Introduction. The two basic focus types, information focus and contrastive focus, show a strong tendency to be realized in different ways in the languages of the world. While the former is often encoded by means of a canonical focus structure, the latter is realized with a relatively more marked focus strategy, as it adds additional semantic/pragmatic information such as contrast or exhaustivity. Depending on the language, this difference can manifest itself in the opposition of in-situ vs. ex-situ structures (Hartmann and Zimmermann 2007, Fiedler et al. 2010), different levels of prosodic prominence (Bolinger 1961, Alter et al. 2001, Katz and Selkirk 2009), or the opposition of prosodic prominence and reordering/clefting (Skopeteas and Fanselow 2009). From a pragmatic point of view, the different levels of complexity receive an explanation by the observation that contrastive information often comes with an unexpectedness flavour, which, thus, requires the more marked focus strategy in order to facilitate common ground update (Skopeteas and Fanselow 2009, Zimmermann 2008, Zimmermann and Onea 2011).

A new observation. Limbum – a Grassfield Bantu Language, spoken in Cameroon – shows the exact mirror image of the generalization proposed above. Limbum is a tone language with a basic SVO word order (Fransen 1995). New information focus is realized as a combination of focus fronting and the morphological focus marker á, whereas contrastive focus is realized in-situ with the morphological focus marker bá, see (1a) and (1b) below (Becker and Nformi 2016:60).

(1) a. á Ngàlá (cí) mè bí kòñi
   FOC Ngala (COMP) 1SG FUT1 meet
   ‘I will meet NGALA.’

   b. mè bí kòñi bá Ngàlá
      1SG FUT1 meet FOC Ngala
      ‘It is Ngala I will meet.’

A similar pattern is shown for verb focus: while new information focus is expressed via verb doubling (as a result of movement) and an additional focus marker á, contrastive focus is accomplished by verb doubling only, compare (2a) to (2b) (Becker and Nformi 2016:73).

(2) a. á r-cāŋ (cí) ñgwá wò á mú căŋi
    FOC INF-run (COMP) wife your.SG 3SG PST run
    ‘Your wife RAN.’

   b. ñgwá wò á mú caŋ căŋi
      wife your.SG 3SG PST run run
      ‘It is running that your wife did.’

Both patterns show that Limbum produces a pragmatically more marked structure with formally less complex means, while encoding a canonical focus strategy with an increased formal complexity.

Towards an explanation. Key to understanding the different focus strategies in Limbum is the idea that unexpectedness cannot be derived by the opposition of canonical
focus marking and additional markedness. We propose that the notion of unexpectedness is directly encoded in the focus marker bá on the one hand and in-situ doubling on the other hand. In other words, we assume that Limbum provides the means to express mirativity (DeLancey 1997, Aikhenvald 2012) instead of contrast in its focus system. Preliminary evidence for our proposal comes from the following context:

(3) Context: Shey is about to cook dinner. Shey knows that Yaah loves yams and assumes she will prefer it over fufu, but he asks her nevertheless: Will you eat FUFU or YAMS?

a. mè bí zhè mbrè
de fufu eat 1SG FUT2 ‘I will eat yams.’

b. mè bí zhè bá bā
de fufu eat FOC 1SG FUT2 ‘I will eat fufu.’

c. #á bā (cí) mè bí zhè
FOC fufu (COMP) eat 1SG FUT2 ‘I will eat FUFU.’

The context introduces both alternatives, hence new information focus marking is infelicitous, see Yaah’s answer in (3c). The difference between the answers (3a) and (3b) clearly shows that bá has to be used for the unexpectedness alternative. Since both (3a) and (3b) are contrastive but only one of the answers is marked with the focus marker, contrast cannot be the decisive factor.

Formal implementation. Both focus markers in Limbum make use of alternatives that are either implicitly or explicitly provided by the context (Rooth 1992, Krifka 2008). While á signals new information, bá expresses unexpectedness. This notion of mirativity can be implemented in a number of ways. With the help of standardized projection tests (Karttunen 1973) and the behaviour of subsequent discourse moves (von Fintel 2004, Potts 2005), we will show whether mirativity is asserted, presupposed, or conventionally implicated. Another important diagnostic is the interaction of mirativity with focus sensitive adverbs. Preliminary tests have shown that the Limbum equivalent of only asserts its exhaustivity, as it is affected by negation. Depending on whether the mirativity is sensitive to exhaustivity, we can draw conclusion towards the strength of its inference status.

Selected References: