

# The Zulu Conjoint/Disjoint Verb Alternation: Focus or Constituency?\*

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Zulu shows an alternation of conjoint and disjoint (conjunctive/disjunctive, short/long) verb forms. Certain contexts suggest that the distribution of these forms is related to focus. For example, certain adverbial expressions receive a focal interpretation when preceded by a conjoint form but not when preceded by a disjoint form. Similarly, a *wh*-phrase must be preceded by a conjoint form. This has led some researchers to argue or suggest that the alternation encodes focus directly. This paper examines two different focal hypotheses, one in which a disjoint form encodes focus on the verb and another in which the conjoint form encodes focus on the element following the verb. It is shown that both of these hypotheses are inadequate because certain contexts requiring the conjoint form do not display the predicted focal interpretation. Relativization morphology is argued to also support an analysis independent of focus. It is proposed that the alternation is regulated entirely by the position of the verb within the surface constituencies first proposed in Van der Spuy (1993) and that the associated focal interpretations are the result of a range of interpretations permitted within the different constituencies. Elements remaining within the relevant constituent are non-topical, and focus is one of a range of interpretations they can receive.

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## 1 Introduction

Zulu (S40), a Bantu language of the Nguni cluster spoken primarily in South Africa, has a morphological alternation in certain tenses of its verbal paradigm which will here be referred to as the conjoint/disjoint alternation, shown in this paradigm:

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## (1) The Zulu conjoint/disjoint alternation

	Conjoint (Conjunctive, Short)	Disjoint (Disjunctive, Long)
Present	<i>bacula X</i> “they sing X, they are singing X”	<i>bayacula</i> “they sing, they are singing”
Recent past	<i>bacule X</i> “they sang X”	<i>baculile</i> “they sang”

The terms *conjoint* and *disjoint* are due to Meeusen (1959). Other terms for the alternation include *conjunctive* and *disjunctive* (due to Creissels (1996)), and, in the literature on the Nguni languages, the terms *long* and *short* are pervasive. The conjoint form cannot appear clause-finally,<sup>1</sup> while the disjoint form canonically does appear in clause-final position.<sup>2</sup>

- (2) a. A- bafana [ ba- ya- cul- a. ] (disjoint)  
 DET- 2.boys 2.SBJ- ya- sing- FV  
 b. \* A- bafana [ ba- cul- a. ] (conjoint)  
 DET- 2.boys 2.SBJ- sing- FV  
 “The boys are singing.”

- (3) a. A- bafana [ ba- cul- a i- ngoma. ] (conjoint)  
 DET- 2.boys 2.SBJ- sing- FV DET- 9.song  
 b. \* A- bafana [ ba- ya- cul- a ] i- ngoma. (disjoint)  
 DET- 2.boys 2.SBJ- ya- sing- FV DET- 9.song  
 “The boys are singing a song.”

Certain focal interpretations are associated with the alternation, illustrated with this pair of sentences:

<sup>1</sup> Some, but not all, speakers accept (3b) with what appears to be an assertion of truth value. All speakers use (3a) for the neutral reading. More will be said about this point.

<sup>2</sup> In the glosses, the following conventions are used. Third person subject and object markers appear with a noun class number, such as 2.SBJ- for “noun class 2 subject marker”. First and second person markers appear with both person and number, such as 2S.OBJ- for “second person singular object marker”. Nominal augments (preprefixes) are glossed as DET- (for “determiner”). All tense/aspect/negation-related verbal suffixes (of which exactly one appears per verb) are glossed as FV (for “final vowel”). Other abbreviations are APPL “applicative”, COP “copula”, INF “infinitive”, NEG “negation”, PRO “pronoun”, Q “question”, and REL “relative”.

- (4) a. Ba- ya- dlal- a phandle. (disjoint)  
 1.SBJ- ya- play- FV outside  
 “They’re playing outside.”
- b. Ba- dlal- a phandle. (conjoint)  
 1.SBJ- play- FV outside  
 “They’re playing OUTSIDE.”

In this paper I will argue that the distribution of these two forms is only indirectly related to focus, in contrast with other analyses which assume a direct relation (Hyman and Watters 1984), such as Creissels (1996) whose claim that the element following a conjoint verb form (in Tswana) provides new information could easily be taken to imply that the postverbal element is endowed with “new information focus”, or Güldemann (2003), who claims that the disjoint form in Zulu directly encodes predicate focus (a term which he defines to exclude the postverbal element).

Analyses of the first type, where the interpretative contrasts between conjoint and disjoint forms are attributed to a property of an element following the verb (rather than of the verb itself) are of particular interest in light of Ndayiragije’s (1999) analysis of Rundi, in which the presence or absence of disjoint morphology depends on whether the specifier of a focus projection below the inflectional domain is empty or filled with a focused phrase. While no such claim has been made in the literature for any of the Nguni languages, Sabel and Zeller (2006) adopt Ndayiragije’s low focus projection in their analysis of Zulu *wh*-questions. Given that Zulu in situ *wh*-questions require the conjoint verb form, just as Rundi does, it is important to explore whether the Zulu alternation can be made dependent on the focal property of an element following the verb, which could be analysed structurally in terms of a low focus position.

