

# Predicate focus in embedded clauses in Kisubi

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Information structure is often constrained by syntactic contexts. In particular, subordinate clauses sometimes restrict which information structure configurations are permitted (Kiparsky and Kiparsky, 1971; Hooper and Thompson, 1973)

We'll discuss today one such case in Kisubi, a Bantu language of Northern Tanzania, beginning with a description of focus marking in Kisubi in general, and then examining focus in (selected) subordinate clauses.

Our main descriptive takeaways are the following:

- In general, focus in Kisubi is marked with *ni*, which is multifunctional as a present progressive marker and a copula. The latter two we treat as cases of predicate focus.
- Certain selected embedded clauses block predicate focus—and only predicate focus—while other selected embedded clauses don't.

The restrictions on focus in subordinate clauses is typically treated in terms of syntactic structure: some clauses are smaller than others (Djärv, 2019), which translates to left-peripheral focus positions being unavailable in some environments.

We will suggest a different take: the ban on predicate focus in certain embedded clauses is the result of the inherent function of the **discourse deictic complementizer** that heads those clauses.

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Kisubu is listed in Maho 2009 as JD64 (and absent from other classifications), however, it is more accurately within JE20, as documented in The Languages of Tanzania Project (2009). It is listed there as having 135,479 speakers.

Kisubi is spoken in Northwestern Tanzania (in Biharamulo, Kagera district) and is mostly mutually intelligible with Kinyambo and Kihaya, sharing phonological, lexical, and morpho-syntactic similarities with these languages (Vumilia and Gluckman, in progress). All the data presented here are from the second author's judgments.

## Focus in Kisubi

Like many other Bantu languages, the morpheme *ni* is used as a marked of focus (Güldemann, 2003). For instance, focus pseudo-clefts are introduced with *ni*.

(1) *ni Majaliwa winyenda.*

**ni** Majaliwa wi-ny-enda  
FOC Majaliwa 1RP-1SG.SM-want

'It's Majaliwa who I love.'



*Wh*-questions, which are preferentially directly post-verbal, require *ni* as a verbal prefix (in the present tense—an issue we return to).

(2) a. *Maria nayend'ohi?*

Maria **ni**-a-enda **ohi**  
Mary FOC-1SM-love who  
'Who does Mary love?'

b. *Nibhalya ki?*

**ni**-bha-lya **ki**  
FOC-2SM-eat what  
'What are they eating / do they eat?'

c. *Nitulyama nkahi?*

**ni**-tu-lyama **nkahi**  
FOC-1PL.SM-sleep where  
'Where are we sleeping (tonight).'

*In situ* constituent focus is also possible, with the same strategy of marking the verb with *ni*.

(3) a. *Majaliwa namwenda Maria wenka.*

Majaliwa **ni**-a-mw-enda **Maria** wenka

Majaliwa FOC-1SM-1OM-love Mary only

‘Majaliwa only loves MARY.’

b. *Majaliwa namwenda na Maria.*

Majaliwa **ni**-a-mw-enda na **Maria**

Majaliwa FOC-1SM-1OM-love CONJ Maria

‘Majaliwa also loves MARY.’

As these examples show, *ni* does not distinguish between exclusive or inclusive focus.

Pure predicate focus is marked the same way, as are *verum* readings.

*What's wrong with Majaliwa?*

(4) *Narwara.*

ni-a-rwara

FOC-1SM-be.sick

'He's sick.'

*Does Majaliwa love Mary?*

(5) *Ego, namwenda*

Ego, ni-a-mw-enda

AFF, FOC-1SM-1OM-love

'Yes, he DOES love her.'

For VP-external material that is in focus, a cleft construction is preferred.

(6) *Ni Majaliwa ayandeta.*

**ni** Majaliwa a-a-n-deta

FOC Majaliwa 1SM-PAST-1SG.OM-bring

'MAJALIWA brought me.'

We note that *ni-* is not an obligatory prefix in the present tense. Rather, without *ni-* the sentences tend to indicate general (or “thetic”) statements.

(7) a. *Majaliwa arwara.*

Majaliwa a-rwara

Majaliwa 1SM-be.sick

‘Majaliwa is sick (in general, as a matter of fact).’

b. *Majaliwa amwenda Maria.*

Majaliwa a-mw-enda Maria

Majaliwa 1SM-1OM-love Mary

‘Majaliwa loves Mary (just a fact).’

