This talk examines two subject asymmetries in Defaka, and proposes an analysis that ties both to conditions on focus movement imposed by vP.

Defaka is an extremely endangered Ijoid language spoken by approximately 50 speakers in a single village in the southeastern Niger Delta area of southern Nigeria (Jenewari 1983, Connell et al. 2010). Defaka optionally allows any one constituent in a clause to be fronted and marked with a specialized particle; this designates the fronted constituent as focused. These focus constructions exhibit two morphological patterns that depend on whether the extracted element is a local subject. First, focused subjects are followed by the particle ko, while objects (and other non-subjects) occur with the particle ndo instead. Second, when an object (but not a subject) is focused, the verb is obligatorily followed by a clitic –ke (either instead of, or in addition to, tense/aspect/mood morphology normally found in this position, exemplified by the non-future clitic –ma). These patterns are illustrated below:

(1)  i èbèrè bàà-mà ntà tè 
    I dog kill-NFUT today Pº
    ‘I killed (the) dog today’
    (discourse-neutral)

(2) a. èbèrè ndò i bàà-kè ntà tè  
    [Object ndo…V-ke]
    dog FOC I kill-KE today Pº
    ‘I killed (the) dog today’
    (focused object)

   b. i kò èbèrè bàà-mà ntà tè  
    [Subject ko…V-ma]
    I FOC.SBJ dog kill-NFUT today Pº
    ‘I killed (the) dog today’
    (focused subject)

In situations with long-distance movement, these two morphological patterns are dissociated. When an object from an embedded clause moves to the focus position of the matrix clause, then –ke is required on both verbs, as in (3).

(3) áyá jíkà ndò Bòmá i bië-*kè [i ísò tì sónó-mà-*kè ]CP 
    new house FOC Boma I ask-KE I ISO buy- MA- KE
    ‘Boma asked me if I’m going to buy a new house’

When the subject of an embedded clause is extracted to the matrix focus position, it patterns like a focused non-subject: it appears with the particle ndo (instead of ko), and triggers –ke on the matrix verb, as in (4).

(4) Bruce, ndò/*ko Bômá jirí-*kè  
    Bruce FOC Boma know-KE her see-NFUT
    ‘Boma knows (that) Bruce saw her’

This talk proposes an analysis that unites both of the subject asymmetries in Defaka as visible morphological consequences of the interaction between focus movement and requirements of the vP phase. We take focus movement to be raising to FocP, a syntactic position dedicated to focus (following Rizzi 1997, 2004, and others). Under the standard minimalist assumption that vP is a phase, this means that focused objects and embedded-clause subjects can move to FocP only if they
first stop in the edge of the vP phase along the way. The post-verbal clitic –*ke in Defaka is an overt morphological reflex of this intermediate movement through the edge of vP. We analyze the subject-specific focus particle *ko as the head of a syncretic projection (in the sense of Giorgi & Pianesi 1996), which bundles the Focus feature together with the features responsible for licensing subjects. This syncretism is possible only in the case of focused local subjects, because they are first merged in the same phase as the Focus feature, and thus can check both their case feature and the uninterpretable [Focus] feature of FocP simultaneously. Thus, both subject asymmetries ultimately derive from perturbations to focus movement caused by the presence of an intervening vP phase boundary.

References: