THE FOCUS STRUCTURE OF SOMALI

John Saeed

Trinity College Dublin

1. Introduction

1.1 Aims

Although I’m not a practitioner of RRG I am a keen reader of its literature and, as an Africanist an admirer of both the foundational principles and the success in coming up with insightful analyses of a wide range of the languages of the world. More particularly, for this paper, I welcome the project to instantiate the integration of information structure and grammar into the model of language.

In this talk I want to discuss a particular kind of focus system, where pragmatic notions, more specifically information packaging notions like focus and topic are very heavily grammaticalized. This kind of system is found in various versions in the East Cushitic languages of North East Africa, though similar features are found all over Africa. I will use Somali as my example, partly because I know this language best and partly because most of the literature on focus in Cushitic has been on Somali. I have two basic aims:

(a) to try to explain some key syntactic and semantic constraints on focus structures in this kind of focus system; and
(b) to briefly discuss the typological implications

At the level of syntax I briefly examine the relationship between clause structure and focus structure. In the semantics I discuss the implications this system has for relationship between given and new, on the one hand, and presupposition and assertion, on the other. The general aim of the paper is to make clear the interdependence of focus structure and morphosyntax, which supports the RRG approach to information structure.

1.2 Terminology

The discussion of information structure, or packaging, is a terminological minefield so I will begin by defining some basic terms. In discussing Somali and related East Cushitic languages we can define our terms as follows:

By topic is meant sentence topic. This is a syntactic position occupied by a constituent whose referent is known and which provides background or contextual knowledge judged by the speaker to be useful to the hearer in comprehending the sentence.

By focus is meant a constituent occupying a specific syntactic position and also identified by an accompanying focus morpheme. The focused constituent is marked as of higher salience than non-focused constituents in the same sentence. One typical use of focus is to mark new information in a sentence. Another is to provide contrastive focus on one member of a set, which typically represents old, or given information.
These definitions rely on a distinction between *given* and *new*. Without going into details of different terminology I will assume a distinction between the various types of knowledge in (1a-c):

(1)  
(a) background/common/shared knowledge  
(b) given (Chafe 1976)/salient (Prince 1981)/activated (Dryer 1996) information  
(c) common ground (Clark 1996)

The terms in (1a) can be used to describe the knowledge (or beliefs) that the interlocutors might have independently of or prior to the talk we are examining; while those in (1b) reflect knowledge that is activated in the conversation and thus linguistically signalled in some way. Such signalling, for example, licensing the use of pronouns, has been much studied in the literature (e.g. Gundel et al. 1993 and Walker et al. 1998). For present purposes I leave aside the interaction between (1a), (1b) and other knowledge sources that combine to give rise to what Clark (1996) calls the *common ground* (1c), that is the set of assumptions taken for granted at any particular point in the communicative act.

An important difference between 1a and 1b of course is that the terms in 1a refer to states of knowledge while those in 1b are describe speakers’ actions in discourse, i.e. they might be better described in terms of *information packaging* rather than *information structure* (to recall Lambrecht’s 1994 discussion). In Halliday’s terms they reveal the linguist’s interest in meaning rather than knowledge or information; for Halliday linguistic devices:

(2) “treat ‘information’ as meaning rather than knowledge and interpret language as a semiotic system, and more specifically as a social semiotic, rather than as a system of the human mind…meaning is a social, intersubjective process. If experience is interpreted as meaning, its construal becomes an act of collaboration, sometimes of conflict, and always of negotiation.” (Halliday & Matthiessen 1992:2)

In this discussion I will use the terms *given* and *new* as terms in this process, where given could also be termed activated and new, non-activated, as we shall see. It seems reasonable to allow some kind of gradient between activated and inactivated, for example for referents that are fading from the current centre of attention (‘semi-activated’ in Dwyer 1996) or for referents that are inferable from activated elements, for which the term accessible is sometimes used (cf. Lambrecht 1994).

One main aim here is to explore the relationship of the grammatical markers of focus in East Cushitic with the notions of given (activated) and new (unactivated). As is well known there has been a strong tendency in the literature to associate focus with the marking of new information (similarly topic is described as marking given/activated information). If I may take just two examples separated in time, in early generative grammar, this was reflected in the oppositional use of the terms *presupposition* and *focus* in for example Jackendoff (1972). In a different, more recent approach Vallduví and Engdahl (1996) make a similar distinction between *ground* (old or known information) and *focus* (new information).
(3) (a) presupposition and focus (Jackendoff 1972)
(b) ground and focus (Vallduví and Engdahl 1996)

Where relevant I’ll incorporate Vallduví and Engdahl’s terminology to help make a distinction between elements of focus structure on the one hand, and types of pragmatic functions, on the other. So I’ll use the terms ground and focus for the linguistically marked partition of information structure and terms like presupposing, asserting, questioning, for pragmatic functions; as in (4a).

(4) (a) ground and focus vs. presupposing, asserting, questioning, etc.
(b) link and tail

I will discuss grammatical evidence for the relationship between presupposition and the ground in Somali focus structures.

