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# Discourse functions of focus marking in Avatime

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**Abstract:** Avatime is a Kwa language spoken in Ghana.<sup>1</sup> It has a focus construction in which the focused element is placed in clause-initial position and marked with an extra-high tone. In this paper I discuss the functions of this focus construction, mostly based on a corpus of spontaneous discourse. The focus construction can mark focus on subjects, objects, adjuncts and verbs. Focus marking is usually interpreted as narrow focus on the focus-marked element, but the focus may be wider. Focus marking is not obligatory. In answers to questions, it is rarely used, except when the focused element is the subject. In other contexts, the focus construction is mostly used for contrastive purposes, indicating there are alternatives to the focused element or that the focused element is unexpected. These functions can be unified in the definition of focus marking as highlighting the common-ground update.

**Keywords:** focus, information structure, Avatime, Kwa languages

## 1 Introduction

This paper discusses focus marking in Avatime, a Kwa language spoken in Ghana. In Avatime, elements are marked for focus by placing them in clause-initial position and attaching a tonal focus marker. I show what kinds of elements can be marked for focus and discuss whether focus marking is obligatory and what functions the focus construction has in spontaneous discourse. In the present section, I start off with a discussion of the notion of

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focus (Section 1.1), followed by a description of the methods used for data collection (Section 1.2) and an introduction to the language (Section 1.3).

## 1.1 Focus

The notion of focus refers to the part of the sentence that contains the common-ground update. When speakers communicate, they try to increase their common ground, i. e. the knowledge that they share. They do this by linking new information to information that is already part of the common ground (see also Matic' 2015). Most sentences contain both information that is already shared knowledge and information that is not yet shared. The latter information can be said to update the common ground and is what I refer to as focus. This view is very similar to that of Lambrecht (1994), who defines focus as the part of the sentence that is not presupposed.

Examples of focus in English can be seen in (1) and (2). In English, focus is usually marked with a pitch accent, which is indicated in the example with capital letters. The examples show that the assumptions the speaker makes about the state of the common ground at the current point in discourse determine which element of the sentence is focused. In example (1), speaker B assumes that speaker A knows that the mouse was killed, but does not know who did it. Speaker B therefore marks the subject of the sentence, **the dog** for focus to indicate that this is the element that updates the common ground. In example (2), the common ground update is provided by the object of the sentence, **the mouse**.

- (1) 1 A: **Who killed the mouse? / It looks like the cat killed a mouse.**  
 2 B: **(No,) The DOG killed it.**
- (2) 1 A: **What did the dog kill? / I think the dog killed a bird.**  
 2 B: **(No,) It killed a MOUSE.**

Another common definition of focus is that it indicates the presence of alternatives that are relevant for the interpretation of the focused element (Rooth 1992; Krifka 2007). This means that when interpreting a focus-marked element, we understand it within the context of the elements that could have replaced it. For instance, in example (1) above, the interlocutors have alternatives to the dog in mind that could have killed the mouse. In the context of speaker A's first question, this is an unlimited set of alternatives, whereas in the context of speaker A's second question, a specific alternative (the cat) is mentioned. The view of focus as evoking alternatives can be seen as compatible, to a certain extent, with the view of focus as the common-ground update. Whenever we say something informative,

this implies that things could have been otherwise and thus that there are alternatives (see Matic' and Wedgwood 2013).

Languages can mark focus in various ways. They can use intonation, they can use morphological marking on the focused element or on the verb, or they can place the focused element in a particular syntactic position. Many West-African languages use morphological marking and syntactic displacement strategies. An example of morphological marking in the Gur language Byali can be seen in line 2 of example (3), where the focus marker **è** follows the focused element. Line 2 of example (4) from Yoruba (Benue-Congo) shows a combination of morphological and syntactic marking, with the focused element occurring in sentence-initial position followed by the focus marker **ni**. The focus construction in Avatime is very similar to that of Yoruba.

- (3) 1 A: **ù nōndó bāārē**  
           c.SBJ buy.PFV what  
           'What has (s)he bought?'  
       2 B: **ù nōndó bānānā é**  
           c.SBJ buy.PFV banana FOC  
           '(S)he has bought [bananas]<sub>FOC</sub>.' (Byali: Reineke 2007: 228)
- (4) 1 A: **kí lo rà**  
           what FOC:2s buy  
           'What did you buy?'  
       2 B: **aşo ni mo rà**  
           clothes FOC 1s buy  
           'I bought [clothes]<sub>FOC</sub>.' (Yoruba: Bisang & Sonaiya 2000: 179-180)

An important difference between languages is that in some languages, focus marking is obligatory in every sentence, whereas it seems to be optional in other languages. In English, the focus is marked with a pitch accent in every sentence. The focus construction in Yoruba, on the other hand, is only used occasionally to mark focused elements. The question asked in example (4) can also be answered without focus marking. The same, as I will show in Section 3.2, is true for Avatime. So, elements that are marked for focus in one language may remain unmarked in another language in the same context. Because of this, I make a distinction between 'focused' or 'in focus' on the one hand and 'focus marked' on the other hand. The former refers to elements that are pragmatically understood as being in focus (i. e. being the main common-ground update) and the latter refers to elements linguistically marked for focus. Focus-marked elements are always in focus, but elements that are in focus are not necessarily focus marked.

When focus marking is not obligatory, the question is when and for what purpose is it used? This question has proven difficult to answer. Several authors have associated non-obligatory focus-marking strategies with marking some form of contrast (Vallduví and Vilkuna 1998; É. Kiss 1998; Bisang and Sonaiya 2000; Zimmermann 2008), but how this notion of contrastive focus is defined differs from author to author and may well differ from language to language too. I will come back to this in Section 3.1. Languages may also possess multiple focus-marking strategies which correspond to different contexts of use (cf. Watters 1979). This means that more than two types of focus may be necessary to account for focus marking in these languages. Dik (1997) proposes seven distinct types of focus based on different contexts of use. However, as shown by Skopeteas and Fanselow (2010) for two different focus-marking strategies in Georgian, linguistic strategies do not necessarily map onto such pre-conceived types.

As there are different focus-marking strategies in different languages, and they are not necessarily used in the same pragmatic contexts, it is not clear whether a core linguistic category of focus can be identified. Matić and Wedgwood (2013) argue that focus is not a unified phenomenon and should be seen as a cover term for a number of related pragmatic effects. This means that when studying focus marking in a certain language, it is not enough to label it as focus, or even contrastive focus, based on a few examples. Rather, before any generalizations are made, the full range of uses of the focus markers should be taken into account. This is what I aim to do in the present paper on Avatime.

## 1.2 Methods and research questions

This paper is mostly based on transcribed audio and video recordings of spontaneous speech. These recordings form a corpus of 7 hours (about 8,000 utterances, 46,700 words) and are of several different genres: storytelling, interviews about cultural practices, public meetings and conversation. In addition to this corpus, linguistic elicitation has been used, mostly in order to get an initial understanding of how focus is expressed. Elicited forms have always been checked against the corpus data.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> All recordings have been archived in The Language Archive at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, Nijmegen: <https://hdl.handle.net/1839/00-0000-0000-0016-AA18-E@view>. In this paper, each example contains a reference to the filename of the recording from which it was taken.

Several types of elicitation methods have been used. The first is traditional grammatical elicitation, in which consultants are asked to translate English sentences or are asked about the grammaticality and/or meaning of constructed Avatime sentences. This is not a very reliable method for a study of focus, as the acceptability of focus constructions depends on context and people generally have a poor awareness of how focus marking is used. Nevertheless, it has been a useful method for trying out various possibilities.

A method that does take context into account is the method of question-answer pairs, probably the most commonly used method for eliciting focus marking. The consultant is presented with a content question and asked to provide the answer in a full sentence. In order to control the answer, the researcher can describe a scenario, provide the answer as a single word or provide a picture based on which the question has to be answered. The assumption of this method is that what is asked for in the question will be in focus in the answer. This is a good and easy way to manipulate which part of the sentence is in focus. However, it is clearly not sufficient to use this method only. Focus-marking may not show up in answers to questions but only in other contexts, or focus marking may be different in different types of contexts. Another reason why this task could be problematic is that it is rather unnatural: the participant is answering a question to which the researcher obviously already knows the answer and is doing so with a full sentence, while a single word would be sufficient.

To address some of these issues, the method of question-answer pairs can be extended to include a wider range of contexts. The Questionnaire on Information Structure (Skopeteas et al. 2006) provides a long list of such context types, meant to elicit different types of focus. This is the third type of elicitation method that has been used for this paper. It is a great improvement over the use of content questions only and is likely to shed more light on the availability of different focus-marking strategies in a language. Nevertheless, the procedure is still quite unnatural and it is difficult to convey to consultants what their answer should be without giving away the information structure.

A way to get more natural but still controlled discourse is by using pictures and video clips. The Questionnaire on Information Structure contains a number of tasks that make use of picture and video stimuli. There are, for instance, sequences of pictures that form a short story in which contrastive events happen. Descriptions of such events are difficult to elicit with other methods.

I have used all these different kinds of methods to elicit focus marking in Avatime. The elicitation methods were mainly used to get an initial idea of what focus marking looks like and how it can be used. I also used these methods to investigate whether focus marking is obligatory in certain contexts, a question that is difficult to answer with more spontaneous discourse.

On the basis of my elicitation findings, I identified one construction that appears to mark focus. I selected this construction for a detailed investigation using my corpus of spontaneous speech. In the corpus, I tagged all occurrences of the focus construction and looked at the types of elements that were marked for focus. For a subset of these focus constructions, I investigated their contexts of occurrence in detail.

