CHAPTER 6

Information Structure and Requesting Information

Information structure and requesting information are discussed together in this chapter since they share a number of features, for example similar syntactic constructions for focused constituents and question words. Moreover, both are concerned with the information available about participants or events in discourse. However, while information structure provides information about participants or events in discourse (cf. 6.1.), questions inquire for more information about these (cf. 6.2.).

6.1 Information Structure

As has been discussed in the preceding chapters, the structure of a sentence greatly depends on the meaning the speaker wants to convey in discourse and thus on the semantics of the verbs and the semantic roles of the arguments associated with them. Moreover, the realization of arguments in discourse differs depending on the status of the participants. In the present chapter, information structure in Mbembe will be described on the sentence as well as the discourse level.

On the discourse level, different types of noun phrases can introduce new participants into the discourse or help the hearer to keep track of the ones already known to her/him (cf. 6.1.1.; cf. Foley 2007: 402/403). Although the different determining and anaphoric devices employed in Mbembe (cf. 3.4.) and the realization of arguments in discourse (cf. 4.2.3.) have already been described, some of them will be mentioned here again to illustrate how these devices are employed in a continuous stretch of discourse (cf. 6.1.1.). This will be exemplified with a folk tale from the Kuta dialect (village of Mbande).¹

Moreover, examples from this story, but also other examples, will be used to show how the speakers highlight specific information in a sentence as especially relevant to the hearer. This is achieved either with constructions which indicate about whom information is provided (topic, cf. 6.1.2.) or with constructions which help to identify the referent which is most relevant for the hearer—often in contrast to other possible referents (focus, cf. 6.1.3.).

¹ While only certain sentence examples will be presented here, the story is given in full length in the appendix. The numbering of the examples is then according to their occurrence in the story. Thus, the example marked as 1) here is the first sentence in the story.
6.1.1 Reference Tracking

As mentioned above, information structure on the discourse level is concerned with the status of participants and the information provided about them (cf. Foley 2007: 402/403; Dik & Hengeveld 1997: 314). A distinction is generally made between participants which are newly introduced into the discourse and are thus unknown to the hearer, and given or resumed participants. Given participants can be clearly identified by the hearer. By contrast, resumed participants are those which have been mentioned in discourse before but some time ago, and are thus probably not immediately retrievable for the hearer. Thus, the speaker has to remind the hearer that s/he already knows the participant (cf. Dik & Hengeveld 1997: 314/315). In addition, participants can be highlighted as known for other reasons as will be discussed below. The status of the participants is indicated in Mbembe by different types of noun phrases, most commonly by the modification of the noun by different determiners or anaphoric devices. In the following, the means used in the introduction of new participants into discourse (6.1.1.1.) and the tracking of known, i.e. given or resumed, participants (6.1.1.2., 6.1.1.3.) will be outlined. Since the realization of participants is also tied to their relevance for the discourse as a whole, this will be considered in the description as well.

6.1.1.1 New Participants

New participants are unknown to the hearer (cf. Dik & Hengeveld 1997: 314). They can be established in the discourse in different ways, depending on whether they are specific or nonspecific, or relevant to the coming discourse or not. In Mbembe, new participants are usually introduced into the discourse in subject position of a sentence, which might be existential (408.112), possessive (408.1) or locative (408.3). Most commonly a semantically relatively general noun refers to these new participants which is modified by the indefinite determiner ðũ̀ ~ zò ‘certain’ (cf. 3.4.1.1.). This determiner restricts the number of possible referents to one specific, though so far unknown, referent. Further information about these participants is sometimes added to the noun.

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2 The usage of the terms ‘new’, ‘given’ and ‘resumed’ is adopted from Dik & Hengeveld (1997). However, the definition of ‘resumed’ is slightly extended to include participants which are highlighted as known for other reasons. Moreover, the term ‘discourse topic’ used by Dik & Hengeveld (2007) to refer to the participants on the discourse level is avoided here as the term ‘topic’ is also used to refer to entities about which information is provided on the sentence level (cf. Foley 2007: 404). While a discourse topic can also be the topic of a sentence, it does not necessarily have to be and vice versa. Thus, the term ‘topic’ will only be used here to refer to the topics of a sentence (cf. 6.1.2. below). ‘Discourse topics’ will be called ‘participants’ in the description of reference tracking in Mbembe.