The present discussion will say little about topics. We do need to distinguish between left detached and right detached positions (in RRG terms) or what Vallduví and Engdahl (1996) distinguish as link and tail (4b). Both occur in Somali and we can also accept their characterisation where the link is roughly the ‘anchoring point’ for the sentence. It is a kind of organisational clue to the hearer, indicating where the new information is to be fitted into the existing state of knowledge. The tail is further old information which helps explain how the new information is to interact with the previous knowledge state.

1.3 A tonal accent language

Somali has been described as a tonal accent language, which is an attempt to distinguish the tonal system from true tone languages like the West African languages Igbo or Ewe (and outside Africa, Chinese) on the one hand, and from pitch accent languages like Japanese on the other. Characteristic of the latter is the restricted number and placement of tonal prominences: at most one syllable in a word bears pitch prominence (in Japanese a HL pitch fall) and the location is restricted (we read for example that in Japanese nouns the position must be lexically stipulated; in verbs and adjectives it is the penultimate syllable).

Somali stands somewhat between the two types. Somali has a simple two system of two level tones HIGH (marked á) and LOW (marked a), as shown in (5).

(5) Two level tones: HIGH (marked á) and LOW (marked a)

The tone bearing unit is the mora. Short syllables contain one mora and long vowels and diphthongs contain two moras. The are restrictions on the permutations of tones on words. With the exception of place names, basic words can only contain one high mora. There are in fact three basic accentual patterns, as shown in (6):

(6) AP1: HIGH tone on the last mora
AP2: HIGH tone on the penultimate mora.
AP3: no HIGH tone

Phonetic divergences from these patterns are caused when two moras are realised on a long vowel or diphthong, e.g.:
(7) high + low → falling [MARKED ÀA]
LOW + HIGH → HIGH – HIGH (sometimes RISING) [marked áa]

Though these are predictable they are marked in examples here. As an example of varying phonetic realisations: Imperative forms of weak verbs have AP2, which has the exponents in (8):

(8) Imperative forms of weak verbs have AP2:
 hádal! ‘Speak!’
kèen! ‘Bring (it)!’
áamus! ‘Be quiet!’

What distinguishes this type of system is the use made of the tonal distinctions. The tone patterns carry grammatical information, being characteristic of the category of a word, and signalling its grammatical information. So for nouns, for example, the tone pattern marks declension, gender, number, and case. Any lexical distinctions are ‘accidental’ so to speak following from grammatical distinctions. Some roots for example surface as either masculine or feminine nouns, distinguished only by the tone pattern:

(9) ínan ‘boy’  inán ‘girl’
wíyil ‘male rhino’ wiyíl ‘female rhino’

In some declensions of nouns the plural is marked tonally:

(10) yèy ‘wolf’  yéy ‘wolves’
Cárab ‘an Arab’  Caráb ‘Arabs’

In all nouns case is marked tonally:

(11) taliye ‘commander’  absolutive case (object, isolation etc.)
talíye nominative
taliyé genitive
táliye vocative

Another feature of this system is that there is no intonational marking of sentence type (or as we will see later focus):
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus morpheme</th>
<th>Function</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>baa</td>
<td>(a) narrow (NP) focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(b) sentence focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>waa</td>
<td>predicate focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>waxa</td>
<td>cleft narrow (NP) focus</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 1.5 The focus morphemes

There are three types of focus morphemes identified for Somali, as listed in (13) and outlined below:

The first type consists of the lexically empty morpheme baa (variant ayaa). This is usually described as nominal focus marker, and follows the NP in focus, (see examples in (14) where the focused element is shown in square brackets, marked by a feature F). Examples of items focused by this morpheme are given in Appendix 1. It has two functions: the first is to mark narrow focus, typically on an NP. See for example the answer (a) in (14) where it focuses new information. The question in (14) identifies inantii ‘the girl’ as topic, and questions her location, focussing the question word. All the replies are grammatical but only (a) is an appropriate reply. As (14b) and (c) show, to focus the topic in the reply, or to use what we’ll call in a moment predicate focus with waa would both be inappropriate. Replies (b) and (c) are appropriate to different questions: (b) to a question *Who is in that room?* and (c) to a question *Is the girl in that room?*

(14) Q: Inantii hálkáy joogtaa?
      inán-tii hál-kée+baa+ay joogtaa
girl-the place-which+NFOC+she stay
      ‘[F Where] is the girl?’, lit. ‘The girl, [F which place] is she in?’

A: (a) Inantii Qólkáas báy ku jirtaa.
     inán-tii qól-káas báa+ay ku jirtaa
girl-the room-that+NFOC+she in is
     ‘(The girl), She’s in [F that room].’
The use of this narrow focus for contrast can be seen in the proverb in (15):

(15) *Libàax yeedháy iyo libàax aammusáy, libàax aammusáy bàa xún*  

lion roared and lion kept:silent lion kept:silent  

‘(Of) a roaring lion and a silent lion, \[F\] a silent lion] is worse.’

The second function of this morpheme is to mark sentence focus, for example in all-new event, reporting sentences where there is no topic and any subject is not held to express topicality. These are sometimes called *thetic* sentences (e.g. Sasse 1996) and in Vallduví & Engdahl’s terms, they are *groundless*.