My main research questions are:

1. What kinds of elements can be marked for focus with the focus construction?
2. Is focus obligatorily marked in certain contexts?
3. What are the functions of the focus construction?
  - (a) Is the focus construction used for a specific subtype of focus?
  - (b) Is there one definition of focus that can account for all cases of the focus construction?

Section 2 deals with the first question, describing in detail what the focus construction looks like and what elements can be marked for focus. Section 3 answers questions two and three, looking into the obligatoriness of focus marking and describing the function of focus marking in discourse. In Section 4, I summarize my findings and discuss remaining issues. But first, in the next section, I will briefly introduce Avatime.

### 1.3 Avatime

Avatime is a Kwa (Niger-Congo) language and within Kwa belongs to the Ka-branch of the Ghana-Togo-Mountain languages. It is spoken in 8 villages in the South-East of Ghana (Volta Region) by about 15,000 speakers.

Avatime is a tone language. It has three level tones: low (marked  $\grave{}$ ), high (unmarked) and extra-high (marked  $\acute{}$ ).<sup>3</sup> The extra-high tone has a limited distribution and is often the result of tone-raising processes. Contour tones are rare and when they occur they are usually distributed over two vowels. The rising tone (marked  $\tilde{}$ ) is sometimes realized on a single vowel. Avatime has 9 vowels and an ATR-based vowel harmony system in which affixes harmonize with the nearest root vowel.

Avatime has a noun class system with 7 genders, consisting of 6 singular-plural pairs and one gender for mass nouns. The noun class is usually marked

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<sup>3</sup> Some previous literature on Avatime (Ford 1971; Schuh 1995) describes four level tones. In addition to the three tones I mentioned, these previous works find a mid tone in between the low and high tones. I have not found any instances of this tone (see van Putten 2014) and therefore describe the tone system with three tones only.

on the noun with a prefix. There is noun-class agreement with definite and indefinite articles, demonstratives and numerals. Subject prefixes on the verb also agree in noun class with the subject.

Possession is indicated by juxtaposition with possessor-possessum word order. Locative phrases consist of a locative preposition **ní**, followed by a noun phrase, which is usually followed by a postposition.

Aspect, mood and modality are marked with prefixes on the verb. These are sometimes fused with the subject markers. There is no grammatical tense in Avatime (see Defina in press (b)). Negation is usually marked with an extra-high tone that attaches to the subject marker.

Subject prefixes on the verb are obligatory. In the absence of a lexical subject, they have a pronominal function. There is no object agreement on the verb. Zero objects are possible but seem to be mainly restricted to certain types of serial verb constructions.

Serial verb constructions occur frequently. These are constructions in which two or more verbs occur in sequence within one clause, without any marking of coordination or subordination. In Avatime, subsequent verbs may be marked with a reduced agreement prefix (see Defina in press (a)).

Constituent order in Avatime is rigidly SVO. The only way to deviate from this order is by focus marking or left-dislocation. Left-dislocated elements precede focus-marked elements.

## 2 The focus construction

In this section, I discuss what the Avatime focus construction looks like, what types of elements can be marked for focus and to what extent the element that is marked for focus overlaps with the part of the proposition that is interpreted as being in focus. I start with an overview of the properties of the focus construction (Section 2.1), then I discuss focus marking on arguments and adjuncts, including ways in which the part of the proposition that is in focus can extend beyond or be a subpart of the focus-marked phrase (Section 2.2). After that, I discuss focus marking of verbs, including the possible interpretations this may have (Section 2.3).

### 2.1 Grammatical properties

The Avatime focus construction consists of three elements that always occur together: (i) the focused constituent occurs in clause-initial position, (ii) the focused constituent is followed by a floating extra-high tone which attaches



to its final syllable and (iii) the end of the clause is marked with a floating high tone.<sup>4</sup>

The schema in (5) shows the Avatime constituent order. The focus-marked constituent occurs before the subject but after any left detached elements. No resumptive pronoun occurs in the canonical position of the focus-marked element. A sentence cannot contain multiple focus-marked elements.

- (5) Constituent order of simple monoverbal Avatime sentences:  
left detached elements - focus - subject - verb - object - adjuncts

Example (6) shows a canonical construction compared to a focus construction. In the canonical construction in (6a), the object, **ḡmɔɛnḡ** ‘the orange’, follows the verb. Both the object and the verb, **ŋà** ‘eat’, end in a low tone. In (6b) the object is focused. It precedes the verb and the extra-high tone focus marker is attached to its final syllable. The verb now ends in a high tone. The canonical position of the object remains empty.

- (6) a. **àfuà a-ŋà ḡmɔɛ = nḡ**  
Afua c1s.SBJ.PFV-eat c2s-orange = DEF  
‘Afua ate the orange.’
- b. **ḡmɔɛ = nḡ àfuà a-ŋa**  
c2s-orange = DEF:FOC Afua c1s.SBJ.PFV-eat:CFH  
‘Afua ate [the orange]<sub>FOC</sub>.’ (elic-foc\_100602\_SO)

The tonal properties of the focus construction can be seen by comparing Figures 1 and 2. In Figure 1, the pitch clearly goes down on the final syllable of **ónyimeè** ‘the man’, whereas in Figure 2 it goes back up to extra high. The final syllable of **òhulò** ‘the car’ is clearly low in Figure 1 and high in Figure 2.

This type of focus construction, with the focused element in initial position and marked with a focus-marking morpheme, is commonly found in Kwa languages (see e. g. Ameka 2010). Avatime differs in an interesting way from other Kwa languages with respect to the nature of the focus marker: in other languages this is a segmental morpheme (e. g. **yé/é** in Ewe, **na** in Akan) whereas in Avatime it is a floating tone. It is likely that in a previous stage of the language, Avatime had a segmental focus marker like other Kwa languages, but that this was lost, leaving behind only its tone. The deletion of a segment followed by the attachment of its

<sup>4</sup> This is only audible if the final word does not already end in a high tone, so in many cases it cannot be perceived.

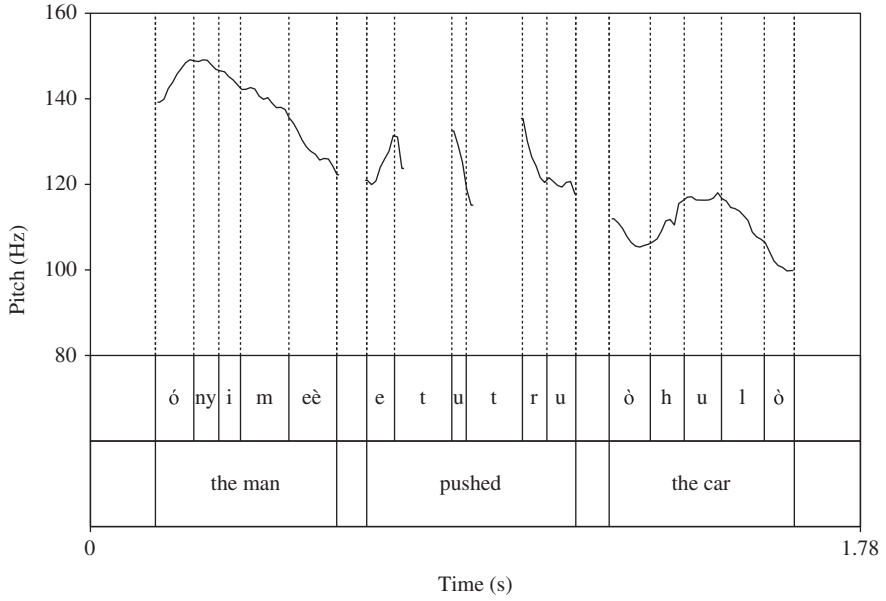


Figure 1: Pitch contour of a sentence without focus marking.

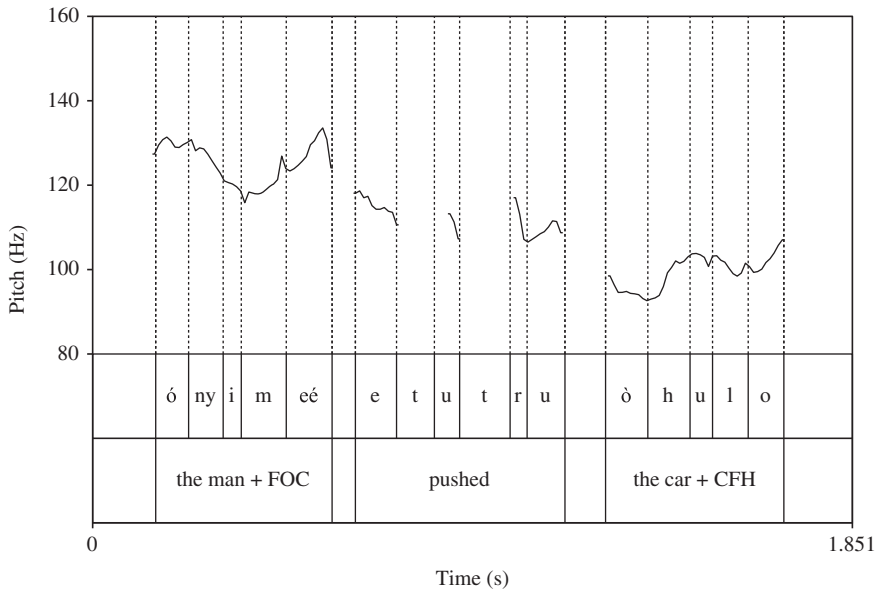


Figure 2: Pitch contour of a sentence with focus marking on the subject.

tone to the previous syllable happens in other areas of Avatime grammar as well. For instance, the locative prefix **ní** is often deleted and its extra high tone is realized on the previous syllable, as shown in (7).

- (7) a. **a-trɛ ní ke-pe = a mɛ̀**  
 c1s.SBJ.PFV-go LOC c6s-house = DEF inside  
 ‘He went home.’ (S0811171\_WO)
- b. **a-trɛ́ ke-pe = a mɛ̀**  
 c1s.SBJ.PFV-go:LOC c6s-house = DEF inside  
 ‘He went home.’ (S0811171\_WO)

Another difference with some other Kwa languages is that the clause-initial focus position and the focus marker always co-occur: it is not possible to mark an element for focus by fronting only or with the focus marker only. In many other Kwa languages, it is possible to mark certain types of elements for focus using fronting only (Ameka 2010).

There are several particles in Avatime that can interact with focus marking. These particles directly follow the focused element. The extra high tone focus marker attaches to the particle. The most frequent particle in the corpus is **kò** ‘only’, an example of which can be seen in (8), where it is associated with **katɔ̀kpa** ‘male goat’.

- (8) **li-poé lé-lò vâ = ɛ, kà-tùkpa kó bí-zě-ye**  
 c3s-time c3s-DIST on = CM c6s-male.goat only:FOC c1p.SBJ-HAB-kill  
**ní kunu = ye me**  
 LOC funeral = DEF inside:CFH  
 ‘From that time on, they only kill [male goats]<sub>FOC</sub> at funerals.’  
 (kadzidzia\_110406\_QM)

There are a number of cases of focus marking in which the focused element is followed by a pronoun that agrees with it in noun class and carries the extra-high tone focus marker. In these cases, the focused element can be analyzed as occurring in the left-detached position while the pronoun occupies the clause-initial focus position. There are 63 such cases in the corpus. An example can be seen in (9), where the class 1 singular pronoun **yɛ** is marked with the focus marker.

- (9) **agì sòlɛ̀mɛ̀ yɛ́ ɔ-le xé ð-ha = lò**  
 because church c1s:FOC c1s.SBJ.PFV-be.at before c2s-group = DEF

ǎ-ɪɛ = ɛ

C2S.SBJ.PFV-be.at = CM

‘Because [the church]<sub>FOC</sub> is there before its members are there.’

(funeral\_100531\_MM-EM)

It is possible that in some cases the pronoun is added to make the focus marking clearer. Out of the 63 left-dislocated elements with focus-marked resumptive pronouns, 40 are subjects. This is a high number as in the entire corpus, only 31 % of the focus-marked elements are subjects (see Section 2.4). A reason could be that subjects are more difficult to recognize as focus-marked, because the only indication is the tone on the final syllable of the subject (and possibly the clause-final high tone), as opposed to objects and adjuncts, where syntactic position is an additional indicator. This might prompt people to use a pronoun as an extra indication of focus.

Tafi, the language most closely related to Avatime, also uses the pronoun strategy for focus marking. However, in Tafi, there is no additional morphological or tonal focus marker. Object focus is simply marked by fronting and for subject focus, the pronoun strategy is exclusively used (Bobuafor 2013). More research is needed to investigate how the focus constructions in the two languages are related to each other. One might think that the Avatime extra-high tone focus marker has historically developed out of the focus-marking pronoun. However, this scenario does not explain where the extra-high tone comes from, as independent pronouns never bear an extra-high tone outside of the focus construction. It is also contradicted by the order in which elements occur in the focus construction: focus particles such as **kô** ‘only’ follow the independent pronoun, whereas they precede the floating extra-high tone focus marker (10).

(10) **kokó lǐyè ye kó yèé-kpe**

COCOA C1S.PROX C1S only:FOC C1S.SBJ.PROG-put

‘He is planting [only this cocoa]<sub>FOC</sub>.’ (conv-greenhouse\_110408\_SO-ViA\_2)

A more likely scenario is that the language from which both Avatime and Tafi have descended had a focus marker (either segmental or tonal) and that Tafi lost this marker and replaced it with the pronoun strategy for subject focus.

## 2.2 Focus marking of arguments and adjuncts

Example (6) showed focus marking on the object. Adjuncts are marked for focus in the same way. In (11), a temporal adverb is marked for focus.

- (11) **agì òmonó í-zě-se a-sja = nà = ε**  
 and today:FOC c1s.SBJ-HAB-tell c3p-lie = DEF = CM  
 ‘Is it [today]<sub>FOC</sub> that she is telling lies?’ (implying she always lies)  
 (conv-rice\_110411\_3-2)

The corpus examples of focus-marked adverbials are mostly adverbials of time and place. It also seems to be possible to mark other types of adverbials for focus, such as manner adverbs, as in (12). Examples such as these do not occur in my corpus of spontaneous speech, but they do occur in elicited discourse.

- (12) **gaglá mɔ-kà e-se kuni**  
 strong:FOC 1s.POSS:c1s-father c1s.SBJ.PFV-run follow:LOC  
**ò-hui = lò ede**  
 c2s-car = DEF back  
 ‘My father ran after the car [very fast]<sub>FOC</sub>.’  
 (elic-adv-placement\_110318\_SO)

When adpositional phrases are marked for focus, the locative preposition **ní** is left out. An example can be seen in (13a). Here, if the phrase **lìkpɔkpɛkpɛ mè** ‘in unity’ occurred in its canonical position at the end of the clause, it would have been preceded by **ní**, as shown in (13b).

- (13) a. **lì-kpɔkpɛkpɛ mé kɪ-ba**  
 c3s-unity inside:FOC 1p.SBJ.PFV-COME  
 ‘We came in [unity]<sub>FOC</sub>.’ (avopa\_100512\_1)  
 b. **kɪ-ba ní lì-kpɔkpɛkpɛ mè**  
 1p.SBJ.PFV-come LOC c3s-unity inside  
 ‘We came in unity.’

Question words in content questions are also marked for focus, with the extra-high tone focus marker attached to the fronted question word. Questions do not end in a final high tone. An example can be seen in (14).

- (14) **egé àfuà a-nà**  
 what:FOC Afua c1s.SBJ.PFV-eat  
 ‘What did Afua eat?’ (elic-foc\_100602\_SO)

Subjects are marked for focus in the same way as objects and adjuncts. However, as subjects already occur in clause-initial position, no change in

position is visible. It is only the extra high tone focus marker and possibly the clause-final high tone that mark the sentence as a focus construction. This can be seen in (15) and was also shown in Figures 1 and 2.

- (15) **kedɔné**                      **ɛ́ɛ-ŋà**                      **li-wè = le**  
 Avatime.person:FOC c1s.SBJ.PROG-eat c3s-day = DEF  
 ‘[The Avatime person]<sub>FOC</sub> will celebrate (literally: eat) the festival.’  
 (chiefs-meeting\_100619\_03)

Parts of noun phrases or locative phrases cannot be individually marked for focus. To indicate that these parts are in focus, the entire NP or locative phrase must be focus marked. This can be seen in (16), where the context indicates that only the possessor is focused, but the entire possessive construction is marked for focus. It is not possible to place only **ónyimeè** ‘the man’ in clause-initial position and leave **ɔ̀klɪ̀ɪ̀** ‘the leg’ in-situ. It is also not possible to attach the extra-high tone focus marker to **ónyimeè** ‘the man’; it can only occur at the end of the entire phrase.

- (16) 1 A: ‘Did the dog bite the girl’s leg?’  
 2 B: **o ó-nyime = è ɔ̀-klɪ̀ = lɪ́ kèé-némi**  
 no c1s-man = DEF c2s-leg = DEF:FOC c6s.SBJ.PROG-bite  
 ‘No, it bit the [man’s]<sub>FOC</sub> leg.’ (STIS2\_100708\_MiA)

In example (16), only a part of the element that is marked for focus is interpreted as being in focus. It is also possible for things to be the other way around: for the part of the proposition that is in focus to extend beyond the focus-marked element. There are two types of extension possible: focus-marking of the object can be interpreted as focus on the object + verb and focus marking on the subject can be interpreted as focus on the entire sentence.

There are several cases of focus marking on objects and oblique arguments in which the part that is interpreted as in focus includes the verb as well. An example is seen in (17). The focus marking is on (the inside of) the tree. If that were also the part of the sentence interpreted as being in focus, the questioner would be entertaining the possibility that the man climbed into something other than the tree. This is not the case here, as there are no other things the man could have climbed into to pick pears. Instead, the questioner seems to want to know whether the man climbed into the tree or was standing on the ground. The focus is thus on ‘climb into the tree’. That this is the case is also apparent in the answer to this question, in which the

storyteller explains that he first thought the man was standing on the ground while picking, but later realized that he was in the tree.

- (17) A tells B about a man who was picking fruits from a tree. B asks a clarification question.

1 B: **ò-se = lo mé e-mu ku xé**  
 c2s-tree = DEF inside:FOC c1s.SBJ.PFV-ascend arrive when  
**èé-gụ ba = ε**  
 c1s.SBJ.PROG-pick c1p = CM  
 ‘Did he [climb into the tree]<sub>FOC</sub> when he picked them?’

2 A: **gɔmɛdzedze ó-mu kú ò-se mè**  
 beginning c1s.SBJ.PFV.NEG-ascend arrive:LOC c2s-tree inside  
 ‘In the beginning he did not climb into a tree.’

3 **ma-mò sị a-zε-gụ bé**  
 1s.SBJ.PFV-see COMP c1s.sbj.pfv-rec-pick c4p:LOC  
**ke-se = à rrrr**  
 c6s-ground = DEF continuously  
 ‘I thought that he was picking them on the ground.’

