponds to Type I languages in which verum is marked directly as focus and the LOT corresponds to Type II languages in which verum is marked directly by a dedicated marker. Building on the work of Güldemann (2016), they add a third class, Type III languages, in which verum is indirectly marked by a *maximal backgrounding* strategy. In this strategy, one or more constituents that could plausibly bear focus are marked as non-focus (background, i.e., familiar/discourse-given), leaving at least the truth of the proposition as a possible target of focus, thereby leading to a verum interpretation. Kerr and Van der Wal distinguish polarity focus from emphatic verum, but note that the latter is dependent on the former: emphatic verum can only be expressed when the truth of the proposition is part of the QUD. This conceptual dependence means that verum and polarity focus, as theoretical concepts, cannot be considered as fully separate, no matter how a given language marks verum.

Bloom Ström and Zeller (2023) analyze the expression of verum in Xhosa and Zulu, southern Bantu languages of the Nguni subgroup. In Nguni, verbs can appear in a conjoint (CJ) or disjoint (DJ) form. Verbs occur in the conjoint form when there is additional material inside *vP*, while verbs occur in the disjoint form when there is no other material inside *vP*. Critically, since *vP* is a focus domain in Nguni (Buell 2009, Cheng and Downing 2009), *vP*-internal material is marked as focused or part of a focused constituent, linking the conjoint-disjoint alternation to focus. Furthermore, discourse-salient object DPs can be marked on the verb with an object marker (OM) agreeing in noun class. Bloom Ström and Zeller show that verum is expressed by two strategies in Nguni: the use of disjoint verb forms and the cooccurrence of OM and

their coreferent DPs, called *object marker doubling* or *OM-doubling*².

(2) Zulu conjoint-disjoint (Bloom Ström and Zeller 2023:502–503)

- a. Ikati li-wis-e inkomishi.
5.cat 5SM-fall.CAUS-REC.CJ 9.cup
'The cat broke the cup.' (In response to 'What happened?')
- b. Hhayi ma, ngi-**yi**-hlanz-**ile** indlu.
no mother 1SG.SM-9OM-clean-REC.DJ 9.house
'No mother, I did clean the house.' (In response to 'You didn't
clean the house.')

The nonverum utterance (2a) was elicited in response to the question 'What happened?'. The entire predicate receives focus, which is marked by its sub-constituent *inkomishi* 'cup' occurring in vP and the verb appearing in the conjoint form. In contrast, the verum utterance (2b) is marked by both the disjoint form on the verb and OM-doubling *indlu* 'house': there is no overt nonverbal material within vP. Bloom Ström and Zeller explain the correlation between verum on the one hand and disjoint verb forms and OM-doubling on the other as an instance of maximal backgrounding. Disjoint verb forms and OM-doubling are morphological consequences of removing material from vP, which must occur to restrict the set of possibly focused material to only the polarity of the predicate and thus mark polarity focus. The removal of OM-doubled objects from vP also marks the object as discourse-given (Zeller 2015), a pattern also reported in Ndebele (Pietraszko 2023). On this account, verum in Nguni is deeply intertwined with polarity focus and realized through object-marking.

In this squib, we contribute to the discussion of verum and focus in the Bantu context by examining object marking doubling in two closely related

Bantu languages of the Luhya subgroup, Lubukusu and Llogoori.³ Although Lubukusu object marking is becoming well-documented, we contribute new empirical patterns from Llogoori that have not been reported previously and use them to show that there is evidence within Bantu to support the separation of verum and focus.

2 Object marker doubling in Luhya

2.1 Focus and verum in Lubukusu OM-doubling

Lubukusu, like Nguni, may mark its verbs with an OM agreeing in noun class with the object DP. For example, the class 2 object DP *baa-soomi* in (3) is replaced by the class 2 OM *ba*, shown in boldface. In neutral discourse contexts, such as out-of-the-blue contexts, an OM may not cooccur with (*double*) its coreferent object DP.

(3) Lubukusu (Sikuku et al. 2018:366)

N-á-**ba**-bon-a (#**baa-soomi**).
 1SG.SM-PST-2OM-see-FV 2.2-students
 ‘I saw them.’ (not ‘I saw the students.’)

However, certain pragmatic contexts do license OM-doubling. One such context is verum. When addressing, denying, or emphatically asserting the interlocutor’s statement, OM-doubling is acceptable in Lubukusu.⁴

(4) Lubukusu (Sikuku et al. 2018:383)

Lionéeli a-**kú**-l-iilé **kú-mú-chéele**.
 1Lionell 1SM-3OM-eat-PFV 3-3-rice
 ‘Lionell did eat the rice.’ (In response to ‘Did Lionell really eat the rice?’)