As an example we might take a scenario where a parent returns home to find chaos and asks a question like that in (16) below, assuming this to be the first utterance in an exchange and therefore carrying no information linguistically marked as activated. Of course the use of names like ‘Ali’ in this example means that the identity of the individuals has to be known. We rely here on the distinction made earlier between background knowledge and activation.

The replies in (16) report a new event: (a) is the pragmatically appropriate reply; (b) and (c) are inappropriate (again marked #).

(16) Q: *Maxáa dhacáy?*  

what+NFOC happened  

‘[F What] happened?’

A: (a) *Cáli bàa Fáarax kú dhuftay.*  

Ali NFOC Farah on struck  

‘[F Ali hit Farah].’

(b) #*Cáli Fáarax biu kú dhuftay.*  

Ali Farah NFOC+he on struck  

‘Ali, he hit [F Farah].’

(c) #*Cáli Fáarax wùu kú dhuftay.*  

Ali Farah wàa+he on struck  

‘Ali, Farah, [F he hit him].’

It seems that the normal information structure for this kind of event report where everything is new is for the subject to be focused: focusing the object or treating the nominals as topics and using *waa* to for predicate focus is pragmatically inappropriate.

Another type of thetic sentences discussed in the literature is weather sentences. Here again we find the same pattern in Somali. The normal way of saying ‘It’s raining’,
either unprovoked (if you look out the window, say) or in answer to a question ‘What’s the weather like?’ is:

(17) \[ Ròob bàa dá’ayaa \]
\[ \text{rain NFOC is:falling} \]
\[ ‘[F Rain is falling]’ = \text{English ‘It’s raining’} \]

Here again focus falls on the subject nominal.

The fact that in all-new or thetic sentences focus falls on the subject, is seems to form a parallel to the strategy of subject accentuation in thetic sentences in European languages, discussed by Sasse (1996) in his review of the EUROTYPO survey of this area (Theme group 1).

In these cases we can use Lambrecht’s terminology to say that while the focus is marked on the subject noun phrase, the focus domain is the entire sentence.

Having established these functions, it must be noted that the use of \( bàa \) focus is more restricted in negative sentences and in polar questions. In both of these \( bàa \) focus only has the contrastive function described above. We can compare the pair of negative sentences in (18), for example:

(18) (a) \[ Cali má bixín. \]
\[ \text{Ali not left:NEG} \]
\[ ‘Ali didn’t leave.’ \]

(b) \[ Cáli báan bixín. \]
\[ \text{Ali NFOC+not left:NEG} \]
\[ ‘[F Ali] didn’t leave.’ \]

Sentence (18b) is typically used against the background of a presupposition ‘Someone left’, a context that (18a) does not require. Focus in (18b) marks a contrast between Ali and the presupposed person(s) who did leave. We find a similar contrast in polar questions like the pair in (19):

(19) (a) \[ Cali má baxay? \]
\[ \text{Ali QM left} \]
\[ ‘Did Ali leave?’ \]

(b) \[ Ma Cáli bàa baxáy? \]
\[ \text{QM Ali NFOC left} \]
\[ ‘Did [F Ali] leave?’ \]

Again (19b) is typically used against a presupposition that someone left and compares Ali to this person, asking if they are the same. Sentence (19a) does not require such a presupposition.

The negative polar question in (20) has an even more specific licensing context:
(20) (a) **Ma Cáli báan bixín?**
QM Ali NFOC+not left:NEG
‘Didn’t [F Ali] leave?’

(b) i. Someone left
ii. The someone = Ali

Here in a typical context the speaker would be communicating the two presuppositions in (20b): ‘Someone left’ and ‘the someone = Ali’. The question asks for confirmation of this second presupposition, i.e. of the identity of Ali with the leaver. This functions something like the English cleft: *Was it not Ali who left?*

Thus bàalayàa focus has a narrower and more specific function in negative sentences and polar questions, requiring the support of more contextual assumptions. We will come back to this shortly.

### 1.5.2 Waa
The second focus morpheme is *waa*, which occurs before the verbal group and is usually identified as a predicate focus morpheme. In (21) *waa* marks new information in the predicate:

(21) Q: **Baabùur-kíi sidùu yidhi?**
car-the how+NFOC+he did
‘[F What] did he do with the car?’ (lit. ‘[F How] did he do with the car?)

A: **Wàu tiibiye.**
Waa+he sold
‘He [F sold] it.’

A typical use of this is in positive replies to yes-no questions, where no nominal is focussed:

(22) (a) **Gábadh-íi má timi?**
girl-the QM came
‘The girl, has she arrived?’

(b) **Hàa, wày timi.**
yes waa+he came
‘Yes, she’s arrived’

(23) (a) **Miyàanú sóo noqónayn?**
QM+not+he VEN return:PROG:NEG
‘Isn’t he coming back?’, ‘Won’t he come back?’

(b) **Hàa, wuu sóo noqónayaa.**
yes waa+he VEN return:PRES:PROG
‘Yes, he’s coming back’

In (22) and (23) all elements of the sentence are given (i.e. these are all ground sentences) and the speaker uses the *waa* sentence to affirm the predicate.

### 1.5.3 Wáxa
The third type of focus is a cleft-like structure where an expletive element *wáxa* occurs before the verb and focused elements occur after the verb. This morpheme, like bàalayàa is typically used with nominals and can also be used to introduce new
information and to provide contrastive focus. There are a number of differences between wáxa focus and our first type, which we will not go into here, but typically wáxa is used to postpone and focus long or ‘heavy’ constituents:

(24) (a) Maxáad dónaysaa?
   maxáy+bàa+aad doonaysaa
   what+NFOC+you want:PROG
   ‘[F What] would you like?’

(b) Wáxaan dónayaa koob shàah áh oo án sonkór laháyn
   wáxa+I want cup tea be and not sugar have:NEG
   ‘I would like [F a cup of tea without sugar]’

Again, a characteristic list of constituents focused by wáxa is given in the Appendix.

These are the three types of focus morphemes that have been identified. Our discussion here will concentrate on the nominal focus morphemes bàa and ayàa, say less about predicate focus with waa, and even less about wáxa clefts.

It is important to note that as with the marking of sentence type, the use of these morphemes means that there is no intonational focus marking in Somali. See (25) below:

(25) (a) Calì wùu yimi. = Predicate focus
   Ali wàa+he went
   ‘Ali, he [F went].’

(b) Cálì baa yimí. = Narrow focus on NP
   Ali NFOC went
   ‘[F Ali] went’

No prosodic prominence on Cálì in sentence (a) or yimí in (b) will signal focus on the NP or predicate.

2. Focus and clause structure

I would like to make two points at the level of syntax. The first is to review the evidence that focus occupies a particular structural position in the clause; and the second is to suggest that the notion of focus domain might help explain a strong constraint against focus in subordinate clauses.

2.1. Discourse configurationality

Somali has been described as a ‘discourse configurational’ language, for example in Kiss (ed. 1995). This is of course because its word order, and phrase structure, cannot be described in terms of grammatical relations like subject, object, etc. but instead we must make reference to discourse notions like focus and topic. To take bàalàyaa sentences for example, the order may be given as:

(26) [TOPIC* FOCUS (other NP) V-COMPLEX TOPIC*]

See for example, numbers (5) and (2) in the Appendix.
One prominent feature of the sentence is the verbal complex (called the verbal group VGP in Saeed 1999), where a satellite of clitics occurs in a fixed order before the verb and basically contains the whole argument structure of the sentence. Its structure may be described by the template (27):

\[ (27) \begin{array}{ccccccc}
V & S & PRO & - & O & PRO I & - & ADP & - & ADV I & - & ADV II & - & O & PRO II & - & V
\end{array} \]

The elements of the template are given in (28) and an example in (29):

(28) VC elements
- S PRO: subject clitic pronoun
- O PRO I: object clitic pronoun - first series
- ADP: verbal adpositions
- ADV I: VENITIVE sóo or ALLATIVE síi
- ADV II: adverbials wada ‘together’ or kala ‘apart’
- O PRO II: object clitic pronoun - second series
- V: main verb or infinitive and auxiliary verb

(29) (a) London bay iigá sóo iibsatay
London bàa+[vc ay i + ú + ká sóo iibsatay]
L. NFOC she me+for+from VEN bought
‘She bought it for me from [F London].’
(b) [vc S PRO - O PRO I + ADP + ADP - ADV I - V]

Note that adpositions occur in the VC; and that it retains the SOV order that is usually proposed historically for Cushitic.

Looking at the basic bàa/àyaa focus, what is striking is that there is an absolute constraint against focused elements occurring post-verbally. In order to have a focus after the verb a speaker must employ a wáxa-cleft construction. Even here question words may not occur. This rigidity of focus structure (in the terms discussed by Van Valin 1999) contrasts with the flexibility of the grammatically unconstrained word order.

2.2 Structure of the clause

There are two sets of syntactic facts that have led linguists to propose some internal hierarchical structure to string of elements in (26). Firstly, there are two important differences between the topic and focus elements in (26):

(30) (i) Topic nominals may have a coreferential clitic pronoun in the verbal group while focused elements may not do so;
(ii) Topic elements can always be omitted to leave a grammatical sentence while deleting a focus element renders the sentence ungrammatical.

These differences have suggested to most observers that topics and focus elements have different phrase structure positions, with topics being outside some inner construction, corresponding to the main predication. Or schematically,
(31) \[ \alpha \text{TOPIC*} \ [\beta \text{FOCUS (other NP)} \ V\text{-COMPLEX}] \ \text{TOPIC*} \]
where \(\alpha\) = sentence; \(\beta\) = clause

The second group of facts arises because attaching the focus morpheme to an element is not a syntactically inert process. We can see this most easily in examples where focus is attached to the subject of a sentence. Compare the pair:

(32) (a) Nimánkii wày yimaaddeen.
    nimán-kii wàa+ay yimaaddeen
    men-the VFOC+they came:PL
    ‘The men came.’

(b) Nimánkíi báa yimí.
    men-the NFOC came:SG
    ‘[F The men] came.’

The main differences are given in (33).

(33) Features of focused subjects
(a) A focused subject is not subject marked but occurs in the absolutive case.
(b) A verb agreeing with a focused subject shows a much reduced set of agreement markers (Andrzejewski’s 1968 ‘restrictive paradigm’) and in positive paradigms a distinct accentual pattern, AP1.
(c) A focused subject may not be doubled by a clitic pronoun in the verbal group.