I will argue that the alternation encodes only constituency (whether the verb is final within a particular constituent) along the line of reasoning put forth by Van der Spuy (1993). Specifically, the claim is that a conjoint form is non-final within a particular syntactic constituent, which I will assume is AgrSP, while the disjoint form is final within that constituent:

- (5) a. [ V<sub>conjoint</sub> X ]<sub>AgrSP</sub> (Y)  
 b. [ V<sub>disjoint</sub> ]<sub>AgrSP</sub> (X) (Y)

The relation between the alternation and focus will then be examined. Two alternative analyses employing focus will be considered and found inadequate, one in which the alternation encodes the focal properties of an element following the verb, and another in which it encodes the focal properties of the

verb itself. Cases will then be discussed that are problematic for these two conceptions of a direct correlation with focus. These cases will be taken to greatly weaken the argument for an analysis in which focus is encoded directly in the alternation. I will then suggest that the varying focal interpretations are the by-product of surface constituencies rather than of focus or antifocus features associated with the verbal morphology. It will also be argued that the distribution of the relative clitic *-yo*, which in some ways mirrors the alternation, also supports an analysis based on constituency rather than focus.

## 2 Establishing Constituency

Van der Spuy (1993) identified several different types of evidence showing a correlation between the distribution of the conjoint and disjoint variants and syntactic constituency. Buell (2005) divided this evidence into two classes of syntactic arguments (agreement and insertion) and one class of phonological evidence (phonological phrasing) and provided additional evidence of the two latter types. Let us look briefly at each of these three classes of evidence.

We will first consider agreement evidence (Van der Spuy 1993). We will assume that in Zulu, all verbal agreement comes about by a specifier/head relationship, meaning that for a subject or verb to contain a morpheme agreeing with a subject or other argument, that argument must have raised to the specifier of the agreeing head.<sup>3</sup> Now we note that both a conjoint and disjoint verb must agree with their subject if the subject precedes the verb, as in (6), but when the subject follows the verb, the facts are quite different. In that case, the verb cannot agree with the subject if the verb is in its conjoint form, and instead it takes expletive (class 17) agreement, as in (7). And conversely, if the verb is in its disjoint form, the verb must agree with its following subject, as in (8):

- (6) a. A- bafana ba- ya- cul- a. ] (disjoint)  
 DET- 2.boys 2.SBJ- ya- sing- FV  
 “The boys are singing.”  
 b. A- bafana ba- cul- a i- ngoma. ] (conjoint)  
 DET- 2.boys 2.SBJ- sing- FV DET- 9.song  
 “The boys are singing a song.”

<sup>3</sup> In a framework assuming an Agree relationship, this assumption can be restated by saying that all agreeing heads in the verbal complex have a strong EPP feature, forcing the agreeing argument to raise to the head.

Van der Spuy (1993) argues that arguments appearing outside the constituent relevant for the conjoint/disjoint alternation are based-generated in these “dislocated” positions.

- (7) a. Ku- cul- a a- bafana. ] (conjoint)  
 17.SBJ- sing- FV DET- 2.boys  
 a. “The BOYS are singing.”  
 b. “There are boys singing.”  
 b. \*Ba- cul- a a- bafana. (conjoint)  
 17.SBJ- sing- FV DET- 2.boys
- (8) a. Ba- ya- cul- a ] a- bafana. (disjoint)  
 2.sbj- ya- sing- FV DET- 2.boys  
 “They’re singing, the boys.”  
 b. \*Ku- ya- cul- a a- bafana.<sup>4</sup> (disjoint)  
 17.SBJ- ya- sing- FV DET- 2.boys

This pattern is easily explained under an analysis where the conjoint/disjoint alternation is regulated by the verb’s position within a constituent, that is, under an analysis in which the conjoint form appears constituent-medially and the disjoint form appears constituent-finally. In both forms in (6), the verb agrees with the subject because the subject occupies (or has moved through) the specifier of AgrSP, triggering agreement. In (7a), the verb fails to agree with the logical subject because the latter has not moved out of its base position, say spec-vP, and this leaves the verb non-final in the relevant constituent. The result of this fact is that the verb must appear in its conjoint form. (7b) is ungrammatical because it presents an incoherent picture of the position of the subject. The agreement on the verb indicates that the subject must have passed through spec-AgrS on its way to a right-dislocated position, leaving the verb final in the relevant constituent, while the conjoint form of the verb indicates that the verb is medial within that constituent, meaning that the subject must still be in spec-vP. (8a) is grammatical because the verb agreement shows that the subject has passed through spec-AgrS, making the verb final in its constituent, which is consistent with the disjoint form in which it appears.<sup>5</sup> Conversely, (8b) presents another incoherent picture. The expletive agreement on the verb

<sup>4</sup> Doke (1997, §811) claims that such a sentence is grammatical, with contrastive focus on the subject (an interpretation unpredicted by any known analysis). My informants have not found such sentences grammatical, and Doke’s grammaticality judgement is specifically refuted in Raaijmakers (1997).

<sup>5</sup> It is assumed that *abafana* in (8a) comes to appear in postverbal position by first moving to a topic position, with lower material subsequently moving around it. In an analysis where such a topic is not the result of movement through the subject position, the subject agreement on the verb in (8a) would be the result of moving a silent pronoun (*pro*) to spec-AgrS, and the presence of the topic becomes irrelevant to the discussion of agreement. Under either analysis, what is relevant is that the subject has raised to spec-AgrS.

indicates that the verb has not moved out of spec-vP to spec-AgrS, while the disjoint form in which the verb appears indicates that the verb is final in its constituent, meaning that the subject must indeed have moved out of the relevant constituent.