# Aspectual function

Kisubi also uses *ni-* to indicate present progressive, a pattern found in a number of languages (Hyman and Watters, 1984; Güldemann, 2003), including the closely related Nyambo (Rugemalira, 2005) and Haya (Rubanza, 1988). This meaning is clearest with activity verbs.

(8) a. *Nituzina.*

*ni*-tu-zina

FOC-1PL.SM-dance

'We are dancing.'

b. *Nosoma ekitabo.*

*ni*-o-soma                      ekitabo

FOC-2SG.SM-read 7NC.book

'You are reading a book.'

We can control for the Aspectual use by employing stative verbs, which are not easily coerced into progressive meanings.

(9) a. *Majaliwa narwara*

Majaliwa ni-a-rwara

Majaliwa FOC-1SM-be.sick

'Majaliwa is sick' (NOT: '??Majaliwa is being sick.')

b. *Majaliwa nabhimanya*

Majaliwa ni-a-bhi-many-a

Majaliwa FOC-1SM-8OM-know

'Majaliwa knows it.' (NOT: '??Majaliwa is knowing it.')



Note, though, that *ni-* is restricted to present tense, affirmative contexts (Güldemann, 2003).

(10) a. *bhakalya ki?*

(\*ni-)bha-ka-lya ki?  
FOC-2SM-PAST-eat what  
'What did they eat?'

b. *tibhalya enfi*

(\*ni-)ti-(\*ni-)bha-lya enfi  
FOC-NEG-FOC-2SM-eat fish  
'They don't eat fish.'

# Copular function

Finally, *ni* functions generally as a “copular” element in nonverbal predications (Gibson et al., 2018).

(11) a. *Majaliwa n'omwegesa / muzima.*

Majaliwa **ni** omwegesa / muzima

Majaliwa FOC 1NC.teacher 1AGR.good

‘Majaliwa is a teacher / fine.’

b. *Omwegesa ni Majaliwa.*

omwegesa **ni** Majaliwa

1NC.teacher FOC Majaliwa

‘The teacher is Majaliwa.’

We note briefly that there is a “true” copula *kubha* (allomorphs *-bha* and *-li*) which is not available in these contexts.

(12) \**Majaliwa ali omwegesa / muzima.*

\*Majaliwa a-li omwegesa / muzima

Majaliwa 1SM-COP 1NC.teacher 1AGR.good

Intended: ‘Majaliwa is a teacher / fine.’

Summarizing,

- *Ni* in general marks predicate and predicate-internal focus.
- *Ni* marks VP-external focus (pseudo-clefts)
- *Ni* expresses present progressive meaning
- *Ni* functions as a copular element.

We follow previous work in assuming that all of these uses—even the latter two—ultimately reflect focus constructions.

Hyman and Watters (1984); Güldemann (2003) (using data from related Bantu languages) argue that the present progressive is an inherently focused category, drawing attention to the **current situation**—the “here-and-now” (HIC-ET-NUNC).

*“[i]t can be said that the continuous, ongoing nature of an event is that information which is viewed by the speaker to be the most relevant for the addressee in a given communicative context”*  
(Güldemann, 2003, 29)

Likewise, non-verbal predications are often analyzed as focus constructions (e.g., Mikkelsen 2005 and Bantu-specific Güldemann 2013). Like “aspectual” *ni*, “copular” *ni* is also a form of predicate focus linked to the current situation. Indeed, In Kisubi, as a copula, *ni* is restricted to the present tense.

(13) *Majaliwa akabha ali omwegesa.*

Majaliwa a-ka-bha a-li omwegesa

Majaliwa 1SM-1PAST-COP 1SM-COP 1NC.teacher

‘Majaliwa was a teacher.’

Summarizing, *ni* is always a marker of focus.

- Sometimes it associates with a **DP**  $\rightsquigarrow$  Clefts, VP-internal material
- Sometimes it associates with a **predicate**  $\rightsquigarrow$  Predicate focus, including aspectual and copular uses

Importantly, in its function as a marker of predicate focus, it is always linked to the **current situation**.