Comparing the negative sentences in (34), we can add a further difference (35):

(34) (a) Nimánkii má imán.
    men-the not came:NEG
    ‘The men didn’t come.’

(b) Nimánkíi (*ay) *báa* imán.
    nimán-kíi báa+áan imán
    men-the NFOC+not came:NEG
    ‘[F The men] didn’t come.’

(35) Negative bàa/ayàa sentences employ the negative word áan ‘not’ rather than má ‘not’.

As has often been noted, this range of behaviours, while unusual for main clauses, is exactly paralleled by relative clauses where the head nominal is also subject of the clause, as we can see by comparing (36a-c):

(36) (a) buugágga ay nimánku keenàan
    books-the they men-the bring:PL
    ‘the books which they the men bring’

(b) nimánka (*ay) buugágga keená
    men-the (*they) books-the bring:SG
    ‘the men who bring the books’

(c) nimánkaan buugágga keenáyn
    men-the+not books-the bring:NEG
    ‘the men who don’t bring the books’
Given that it is in just these two contexts, relative clauses and focus, that we see such
effects, it seems plausible to try to provide some structural account of the parallel. It
seems reasonable to conclude, in particular, that the focused element, like the head of a
relative clause, is outside some inflectional domain within which agreement processes
operate. There have been basically three approaches to this in the literature:

(37) Focus/relative clause parallelism
   (a) Historical: grammaticalization (Heine & Reh 1983)
   (b) Movement rule in syntax (Saeed 1984, Svolacchia et al. 1995)
   (c) Static, construction parallelism (Lecarme 1991, Mereu 1999)

Whatever about the details of individual accounts this suggests further structure for our
string in (24), i.e.:

(38) [\[α TOPIC* \β FOCUS \χ (other NP) \ν-COMPLEX\] \] TOPIC* ]
   where \(α\) = sentence; \(β\) = clause; \(χ\) = core

We note again that focus may not occur post-verbally.

2.3 Focus and Subordinate clauses

There is another important connection between focus and syntax: focus is restricted to
main clauses: it may not be used occur in subordinate clauses. For example if one tries
to get a Somali to translate English examples where intonational focus falls on a
nominal in a subordinate clause, the sentences will be restructured to allow focus in a
main clause:

Example (39) has the whole of the subordinate clause in focus:

(39) Wuxuu íi sheegay ínuu Berberá tegáy
    wáx+a me+to told that+he B. went
   ‘He told me that [\(F\) he went to Berbera]’

If you try to trigger narrow focus within the subordinate clause (contrastive focus on
Berbera) then a restructuring like (40) will occur, where the subordinate clause is recast
as a main clause.

(40) Wuxuu igú yidhi ‘Berberàan tegay’
    wáx+a me+to said Berbera+FOC+I went
   ‘He said to me [\(F\) I’m going to [\(F\) Berbera]]’

A similar example is in (41):

(41) (a) Súuq-a ayày tegay ín-ay dhár sóo iibsato
    market-the FOC+she went that-she clothes VEN buy
   She went to [\(F\) the market] to buy clothes.
   (b) She went to the market to buy [\(F\) clothes].
   (c) Dhár ayày súuq-a u sóo iibsánaysay.
    clothes-the FOC+she market-the in VEN was:buying
   ‘She went shopping for [\(F\) clothes] in the market.’
We may be able to propose an explanation for this constraint. As has been argued by a number of writers, including myself (Saeed 1999), complement clauses in Somali are in fact syntactically relative clauses, in this case on the bleached nominal in \((N_F)\) amount, thing'. Indeed all subordinate clauses in Somali are relative clauses on nominal heads.

This independently motivated fact means that a general constraint on focus domains proposed by Robert van Valin (1998) may provide us with an explanation for the subordinate constraint on Somali focus:

\[
(42) \quad \text{“The potential focus domain in complex sentences: A subordinate clause may be within the potential focus domain if it is a direct daughter of \((a \text{ direct daughter of… })\) the matrix clause node.”} \quad \text{(Van Valin 1998: 11)}
\]

This constraint essentially predicts that a relative clause within a sentence will not form an independent focus domain. This prediction is borne out by the Somali facts.

A corollary of this for Somali is that question words, which must receive narrow focus, cannot occur in subordinate clauses. A question word may only be a main clause constituent coreferential with a subordinate clause argument as in (43) and (44):

\[
(43) \quad \text{Naagtée ayày akhristeen biuggíí ay qortáy?}
\text{woman-which NFOC+they read book-the she wrote}
\text{‘Which woman did they read the book which she wrote?’}
\]

\[
(44) \quad \text{Kumàad rumeysántahay hádalka áh ínuu imàankíi lá kulmay?}
\text{who+NFOC+you believe talk-the be that-he imam-the with met}
\text{‘Who do you believe the claim that he met the imam?’}
\]

As can be seen such questions are not then subject to a subjacency constraint.\(^{81}\)

3. The semantic force of focus

3.1 Modal force

In addition to the marking of new information and contrast it seems that there are other semantic and pragmatic factors involved. It was noted in Saeed (1984, 1993), and supported by Ajello (1995), that the focus words seem to have an epistemic modal force. We can look at this with a fairly traditional analysis of a simple example of nominal focus in (45) below.