Arguments for the constituency analysis on the basis of object agreement evidence follow the same line of reasoning as for subject agreement just presented. Consider, for example, these two sentences:

- (9) a. A- bafana [ ba- ya- yi- cul- a ] i- ngoma. (disjoint)  
           DET- 2.boys   2.SBJ- ya- 9.OBJ- sing- FV   DET- 9.song  
           “The boys are singing a song.”  
       b. \* A- bafana [ ba- ya- cul- a ] i- ngoma. (disjoint)  
           DET- 2.boys   2.SBJ- ya- sing- FV   DET- 9.song

Sentence (9a) is grammatical because the object *ingoma* has moved through the appropriate agreement projection to trigger the observed object agreement before reaching its dislocated position. Conversely, (9b) is ungrammatical because, while the lack of object agreement on the verb indicates that the object should be inside the relevant constituent, the disjoint verb form that precedes the object indicates that the object should be outside that constituent.

For phonological phrasing evidence, we will consider penultimate lengthening (Van der Spuy 1993), a process in Zulu which lengthens the vowel of the last (polymoraic) word of a certain prosodic constituent. Note how the penult of *incwadi* “book” is lengthened in (10a), while in (10b) it is the penult of *yami* “my” that is lengthened:

- (10) a. [ Ngi- fund- a i- ncwa:di ] pha:ndle. (conjoint)  
           1S.SBJ- study- FV   DET- 9.book   outside  
           “I’m reading a book outside.”  
       b. [ Ngi- fund- a i- ncwadi ya:mi ] pha:ndle. (conjoint)  
           1S.SBJ- study- FV   DET- 9.book   9.my   outside  
           “I’m reading my book outside.”

Now note that the penult of a disjoint verb form can be lengthened (as in (11a)), while the penult of a conjoint form cannot (as in (11b)):

- (11) a. A- bafana [ ba- ya-si- hlu:ph- a ] i- saluka:zi. (disjoint)  
 DET- 2.boys 2.SBJ- ya- 7.OBJ- annoy- FV DET- 7.old.woman  
 b. A- bafana [ ba- hluph- a i- saluka:zi. ] (conjoint)  
 DET- 2.boys 2.SBJ- annoy- FV DET- 7.old.woman  
 “The boys are annoying the old woman.”

It can be concluded, then, that a phonological phrase cannot end in a conjoint verb form, suggesting that a conjoint form must be non-final in some constituent. For additional phonological phrasing evidence, see the brief discussion of tone shifting in Buell (2005).

And finally, for insertion evidence, we will consider question particle insertion (Buell 2005). Zulu has a question particle *na*, which can appear in various positions, as shown in (12):

- (12) a. A- bafana ba- ya- dlal- a phandle na? (disjoint)  
 DET- 2.boys 2.SBJ- ya- play- FV outside Q  
 b. A- bafana ba- ya- dlal- a na phandle? (disjoint)  
 DET- 2.boys 2.SBJ- ya- play- FV Q outside  
 “Are the boys playing outside?”

Importantly, though, *na* cannot be placed immediately after a conjoint verb form:

- (13) \*Ba- dlal- a na phandle? (conjoint)  
 2.SBJ- play FV Q outside  
 “Are they playing outside?”

Thwala (2005) has argued convincingly that *na* (in closely related Swati) is a Force<sup>0</sup> head in the complementizer field. If this is so, then it appears in non-initial position only by phrases moving to its left. For example, in (12a), *na* is merged to head a ForceP projection dominating the IP *abafana bayadlala phandle*, which must subsequently be moved to a position above *na* to precede it. In (12b), the IP must be split by forming a remnant out of *abafana bayadlala* to move to the left of *na* independently of *phandle* (as in Buell (2005)). This analysis is consistent with the ungrammaticality of (13). *Na* cannot appear after a conjoint verb form because if the phrase which moves to the left of *na* ends in a verb, the verb, being constituent-final, must appear in its disjoint form. For additional insertion evidence, see Van der Spuy’s (1993) discussion of vocative insertion.

### 3 The Focus Hypotheses

Now we will return to the focal properties associated with the conjoint/disjoint alternation, illustrated above in (4). Following the two conceptions under which the conjoint/disjoint alternation has been argued to directly encode focus in the literature, we can posit two different hypotheses, which we can call the Postverbal Term Focus Hypothesis and the Verb Focus Hypothesis:

(14) THE POSTVERBAL TERM FOCUS HYPOTHESIS

The element following a conjoint form is in focus, while the element following a disjoint form is not in focus.

(15) THE VERB FOCUS HYPOTHESIS

The verb appearing in a disjoint form is in focus, while a verb appearing in a conjoint form is not.

Note that both of these hypotheses are conceivably compatible with the constituency correlation just established. Furthermore, for either of these hypotheses to be correct would be highly desirable, because that would constitute a direct correlation between syntax and interpretation. However, we will soon see that the correlation between the conjoint/disjoint alternation and focal interpretations is imperfect, suggesting that neither of the hypotheses is correct.

#### 3.1 *The Postverbal Term Focus Hypothesis*

To evaluate the Postverbal Term Focus Hypothesis, we will examine some of the contexts in which the conjoint form is used. The hypothesis at first looks promising, because when the verb is followed either by a *wh*-phrase (or *wh*-enclitic, as in (16)), or a phrase answering a *wh*-question, it is the conjoint form of the verb which is required:

- (16) Q: A- bafana ba- dlal- a- phi? (conjoint)  
 DET- 2.boys 2.SBJ- play- FV- where  
 “Where are the boys playing?”  
 A: Ba- dlal- a phandle. (conjoint)  
 2.SBJ- play- FV outside  
 “They’re playing outside.”