(pear\_100719\_PhA-DQ)

The association between object focus and focus on the object and verb together, also called predicate focus, is common crosslinguistically. It has been especially well-described for languages with prosodic focus marking. Lambrecht (1994) describes predicate focus as the default focus articulation: the subject is the topic and usually stays the same throughout a stretch of discourse, while what is predicated of the subject changes and conveys the new (non-presupposed) information. Importantly, in English transitive clauses, predicate focus is marked with a pitch-accent on the object, which is the same way in which narrow focus on the object is marked. Selkirk (1995) explains this as focus projection: focus can extend from the internal argument of a phrase to its head and from the head of a phrase to the entire phrase.

The second way in which the focused part of the proposition can extend beyond the focus-marked element in Avatime is by using a focus-marked subject to indicate focus on the entire sentence. This occurs rarely. One case can be seen in (18). Here, the subject of B’s sentence, **ìlelè** ‘messages’, is marked for focus, but the interpretation is one of focus on the entire sentence. B’s utterance does not consist of a focused part and a background part. All information in the sentence is presented as equally newsworthy.

- (18) 1 A: **lě kɪɛ bɛ-wó te òmonò = e**  
 and how c1p.SBJ.PFV-be.late like.that today = CM  
 ‘And why are they this late today?’
- 2 B: **ì-le = lé nyàfɛ ì-dò kpanwi**  
 c2p-message = DEF:FOC maybe c2p.SBJ.PFV-move.out plenty  
 ‘Maybe there were many messages.’ (conv-street\_100720\_2)

Lambrecht (2000) shows that marking the subject as prominent is a cross-linguistically common strategy to mark sentence focus. He explains this as a need to indicate a difference from the default predicate focus configuration. To avoid the default interpretation of a topical subject and a focused predicate, the subject is marked as a non-topic.

### 2.3 Focus marking of verbs

Verbs are marked for focus with the same focus construction that is used for arguments and adjuncts. A copy of the verb root marked with the noun class prefix **kɪ-/ki** occurs in the clause-initial focus position, while the inflected verb remains in its normal position in the sentence. The clause-initial copy of the verb is also marked with the extra-high tone focus marker. Like with argument and adjunct focus, the clause ends in a high tone. An example can be seen in (19), where the verb **hɔ** ‘grind’ occurs first in clause-initial position with the prefix **ki-** and then again inflected as **bɛtáɬɔ** ‘they will grind’.

- (19) **kɪ-hó bɛ-tá-hɔ lɔ àló bɪà-to lo**  
 c4s-grind:FOC c1p.SBJ.PFV-INT-grind c2s or c1p.SBJ.POT-pound c2s  
**ní kɪ-dɛ mɛ**  
 LOC c4s-mortar inside  
 ‘Do they [grind]<sub>FOC</sub> it or pound it in a mortar?’ (illness\_100616\_SO-DS)

Several other Kwa languages have a similar verb focus construction in which the clause-initial copy of the verb is nominalized (see e.g. Ameka 2010). In Avatime, the prefix marking the focused verb is not the regular nominalizing prefix, which is **ku-/ku-**. The prefix **kɪ-/ki-** does not function as a nominalizer in other contexts.

Individual verbs in serial verb constructions can be marked for focus. It is usually the first verb of the serial verb construction that is marked for focus.



An example can be seen in line 4 of (20), where the verb *yɔ* ‘get up’ is marked for focus. Marking the first verb for focus often results in focus on the entire serial verb construction, which is also the case in this example. In A’s final line, what she wants to emphasize is that the children left. The fact that they got up before they left, though marked for focus, is not the most important information.

- (20) 1 A: **bɛ-dzɛ,            ó-dò                                    sɔ̀lɛ̀mɛ̀**  
 c1p.SBJ.PFV-go c1s.SBJ.PFV.NEG-move.out church  
 ‘They went, she has not come out of church.’
- 2 B: **o-í-dò**  
 c1s.SBJ.PFV.NEG-move.out  
 ‘She has not come out?’
- 3 A: **this time bá-li-tso                                    dò            lósòè**  
 this time c1p.SBJ-PROG.NEG-be.early move.out so  
**xé    mà-tré                    lɔ̀ = ɛ            bjà-kpɛ            mɛ**  
 when 1s.SBJ.PFV-go:LOC there = CM c4p.SBJ.POT-put 1s  
**ku-nugu = yò**  
 c5s-trouble = DEF  
 ‘This time they are not closing early, so when I go there it will trouble me.’
- 4 **ìmò àsafò ye-bi = à,                                    kɪ-yó**  
 see Asafò c1s.POSS:c1p-child = DEF c4s-get.up:FOC  
**bɛ-yó                                    sɛ́    lo**  
 c1p.SBJ.PFV-get.up leave FP  
 ‘Look at Asafò’s children, they [got up and left]<sub>FOC</sub>.’  
 (conv-street\_100720\_2)

Marking the second verb of the serial verb construction for focus is less acceptable. There are no examples in the corpus of spontaneous speech. In elicitation, no consultants spontaneously came up with such constructions, but they accepted (some of) them when prompted.<sup>5</sup> An example can be seen in (21), where in the first clause *mu* ‘descend’ is used as the second verb in a serial verb construction and is marked for focus.

5 Whether or not focus on the second verb of the serial verb construction is accepted seems to depend on the type of serial verb construction. At the moment, I do not have enough data to investigate this in more detail.

- (21) **ki-mú a-gà mu àló a-gà**  
 c4s-ascend:FOC c1s.SBJ.PFV-move ascend or c1s.SBJ.PFV-move  
**ple**  
 descend  
 ‘Did he walk [upwards]<sub>FOC</sub> (literally: move ascend) or did he walk down-  
 wards (literally: move descend)?’ (elic-verbfocus\_100716\_SO)

The verb focus construction is also used to mark non-finite verbal complements for focus. This can be seen in example (22), in which the verb **lila** ‘disappear’ is the non-finite complement (marked with the prefix **ɔ-**) of the verb **kpese** ‘start’ and is marked for focus.

- (22) **lě ì-trse = nè gî ì-bjɛ ɲwa ki-dó**  
 and c2p-okra = DEF REL c2p.SBJ.PFV-do like c4s-move.out:FOC  
**ì-do, kɔ àblɔ kɔ kɔ kɔ kɔ kɔ kɔ kɔ kɔ kɔ kɔ kɔ kɔ kɔ kɔ kɔ kɔ kɔ**  
 c2p.SBJ.PFV-move.out then now CTR then c4s-disappear:FOC  
**ì-kpese ɔ-lila tàa**  
 c2p.SBJ.PFV-start INF-disappear a.bit  
 ‘And the okra, which seemed to be [appearing]<sub>FOC</sub> (literally: moving out),  
 now it is starting to [disappear]<sub>FOC</sub>.’ (conv-street\_100720\_1)

Güldemann et al. (2010) distinguish between three focus interpretations related to focus on the verb: focus on the lexical content of the verb, focus on the truth value and focus on tense/aspect/mood. All three types can be marked in Avatime with the verb focus construction.

The most common interpretation is focus on the lexical content of the verb, as in (23), repeated from (19), in which grinding is contrasted to pounding.

- (23) **kɪ-hó bɛ-tá-hɔ lɔ àló bɛ̀à-to lo**  
 c4s-grind:FOC c1p.SBJ.PFV-INT-grind c2s or c1p.SBJ.POT-pound c2s  
**ní kɪ-dɛ mè**  
 LOC c4s-mortar inside  
 ‘Do they [grind]<sub>FOC</sub> it or pound it in a mortar?’ (illness\_100616\_SO-DS)

There are several cases of focus marking on the verb that are interpreted as focus on the truth value of the sentence. An example can be seen in (24), where **dzi** ‘buy’ is marked for focus. There is no other action that buying is contrasted to, rather, it is contrasted to not buying. That is, given that the child is still sick, the listener might think the speaker did not buy medicine. The focus on buying emphasizes that she did.

- (24) The speaker talks about a sick child sitting on her lap, saying her head feels hot.

**kivoe ki-dzí ma-ze-dzi bà-wa kǐ yɛ**  
 yesterday c4s-buy:FOC 1s.SBJ.PFV-IT-buy c5p-medicine give c1s  
 ‘Yesterday I [did buy]<sub>FOC</sub> medicine for her.’ (conv-street\_100720\_1)

Focus marking on the verb can also be used to indicate focus on the aspect or mood, though this happens rarely. One example can be seen in (25), where **kusi** ‘beat’ is marked for focus. Here the focus is on the intensive mood of **bɛtá-kusi** ‘they are going to (intending to) beat him’, which is contrasted to the possibility that they have already beaten him.

- (25) Two men are discussing a picture in which they see a man in prison, with a thought bubble in which the man is shown as being beaten.

**xé nyàfɛ aní ki-kusí bɛ-tá-kusi ye fɛ**  
 if maybe NEG c4s-beat:FOC c1p.SBJ.PFV-INT-beat c1s ADD  
**nyàfɛ kǐlɛ gǐ èé-bú lɛ sɔ kǐlɛ gǐ**  
 maybe how REL c1s.SBJ.PROG-think:LOC c3s about how REL  
**bɛ-kusi ye**  
 c1p.SBJ.PFV-beat c1s  
 ‘If maybe they are not [going to]<sub>FOC</sub> beat him, maybe he is thinking about how they beat him (already).’ (famprob\_110316\_MM-A1A)

## 2.4 Summary

In Sections 2.1–2.3, I have shown what the focus construction looks like, and what types of elements can be marked for focus with it. Table 1 shows how often different types of elements are marked for focus in the corpus of spontaneous

**Table 1:** Number of focus constructions in the corpus.

Focused element	Count	Percentage
object	248	46
subject	164	31
adjunct	72	13
verb	50	9
<b>total</b>	<b>534</b>	<b>100</b>

speech. Objects are most frequently marked for focus, followed by subjects, adjuncts and verbs. The fact that objects are most frequently marked for focus is in line with the idea that objects tend to represent new information whereas subjects of transitive clauses tend to be topics (Du Bois 1987; Lambrecht 1994). Altogether, there are 534 cases of focus marking, which means that about 6.7% of the utterances in the corpus contains a focus-marked element.

