

# Phrase-finality is (anti)-focal: reexamining the Kinyarwanda conjoint-disjoint alternation

Adam An · University of Kansas · ACAL 57 · aan@ku.edu

## 1 Introduction

The conjoint / disjoint alternation is a verbal alternation in many Bantu languages that often reflects verbal focus. However, in Kinyarwanda (Bantu; Rwanda) the alternation is, on the surface, sensitive both to the constituency of the vP and to the information structure of the clause.

- |                            |                           |                 |
|----------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------|
| (1) <i>Ba-*(ra)-som-a.</i> | (2) <i>Ba-(*ra)-som-a</i> | <i>ibitabo.</i> |
| 2.SBJ-DJ-read-IPFV         | 2.SBJ-read-IPFV           | books           |
| ‘They read.’               | ‘They read books.’        |                 |

### Claim

- Conjoint morphology Agrees with backgrounded information.
- This derives the surface distribution of conjoint and disjoint forms while preserving their connection to information structure.

### Roadmap

1. Introduction
2. Background: information structure and the conjoint / disjoint alternation
3. Kinyarwanda data
4. Previous analysis of the conjoint / disjoint alternation
5. Kinyarwanda analysis: conjoint Agrees with backgroundedness
6. Formalizing backgroundedness

## 2 Background: information structure and the conjoint / disjoint alternation

We adopt the following assumptions:

- We assume a tripartite split in information structure between topic, focus, and background (van der Wal 2025). **Material is backgrounded iff not topic and not focus.**
- We assume every utterance has a focus (van der Wal 2025), which can be assigned to a single word, a phrase, or a functional head on Merge (Erteschik-Shir 2006).
- In Kinyarwanda we assume that subjects begin in the thematic domain; topics must be preverbal and vP-external; focus must be on or in the vP unless negated; there is exactly one focus per sentence.

Many Bantu languages exhibit an alternation known as the *conjoint / disjoint* alternation. In many of these languages disjoint morphology straightforwardly encodes verb focus (3).

(3) a) *Abáana ba-aá-ra-nyóo-ye amatá.*  
 children 2.SBJ-PST-FOC-drink-PFV milk  
 ‘Children DRANK milk.’

b) *Abáana ba-aá-nyoo-ye amatá.*  
 children 2.SBJ-PST-drink-PFV milk  
 ‘Children drank MILK.’  
 (Kirundi; Ndayiragije 1999)

Because focus must normally be vP-internal, verbs alone in the vP are obligatorily disjoint (4).

(4) *Abáana ba-aá-\*(ra)-ya-nyóo-ye.*  
 children 2.SBJ-PST-FOC-OBJ-drink-PFV  
 ‘Children drank it.’  
 (Kirundi; Ndayiragije 1999)

Focal morphology is typically (van der Wal 2016) forbidden in negated verbs (5). Typically this is analyzed as the result of a ban on focused information under negation because negation itself bears focus (Hyman & Watters 1984, Nshemezimana & Bostoen 2016).

(5) *Abáana nti-ba-aá-\*(ra)-nyóo-ye amatá.*  
 children NEG-2.SBJ-PST-(\*FOC)-drink-PFV milk  
 ‘Children did not drink milk.’  
 (Kirundi; Ndayiragije 1999)

### 3 Kinyarwanda data

In all examples, disjoint forms are marked by *ra-* and conjoint forms can be considered unmarked. (Disjoint morphology has other allomorphs, conditioned by tense and mood, that we avoid here.)

Kinyarwanda’s conjoint / disjoint alternation shares some features of the focal alternations seen elsewhere in Bantu. Disjoint morphology is required in verbs alone in the vP (6) but banned under negation (7), and indeed focused information (e.g. wh-questions) is more generally banned under negation as well (8).

(6) *Ba-\*(ra)-som-a.*  
 2.SBJ-DJ-read-IPFV  
 ‘They read.’

(7) *Nti-ba-\*(ra)-som-á.*  
 NEG-2.SBJ-read-IPFV  
 ‘They do not read.’

- (8) \**Nti-ba-(\*)ra)-som-á*      *ikí*<sub>FOC</sub>?  
 NEG-2.SBJ-CJ-read-IPFV    what  
 Intended: ‘What don’t they read?’

However, in Kinyarwanda, the distribution of conjoint / disjoint morphology cannot be predicted from focus alone (Ngoboka & Zeller 2016). A verb bears conjoint morphology if accompanied by vP-internal material, even if focused (9).

- (9) *Joyeuse y-a-som-ye*                      *ibitabo cyaangwa y-a-aandits-e*                      *ibitabo?*  
 Joyeuse 1.SBJ-PST-read-PFV books    or                      1.SBJ-PST-write-PFV books  
 ‘Did Joyeuse read books or write books?’