These thus constitute two contexts in which the predictions of the Postverbal Term Focus Hypothesis are borne out, because in both contexts the element



following the conjoint verb form is clearly in semantic focus. Other contexts in which the predictions of the hypothesis are borne out include expletive constructions of the type seen above in (7a) when the context clearly suggests a subject focus reading, and when the postverbal logical subject is itself a *wh*-phrase, as in (17).<sup>6</sup> More on these expletive constructions will be said below.

- (17) Kw- azi bani? (conjoint)  
 17.SBJ- know 1.who  
 “Who knows?”

et us now turn to the more difficult cases. The most pervasive problematic case for the Postverbal Term Focus Hypothesis is the (S)VO sentence with a neutral reading, as in (18A), where there is no focus on the object:

- (18) Q: Kw- enzek- e- ni? (conjoint)  
 17.SBJ- happen- FV- what  
 “What happened?”  
 A: Ngi- cul- e i- ngoma. (conjoint)  
 1S.SBJ- sing- FV DET- 9.song  
 “I sang a song.”

Such statements also occur in out-of-the-blue contexts. If there is any focus in the answer in (18), it is on the entire verb phrase rather than on the direct object *ingoma* “song” predicted by the hypothesis.

The next class of problematic contexts for the conjoint form involve resumptives in relative clauses. First we’ll consider object relatives. In Zulu, as in many Bantu languages, no more than one object marker can appear on a verb. Additionally, an object marker is required when an object undergoes relativization. This leads to an interesting situation in ditransitive constructions as in (19a), in which we can first pronominalize the first object *uSipho* by expressing it as an object marker, as in (19b).

<sup>6</sup> Another context which could be argued to satisfy the predictions of the hypothesis is where a negative verb is followed by a bare (determinerless) noun, which is interpreted as negatively quantified. For example, given the negative perfect forms *angigqoke/angigqokile* “I’m not wearing (conjoint/disjoint)”, the bare noun *sigqoko* “(any) hat” must be preceded by the conjoint verb form: *angigqoke sigqoko* (conjoint) “I’m not wearing any hat.”, \**angigqokile sigqoko* (disjoint).

- (19) a. Ngi- cul- el- e u- Siphho i- ngoma. (conjoint)  
 1S.SBJ- sing- APPL- FV DET- Siphho DET- 9.song  
 “I sang Siphho a song.”
- b. Ngi- m- cul- el- e i- ngoma (conjoint)  
 1S.SBJ- 2.OBJ- sing- APPL- FV DET- 9.song  
 “I sang him a song.”
- c. Yi- ngoma engi- m- cul- el- e yona. (conjoint)  
 COP:DET- 9.song REL:1S.SBJ-2.OBJ-sing- APPL- FV 9.PRO  
 “It’s the song that I sang for him.”

What happens now when we relativize the second object *ingoma* “a song”? The result is shown in (19c), where the direct object is doubled with the resumptive independent pronoun *yona*. This case is problematic for our hypothesis because the pronoun is merely resumptive and is hence not in semantic focus, even though it is preceded by a conjoint verb form. The second problematic case of this type involves locative and temporal relatives, as illustrated in (20):

- (20) a. i- ndawo lapho ngi- cul- e khona (conjoint)  
 DET- 9.place there 1S.SBJ- sing- FV 17.PRO  
 “the place where I sang”
- b. i- sikhathi engi- cul- e nga- so (conjoint)  
 DET- 7.time REL:1S.SBJ- sing- FV at- 7.PRO  
 “the time when I sang”

In the locative relative in (20a), the relativized argument is doubled with the independent pronoun *khona* of locative noun class 17, while in the temporal relative in (20b), the class 7 noun *isikhathi* is doubled with the bound pronoun *-so*. These pronouns are both resumptive and hence unfocused in the same way as in the object relatives, so their appearance after a conjoint verb form is unexpected under the Postverbal Term Focus Hypothesis.

Another problematic context in which the conjoint form of the verb is used involves a class of adverbs including *kahle* “well”. As shown in (21), a verb preceding *kahle* must be in its conjoint form:

- (21) a. Ngi- cul- a kahle. (conjoint)  
 1S.SBJ- sing- FV well
- b. \*Ngi- ya- cul- a kahle. (disjoint)  
 1S.SBJ- ya- sing- FV well  
 “I sing well.”

Were the Postverbal Term Focus Hypothesis correct, we would not expect to be able to get contrastive focus on the verb in a clause containing *kahle*, but this is what we see in (22):

- (22) A-   ngi-   dans- i   kahle, kodwa ngi-   cul- a   kahle.           (conjoint)  
       NEG- 1S.SBJ- dance-FV well   but   1S.SBJ-sing- FV   well  
       ‘‘I don’t dance well, but I sing well.’’

The neutral focus cases, resumptives, and adverbs like *kahle* ‘‘well’’ constitute the most difficult cases for the Postverbal Term Focus Hypothesis. In all three cases the interpretation of the clause lacks the predicted focus on the element following the conjoint verb form, leading us to reject the hypothesis. Let us now consider the alternative hypothesis.