\[
(45) \quad \text{Q: Maxàynu ráacaynaa?}
\text{what+NFOC+we travelling:by}
\text{‘[F What] are we travelling by?’}
\]

\(^{81}\) Note that Somali does not show weak-crossover effects for focus/Q:

\[
\text{Kúmàa booyádlís jecéshahay?}
\text{mother-his love}
\]

\[
\text{kúma+bàa booyó+diís jecéshahay}
\]

\[
\text{who+NFOC mother-his love}
\]

\[
[F \text{Who,}] \text{does his, mother love?}]
\]
(46) A: \textit{Jèeb bàynu ráacaynaa.}
jeep NFOC+we travelling:by
‘We are travelling by [F a jeep].’

The information structure of the question Q in (45) can be seen to consist of two parts:

(45’) a. Ground: we are travelling by (something)
b. Focus: what?

We might conventionally take the pragmatic actions similarly to be divided into two:

(45’’) a. Presupposes: we are travelling by something
b. Asks: what is the something?

The information structure of the answer A in (46) can also be seen to consist of two parts:

(46’) a. Ground: we are travelling by (something)
b. Focus: a jeep

and the pragmatic actions would similarly be divided into two:

(46’’) a. Presupposes: we are travelling by something
b. Identifies: the something is a jeep

Looking at the answer in (46) for a moment, what seems to be involved in the use of focus here is a double commitment from the speaker: to the commitment of the existence of an entity in the focused constituent, and to the factuality of the ground.

Recognising this factive element allows us to account for some constraints on the use of focus. The first is the distribution across sentence types. Somali sentence types fall into two main groups:

(47) \begin{center}
\begin{tikzpicture}
  \node (A) {SENTENCE TYPES};
  \node (a) [below left of=A] {declarative};
  \node (b) [below right of=A] {imperative};
  \node (c) [below of=a] {interrogative};
  \node (d) [below of=b] {optative};
  \node (e) [below of=c] {potential};
  \draw (A) -- (a); \draw (A) -- (b); \draw (A) -- (c); \draw (A) -- (d); \draw (A) -- (e);
\end{tikzpicture}
\end{center}

The distinction between the two groups is very clear in the grammar. The A-type sentences carry the full range of tense, aspect and mood (TAM) distinctions, so the verb may be marked for example for tense (past/present/future) and aspect (habitual/progressive), as in the examples in (48) below. The B-type sentences carry no TAM distinctions and occur in just one form; see the examples in (49).
TAM distinctions in A-type: declarative

(a) \[ \text{wùu sugay} \quad \text{Past perfective} \]
    \[ \text{waa+he wait:PAST:PERF} \]
    ‘He waited’

(b) \[ \text{wùu sugaa} \quad \text{Present habitual} \]
    \[ \text{waa+he wait:PRES:HAB} \]
    ‘He waits’

(c) \[ \text{wùu sugayaa} \quad \text{Present progressive} \]
    \[ \text{waa+he wait:PRES:PROG} \]
    ‘He is waiting’

(d) \[ \text{wùu sugayay} \quad \text{Past progressive} \]
    \[ \text{waa+he wait:PAST:PROG} \]
    ‘He was waiting’

(e) \[ \text{wùu sugi donaa} \quad \text{Future (carries speaker certainty)} \]
    \[ \text{waa+he wait:INF will} \]
    ‘He waited’

Lack of TAM distinctions in B-types:

(a) \[ \text{Súg/Súga!} \quad \text{Imperative} \]
    \[ \text{wait:IMP:SG/ wait:IMP:pl} \]
    ‘Wait! (sg/pl)

(b) \[ \text{Há sugo!} \quad \text{Optative (wishes, hopes, blessings)} \]
    \[ \text{OM wait:OPT} \]
    ‘May he wait!’

(c) \[ \text{Shòw sugee} \quad \text{Potential} \]
    \[ \text{PM wait:POT} \]
    ‘Perhaps he’ll wait, Maybe he’ll wait’

The semantic difference between the two types is that the B-types are contra-factive (to use a term from Lyons 1977) or irrealis types, while the A-types are either factive or non-factive, i.e. neutral for factivity, or realis types. The significant fact for our discussion is that focus cannot occur in contra-factive sentence types. So for example, nominals occur in optatives (as can be seen in the examples) but there’s no way to place focus on such nominals, i.e. no way to say ‘May ALI wait!’ to contrast with ‘May MOHAMED wait!’. I take this to be a consequence of a clash between the commitment in focus to the factuality of the ground with the contra-factive sentence.