This section has also shown that the element that is marked for focus is not necessarily exactly the same as the element that is interpreted as being in focus. When a complex noun phrase or adpositional phrase is marked for focus, the element that is interpreted as being in focus may be only one part of it. When a verb is marked for focus, the element that is interpreted as being in focus may be only the aspect/mood/modality value or truth value. When one verb of a serial verb construction is marked for focus, the focus may be over the entire serial verb construction. When the object is marked for focus, the focus may be on the object + verb. And finally, when the subject is marked for focus, the focus may be on the entire sentence.

Now that it is clear what the focus construction looks like and how it can mark different parts of a proposition for focus, the next step is to investigate in more detail the function of the focus construction. This is what I will do in the next section.

## 3 Functions of focus marking

### 3.1 Introduction

As mentioned in Section 1.1, some languages obligatorily mark focus in every sentence while focus in other languages is only occasionally marked. English belongs to the former type: in every sentence, a pitch-accent indicates which part of the sentence provides the main common-ground update. Avatime belongs to the other type: in my corpus, there are 534 instances of the focus construction, which amounts to 6.7% of the utterances. This raises the question of what the focus construction is used for. If, like the English pitch-accent, it indicates the main information update of the sentence, then why does it only do so in some sentences? In other words, what kind of information update does it mark?

A number of different types of focus have been proposed in the literature. The main division is usually made between information focus and contrastive focus or identificational focus. The former is the most unmarked type of focus

and occurs in every utterance in which the speaker wants to update the common ground. Contrastive or identificational focus has been linked to syntactic focus marking. Identificational focus has been defined by É. Kiss (1998) as indicating that the predicate holds exhaustively for the focused phrase and not for any other contextually salient alternative. The set of alternatives can be open-ended, as in Hungarian, or closed, as is proposed for Italian, Romanian and Catalan. When the set is closed, the focus is not just identificational, but also contrastive. Other authors define contrast differently. Vallduví and Vilkuna (1998) analyze contrastive focus as a combination of information focus and contrast, where contrast is simply defined as evoking alternatives. Dik (1997: 332) is a bit more explicit about the notion of alternatives and defines contrastive focus as expressing “contrast between the focus constituent and alternative pieces of information which may be explicitly presented or presupposed”.<sup>6</sup> Zimmermann (2008: 154) argues that contrastive focus is not related to alternatives, but to hearer expectations. He defines it as follows: “Contrastive marking on a focus constituent  $\alpha$  expresses the speaker’s assumption that the hearer will not consider the content of  $\alpha$  or the speech act containing  $\alpha$  likely to be(come) common ground.”

Dik (1997) uses contrastive focus as an umbrella term for a number of subtypes of focus. His main distinction within the category of contrastive focus is between parallel focus and counter-presuppositional focus. Example (26) shows parallel focus. In parallel focus, a contrast is made between properties of two entities, times, or places. In this example, **nice** and **boring** are the parallel foci. **John** and **Bill** are the entities being compared and are marked as contrastive topics.

- (26) 1 **John and Bill came to see me.**  
 2 **JOHN was NICE, but BILL was rather BORING.**

(Dik 1997: 326)

In counter-presuppositional focus, the focused element contradicts something that has been previously said or presupposed. This is similar to Zimmermann’s definition of contrastive focus as contrary to hearer expectations. An example of counter-presuppositional focus can be seen in (27), where B’s utterance challenges what A seems to believe.

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<sup>6</sup> Note that defining contrastive focus as involving alternatives is incompatible with the approach taken by Alternative Semantics (Rooth 1992) in which all kinds of focus are taken to evoke alternatives.

(27) 1 A: **John bought apples.**

2 B: **No, he didn't buy APPLES, he bought BANANAS.**

(Dik 1997: 334)

A difference between parallel and counter-presuppositional focus is that in parallel focus, the two sentences that are compared can co-exist within one person's perspective on the world, whereas in counter-presuppositional focus, the two sentences are incompatible within one perspective and usually involve the assumptions of two people.

The optionality or obligatoriness of contrastive or identificational focus marking differs depending on the context and the language. Identificational focus in Hungarian, for instance, is obligatory in answers to content questions (É. Kiss 1998). This is unexpected, as such answers are generally thought to be cases of information focus. It is also not clear whether contrastive focus is obligatorily used in contrastive contexts such as the comparison of similar events or the correction of an assumption. Zimmermann (2008) presents some examples in which a contrast between alternatives is present, but there is no focus marking. He takes this to mean that contrastive focus should not be explained in terms of alternatives. Skopeteas and Fanselow (2010) carry out a production experiment in Georgian, using question-answer pairs, to find out what types of focus are more likely to be marked. They find that the marked focus construction in Georgian is more likely to be used for contrastive purposes, but can be used in both contrastive and information focus.

Focus marking has also been argued to be obligatory when the subject is in focus. This has been claimed for several Kwa languages by Ameka (2010) and for a large group of Kwa, Gur and West-Chadic languages by Fiedler et al. (2010). The rationale behind this is that in most sentences, the main information update is encoded in the predicate, whereas the subject tends to encode uncontroversial information to which the new information is linked. Marking focus on the subject is important, because it makes clear to the listener that the sentence does not have this expected information structure. Marking focus on the object is less important, because the object is normally already part of the information update. Skopeteas and Fanselow (2010) find for Georgian that focused subjects are indeed marked for focus more frequently than objects, but they can remain unmarked.

In the remainder of this section, I will look into the functions of focus marking in Avatime. In Section 3.2 I investigate to what extent focus marking is optional and whether focus is more likely to be marked in some contexts than in others. In Section 3.3, I analyze the function of the occurrences of the focus construction in a subset of my corpus of spontaneous discourse.



This time, object and subject focus were closer together: 5 out of 6 answers were focus-marked in the subject condition and 3 out of 6 in the object condition. Altogether, focus marking was more frequent in this condition than after content questions. Example (30) shows focus marking on the object and example (31) shows the answer to the same question without focus marking.

- (30) 1 A: ‘Is the man kicking the table?’  
 2 B: **o aní ð-kplò = nó      èé-ta,      li-gbo = lé**  
 no NEG c2s-table-DEF:FOC c1s.SBJ.PROG-hit c3s-chair-DEF:FOC  
**èé-ta      ð-klì = lɔ**  
 c1s.SBJ.PROG-hit c2s-leg = DEF:CFH  
 ‘No, he is not kicking the [table]<sub>FOC</sub>, he is kicking the [chair]<sub>FOC</sub>.’  
 (STIS2\_100525\_SO)

- (31) 1 A: ‘Is the man kicking the table?’  
 2 B: **o èé-ta      li-gbo = lè      ð-klì = lɔ**  
 no c1s.SBJ.PROG-hit c3s-chair = DEF c2s-leg = DEF  
 ‘No, he is kicking the chair.’  
 (STIS2\_100717\_DQ)

To elicit parallel focus, sets of two pictures were used. In the first picture, participants would see two entities and in the second picture, these entities were involved in an event with two other entities. For instance, they saw a picture of a cat and a dog and would be asked to describe this. Then they would see a picture of the cat biting a woman and the dog biting a man. The same six participants saw two pictures each, each picture once with the subjects newly introduced and once with the objects newly introduced.

None of the descriptions included focus-marking. Instead, people tended to mark the contrastive topics, using particles. An example can be seen in line 2 of example (32). Here, the additive particle **tsyɛ** follows ‘the dog’, which is one of the non-focused entities that are being compared (for more information on the additive particle, see van Putten 2013, 2014). We might have expected focus marking on the man and/or the woman, but this does not happen.

- (32) 1 **ka-drùì = a nì púsi = yè ba-di**  
 c6s-dog = DEF and cat = DEF c1p.SBJ.PFV-sit  
 ‘The dog and the cat were sitting.’  
 2 **púsi = yè èé-míni      ɔ-kà = ɛ,      ka-drùì = a**  
 cat = DEF c1s.SBJ.PROG-lick c1s-father = DEF c6s-dog = DEF



**tsyε**      **kèè-némi**      **ǰ-dzε = è**  
 ADD      C6S.SBJ.PROG-bite      C1S-woman = DEF

‘The cat licked the man and the dog (**tsyε**) bit the woman.’

(STIS3\_100708\_MiA)

All in all, the results show that focus marking is not obligatory in any of the investigated contexts, but focused subjects are much more likely to be focus-marked than focused objects. There also seems to be a difference (though smaller) between information focus and counter-presuppositional focus, with the latter more likely to be marked. Parallel sentences were never marked for focus. This does not necessarily mean that focus marking cannot be used for parallel sentences - it might have to do with the particular stimuli that were used or with the small number of participants and items. As I will show in Section 3.3, the corpus of spontaneous discourse does include some cases of parallel focus, such as example (33).