### 3.2 *The Verb Focus Hypothesis*

Recall that under the Verb Focus Hypothesis above in (15), it is the verb itself that is in focus when it is in its disjoint form, while the verb is not in focus in its conjoint form. There are two contexts for disjoint verb forms that provide support for this hypothesis. The first is the situation where the verb is in clause-final position, making it the only element following the subject that could possibly be focused.<sup>7</sup> As shown in (2) above, repeated here as (23), the clause-final position requires the disjoint form:

- (23) a. A-   bafana   [ ba-   ya-   cul-   a. ]                           (disjoint)  
       DET- 2.boys   2.SBJ- ya-   sing- FV  
       b. \* A-   bafana   [ ba-   cul-   a. ]                           (conjoint)  
       DET- 2.boys   2.SBJ- sing- FV  
       ‘‘The boys are singing.’’

The second context supporting the hypothesis is where the disjoint form is followed by an object but the verb has a focused interpretation, as in (24) (modified from (3b)):<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Because the disjoint form is required when the verb is clause-final, it must be assumed under the Verb Focus Hypothesis that in all verbal clauses something following the subject must be in focus.

<sup>8</sup> This sentence can be made grammatical with something very close to the intended interpretation by putting an object marker on the verb. However, it is generally assumed in the literature that an object with an associated object marker is definite, unlike the sentence in (24).

- (24) # A- bafana [ ba- ya- cul- a ] i- ngoma. (disjoint)  
 DET- 2.boys 2.SBJ- ya- sing- FV DET- 9.song  
 “The boys ARE singing a song.”

However, many speakers do not accept (24) as grammatical. Thus, while this case supports the Verb Focus Hypothesis, under that hypothesis, it remains unexplained why many speakers reject (24) and how these same speakers can get contrastive focus on the verb without recourse to the disjoint form. If the disjoint form is the morphological expression of focus on the verb, why is this morphology not obligatory in all contexts where the interpretation would seem to require it?

There are two clear cases which are problematic for the Verb Focus Hypothesis. The first of these involves resumptive pronouns in relative clauses of the type encountered above in (19c). Consider the sentences in (25):

- (25) a. Yi- mali engi- m- nik- e yona. (conjoint)  
 COP:DET- 9.money REL:1S.SBJ-2.OBJ- give- FV 9.PRO  
 b. Yi- mali engi- m- nik- ile- yo. (disjoint)  
 COP:DET- 9.money REL:1S.SBJ- 2.OBJ- give- FV- REL  
 “It’s the money that I gave him.”

The conjoint form in (25a) is unexpected under the Verb Focus Hypothesis, because, the pronoun *yona* being resumptive, if anything is in focus, it must be the verb. Another troubling fact for the hypothesis is that the resumptive pronoun is, in fact, not obligatory for some speakers, as shown in (25b). My informant could identify no difference in interpretation or context between the two variants, contrary to the predictions of the Verb Focus Hypothesis. If the alternation encodes a difference in focus, why should either the conjoint or disjoint form be acceptable in such a relative clause?

The other problematic case for the Verb Focus Hypothesis is that of adverbs like *kahle* “well”, which was also problematic for the Postverbal Term Focus Hypothesis. It was shown above in (21) that a verb preceding the adverb *kahle* must be in its conjoint form. The problem again is that sometimes it is the verb which is in focus when *kahle* is used, as in (22), repeated here as (26):

- (26) A- ngi- dans- i kahle, kodwa ngi- cul- a kahle. (conjoint)  
 NEG- 1S.SBJ- dance-FV well but 1S.SBJ-sing- FV well  
 “I don’t dance well, but I sing well.”

Thus again we have a situation where the focus can be varied within the clause, but the form of the verb does not vary accordingly as predicted.

Because of these problems we are led to abandon the Verb Focus Hypothesis, just as we abandoned the Postverbal Term Focus Hypothesis. We are thus left with the correlation between the conjoint/disjoint alternation and syntactic constituency established earlier, but with no direct correlation with focus.

#### **4 A Weak Correlation Between the Conjoint/Disjoint Alternation and Focus**

Having abandoned our two hypotheses relating the conjoint/disjoint alternation directly to focus and having retreated to a purely constituency-based analysis, we are left with the task of explaining the clear focal contrast first seen in (4) and explaining why in many cases use of the disjoint form was accompanied by some sort of focus on the element following the verb, as in the case of *wh*-phrases exemplified in (16Q). Let us consider again the contrast in (4), repeated here as (27):

- (27) a. Ba- ya- dlal- a ] phandle. (disjoint)  
           1.SBJ- ya- play- FV outside  
           ‘‘They’re playing outside.”
- b. Ba- dlal- a phandle. ] (conjoint)  
           1.SBJ- play- FV outside  
           ‘‘They’re playing OUTSIDE.”

Rather than thinking of this contrast in terms of *phandle* being in focus in (27b) and out of focus in (27a), let us instead consider the possibility that *phandle* has been topicalized in (27a) but not in (27b) (as in Creissels 1996). The fact that *phandle* cannot be in focus in (27a) then follows from the fact that it is topicalized. The position in which the topicalized element appears is outside the constituent relevant for the conjoint/disjoint alternation. Looking at the contrast in this way, we can see why *kahle* ‘‘well’’ cannot be preceded by a disjoint verb form: it is not the sort of adverb amenable to topicalization, as shown with its English counterpart *well* contrasted with *outside* in (28):

- (28) a. I could hear that outside the children were singing.  
       b. \*I could hear that well the children were singing.