## Restrictions in subordinate clauses

In certain selected embedded clauses, predicate focus is barred.

(14) *Maria namanya ngu Majaliwa narwara.*

Maria ni-a-manya      **ngu**      Majaliwa **ni-a-rwara**  
Mary FOC-1SM-know COMP Majaliwa FOC-1SM-be.sick

'Mary knows that Majaliwa is sick.'

(15) *Maria namanya nkikwo Majaliwa ali kurwara.*

Maria ni-a-manya      **nkikwo**      Majaliwa **a-li**      **kurwara**  
Mary FOC-1SM-know COMP Majaliwa 1SM-COP INF.be.sick

'Mary knows that Majaliwa is sick.'

The restriction is strict: under *ngu*, predicate focus is required; under *nkikwo*, it is banned.

(16) \* *Maria namanya nkikwo Majaliwa narwara*

\*Maria ni-a-manya      **nkikwo** Majaliwa **ni-a-rwara**

Mary    FOC-1SM-know COMP    Majaliwa FOC-1SM-be.sick

Intended: 'Maria knows that Majaliwa is sick.'

(17) \* *Maria namanya ngu Majaliwa ali kurwara*

\*Maria ni-a-manya      **ngu**    Majaliwa **a-li**      **kurwara**

Mary    FOC-1SM-know COMP    Majaliwa 1SM-COP INF.be.sick

Intended: 'Mary knows that Majaliwa is sick.'

This pattern extends to aspectual and copular functions as well.

(18) a. *Maria namanya ngu nituzina.*

Maria ni-a-manya      ngu    ni-tu-zina

Mary FOC-1SM-know COMP FOC-1PL.SM-dance

‘Mary knows that we’re dancing.’

b. *Maria namanya nkikwo tuli kuzina.*

Maria ni-a-manya      nkikwo tu-li              kuzina

Mary FOC-1SM-know COMP 1PL.SM-COP INF.dance

‘Mary knows that we’re dancing.’

And it's found with “copular” *ni* as well:

(19) a. *Maria namanya ngu Majaliwa n' omwegesa*

Maria ni-a-manya    **ngu**    Majaliwa **ni**    omwegesa  
Mary FOC-1SM-know COMP Majaliwa FOC 1NC.teacher

'Mary knows that Majaliwa is a teacher.'

b. *Maria namanya nkikwo Majaliwa ali omwegesa*

Maria ni-a-manya    **nkikwo**    Majaliwa **a-li**    omwegesa  
Mary FOC-1SM-know COMP    Majaliwa 1SM-COP 1NC.teacher

'Mary knows that Majaliwa is a teacher.'

Likewise, predicate focus in the embedded clause also cannot use *ni* under *nkikwo*.

*Do they catch fish?*

(20) *Mahi, akangambira nkikwo bhalya enfi.*

mahi, a-ka-n-gamb-ir-a nkikwo bha-lya enfi  
NEG 1SM-PAST-1SG.OM-say-APPL-FV COMP 2SM-eat 9NCfish

'No, s/he told me that they EAT fish.'

(21) *Mahi, akangambira ngu nibhalya enfi.*

mahi, a-ka-n-gamb-ir-a ngu ni-bha-lya enfi  
NEG 1SM-PAST-1SG.OM-say-APPL-FV COMP FOC-2SM-eat 9NCfish

'No, s/he told me that they EAT fish.'



The empirical observation is that *predicate focus ni*—including true predicate focus, the “aspectual” use, and the “copular” use—is barred under *nkikwo*.

Other focus functions of *ni*, specifically those that involve DP focus, are permitted. And there is no restriction on focus marking under *ngu*.



# Analysis

Our solution to the particular distribution of *ni* under *nkikwo* takes as its starting point the idea discussed earlier that, as a marker of predicate focus, *ni* in Kisubi is linked to the **current situation**.

The second relevant point involves the multifunctionality of *nkikwo* as a **discourse demonstrative**, specifically, a demonstrative that references a discourse salient (distal) situation.

For instance, *nkikwo* is permitted in the following contexts as long as there is a salient discourse known “way.”

- (23) a. *ohandike nkikwo*  
o-handik-e nkikwo  
2SG.SM-write-SBJV DISC.DEM  
'Write that way [how I showed you]!'
- b. *nkora nkikwo*  
n-kora nkikwo  
1SG.SM-do DISC.DEM  
'I'm doing it that way [as you instructed].'

This use of *nkikwo* fits the pattern for the other discourse demonstratives.

	Prox. Disc. (N-Agr.RED)	Dist. Disc. (N-Agr.RED-o)	Emph. Dem. ni-DEM
Class 1	<i>ngugu</i>	<i>ngugwo</i>	<i>n'ogwo</i>
Class 2	<i>mbhabha</i>	<i>mbhabho</i>	<i>n'abho</i>
Class 3	<i>ngugu</i>	<i>ngugwo</i>	<i>n'ogwo</i>
Class 4	<i>nzizi</i>	<i>nzizo</i>	<i>n'eyo</i>
Class 5	<i>ndili</i>	<i>ndilyo</i>	<i>n'elyo</i>
Class 6	<i>ngaga</i>	<i>ngago</i>	<i>n'ago</i>
Class 7	<i>nkiki</i>	<i>nkicho</i>	<i>n'icho</i>
Class 8	<i>mbibhi</i>	<i>mbibhyo</i>	<i>n'ibho</i>
Class 9	<i>ngigi</i>	<i>ngigyoy</i>	<i>n'iyoy</i>
Class 10	<i>nzizi</i>	<i>nzizo</i>	<i>n'ezo</i>
Class 11	<i>ndulu</i>	<i>ndulwo</i>	<i>n'olwo</i>
Class 12	<i>nkaka</i>	<i>nkako</i>	<i>n'ako</i>
Class 13	<i>ntutu</i>	<i>ntutwo</i>	<i>n'otwo</i>
Class 14	<i>mbhubhu</i>	<i>mbhubhwo</i>	<i>n'obhwo</i>
Class 15	<i>nkuku</i>	<i>nkukwo</i>	<i>n'okwo</i>
Class 16	<i>mpaha</i>	<i>mpaho</i>	<i>n'aho</i>
Class 17	<i>nkuku</i>	<i>nkukwo</i>	<i>n'okwo</i>
Class 18	<i>mbumu</i>	<i>mbumwo</i>	<i>n'omo</i>
Class ??	–	<i>nkikwo</i>	<i>n'ikwo</i>

With the other noun classes, this demonstrative series is used to refer to discourse relevant individuals (as well as their location with respect to the speaker's location).

(24) a. *omwana ngugwo*

omwana ngugwo  
1NC.child 1AGR.DEM

≈ 'That's the child over there that we were talking about.'

b. *omusho ngugu*

omusho ngugu  
3NC.knife 3AGR.DEM

≈ 'Here's the knife which I mentioned earlier.'

We suggest that the discourse demonstrative function of *nkikwo* is similar to a certain kind of **propositional anaphor**, e.g., English *so, that* (Needham, 2012; Snider, 2017): it references a salient situation which is known in the discourse. This situation is relevant to the interpretation of the embedded clause.

Importantly, as a demonstrative which refers to a **previous discourse relevant situation**, *nkikwo* is at odds with the meaning of *ni* as predicate focus marker, which is strictly tied to the **current situation**.

(25) ... [ ... V [CP *nkikwo*<sub>S<sup>1</sup></sub> [ ... *ni*<sub>S<sup>0</sup></sub>-V ... ] ] ]

This is why predicate focus *ni* clashes with *nkikwo*: they conflict in which situation the embedded clause is about.

Importantly, when used for DP focus, there is no such clash between *nkikwo* and *ni*, because in that case, *ni* is associated with an individual, rather than an event. So focus-clefts and VP-internal constituent focus may co-occur with *nkikwo* without a conflict.

- (26) a. ... [ ... V [CP *nkikwo*<sub>s1</sub> [ *ni*<sub>x</sub> DP ... V ] ] ]  
 b. ... [ ... V [CP *nkikwo*<sub>s1</sub> [ ... *ni*<sub>x</sub>-V DP ] ] ]



And since *ngu* is not a demonstrative form (it's historically derived from a personal pronoun; Botne 1995), it doesn't clash with embedded focus at all.