3.2 Negation

This modal force also places constraints on the interaction of focus with negation. As I mentioned, focus is quite uncommon in negative sentences. This, we might assume, has something to do with the more restricted context for negatives than positive sentences generally: in one form of words, we might say that negative sentences often require more licensing presuppositions. Thus we find that a sentence like (50):

(50) \[ \text{Fáarax báan tegín.} \]
    \[ \text{Farah FOC+NEG went:NEG} \]
    ‘[F Farah ]didn’t go.’
has as its main use negative contrast: typically a presupposition of (a) above would be that someone went and the speaker uses this sentence to assert that it wasn’t Farah. It would not be used simply to add new information to a discourse, instead the non-focus version (51) would occur:

(51) \begin{align*}
\text{Fáarax má tegín} \\
\text{Farah NEG went:NEG} \\
\text{‘Farah didn’t go’}
\end{align*}

However there are extra constraints on the use of focus and negation which we can attribute to the modal force of the latter. See the examples in (52):

(52) Q: \begin{align*}
\text{Kumàa yimí?} \\
\text{kuma+bf came} \\
\text{‘[F Who] came?’} \\
\text{Ground: somebody came}
\end{align*}

A: \begin{align*}
\text{(a) Cálí bàa yimí} \\
\text{Ali NFOC came} \\
\text{‘[F Ali] came.’} \\
\text{(b) Cídna má imán} \\
\text{no-one not came:NEG} \\
\text{‘Nobody came.’} \\
\text{(c) ?Cídna báan imán} \\
\text{no-one NFOC+not came:NEG} \\
\text{‘[F Nobody] came.’} \\
\text{(d) ?Waxáan imán cidna} \\
\text{wáxa+not came:NEG no-one} \\
\text{‘There came [F nobody]’ ‘Who came was [F nobody]’}
\end{align*}

I’ve marked replies (52c) and (52d) as semantically ill-formed because there seems to be no context in which their use is appropriate, despite the grammatical parallel with (52a). This seems to be because the modal force of focus (acceptance/re-assertion of the ground) clashes with the negative nominal’s denial of the ground.

It is interesting to compare this behaviour with the observation that has been made in several places that from the English evidence presupposition is too strong a notion to characterise the ground in information questions and their relevant answers. It has been pointed out that in examples like (53) below, since the reply denies the ground, it cannot be said to presuppose it (in the sense of accepting it as a belief):

(53) Q: Who saw John?
A: NOBODY saw John.
Ground: someone saw John

The basic claim is that for English intonational focus, the ground merely has to be ‘held in mind’ rather than believed. In Relevance Theory, for example, (Sperber and Wilson 1995) what focus does, pragmatically speaking, is involve the ordering of implications, a weaker notion than presupposition. On the other hand cleft sentences do seem to presuppose the ground, hence the strangeness of:
(54) Q: Who saw John?
   A: #It was NOBODY that saw John.
   Ground: someone saw John

As our examples above show, the situation with Somali focus is different from English prosodic focus. bàalayàa focus cannot be used to focus nobody in examples like these. This suggests that in this regard, Somali nominal focus parallels English clefts rather than prosodic focus.

3.3 Illocutionary force

As mentioned above, my identification of this modal force in Somali focus has been subsequently supported by other writers. Interestingly, it has been described by Ajello (1995) in terms of a speech act:

(55) “il fenomeno della focalizzazzione in generale abbia stretta affinità col concetto di modalità, e corrisponda in tutte le sue manifestazioni ad un atto illocutivo di sottoscrizione della verità dell’informazione contenuta nell’ennunciato. In altre parole, anche quando la focalizzazzione verte su un sintagma nominale, essa rappresenta l’asserzione che un tale sintagma nominale non è virtuale, ipotetico, ma reale e che esse ha un certo ruolo all’interno della predicazione principale.” (Ajello 1975: 16)

‘the phenomenon of focus in general has a strong affinity with the concept of modality, and corresponds in all its manifestations to an illocutionary act of commitment to the truth of the information contained in the utterance. In other words, whenever focus falls on a nominal constituent, this represents the assertion that the nominal is not virtual, or hypothetical but real and that it has a certain role inside the main predication’

One way of falling in with this approach would be to say that the narrow use of nominal focus asserts or re-asserts the content of the ground.

We could then perhaps explain the sentence type constraint by saying that the preparatory conditions (in the sense of Searle 1969) for uttering commands, optative-type wishes and potential sentences for a proposition P would rule out cases where P is also being asserted (or in a weaker version: is already in the common ground) and therefore they would rule out focus in these sentence types.

4. Conclusion

Our discussion has identified a certain kind of focus system in Somali that is of interest typologically. It has, among others, the features in (56) below:

(56) a. There is no prosodic marking of focus structure.
b. Rigid focus structure contrasts with flexible grammatical word order.
c. Subordinate clauses are relative clauses and do not form focus domains.
d. Focus morphemes have an epistemic modal force that resembles clefts in other languages.
e. As a result of (d), focus does not occur in contra-factive / irrealis sentence types.
More generally, it should be clear that basic clause structure cannot adequately be described without reference to focus structure. The two are intimately bound and I take this to be a validation of the RRG approach to these two axes of linguistic structure.

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Appendix

Examples of constituents focused by bàalayàa (adapted from Saeed 1999: 190-2). Focused elements in bold in Somali and in square brackets in English.

A. NPS ACTING AS ARGUMENTS OF THE VERB

These may be object (1,2,3) or subject (4) and may be indefinite (2,4) or definite (1,3). The focus is a question word in (2).