We saw above that while *kahle* “well” must be preceded by a conjoint verb form, it does not always receive narrow focus. This fact can be explained by saying that an element in the relevant constituent (assumed above to be AgrSP) has a range of possible interpretations, including a focused one. Thus not every element following the verb in this constituent will necessarily be in semantic focus. This explanation allows the two observed interpretations of a simple SVO sentence with a conjoint verb form as in (29):

- (29) A- bafana [ ba- cul- a i- ngoma. ] (conjoint)  
 DET- 2.boys 2.SBJ- sing- FV DET- 9.song  
 a. “The boys are singing a song.” (neutral focus)  
 b. “The boys are singing A SONG.”

*Ingoma*, being inside the relevant constituent, may be focused, but it does not need to be.

The analysis also allows us to account for elements preceded by a conjoint verb form which are either inherently focused or inherently out of focus. A *wh*-phrase, for example, is inherently focused, and its occurrence within the relevant constituent allows it to receive the focused interpretation. Conversely, a resumptive pronoun is inherently not in focus, and this interpretation is also allowed within the relevant constituent.

Is there then no correlation between the conjoint/disjoint alternation and focus? There is, as should be expected, given the observed contrast in (27), but it is weaker than the correlation formulated in our two hypotheses, because it is an indirect one. The hypotheses said that focus was directly encoded in the alternation. In an analysis in which the alternation is dependent entirely on constituency, the correlation between the alternation and focus is mediated by constituency: both the alternation and the focal interpretations are dependent on constituency, but in different ways. The alternation depends blindly on whether anything follows the verb within the relevant constituent. The focal interpretations depend on the range of interpretations (possibly associated with specific syntactic positions) inside and outside the relevant constituent. The strongest correlation it seems possible to make, then, is that no item following a disjoint verb form can be in focus (like the adverb in (27a)).

Let us return briefly to the expletive construction in (7a), repeated here as (30):

- (30) Ku- cul- a a- bafana. (conjoint)  
 17.SBJ- sing- FV DET- 2.boys  
 a. “The BOYS are singing.”  
 b. “There are boys singing.”

In some Bantu languages such inversions have been claimed to entail contrastive focus on the subject (Kimenyi 1978, Ndayiragije 1999), but in Zulu this is not the case, although contrastive focus on the subject is sometimes available (Du Plessis and Visser 1992, p. 131, and here below). In a primary school Zulu reader (Kheswa 1996), 125 instances of such expletive inversions were identified and only one was found to arguably exhibit contrastive focus on the subject. Among the other common uses of such inversions in Zulu are locative relatives, as in (31), and quotative inversions, as in (32):

- (31) e- bhikawozi yi- lapho ku- bhak- w- a khona i- zinkwa  
 LOC:DET- 5.bakery COP- there 17.SBJ-bake- PSV- FV 17.PRO DET- 10.breads  
 “...a bakery is where bread is baked.” (Kheswa 1996)

- (32) “U- zo- phak- a- ni?” Ku- buz- a u- Siphso. (conjoint)  
 2S.SBJ- FUT- cook- F V- what 17.SBJ-ask- FV DET- 1.Siphso  
 “What will you cook?”, asks Siphso.

In line with another frequent claim in the literature that such constructions entail presentational focus (such as in Demuth and Mmusi (1997)), it could be argued that *izinkwa* “bread” is in presentational focus in (31), but its occurrence in this relative can be explained just as easily by the fact that “bread” is new information and not a topic. It is also doubtful that the subject in the quotative inversion construction (32) is focused, given the properties of quotative inversion we observe in other languages. For example, in English, the subject of a quotative inversion does not receive the same type of intonation as a focused postverbal object or adverb, and in French, the subject of a quotative inversion can be a subject clitic, and these clitics are known to be inherently unfocused:

- (33) “Salut!”, dît- il.  
 hello said- he  
 “Hello!”, he said.

An analysis more consistent with these cross-linguistic facts, then, is that the subject of a Zulu quotative inversion is simply not topicalized.

No claim is being made to the effect that Zulu quotative inversion is identical to English and French quotative inversion in the structural sense. The English and French constructions show agreement between the subject and the verb, and the subject is thus assumed to have raised to the inflectional domain before inversion takes place, while in the Zulu construction the verb manifests class 17 expletive agreement with the subject remaining below the inflectional domain. However, the inversions seem to be similar in usage, and the Zulu inversions, just like their English and French counterparts, are not restricted to contexts which require either contrastive or presentational focus.

What does the constituency analysis say about the existence of a low focus projection? Nothing except that such a projection or its head cannot be what regulates the conjoint/disjoint alternation. Given that certain types of focused elements, such as *wh*-phrases, generally need to immediately follow the verb in Zulu, such a focus projection within the constituent relevant for the conjoint/disjoint alternation may in the end be required. However, the availability of resumptive pronouns (for example) within this constituent shows that it is not the only position in which a postverbal element can appear.

