

Lexicalized Focus on Tense:
AAE Remote Past *BIN* as a Variation on Verum Focus
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Proposal: I propose the existence of “Temporal Focus,” which is like Verum Focus, but with the focus on tense instead of polarity. The evidence for Temporal Focus is the African American English (AAE) remote past tense/aspect marker, *BIN*. The characteristics of *BIN* follow Grosz’s analysis for the German particle *doch* in that *BIN* triggers two presuppositions: uncontroversiality and correction (Grosz, in press). I define *BIN* as an operator, RP for remote past, that takes the proposition as an argument. RP then sets the time of that proposition to t'' , which precedes t' , the original time of the proposition (1). The proposition is uncontroversial to the speaker, and *BIN* corrects the time of the proposition to the remote past. This analysis seeks to answer two questions specific to *BIN*: 1) what types of discourse contexts license *BIN* usage, and 2) how does *BIN* affect the at-issue content? I answer these questions by demonstrating that *BIN* triggers the uncontroversiality and correction presuppositions, using examples from the 335 *BIN* attestations I gleaned from Dayton 1996. I place my analysis of *BIN* in the context of focus and Verum Focus, with the goal of expanding our understanding of cross-linguistic discourse particles.

Background: *BIN* is used to express that an event happened in the remote past, has been happening since, and is still true (Rickford 1973). It has stress and low pitch. Crucially, “only stressed *BIN* can signal remote function by itself,” as is evidenced by the ability of unstressed *bin* to occur with temporal specifiers, whereas stressed *BIN* cannot co-occur with these, and signals remote past without them (Rickford 1999:20). **Verum Focus and *doch*:** Höhle coined the term Verum Focus (VF) to describe when a word asserts the truth of the previous proposition, but not the lexical meaning of the word itself (1992). Höhle’s original formulation of VF described it as indicating that p was true, which both he and Gutzmann & Castroviejo (G&C) point out is essentially equivalent to simply stating p (Höhle 1992, G&C 2009). Romero and Han (R&H) describe VF as a speaker’s way of saying that he/she is certain that the proposition should be added to the Common Ground (2004). G&C point out that this system does not make correct predictions for negations; if R&H were correct, it should be the case that it is possible to negate the VF speaker’s certainty about the proposition, as well as the truth of the proposition itself, both of which are available interpretations for embedded propositions (2) (2009). However, this is not the case (3) (G&C 2009). G&C instead analyze VF as a conventional implicature that is above the level of truth conditions.

Analysis: As previously mentioned, Grosz analyzes *doch* as triggering two presuppositions: uncontroversiality and correction. I will structure my analysis of *BIN* around these presuppositions. **Uncontroversiality:** The uncontroversiality presupposition matches the description of *BIN* as “incompatible with expressions of doubt or ignorance” (Labov 1998:31). This presupposition is in line with R&H’s analysis of VF as expressing speaker certainty about the proposition being added to the Common Ground. While this analysis did not make accurate predictions for VF, it does make the correct predictions for *BIN*: it is possible to negate an entire RP proposition (4). **Correction:** *BIN* is often described as contrastive. For example, it is described as signaling “moral indignation” (Labov 1998), and as refuting a previous speaker’s claim (Dayton 1996). In contrastive focus, it is infelicitous to contrastively focus two changes simultaneously (5), which is also true for *BIN* (6). However, the predicate can change as long as it is not contrastive (7). Crucially, the element with which *BIN* contrasts is the time of the proposition, indicating that *BIN* is not a conventional implicature in the sense of G&C because it interacts with the at-issue content and changes truth conditions. In (8), *They BIN dead* and *They dead/They just died*, is essentially a minimal pair for the presence and absence of *BIN*, and they are contrasted in terms of their truth conditions. *They BIN dead* is in the remote past, while the focus alternatives, *They dead/They just died*, are in the more recent past. Moreover, remote past can be separated from recent past in terms of the truth of the proposition (9). The discourse context for *BIN* has a restriction such that a start time must be available for the predicate in question, which *BIN* then corrects by saying that the actual start time preceded the original. This is not to say that a start time must be explicit; it can be implicit, and available by pragmatic inference, as in (1&10) (which I notate by putting *at t'* in brackets). In (11), p is eventive, implying that there was a starting point in the past for the proposition. *BIN* places the proposition before the original starting point t' . (12), however, has no clear start time for the proposition, and as a result a *BIN* response is infelicitous. (1&10) also demonstrate this, in particular the fact that the stative in the present tense provides a focus alternative with which *BIN* can contrast.

Conclusion: Through comparisons to previous analyses on focus particles and Verum Focus, I have demonstrated that *BIN* is a contrastive discourse particle that refutes a previously implied or mentioned focus alternative, recent past, by returning an uncontroversial proposition in the remote past, regardless of the polarity of the original proposition. While *BIN* matches Grosz’s analysis of *doch* (in press) and R&H’s analysis of Verum Focus (2004) in general terms, it dramatically differs in that it does not affect the polarity of truth conditions, but instead the time. *BIN* is unusual cross-linguistically in that it is a contrastive focus marker that obligatorily contrasts along the temporal dimension, and that focus and the temporal meaning of remote past are lexicalized into this one tense/aspect marker. Understanding *BIN* is important not only for understanding AAE tense/aspect, but also for understanding the possible characteristics of discourse particles, with an eye toward developing a theoretical system that can account for the full range of cross-linguistic variation.

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- 1) A: Are they ordered? ?(p[at t']) (stative p at present) [Dayton 1996(D):730]
B: Yeah, they ordered. p[at t']
They *BIN* ordered. Furthermore, there is t'' that is sufficiently prior to t',
and p was the case then as well. [henceforth referred to as RP(p)]
- 2) A: I believe John is rich enough to buy a house. 3) A: Karl SCHREIBT ein Buch. ['Karl WRITES a book.']
a. B1: No, he can't afford it. a. B1: No, he writes a personal diary. ¬p
b. B2: No, I know you don't believe that. b. #B2: No, you are not sure about that. #¬VERUM(p)
[C&G 2009]
- 4) A: Where'd you get the shoes? Where did you (p at t') [D:735]
B: We *BIN* had them. RP(p)
C: Uh, uh we ain't¹ *BIN* had them; ¬RP(p)
we got them Saturday [4 days ago]. p at t'
- 5) A: Mary called Bill. 6)* A: Did you call her?
a. B1: No, BILL called MARY. a. B1: I SEEN her.
b. B2: No, Mary KISSED Bill. b. B2: I *BIN* called her.
c. #B3: #No, BILL KISSED MARY. c. #B3: #I *BIN* SEEN her.
- 7) A: When you meet him? Given p, what is t'? 8) A: See, they dead. p[at t'] [D:795]
B: I didn't just meet him. ¬(p at t') [OR p is not at t']
I *BIN* knowin' him. RP(q) B: They *BIN* dead. RP(p)
[D:786] A: No they didn't; ¬RP(p)
They **just** died. p at t'
- 9) A: Are you payin' it? [D:727] ?p 10) A: He got scratched? ?(p[at t']) (eventive p at t')
B: I *BIN* payin' it. RP(p) B: No, ¬(p[at t'])
I ain't paid **this month or last month.** ¬(p at t') he *BIN* scratched. RP(p) [D:730]
- (11)* A: Did you call her a long time ago? eventive p at t' (where t' = a long time ago)
B: I *BIN* called her. RP(p)
- (12)* A: Were you there a long time ago? stative p at t' (where t' = a long time ago)
B: #I *BIN* there.

Selected References

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¹ *BIN* is typically analyzed as a PPI (Dayton 1996). This example is metalinguistic negation.

* Intuitions from AAE speaker. All other examples are attestations.