(1) Sayídka na gabaygan ayuu ka tiriyeey dilaakaas Koofil
‘And the Sayid, [F this poem] he composed about that killing of Corfield’ [S1 27.12]

(2) Ismaaciil mucuur guuguulaha ugu sheegayaa?
‘Ismail, [F what] is he saying about the hoopoe?’ [S2 21.26]’

(3) Cigaal baa geelodii la raaciyeey.
‘Igal was sent along with their camels.’ [S5 14.1]

(4) Ka dib abaar xun baa dhacday
‘Later [F a severe drought] occurred.’ [SHS 79.3]

B. NPS ACTING AS PREDICATE NOMINALS

(5) Ninka reerka lihi deeqsi buu ahaa
‘The man, who had the family, he, was [F a generous person]’ [SHS 56.8]

C. NPS ACTING AS ADVERBIALS

(6) Arooska weyn had dhow baan dhiigaynaa
‘The big wedding, [F soon] we will be arranging it.’ [SHN 72.12]
D. THE INTENSIFIER (ADVERBIAL) *aad*

(7) *Soomaalidu guurka aad bay u tixgelin jirtey*  
Somalis-the marriage-the much ADP+they ADP value used  
‘The Somalis, marriage, they used to value it, [F very highly].’  
[S2 1.12]

E. RELATIVE CLAUSES AS ARGUMENTS

(8) *Markaana dad badan oo reer Masar ah ayaa qaabay*  
time-that-and people many and nation Egypt be NFOC took  
dinta islaamka  
religion-the Islam-the  
‘And then [F many Egyptians] converted to Islam.’ (lit. ‘And then [F many people who were of the nation of Egypt] took the religion of Islam’)  
[4 22.16-17]

(9) *Libaax oo ah bogorkii habardugaag baa beri bukooday oo lion and is king-the beasts NFOC day fell:ill and*  
avoodi kari waayey in uu ugaarsado  
have:capacity be:able failed that he hunt  
‘One day [F Lion, who is the king of beasts,] fell ill and lost the ability to hunt.’  
[SHS 83.13-14]

E. RELATIVE CLAUSES AS ADVERBIALS

(10) *Inta qofku nool yahay ayuu awood leeyahay oo amount-the person-the alive is NFOC+he potential has and*  
wax qabsan karaa  
thing take:MIDDLE:INF can  
‘[F As long as a person is alive], he has potential and can achieve something.’

F. *Ín ‘that’ COMPLEMENT CLAUSES (8.4.1)*

(11) *Berri inuu soo fuji doono baan ku fekeraa tomorrow that+it VEN sprout will NFOC+I on think*  
‘I reflect [F that it will sprout back again] tomorrow.’  
[FS 41.8]

G. COMPLETE SENTENCES AS REPORTED SPEECH

(12) *Gacaliso maxaad iga doonaysaa? - buu weydiiyey dear what+you me+from want:PRES.PROG NFOC+he asked*  
yaxaaskii  
crocodile-the  
[SHS 79. 24-5]  
‘[F Dear, what do you want from me?]’ – he, asked him, the crocodile.

2. **Constituents focused by *wáxa* (adapted from Saeed 1999: 194-5)**

The typical use of a *wáxa(a)* construction is to place into focus a long noun phrase or a clause occurring after the verbal group. *Wáxa(a),* unlike *bàa/làyàa,* is not used to focus question words (cf 2 above), nor the intensifier *aad* (cf. 7 above) and indeed does not generally focus shorter, non-clausal adverbials. As with *bàa/làyàa,* *wáxa(a)* may not focus the verb, or any element of the verbal group. The focused element may be a
subject (13 below), an object (14), a predicate nominal (15) or an adverbial (16). It may be a noun phrase (13), an in ‘that’ clause (14), or a direct quotation (42):

(13) Waxaa keena uun aad u yar oo la yiraahdo ‘Fiiruus’
wáxaa brings creature INTENS ADP small and one calls ‘virus’
‘What causes it is [F a very small organism called a virus]’[BCH 10. 34-5]

(14) Waxa la wada ogsoonyahay nолосheennu in ay ku
wáxa one together aware-is life-our that it to
xidhantahay roobka
bound-is rain-the
‘It is well known to all [F that our life is bound to the rain]’[S2 19. 29-30]

(15) Saahid Qamaan wuxuu ahaa nin gabayaa ah oo aad ugu
Sahid Qaman wáxa+he was man poet be and INTENS ADP+ADP
xeel dheeraa gabayada xikmadda, waanada iyo duurxulka
cleverness deep-was poems-the wisdom, counsel and oblique:language
‘Sahid Qaman was [F a poet who was very ingenious at the poetry of wisdom, counsel and of veiled language].’[S1 12.3-4]

(16) Waxaa la doortay goortii Cismaan la dilay
wáxa one chose time-the Osman one killed
‘He was chosen [F when Osman was killed]’ (lit. ‘Wáxa one chose him [F the time when one killed Osman]’)[T4 27.5-6]

(17) Kii labaadna wuxuu yiri: “Aniguna waxaan rabi lahaa
the:one second-and wáxa+he said: “I-and wáxa+I like would
uubata badan oo arigaada marisa”
wolves many and goats-your wipe:out
“And the second one, what he said was: [F “And what I would like is many wolves to wipe out your goats].”[FS 51.6-7]