In spontaneous discourse, focus marking is rarely used to answer questions. Out of a total of 64 answered content questions found in the corpus (not counting questions that were ignored, got irrelevant answers or were answered by ‘I don’t know’), 27 were answered with a single sentence. The others either got single-phrase or multi-sentence answers. Out of these 27 single-sentence answers, 8 contained focus marking. Polar questions with a wrong assumption are even rarer in the corpus: there are 38 polar questions that are answered with a single sentence (out of a total of 83 answered polar questions) and only 10 of these get a negative answer. In only 2 of these cases, focus marking is used to correct the wrong assumption. This means that, altogether, there are only 10 cases in the corpus (out of 534 cases of focus marking) in which focus marking is used in the answer to a content or polar question. In the great majority of cases, focus marking is used for other purposes. To study exactly what these purposes are, it is necessary to look at the cases of focus marking in the corpus in more detail and study their contexts. This is what I do in the next section.

### 3.3 Functions in discourse

In this section, I look into occurrences of focus marking in my corpus of spontaneous speech and try to determine, based on the context, what focus marking is used for. I study all occurrences of focus marking in a subset of the corpus. This subset consists of 52 minutes of narratives and 53 minutes of conversation. This amounts to 2,500 ‘utterances’, containing about 15,000 words. Within this subset, there are 227 cases of focus marking. In 102 of these, the focused element is marked with a particle. These cases are discarded

for the present purpose, as I want to concentrate on the function of the focus construction only. This leaves 125 cases of focus marking to analyze.

Based on the previous section and on the literature on syntactic focus marking, the Avatime focus construction can be hypothesized to have some kind of contrastive function. According to the most common definitions, contrast involves alternatives to the focused element (e. g. É. Kiss 1998; Vallduví and Vilkuña 1998; Dik 1997). The set of alternatives to an element is often viewed as everything that could potentially replace it. For practical purposes, this notion of alternatives is not very useful, because there is no way to know whether a speaker has alternatives in mind. To make the notion more concrete, I look only at specific alternatives that are present in the discourse context. I tried to identify for each case of focus marking whether an alternative to the focused element is present in the context or can be inferred from it. Within these contrastive cases, I also distinguished between cases of parallel focus and cases of counter-presuppositional focus. As Zimmermann (2008) argues that contrastive focus should not be seen as contrasting alternatives, but rather as contrasting the speaker's utterance to the assumed expectation state of the hearer, I also checked whether the focus-marked elements could be considered unexpected to the hearer.

In the remainder of this section, I discuss to what extent the Avatime data can be accounted for by the two explanations described above. I show that even though both alternatives and unexpectedness can explain a number of cases, neither account is sufficient by itself. In Section 4 I provide a general account that unifies the two functions.

### 3.3.1 Alternatives

Out of 125 cases of focus marking, there are 63 in which a specific alternative (or a group of alternatives) to the focus-marked element has been mentioned in the preceding discourse or can be inferred from it. Out of the remaining cases, 44 do not seem to involve specific mentioned alternatives. In the other 18 cases, it is unclear whether or not alternatives play a role.

Alternatives are elements that form a set with the focus-marked element either by virtue of sharing some property with it or by occurring in a similar situation as the focus-marked element in the context. The alternative and the focused element are always contrasted to each other with respect to another set of elements, which can be explicitly mentioned or can be left to inference.

Consider example (33). Here, the focus-marked element is Kpeve and the alternative to the focus-marked element is Ho. Kpeve and Ho form a set by virtue of both being towns in the same region. Kpeve and Ho are opposed to each other

with respect to ‘yesterday’ and ‘today’. Yesterday is linked with the alternative, Ho, and today is linked with the focus-marked element, Kpeve.

- (33) **kivòe òho ì-vo̩j, òmonò kpevé**  
 yesterday Ho c2p-eggplant today Kpeve:FOC  
**má-dó**  
 1s.SBJ.PFV-move.from:CFH  
 ‘Yesterday (I got) eggplants from Ho, today I came from [Kpeve]<sub>FOC</sub> (to get eggplants).’  
 (conv-street\_100720\_1)

This example is a case of parallel focus. The focused element and its alternative are contrasted with respect to two different times, so the two contrasted propositions can both be true within one person’s perspective. Out of the 63 cases of focus marking involving alternatives, 17 are clear cases of parallel focus.

Another example of a focus-marked element with a specific alternative is line 1 of (34). In this example, a group of women is being recorded. They are aware of the camera, which is standing at some distance. But apparently, at least one of them had not noticed the microphone standing close by, attached to the camera with a long cable, and she points this out to the others. The focused element is ‘this thing’ (the microphone) and the camera is the alternative. The focused element and the alternative are contrasted with respect to speaker A’s current world view (in which the microphone records the sound) and her previous world view (in which she thought there was only a camera and therefore that was recording the sound).

- (34) During a video-recorded conversation, one of the speakers suddenly notices the microphone, which is positioned close to the speakers, away from the camera.

- 1 A: **aa ìmò b̩j-déyà, bε mé ku-nugu = yò**  
 ah see c4p-thing:PROX c4p inside:FOC c5S-talk = DEF  
**k̩j̩-gà ε-tré kób**  
 c5S.SBJ.PROG-move SVM-go:LOC there:CFH  
 ‘Ah, look at this thing (point to the microphone), [this]<sub>FOC</sub> is where the talk is passing through to enter there (point to the camera).’
- 2 B: **ee**  
 ‘Yes.’
- 3 A: **mε m̩-mò ε g̩ e-du be**  
 1s 1s.SBJ.PFV.NEG-see c1s REL c1s.SBJ.PFV-put.down c4p  
**tsyε lo**  
 ADD FP  
 ‘Me, I didn’t see her putting that down, too!’

- 4 B: **aa** **wó-mò ε**  
 ah 2s.SBJ.PFV.NEG-see c1s  
 ‘Ah, you didn’t see it?’
- 5 A: **bé-kólò kó mɛ́-é-mò gi e-fiks = i**  
 c4p-DIST only:FOC 1s.SBJ.PROG-see REL c1s.SBJ.PFV-fix = CM  
 ‘I only saw her fixing [that one]<sub>FOC</sub> (point to the camera).’  
 (conv-street\_100720\_1)

The speaker contradicts her previous presupposition, so this is an example of counter-presuppositional focus. As opposed to cases of parallel focus, the two propositions can clearly not both be true within one person’s perspective. The majority of focus constructions involving alternatives to the focus-marked element are of the counter-presuppositional type: 43 cases.

Parallel and counter-presuppositional focus cannot always be clearly separated. This is exemplified by (35), where the speaker contrasts her own belief to the claim made by another woman. This is made overt by the phrases **asì** ‘she said’ and **mamò** ‘I believe’ (literally: ‘I see’).

- (35) The speaker is talking about a woman who did not wear her new group t-shirt for a group picture, because she had just washed it. The woman justified the washing by saying the shirt was dirty before she got it, but the speaker does not believe this.

**a-sì** **bì-dó** **sì bi-ku** **ye, pò**  
 c1s.SBJ.PFV-say c4p-thing:FOC say c4p.SBJ.PFV-enter c1s but  
**ma-mò** **sì ki-kpé a-kpɛ ye xunyo**  
 1s.SBJ.PFV-see COMP c4s-wear:FOC c1s.SBJ.PFV-wear c1s CTR  
**xé e-lulu**  
 when c1s.SBJ.PFV-be.dirty  
 ‘She said [something entered it]<sub>FOC</sub> but I believe that she [wore]<sub>FOC</sub> it and it got dirty.’  
 (conv-funeral\_100528\_8-1)

The focus is counter-presuppositional in the sense that the speaker is contradicting the claim of another speaker. The two contrasted claims ‘something entered it’ and ‘she wore it and it got dirty’ are incompatible, within one person’s perspective, as being the cause of the dirty t-shirt. However, this example also looks like parallel focus, because the two beliefs with respect to which the focused elements are contrasted are explicitly mentioned and the two full sentences, ‘she said something entered it’ and ‘I believe that she wore it’ are compatible; they can both be true.

There are also cases in which there is an alternative to the focus-marked element, but there is no counter-presuppositional or parallel interpretation. An example is (36). The focus-marked element, ‘village’, forms part of a set consisting of ‘village’ and ‘town’. In this case, the speaker does not contradict an assumption or compare two entities or times. He simply selects the appropriate element from the set.

- (36) From a story about a family who lived in a village. If they wanted to go to town, they had to cross a big river. To do that, they used a canoe. One day, there were heavy rains and their canoe was washed away.

**kɔ** **lě** **kofe** **mé** **ba-lɛ**  
 so then village inside:FOC c1p.SBJ.PFV-be.at  
 ‘So, they were in the village.’ (kadzidzi-crocodile\_PKD\_20110924)

In all cases discussed so far, there is not just an alternative present in the discourse, but this alternative is also indirectly negated by the focus construction. In (36), the focus on ‘village’ also emphasizes that they were not in the town (this is important in the story, because they will have to go to town to buy supplies and there is no way to cross the river). In (34) above, the focus on ‘this thing’ is also meant to convey that the sound is not being recorded by the camera itself.

As already mentioned, the presence of an alternative in the context cannot explain all cases of focus marking. An example can be seen in (37). The canoe is marked for focus, but no alternative to it is mentioned in the surrounding discourse.

- (37) From the beginning of a folktale. ‘There once was a man. He and his family lived in a village. Everytime they come to town, there is a big river that they have to cross. So the man built a canoe.’