Verum is not the only pragmatic context that licenses OM-doubling. In Lubukusu, *emphatic focus* on vP-internal constituents and on vP itself also licenses OM-doubling if the doubled object is given.⁵ One kind of emphasis that licenses OM-doubling is mirativity, a kind of reading that signals an event is less likely than contextually salient alternative events, often contributing a sense of surprise or unexpectedness (Bianchi et al. 2016, Cruschina 2021, Delancey 1997, among others). Another kind of emphasis that licenses OM-doubling together with focus is reprimand, which indicates that the speaker believes the interlocutor should already know the answer to a question they have asked.⁶

(5) Lubukusu (Sikuku and Diercks 2025)

a. Mirative focus on vP (p. 134)

Ba-ba-ana ba-a-**bu**-ly-a **bu-suma**,
 2-2-children 2SM-PST-14OM-eat-FV 14-ugali
 se-ba-a-timany-a chi-ngokho ta.
 NEG-2SM-PST-chase-FV 10-chickens NEG

‘The children ate ugali, they didn’t chase the chickens.’ (It is surprising that the children ate ugali instead of chasing chickens.)

b. Reprimand focus on locative argument (p. 319)

Wekesa a-a-**ka**-tekh-el-a **ka-ma-kanda**
 1Wekesa 1SM-PST-6OM-cook-APPL-FV 6-6-beans
 mu-chikoni.
 18-kitchen

‘Wekesa cooked beans in the kitchen. (Of course—where else?)’

(In response to ‘Where did Wekesa cook the beans?’)

c. Mirative focus on theme (p. 435)

Ba-ba-ana ba-a-**ba**-rer-er-a **ba-b-ebusi** ka-m-echi
 2-2-children 2SM-PST-2OM-bring-APPL-FV 2-2-parents 6-6-water

k-ong'ene.

6-only

‘The children brought their parents only water.’ (It is shockingly unfilial of them not to have brought food also.)

In Lubukusu OM-doubling constructions, OM-doubled objects are interpreted to be *specific* (having a particular referent) and *discourse-given* (familiar to the speaker and the interlocutor). In (6), for instance, the OM-doubled DP *omwaana* receives a specific reading.

- (6) Lubukusu (Sikuku and Diercks 2025:136)

N-a-**mu**-w-a **o-mw-aana** ka-ma-beele.
1SG.SM-PST-1OM-give-FV 1-1-child 6-6-milk

‘I gave a specific child milk.’ (The child’s identity is known.)

2.2 Focus without verum in Llogoori OM-doubling

In Llogoori, mirative and reprimand focus also license OM-doubling.⁷

- (7) a. Mirative focus on locative adjunct

Adaro a-**ru**-imb-i **u-ru-imbu ru-ra** mu-rivugaana!
1Adaro 1SM-9OM-sing-PST 9-9-song 9-DEM 18-church

‘Adaro sang that song in church (out of all places)!’ (In response to ‘Where did Adaro sing that song?’)

- b. Reprimand focus on subject

Ni-Adaro a-**ru**-imb-i **u-ru-imbu ru-dinyu**,
COP-1Adaro 1SM-9OM-sing-PST 9-9-song 9-difficult
ni-(a)-va-ana daave.
COP-2-2-children NEG

‘(Of course) it was Adaro who sang the difficult song, not the children.’⁸

Llogoori is also like Lubukusu in the fact that OM-doubled objects are interpreted as specific and discourse-given.

- (8) Kageha a-ki-haani kihanwa ?(yiki) ku mwana mugoroova
1Kageha 1SM.PST-7OM-give 7gift 7DEM to child yesterday
'Kageha gave this gift to the child yesterday.'

Example (8) is dispreferred without the demonstrative *yiki*. We interpret this to mean that absent either a discourse context marking *kihanwa* as specific and discourse-given or a demonstrative fulfilling the same function, OM-doubling becomes less natural. This matches similar patterns observed in Lubukusu (Sikuku and Diercks 2025:137, examples 57, 58).

However, unlike Lubukusu, verum does not license OM-doubling in Llogoori. Rather, Llogoori's verum-marking strategy initially appears to be null-marking, a pattern also observed in Tunen and Teke (Kerr and Van der Wal 2023).⁹

- (9) Yee! Jabu a-(#ki)-soom-i kitabu!
yes 1Jabu 1SM-7OM-read-PST 7book
Yes! Jabu did read the book! (In response to the interlocutor denying that Jabu read the book)

The utterance in (9) is acceptable on a verum interpretation without the OM *-ki-* but unacceptable with it.

To summarize the empirical observations, verum and emphatic focus both license OM-marking in Lubukusu, while emphatic focus, but not verum, licenses OM-marking in Llogoori.

3 Dissociating verum and focus

The link between focus and verum provided by maximal backgrounding in other Bantu languages have provided good reason to think that verum and focus interpretations are necessarily related, calling into question the universality of Gutzmann et al.'s (2020) LOT. Lubukusu seems to affirm the connection between verum and focus, since it uses the same backgrounding strategy of OM-doubling to express both verum and emphatic focus. However, the Llogoori facts push back against this connection, providing an example of a closely related language which uses OM-doubling to mark focus and interprets OM-doubled objects to be given but nevertheless does not use OM-doubling to mark verum.