*Y-a-(\*)ra)-som-ye*<sub>FOC</sub>      *ibitabo.*  
 1.SBJ-PST-CJ-read-PFV books.  
 ‘She READ books.’

Van der Wal (2025) argues that idiomatic and cognate objects are obligatorily unfocused, forcing focus onto the verb. Indeed in a verb-focus-marking language like Kirundi focal morphology is required on the verb (10).

- (10) *Tu-aá-(\*)ra)-ririimb-ye*<sub>FOC</sub>      *in-ririimb-o.*  
 1pl.SBJ-PST-FOC-sing-PFV 9-sing-NOM  
 ‘We sang a song.’  
 (Kirundi; Nshemezimana & van der Wal 2025)

But in Kinyarwanda these focused verbs nonetheless must be conjoint (11-12).

- (11) *Ba-aá-(\*)ra)-ririimb-ye*<sub>FOC</sub>      *in-ririimb-o.*  
 2.SBJ-PST-CJ-sing-PFV    9-sing-NOM  
 ‘They sang a song.’

- (12) *Ba-aá-(\*)ra)-ta-ye*<sub>FOC</sub>                      *umutwe.*  
 2.SBJ-PST-CJ-throw.away-PFV head  
 ‘They lost their minds. (lit. they threw away their heads)’

The surface pattern in Kinyarwanda is one of **constituency**: disjoint morphology appears on a verb that is alone in the vP; conjoint morphology appears on a verb accompanied by vP-internal material. However, the ban on disjoint morphology under negation suggests connection to information structure.

These competing sensitivities, one to constituency and one to information structure, have been difficult to reconcile. Ngoboka & Zeller (2016) are forced to say that the morpheme has “hybrid status.”

#### 4 Previous analyses of the conjoint / disjoint alternation

isiZulu exhibits a similar surface pattern to Kinyarwanda where the conjoint / disjoint alternation appears sensitive to vP constituency but is banned in negation (13-15). (In isiZulu the allomorph of the disjoint morpheme used here is *ya-* and conjoint may be considered unmarked.)

(13) *Abafana* [ *ba-\*(ya)-cul-a.* ]<sub>vP</sub>  
 boys 2.SBJ-DJ-sing-FV  
 ‘The boys are singing.’

(14) *Abafana* [ *ba-\*(ya)-cul-a ingoma.* ]<sub>vP</sub>  
 boys 2.SBJ-sing-FV song  
 ‘The boys are singing a song.’  
 (isiZulu; Buell 2006)

(15) [ *A-ngi-\*(ya)-thand-i.* ]<sub>vP</sub>  
 NEG-1sg.SBJ-love-NEG  
 ‘I don’t love.’  
 (isiZulu; Buell 2005)

In isiZulu backgrounded vP-internal material can be right-extraposed past other vP-external material (Buell 2008, Cheng & Downing 2009, Zeller 2024) (16). If right-extrapolation leaves the verb alone in the vP, the verb bears disjoint morphology.

(16) *Abafana* [ *ba-\*(ya)-dlal-a* ]<sub>vP</sub> *na phandle?*  
 children 2.SBJ-DJ-play-FV Q outside  
 ‘Are the boys playing outside?’  
 (isiZulu; Buell 2006)

Buell (2006), Halpert (2012): in isiZulu conjoint morphology reflects a probe for vP-internal postverbal phrasal material; disjoint morphology obtains if the probe fails.

- But this analysis fails to capture the connection to information structure still visible in, e.g., isiZulu’s ban on disjoint morphology under negation. Buell (2005) captures the connection as idiosyncratic selectional properties.

Diercks (2022): in isiZulu conjoint morphology reflects a probe for a *focused* nominal element in the vP, which must remain in situ (Cheng & Downing 2009); disjoint morphology obtains if the probe fails (17).

- But Kinyarwanda lacks right-extraposition (Ngoboka & Zeller 2016) (18); unfocused vP-internal material still forces conjoint morphology on the verb.

(17) *Abafana* [ *ba-(\*ya)-cul-a* *ingoma*<sub>FOC</sub> ]<sub>vP</sub>  
 boys 2.SBJ-CJ-sing-FV song  
 ‘The boys are singing a song.’  
 (isiZulu; Buell 2006)

(18) *Abáana* [ *ba-(\*ra)-ririimb-a*<sub>FOC</sub> *indiriimbo* ]<sub>vP</sub> *se* (*\*indiriimbo*)?  
 children 2.SBJ-CJ-sing-IPFV song Q song  
 ‘Do the children sing a song?’

However, isiZulu highlights that Bantu grammars can be sensitive to backgrounded material (see Ndayiragije (1999) for a similar analysis in Kirundi). Additionally, Diercks (2022) invokes Givenness (similar to backgrounding) to explain object marking in Lubukusu.

We argue that in Kinyarwanda **the conjoint / disjoint alternation itself reflects a probe for backgrounded material.**

### 5 Kinyarwanda analysis: conjoint Agrees with backgroundedness

Recall the surface distribution of conjoint / disjoint forms in Kinyarwanda: conjoint morphology occurs when the verb is accompanied by vP-internal material.

**Intuitive observation** When the verb is accompanied by vP-internal material, at least one word in the vP is backgrounded (19).

- This is the information-structural feature that unifies all verbs accompanied by vP-internal material regardless of where focus is actually located.

(19) a) What did Joyeuse eat? Joyeuse<sub>TOP</sub> **ate**<sub>BG</sub> bread<sub>FOC</sub>.  
 b) What did Joyeuse do with the bread? Joyeuse<sub>TOP</sub> ate<sub>FOC</sub> **the bread**<sub>BG</sub>.  
 c) What did Joyeuse do? Joyeuse<sub>TOP</sub> [ ate **bread**<sub>BG</sub> ]<sub>FOC</sub>.  
 d) What happened? [ Joyeuse ate **bread**<sub>BG</sub> ]<sub>FOC</sub>.

The information structural status of words under phrasal focus has not received formal analysis to our knowledge. We propose that at least objects under phrasal focus (19c-d) are backgrounded despite being inside a focused constituent (20).

- (20) a) Joyeuse<sub>TOP</sub> [ ate **bread**<sub>BG</sub> ]<sub>FOC</sub>.  
 b) \*Joyeuse<sub>TOP</sub> [ ate **bread**<sub>FOC</sub> ]<sub>FOC</sub>.

If these objects bore focal features, we would predict focused pronominal morphology to be possible under vP /thetic focus, but it is not (21b).

- (21) a) *Wakóze ikí ejo?* *N-a-ra-ku-bón-ye.*  
 ‘What did you do yesterday?’ 1sg.SBJ-PST-DJ-2sg.OBJ-see-PFV  
 ‘I saw you.’
- b) *Wakóze ikí ejo?* # *N-a-bón-ye* *w-o-wé*<sub>FOC</sub>.  
 ‘What did you do yesterday?’ 1sg.SBJ-PST-see-PFV 2sg-PRON-FOC  
 ‘I saw YOU.’
- c) *Haábaye ikí ejo?* *N-a-ra-ku-bón-ye.*  
 ‘What happened yesterday?’ 1sg.SBJ-PST-DJ-2sg.OBJ-see-PFV  
 ‘I saw you.’

Therefore under phrasal focus we can still guarantee that a multi-word vP has a backgrounded element.

**Proposal** In Kinyarwanda, conjoint morphology reflects a probe for *any* backgrounded element in the vP, including the verb or other material. Disjoint morphology obtains when the probe fails.

- We correctly predict the requirement that verbs alone in the vP be disjoint, as the verb must bear focus and nothing is backgrounded.
- We correctly predict the requirement that disjoint morphology be absent under negation: as focused material does not occur under negation, vP-internal material is backgrounded, giving conjoint morphology.

## 6 Formalizing backgroundedness

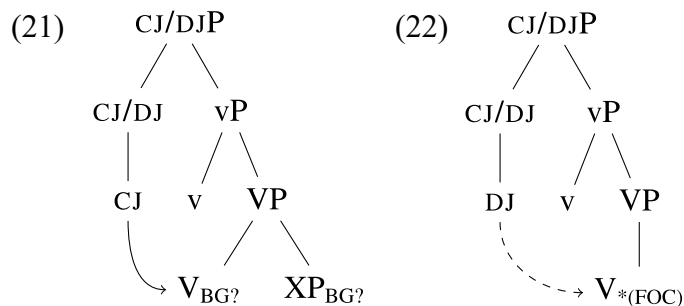
We propose all lexical heads must be tagged with an information-structural feature on Merge.

- Tagging with backgroundedness is required for conjoint morphology to Agree.
- By contrast, in Erteschik-Shir (2006) only topic and focus need to be assigned on Merge.

In a phrase with multiple lexical heads,  $\geq 1$  head must be backgrounded and conjoint morphology reflects successful probing for backgroundedness (21).

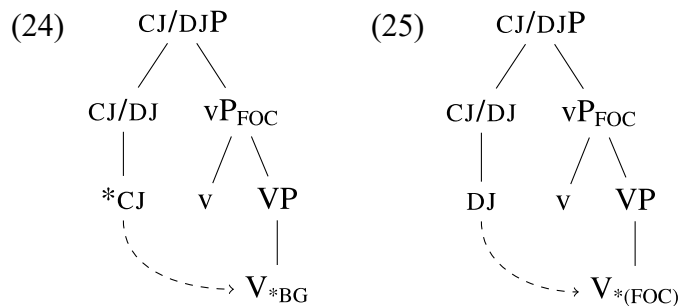
- If all heads under the phrase were focused, the same pragmatic effect could be accomplished more economically by focusing the phrase, leaving backgrounded material underneath.

However, let's switch gears to vPs with only one lexical head (disjoint morphology). The verb must be focused as the only eligible home for an obligatorily-present focus feature (22).



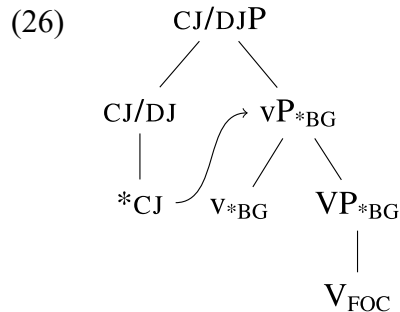
In such a single-lexical-head vP, the V must be focused if the vP is focused (23a, 24). Otherwise in (23b) a focused vP and backgrounded V would predict conjoint morphology on V to be possible (25). (Intuitively, in (23-25) vP focus and V focus are pragmatically equivalent.)

- (23) a) *Bakora ikí buri muúnsi?* [ *Ba-\*(ra)-som-a.\*(FOC)* ]<sub>vP FOC</sub>  
 ‘What do they do every day?’ 2.SBJ-DJ-read-IPFV  
 ‘They read.’
- b) *Bakora ikí buri muúnsi?* \* [ *Ba-som-a.\*BG* ]<sub>vP FOC</sub>  
 ‘What do they do every day?’ 2.SBJ-read-IPFV  
 ‘They read.’



By contrast, we propose that phrases and functional heads cannot bear backgrounding features (though they can be topicalized or focused) (26).

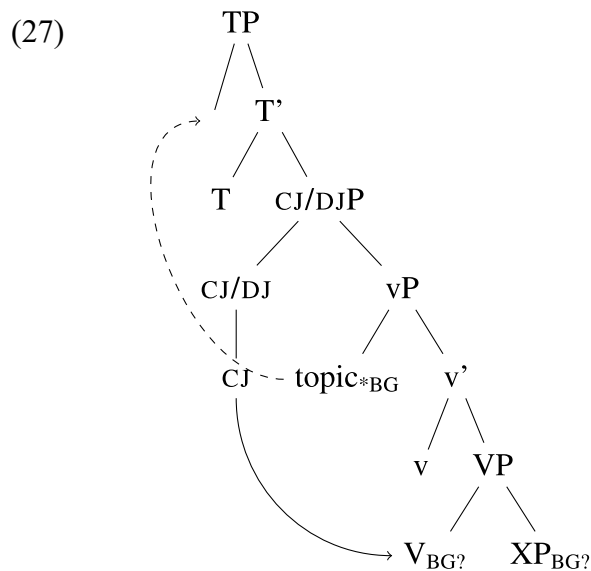
- A majority of phrases and functional heads intuitively lack special information-structural status by default.
- But conjoint morphology still “skips” them and looks for the lexical heads. If phrases and functional heads bore the critical feature their presence would incorrectly predict conjoint morphology in, say, a single-word vP.



The relevant feature is backgrounding, which has received less attention (or rigorous definition) than topic and focus. We assume background = not topic, not focus. A similar concept is Givenness in Kratzer & Selkirk (2002), Diercks (2022).

We propose that the relevant feature is one that topics *lack*.

- If topics do not bear backgrounding features, they can start in the thematic domain (vP-internally) without satisfying the probe and incorrectly deriving conjoint morphology.
- If all material may be in situ at probe time there are no crucial orderings with movement.



## 7 Conclusion

In Kinyarwanda conjoint morphology Agrees with backgrounded material.

This analysis captures the “constituency-based” surface distribution of conjoint / disjoint forms while preserving a connection to information structure.

We predict conjoint / disjoint morphology from in-situ material, removing crucial orderings with movement that is absent in Kinyarwanda.

Kinyarwanda expands the typology of conjoint / disjoint alternations in Bantu: which form reflects a successful probe, what features the probe is sensitive to, and when the probe occurs.

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**Abbreviations** CJ = conjoint; DJ = disjoint; FOC = focus; IPFV = imperfective; NEG = negation; NOM = nominalizer; OBJ = object; PFV = perfective; PL = plural; PRON = pronoun; PST = past; SBJ = subject; SG = singular. Numerals indicate person before sg, pl and noun class elsewhere.

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