**kɔ** **xé** **bɛ-sɛ** **kofe** **mè** **bɛ-tráà**  
 then when c1p.SBJ.PFV-leave village inside c1p.SBJ.PFV-be.coming  
**ḡ-ma = nɔ** **mè** **kɔ** **aklo = e** **y-abá** **lɪ-lɛ**  
 c2s-town = DEF inside then canoe = DEF c1s-on:FOC c3s.SBJ.PFV-be.at  
**sɪ** **báà-ze**  
 COMP c1p.SBJ.POT-be  
 ‘So when they leave the village and come to town, then they have to be [in the canoe]<sub>FOC</sub>.’ (kadzizi-crocodile\_110924\_PKD)

Of course, one may argue that by marking the canoe for focus, the speaker is contrasting it to all alternatives that the listeners might have in mind. However, note that such an analysis amounts to saying that every update of the common ground evokes alternatives, as information is only new for a listener if she believed that it could have been otherwise. For the current purpose of determining the contexts in which the focus construction is used, it is more helpful to stick to the operationalizable notion of alternatives that are present in the discourse context.

What I have shown so far is that many cases of focus marking (at least 50%) involve the presence in the context of an alternative to the focus-marked element. This alternative occurs in a similar proposition with respect to a different background or as part of a different person's belief. The focus marking conveys that with respect to the current background or belief, the focus-marked element and not the alternative is true. As not all cases of the focus construction can be accounted for by the presence of an alternative, I discuss another function in the next section.

### 3.3.2 Unexpectedness

Zimmermann (2008: 154) claims that “[c]ontrary to what is often assumed in the literature, contrastive foci (...) do not mark a contrast between explicit or implicit alternatives to  $\alpha$  in the linguistic context. Rather, they express a contrast between the information conveyed by the speaker in asserting  $\alpha$  and the assumed expectation state of the hearer: a speaker will use contrastive marking on a focus constituent  $\alpha$  if she has reason to suspect that the hearer will be surprised by the assertion of  $\alpha$ , or by the speech act containing  $\alpha$ .”

In this way, Zimmermann explains the observation that answers to questions can sometimes contain contrastive focus marking (when they do, the answer to the question was unexpected) and that situations involving alternatives do not necessarily trigger contrastive focus marking (when the contrast is unsurprising).

Unexpectedness is not easy to identify in a corpus, as the status of something as unexpected is not necessarily overtly expressed in the context. Despite this, I have identified a number of cases in which focus marking seems to indicate that the focus-marked element is unexpected to the listener. Out of the 125 cases of focus marking in the narrow corpus, I have identified 35 cases in which the focus-marked element seems to be unexpected. There are 37 cases in which the focus marking clearly does not indicate unexpectedness. In the remaining cases it is difficult to tell.

An example of a clear case in which the focus construction indicates unexpectedness is line 6 of (38). The focus-marked element, **iliyé** ‘this one’, refers back to the yellow shea butter mentioned by speaker A in the first line. Shea butter is used as a lotion to put on one’s skin and is manufactured in the north of Ghana, where speaker B has lived for a while. Speaker A seems to have been unaware that yellow shea butter existed or at least unaware that it is better than the white type. Therefore, speaker B has a good reason to believe that speaker A will not expect the people of the north (who are the experts) to be using it.

(38) A notices that B has some yellow shea butter in her bag.

1 A: **běě-bj̄te yélo yɔkumi dzè**  
 c1p.SBJ.PROG-do yellow shea.butter again  
 ‘Do they make yellow shea butter too?’

2 B: **ee a-pè sanì wait = yè**  
 yes c1s.SBJ.PFV-good surpass white = DEF  
 ‘Yes, it is better than the white one.’

3 A: **aa sugba**  
 ‘Ah, is that true.’

4 B: **kóko**  
 ‘Very much’

5 **bl̩ ḡì nóf̄u ki-zè = e**  
 1p REL North 1p.SBJ.PFV-be = CM  
 ‘We who were in the North.’

6 **nóf̄wanìma tɔɔ, iliyé bí-zě-za**  
 Northerners self c1s.PROX:FOC c1p.SBJ-HAB-use  
 ‘The Northerners themselves, [this]<sub>FOC</sub> is what they use.’

(conv-street\_100720\_2)

In example (38), there is also an alternative to the focus-marked element: the white shea butter. The focus-marking can therefore be explained both as indicating contrast to an alternative and as indicating unexpectedness. However, there are some cases in which the focus-marking seems to indicate unexpectedness but there is no alternative. One such case can be seen in (39). As the focused element **liṅwáf̄üne m̄e** ‘in the forest’ provides the answer to a question, it looks like a case of information focus. No alternatives are mentioned. However the forest seems to be an unexpected place to find porridge. This could be the reason it is focus marked here.

- (39) From a folktale. There is famine and Lulu goes into the forest to look for food. He comes across a place where people magically appear and cook porridge. After they magically disappear, Lulu takes the leftover porridge home. When his friend Atrodze comes over, he asks Lulu where he got the porridge from.

**a-sì**                    **ba li-ŋwàfù = nɛ mé**                    **sì**  
 c1s.SBJ.PFV-say    c1p    c3s-forest = DEF    inside:FOC    COMP

**y-a-mò**

LOG-c1s.SBJ.PFV-see **nɛ** c3s

‘He told them he found it [in the forest]<sub>FOC</sub>.’                    (kadzizia\_110406\_QM)

Unexpectedness cannot account for all cases of focus marking. An example where the focus-marked element is clearly not unexpected is line 1 of (40). Here, **lifunè** ‘the sky’ is marked for focus, even though the listeners to this story already know (it has been mentioned before) that the vulture lives in the sky. There are also no story characters present at this point in the story to whom this information could be unexpected. The function of focus marking in this example is to contrast the sky to the ground, on which the tortoise lives. The fact that the tortoise lives on the ground is not overtly mentioned in this segment, but it has been mentioned earlier in the story and it can be inferred from what is said in line 2.

- (40) From a story about a vulture and a tortoise who are friends. The vulture invited the tortoise to come to his father’s funeral and even though this event took place in the sky, the tortoise managed to come by using a trick. Towards the end of the story, the storyteller mentions that the vulture is confused and had never thought that the tortoise would be able to come.

1 **lese sì li-fu = né**                    **ɔ-lɛ**  
 because    c3s-sky = DEF:FOC    c1s.SBJ.PFV-be.at  
 ‘Because he (the vulture) lives in the [sky]<sub>FOC</sub>.’

2 **ka-samla pò ò-í-prùdù**  
 c6s-tortoise    CTR    c1s.SBJ.NEG-PROG.NEG-fly  
 ‘As for the tortoise, it does not fly.’

3 **kítɛ a-bjɛ**                    **xé**                    **a-trɛ**  
 how    c1s.SBJ.PFV-do    when    c1s.SBJ.PFV-go  
 ‘How did he manage to go?’                    (kadzidzi-turtle\_PKD\_20110924)



Summarizing, unexpectedness can account for a number of cases of focus marking. Most cases of unexpectedness can also be accounted for by explaining focus as contradicting a specific alternative. However, there are some cases in which no alternative is present in the discourse context, but the focus-marked element seems to be unexpected. There are also a number of cases in which there are alternatives, but the focus-marked element is not unexpected. And there are still a number of cases of focus marking that cannot be explained by either account. I will turn to these now.

### 3.3.3 Other cases

In the cases in which there is no mentioned alternative and no unexpectedness, the function of focus marking seems to be to highlight important information or to provide an explanation or solution. In some of these cases, the contrastive function of the focus construction seems to be used to create the impression that alternatives have been considered or that the focus-marked element is unexpected. One such case is example (41). Here, the speaker is telling a friend how he was making fun of his uncle, who was catching crabs, which is something that older people normally do not do. His uncle replied that crab is food, with focus marking on food. There is no alternative to food in the context and it is not unexpected, as people in the village regularly eat crab when it is available. What the uncle seems to do here is to use the contrastive function of focus marking to imply that there is an alternative and indicate he dismisses that, conveying a meaning like ‘you seem to think crab is something to laugh at but I want to remind you that it is food, i. e. it should be taken seriously’.

(41) The speaker is talking about a time he was working in the field together with a group of people. His uncle was also there and he was catching crabs. As catching crabs is normally not something that older people do, the younger people were making fun of him.

- 1 **lósò bĕĕ-sì**                      **yε sî**    **ɔ-tó**    **léyà**  
 so    c1p.SBJ.PROG-say    c1s    COMP    c1s-INDF    c1s.PROX  
 ‘So they are telling him that there are some (crabs) here.’
- 2 **ò-wla = lò**    **kó**    **e-hle**    **kpé**    **mε**  
 c2s-hand = DEF    only:FOC    c1s.SBJ.PFV-push    put.in:LOC    1s  
 ‘He just threw his hands at me.’
- 3 **o-kóto**    **kì-dòḡaḡá**    **o-nu,**                      **o-kóto**    **kì-dòḡaḡá**  
 c1s-crab    c4s-food:FOC    c1s.SBJ.PFV-be    c1s-crab    c4s-food:FOC

**o-nu**

c1s.SBJ.PFV-be

‘Crab is [food]<sub>FOC</sub>, crab is [food]<sub>FOC</sub>.’ (conv-ablorme\_100715\_SO-AS)

An analysis in terms of creating an impression of alternatives or unexpectedness is not possible for all cases. Two examples are shown here. In (42), the focus-marking seems to be used to highlight the main point of the story. There is no alternative to ‘corner’ and as it is a well-known fact that spiders sit in corners, it can also not be unexpected.

(42) The conclusion of a story about a spider.

**lé lósò kónɛ mé dzyàbublò = e e-zě-zě**

c3s reason corner inside:FOC spider = DEF c1s.SBJ.PFV-REC-sit

‘Because of that, the spider is always sitting [in the corner]<sub>FOC</sub>.’