It appears, though, that a single low focus projection would not be able to accommodate both the contrastive focus and presentational focus interpretations discussed in the literature. Let us assume that in the subject inversion construction in (30), the existential interpretation indeed involves something such as a formal feature called “presentational focus”, and (disregarding quotative inversion) that such a subject inversion construction requires the subject to be in either contrastive or presentational focus (reflected in the two translations). We will now see that the contrastive focus interpretation and the presentational focus position utilise different positions relative to the adverb *khona* “there” and to certain types of prepositional phrases. First, consider the question in (34), which has only a contrastive subject interpretation, and note that the question is grammatical only if the subject precedes *khona*:

- (34) a. Yinindaba<sup>9</sup> ku- hlal- a u- Sipho khona?  
 why 17.SBJ-stay- FV DET- 1.Sipho there  
 “Why does SIPHO live there?”  
 b. \*Yinindaba ku- hlal- a khona u- Sipho?  
 why 17.SBJ-stay- FV there DET- 1.Sipho

Now consider again the locative relative above in (31), which must by hypothesis involve presentational focus (since it does not involve subject focus

<sup>9</sup> *Yinindaba* is a morphologically complex word literally meaning something like “it’s what story?”



in the context from which it was taken), and note that the subject now follows *khona*.<sup>10</sup> That this post-adverbial position is used for the subject in clauses that more clearly involve presentational focus of the subject is demonstrated by (35), in which the subject follows the prepositional phrase *kuwe* “from you”:

- (35) ... ku- ya- ku- vel- a ku- we u- mbusi  
17.SBJ-FUT-<sup>11</sup>INF- come.from FV from- 2S.PRO DET- 1.ruler  
“...out of thee shall come a Governor” (Matthew 2:6, Bible Society of South Africa (1959))

Assuming that the position of *khona* and prepositional phrases like *kuwe* is constant, there now appear to be two positions in which the subject in an expletive-type inversion can occur: a high position for contrastive focus and a low position for presentational focus. The availability of different positions for the two types of subject focus poses an additional problem for an analysis attempting to encode focus directly into the conjoint/disjoint alternation. Focus is no longer a single feature which can be related to the verbal morphology via a single focus projection.

## 5 Relative -yo

The relative suffix *-yo* provides additional evidence against a focus-based analysis. The Nguni languages all have an invariable suffix which sometimes appears on certain tenses of the verb in “Strategy 1” (Poulos 1982) relative clauses (a type in which the verb has a relative prefix preceding the subject marker). The distribution of this morpheme, which in Zulu and Xhosa is *-yo*, is complicated (Doke 1997, §773), but it mirrors the conjoint/disjoint alternation in several ways. First, in a present tense (Strategy 1) relative clause, *-yo* cannot be omitted if nothing follows the verb, which is a configuration in which the long form is required in matrix clauses:<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> This is the preferred context for the subject in such an inverted relative, but the subject may also precede *khona*.

<sup>11</sup> This *ya* is that of the remote future and is distinct from the *ya* of the disjoint present tense. There is no segmental conjoint/disjoint distinction in this tense.

<sup>12</sup> Strategy 1 relatives are based on participial verb forms, which do not exhibit a conjoint/disjoint alternation in the present tense.

- (36) a. a- bafana aba- cul- a- yo  
 DET- 2.boys REL:2.SBJ- sing- FV- REL  
 “the boys who are singing”  
 b. \*a- bafana aba- cul- a  
 DET- 2.boys REL:2.SBJ- sing- FV

Second, *-yo* can never be affixed to a conjoint verb form, as can be illustrated using the recent past tense, which retains the conjoint/disjoint alternation in participial forms, and hence in relative clauses:

- (37) a. i- ncwadi engi- yi- bon- ile- (yo) (disjoint)  
 DET- 9.book REL:1S.SBJ- 9.OBJ- see- FV- REL  
 “the book that I saw”  
 b. i- ncwadi engi- yi- bon- e kahle (conjoint)  
 DET- 9.book REL:1S.SBJ- 9.OBJ- see- FV well  
 “the book that I saw well”  
 c. \*i- ncwadi engi- yi- bon- e- yo kahle (conjoint)  
 DET- 9.book REL:1S.SBJ- 9.OBJ- see- FV- REL well

In this case, then, the appearance of *-yo* appears to correspond directly to the distribution of disjoint verb forms. And further evidence that the presence of *-yo* mirrors disjoint verb forms comes from verbs like *cabanga* “think” that take clausal complements. Consider first that in the relativized recent past clause in (38a), only the conjoint form of *cabanga* is grammatical.

- (38) a. Yi- ni o- cabang- e/\*ile ukuthi a- bantwana  
 COP-what REL:2S.SBJ-think- FV that DET 2.children  
 ba- y- enz- ile?  
 2.SBJ- 9.OBJ- do- FV  
 “What did you think the children did?”  
 (lit. “What is it that you thought the children did?”)  
 b. Yi- ni o- cabang- a- (\*yo) ukuthi a- bantwana  
 COP-what REL:2S.SBJ- think- FV REL that DET 2.children  
 ba- y- enz- ile?  
 2.SBJ- 9.OBJ- do- FV  
 “What do you think the children did?”  
 (lit. “What is it that you think the children did?”)

Now consider the corresponding present tense clause in (38b), and we see that the presence of *-yo* results in ungrammaticality in the same way that the disjoint verb form did in the recent past.