In this way, Llogoori provides a counterexample to the association between OM-doubling or other backgrounding strategies on one hand and verum on the other observed in Nguni (Bloom Ström and Zeller 2023) and many other Bantu languages including Rukiga, Makhuwa, and Kirundi (Kerr and Van der Wal 2023). Llogoori is not the first Bantu language reported to express verum with an unmarked strategy, but it is the first reported to do so while employing an givenness-related OM-doubling strategy to mark focus elsewhere in the language yet unable to express verum with OM-doubling (cf. Table 2 in Kerr and Van der Wal 2023:473).

The Llogoori facts also recast prior results in a new light. For example, Sikuku and Diercks (2025) show that in Lubukusu, emphatic focus expressed through OM-doubling must fall on either vP or a vP -internal constituent, but verum expressed through OM-doubling is not subject to the same constraint. In (10), the adjunct *likolooba* is clefted outside of vP , and so a reading with

emphatic focus on it is unacceptable with OM-doubling. However, the sentence is still acceptable with a verum reading.

(10) Lubukusu (Sikuku and Diercks 2025:229)

Li-kolooba ni-lwo ba-ba-ana ba-(#ka-)ke-sile
 11-yesterday COMP-11 2-2-children 2SM-6OM-harvest-PRF
 ka-ma-indi.
 6-6-maize

‘It was yesterday that the children harvested maize.’ (# with emphatic focus on *likolooba* reading, acceptable with verum reading)

To account for this difference, Sikuku and Diercks propose that the two kinds of OM-doubling are structurally distinct and that verum and mirativity/reprimand are introduced into the syntax by two different operators. In other words, verum is arguably not a kind of focus, even in Lubukusu.¹⁰

Despite these observations, it is still unclear why mirative focus and verum should both be expressed by OM-doubling in Lubukusu. To address this question we cite Lippard et al. (2024), who compare emphatic interpretations of OM-doubling across Bantu languages. Table 1, adapted from their paper, summarizes their results and appends our present preliminary results on Llogoori. By looking at the broader pattern across Bantu languages, we notice that individual emphatic readings exhibit considerable variation in whether or not they license OM-doubling. Previously, before the Llogoori pattern came to light, it seemed that mirativity and verum always licensed OM-doubling, suggesting a possible connection between them. With the new Llogoori pattern, the evidence now suggests that languages may vary in allowing any individual emphatic interpretation to license OM-doubling.

To conclude, new empirical evidence from Luhya object marking pro-

	intensity	exhaustivity	mirativity	reprimand	verum
Lubukusu	✓	#	✓	✓	✓
Cinyungwe	#	#	✓	#	✓
Tiriki		✓	✓	✓	✓
Wanga		✓	✓		✓
Ikalanga			✓		✓
Llogoori			✓	✓	#

Table 1: Whether emphatic readings license OM-doubling across Bantu languages, modified from Lippard et al. 2024:104. A blank cell indicates acceptability is still unknown. We add the final row of the chart.

vides a counterargument to prior work on Bantu object marking and vP properties arguing that verum is focus. The fact that emphatic focus licenses OM-doubling in Luhya regardless of whether verum also licenses OM-doubling points to verum as being a phenomenon distinct from focus and instead one of a range of emphatic interpretations that vary crosslinguistically in whether they license OM-doubling in Bantu languages.

Abbreviations

1	first person	DEM	demonstrative	PRF	perfect
APPL	applicative	DJ	disjoint	PST	past
CAUS	causative	FV	final vowel	REC	recent past
CJ	conjoint	NEG	negative	SG	singular
COMP	complementizer	OM	object marker	SM	subject marker
COP	copula	PFV	perfective		

Notes

1. We mark emphatic intonation in English with underlined text throughout.
2. *OM-doubling* is a theory-neutral term for the phenomenon also analyzed as

differential object marking, object agreement, and clitic doubling.

3. Lubukusu is also called Bukusu. Llogoori is also called, among other names, Maragoli, Ragoli, Lugoli, and Lulogooli.
4. We follow Sikuku and Diercks (2025) in using the terms *acceptable* and *unacceptable* with the symbol # over *felicitous* and *infelicitous*, since bad OM-doubling examples are rejected by native speakers with the same intensity as found with ungrammatical constructions in English.
5. To be precise, the constituent that must contain focused material is the Comment Domain, which is similar to but not identical with vP. See Sikuku and Diercks 2025 for more.
6. Mirativity and reprimand are not the only kinds of emphasis that license OM-doubling in Lubukusu. A less-studied example of an emphatic interpretation is intensity readings, which mark an event as occurring to some great degree.
7. Research on Llogoori is still in its early stages, and it is uncertain that miratives and reprimands are the only interpretations that license OM-doubling.
8. For reasons still unclear to us, this utterance is only acceptable with the cleft.
9. However, there well may be prosodic differences between verum and non-verum utterances, a possibility we intend to investigate in the future.
10. We point out that the independence between verum and focus observed in Luhya only works one way: we see emphatic focus license OM-doubling without verum, but so far, there are no reports of verum licensing OM-doubling without emphatic focus doing so also.

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