(27) ... [ ... V [CP *ngu* [ ... *ni<sub>s</sub>\** ... ] ] ]

## Summarizing,

- Because *nkikwo* specifically references a previous situation, it conflicts with the meaning of predicate focus *ni*, which is strictly tied to the current situation.
- Under *ngu*, no such restriction holds: this complementizer does not interact (situation) focus in general.

Finally, we note a couple of predictions that we've only slightly looked at.

- *Nkikwo* should be most felicitous with response stance verbs (*agree, deny*), since these (often) comment on a given proposition.
  - ▶ This prediction appears to be true. *Nkikwo* is preferred—though not required—with these kinds of verbs.
- We should see an interaction with *sequence-of-tense* and *ni*. This we don't have enough data to say anything about yet.

The facts described for Kisubi are found (with variation) in a wide variety of Bantu languages: (predicate) focus is barred in certain embedded clauses, but not others. (See for instance all the languages in JD60.). It is therefore worth noting that there is consistency in when we find such patterns.

- When (predicate) focus marking in subordinate clauses is banned, the clauses are headed by either (i) demonstrative forms, or (ii) are otherwise “situative,” elaborating on a given situation (cf, Van der Wal 2014).

For instance, in *Kinyamulenge* (JD62a), predicate focus marking (disjoint verbs forms) are dispreferred under the demonstrative complementizer *kó*, but available under the complementizer *ngo*.

We therefore believe the (sketched) analysis here is plausible as a starting point for a cross-linguistic explanation concerning the ban on certain focus constructions in Bantu languages.

The broader takeaway is that such “embedded clause effects” which are found throughout Bantu languages ultimately can be given a semantic, rather than syntactic, explanation.

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## Appendix 1: Situative clauses

In non-selected (adverbial) clauses, we also find restrictions, particular in so-called **situative** clauses. There are two patterns of note. First, in *when(ever)/if* clauses, predicate focus marking is barred, preempted by *ki-*.

(28) *Majaliwa kalwara, Maria amuteekera*

Majaliwa ki-a-lwara, Maria a-mu-teek-er-a  
Majaliwa SIT-1SM-be.sick, Maria 1SM-1OM-cook-APPL-FV

‘Whenever Majaliwa is sick, Maria cooks for him.’

The second pattern is that *ni* itself is used for situative clauses.

(29) *Majaliwa akechemura nayegesa*

Majaliwa a-ka-echemura ni-a-egesa

Majaliwa 1SM-PAST-sneeze FOC-1SM-teach

‘Maria sneezed while teaching.’

We’re not sure what to make of this pattern, as it seems to conflict with the requirement that *ni* be linked to the here-and-now.

## Appendix 2: Relative clauses

Relative clauses also restrict the appearance of *ni*. However, in this case, *all* appears of *ni* are banned, not just those associated with predicate focus.

(30) *omusaiza amwenda Mary narwara*

omusaiza (\*ni-)a-mw-enda Mary ni-a-rwara  
1NC.man FOC-1SM-2OM-love Mary FOC-1SM-be.sick

‘The man who loves Mary is sick.’

As suggested in the text above, we believe that it is plausible that this just a basic focus interaction.

## Appendix 3: The other complementizers

Kisubi has a number of complementation strategies, including *kubha*, *-ti*, and *ki-/ka-*. Only *ki-/ka-* is impossible with *ni*. (Note that *ki-* is also used for situational clauses; see Appendix 1)



(31) a. *akangambira kubha Majaliwa narwara*

a-ka-n-gamb-ir-a kubha Majaliwa  
1SM-PAST-1SG.OM-say-APPL-FV COMP Majaliwa  
ni-a-rwara  
FOC-1SM-be.sick

'S/he said that Majaliwa is sick.'

b. *akangambira ati Majaliwa narwara*

a-ka-n-gamb-ir-a a-ti Majaliwa  
1SM-PAST-1SG.OM-say-APPL-FV COMP Majaliwa  
ni-a-rwara  
FOC-1SM-be.sick

'S/he said "Majaliwa is sick".'

c. *akangambira Majaliwa kali kulwara*

a-ka-n-gamb-ir-a Majaliwa ka-a-li  
1SM-PAST-1SG.OM-say-APPL-FV Majaliwa COMP-1SM-COP  
kulwara  
INF.be.sick

'S/he said that Majaliwa is sick.'