Given the ways in which the presence of *-yo* mirrors disjoint verb forms, while its absence mirrors conjoint verb forms, and assuming a focus-based analysis for the conjoint/disjoint alternation, it would seem plausible to give a focus-based account for *-yo*, as well, similar to the Postverbal Term Focus Hypothesis or Verb Focus Hypothesis we considered for the conjoint/disjoint alternation. However, note the following from Xhosa (Zeller (2004), glosses adapted):<sup>13</sup>

- (39) a. i- ndoda a- makhwenkwe a- yi- bon-ile-yo (disjoint)  
           DET- 9.man DET- 6.boys REL:6.SBJ- 9.OBJ- see- FV- REL  
       b. i- ndoda a- yi- bon-ile ama- khwenkwe (disjoint)  
           DET- 9.man REL:6.SBJ- 9.OBJ- see- FV DET- 6.boys  
           “the man who the boys saw”

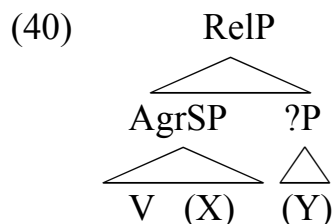
If we believe that the distribution of both *-yo* and the conjoint/disjoint forms is driven by focus, we are faced with a paradox in (39). Assuming that the conjoint verb form and the absence of *-yo* are both indicators of postverbal term focus, *amakhwenkwe* “boys” in (39b) is both *out* of focus by virtue of being preceded by a disjoint verb form and *in* focus by virtue of the absence of *-yo*. Conversely, assuming that the disjoint verb form and the presence of *-yo* are both indicators of verb focus, the verb is both *in* focus by virtue of being in the disjoint form and *out* of focus by virtue of lacking the suffix *-yo*. The  $\emptyset$ /*-yo* alternation and the conjoint/disjoint alternation are similar but independent.

The way out of this paradox is to see that both alternations are in fact regulated by constituency rather than focus, but the constituency to which *-yo* is sensitive is higher than that to which the conjoint/disjoint alternation is sensitive (as should be expected because it is dependent on the clause being relative). The presence of *-yo* encodes constituent-finality in the same way as does the disjoint verb form. Let us assume that the constituent that the conjoint/disjoint alternation is sensitive to (that is, the constituent within which the verb is evaluated as either final or non-final) is AgrSP. Let us also assume that the

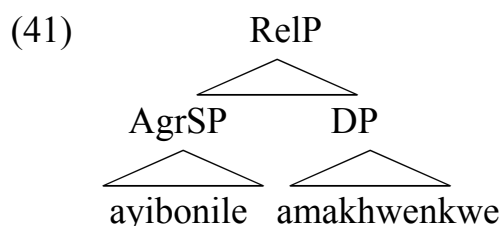
<sup>13</sup> Zeller’s data does not include an example indicating that the inclusion of *-yo* on (39b) would be ungrammatical, but I take its omission in this example as significant.

The relation between the conjoint/disjoint alternation and *-yo* is difficult to assess directly in Zulu. In Zulu (as in Xhosa and Swati), there is no present tense conjoint/disjoint alternation in this type of relative clause, and some Zulu speakers (including my own informant) strongly disprefer use of *-yo* in the perfect.

constituent that *-yo* is sensitive to is a complementizer domain projection named RelP. This is pictured in (40):



This structure explains the similar but imperfect correlation between disjoint forms and *-yo*, that is, why *-yo* does not always appear when the verb is in its disjoint form. A verb non-final in AgrSP, and thus conjoint, will necessarily be non-final in RelP, and thus will appear without *-yo*. But a verb that is final in AgrSP, and thus disjoint in form, will usually, but not always, be final in RelP. *-Yo* will be able to appear only in those cases where the verb is final within RelP. In (39b), the subject *amakhwenkwe* lies outside of AgrSP (as indicated by the disjoint verb form and the subject agreement on the verb) but inside RelP, as in (41):



The verb is in its disjoint form because it is final in AgrSP, but the verb lacks the relative *-yo* suffix because it is not final in RelP.

## 6 Conclusion

We have seen that three different classes of evidence show a correlation between the conjoint/disjoint verb alternation and syntactic constituency. Two attempts were made to go beyond this correlation and establish a direct correspondence between the alternation and focus, first by supposing that the element following a conjoint verb form receives focus, and second by supposing that a disjoint verb itself receives focus. These attempts failed because in some contexts the conjoint form of the verb is required even when the observed interpretation should require the disjoint form. A correlation between the conjoint/disjoint alternation and focus remained, but it was deemed weak and indirect. The distribution of the relative suffix *-yo*, whose distribution mirrors

the conjoint/disjoint alternation only imperfectly, also suggested that the alternation was not directly related to focus.

Although it was not possible to maintain that the conjoint/disjoint alternation directly encoded focus, the constituency correlation was found to be adequate if we assume that the sometimes focused, sometimes not focused interpretation of an element following a conjoint verb form follows from the range of interpretations available to non-topicalized elements. Doing so allowed us to account for the interpretation of elements which can be either focused or not focused, such as postverbal objects; of inherently focused elements, such as *wh*-phrases; and of inherently unfocused elements, such as resumptive pronouns. The analysis also allowed us to account for subjects in expletive inversion constructions whose focal nature is dubious or unclear.

The analysis raises questions for further research. The conclusion that the conjoint/disjoint alternation in Zulu can be accounted for without direct reference to focus does not rule out the possibility that a low focus position is available, as discussed. Exploration of this question will require examining word orders and how they correlate to interpretation, rather than just assuming that, say, a subject in an expletive inversion construction is necessarily in focus, and to looking for syntactic differences between different types of supposed focus. The analysis also suggests revisiting other languages, such as Rundi, in which the correlation between the conjoint/disjoint alternation seems more clear-cut, to determine whether their alternations, too, could be accounted for without direct reference to focus.

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