(kadzidzia\_110409\_AB\_1)

In (43), the focus in line 2 seems to fill an information gap, as after the first line, listeners might be curious about what the speaker said. Again, there is no alternative and no unexpectedness.

(43) The speaker is talking about her recent visit to a dying woman.

1 **kīlɛ ma-bīɛ xé mè-do ì-gbè = lé**

how 1s.SBJ.PFV-do when 1s.SBJ.PFV-say c2s-voice = DEF:LOC

**ye abà = ɛ**

c1s on = CM

‘That is what I did and I said something to her.’

2 **lě mɛ sị e-bo nyànyàni neté ku-nu**

and 1s say c3p-matter bad person:FOC 1p.SBJ.PFV-be

‘And I said we are all [sinners]<sub>FOC</sub>.’

3 **lósò o-zǒ-bì kù-tsatsa**

so c1s.SBJ.SBJV-REC-ask c5s-forgiveness

‘So she should be asking for forgiveness.’ (conv-funeral\_100528\_7)

In Section 3.2, I showed that in answers to questions, subjects were marked for focus more frequently than objects. This means that one might expect the seemingly non-contrastive cases of focus marking to be primarily cases of subject focus - i. e. cases in which the subject provides new information and therefore has to be marked for focus. This hypothesis is not borne out. Out of the 17 non-contrastive cases, only three mark focus on the subject, two of which are cases of sentence focus.

All in all, even though the majority of cases of focus marking can be explained as marking contrast to specific alternatives or unexpectedness, there are a number of cases that seem non-contrastive. Some of these can be analyzed as contrastive with an accommodated alternative. However, some cases remain in which focus marking simply indicates emphasis of an important point.

## 4 Discussion

### 4.1 Summary

In this paper, I have discussed the grammatical properties of the Avatime focus construction and I have analyzed its functions in discourse.

In the focus construction, the focused element is placed in clause-initial position and marked with an extra-high tone. The end of the clause is marked with a final high tone. Arguments and adjuncts can be marked for focus in this way, but not parts of complex noun phrases or adpositional phrases. To focus these, the entire constituent must be marked for focus. Focus-marking of the object can be interpreted as narrow focus but also as predicate focus. Focus marking of the subject can be interpreted as narrow focus, but also as sentence focus. Verbs are marked for focus by placing a nominalized copy of the verb in the clause-initial focus position and marking it with the extra-high tone. Verb focus can be interpreted as focus on the lexical content of the verb, the truth value or the aspect or mood.

The focus construction does not seem to be obligatory in any context, but it occurs more frequently in answers to subject content questions than in answers to object content questions and more frequently in corrective answers to polar questions than in answers to content questions or descriptions of parallel events.

In spontaneous speech, two main functions of focus marking have been identified: indicating that there is an alternative to the focus-marked element in the discourse context and indicating that the focus-marked element is considered unexpected for the addressee.

When there is an alternative, this is contrasted to the focus-marked element with respect to either (i) different beliefs about the world – counter-presuppositional focus or (ii) times, locations, or participants in the event – parallel focus. In both types of cases, the alternative is excluded from replacing the focus-marked element, i. e. the proposition with the focus-marked element replaced by the alternative is assumed to be not true.

When focus-marking indicates unexpectedness, there is not necessarily a specific alternative in the discourse context. However, it is possible that there is both a specific alternative in the context and the focus-marked element is unexpected to the addressee at the same time. There are only a few cases in which neither alternatives nor unexpectedness seem to play a role.

In the introduction to this paper, I listed several research questions. The first two questions, what kinds of elements can be marked for focus and whether focus is obligatory in some contexts, have been sufficiently answered. The third question, what the functions of the focus construction are, has been partly answered. Functions have been mentioned, but it is not yet clear whether there could be one more abstract function that can account for the different cases presented here. This is what I will discuss in the remainder of this section.

## 4.2 A unified meaning for the focus construction

Similar functions to the ones discussed here for Avatime have been proposed as functions of focus in the literature more generally.

Focus is often related to alternatives in some way, although alternatives are most frequently used in the sense of an unbounded set of elements that could possibly replace the focused element (see e.g. Rooth 1992). This notion of alternatives is not helpful in the description of the Avatime focus construction, as it encompasses unmarked focus as well and also contrastive topics. What does seem to be relevant for the Avatime focus construction is a notion of specific alternatives that are present in the context.

Focus marking as excluding alternatives is suggested by É. Kiss (1998: 245). She defines the function of focus marking in Hungarian (and by extension in all languages which use syntactic fronting for focus marking) as excluding alternatives. She seems to interpret the alternatives as an unbounded set (even though in her definition she talks about “contextually or situationally given elements”). In Avatime, even though focus marking seems to indicate exclusion of alternatives most of the time, this exclusion is usually restricted to a specific alternative.

Focus marking as an indication of unexpectedness has been proposed by Zimmermann (2008). He argues that focus marking in West-Chadic languages (and by extension all constructions in other languages that have been claimed to express contrastive focus) is related to hearer expectations. Focus marking is used when the speaker assumes that the focus-marked element is unexpected to the hearer. In Avatime, this account can explain a number of cases of focus marking, but not all.

How can the functions of unexpectedness, contrast to alternatives and exclusion of alternatives be related to each other under a more general definition? For an answer to this question, we must go back to the definition of focus as indicating the element of the sentence that updates the common ground. As mentioned earlier, this definition seems too general to account for focus marking in Avatime, as most sentences contain a common ground update but no focus marking. However, it can still function as a good explanation if we take the markedness of the construction into account.

Unlike English, where every sentence must contain a main pitch accent, Avatime only has a marked construction to signal that a certain element updates the common ground. Along the lines of Levinson's (2000: 136) M-principle that "what is said in an abnormal way indicates an abnormal situation", the focus construction will only be used when the common-ground update is potentially controversial and needs to be highlighted. Normally, focused information is simply information that is newly added to the ongoing discourse. This type of common-ground update does not need to be highlighted. When focus marking is used, the speaker indicates that the addressee needs to pay special attention to the common-ground update. This often implies that new information is not simply added to the common ground, but should replace a previous assumption, as in the case of counter-presuppositional focus and unexpectedness. In the case of exclusion of a previously mentioned alternative, the highlighting draws attention to the fact that the common-ground update differs from what was said about a related background element. This explanation can also account for the tendency to mark subjects for focus in the answers to content questions: the subject does not normally update the common ground, so it is highlighted to indicate that the situation differs from the usual case. This way, the different functions of focus marking arise out of the implications of drawing the addressee's attention to the common-ground update.

This account also makes clear that speakers of the language are to a certain extent free to decide whether or not they will use the focus construction – this is not determined by the context in which their utterance occurs. Of course, whether they will use focus marking is constrained by the context – it will only be used with elements that update the common ground – but whether the common-ground update needs highlighting is ultimately up to the speaker. This is nicely shown in example (44). Here, speaker A tells speaker B to rinse some glasses that are next to her. In line 2, speaker B indicates that she already rinsed the glasses. This contradicts the assumption of speaker A that the glasses have not yet been rinsed, but nevertheless no focus marking is used. In line 4, speaker B corrects herself. She did not (just) rinse the glasses, she washed them. Again, she does not use the focus construction. In lines 5 and 6, speakers A

and C keep insisting that the glasses are still dirty. Only after that, in line 7, does speaker B use the focus construction, to emphasize more clearly that the other speakers' assumptions are incorrect.

- (44) 1 A: **zɛ-ha a mɛ̀ kɪ mɛ**  
 it-rinse c1p inside give 1s  
 'Go and rinse them for me.'
- 2 B: **mà-ha a mɛ̀**  
 1s.SBJ.PFV-rinse c1p inside  
 'I rinsed them.'
- 3 A: **wò-ha a mɛ̀**  
 2s.SBJ.PFV-rinse c1p inside  
 'You rinsed them.'
- 4 B: **ee me-plò a mɛ̀ boŋ**  
 yes 1s.SBJ.PFV-wash c1p inside rather  
 'Yes, I washed them, rather.'
- 5 A: **a me-dzì mò sɪ bɪ-dɛ̀mɛ**  
 ah 1s.SBJ.PFV-return see comp c4p-thing  
 'Ah, I still see that, this thing (indicating they're still dirty).'
- 6 C: **a mɛ tsyɛ mɛ̀ɛ-mó te**  
 ah 1s ADD 1s.SBJ.PROG-see like.that  
 'Ah, I also see it.'
- 7 B: **ki-plo bóŋ me-plo ba mɛ**  
 c4s-wash rather:FOC 1s.SBJ.PFV-wash c1p inside:CFH  
 'I [washed]<sub>FOC</sub> them.'
- (conv-rice\_110411\_3-2)

To conclude, the Avatime focus construction instantiates one of the basic notions of information structure proposed in the literature: marking the common-ground update. The more specific interpretations that the focus construction usually has are due to implicature resulting from the fact that the focus construction is a marked construction and will only be used when the common-ground update needs highlighting.

## Abbreviations

1	first person
2	second person
ADD	additive
c	noun class

CFH	clause-final high tone
CM	clause marker
COMP	complementizer
CTR	contrastive
DEF	definite
DIST	distal demonstrative
FOC	focus
FP	final particle
HAB	habitual
INDF	indefinite
INF	infinitive
INT	intentional
IT	itive
LOC	locative
LOG	logophoric
NEG	negative
PFV	perfective
POSS	possessive
POT	potential
PROG	progressive
PROX	proximal demonstrative
REC	recurrent
REL	relative
SBJ	subject
SBJV	subjunctive
SVM	serial verb marker

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