

The Syntax and Morphology of Focus in Dagbani

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Introduction

- Dagbani has two markers of *ex-situ* focus: *n/m/ŋ* and *ka*.
- What is the distribution?
- How do we explain the distribution?
- **Wider Question:** How does Dagbani (and the analysis thereof) fit in with other languages of the region?

- Basic cases:

- (1) a. Abu ń dá búkù máá
Abu FOC buy.PERF book DEF
‘ABU bought the book.’
- b. Búá máá kà Abu dá
goat DEF FOC Abu buy.PERF
‘Abu bought THE GOAT.’

Traditional Description

- Traditionally:
 - *n* is the marker of focussed **subjects**.
 - *ka* marks **all other arguments and adjuncts**.
- Surprise: allomorphy of focus marker based on Grammatical Function.
- Bigger question: what can allomorphy be sensitive to?

The Distribution of the Markers

Focus in West African languages (Fiedler et al., 2010) (Informal version)

- Subjects and non-subjects often (not always) behave differently under focus in the languages of West Africa.
- Subject marking of focus is consistently **more robust** than marking of non-subjects.

Introduction: Background

Marking asymmetry (Fiedler et al., 2010) (Official version)

- Non-subject focus cannot or need not be marked syntactically.
 - Non-subject focus is restricted to *in-situ* positions (Bole, Duwai, Bade, Ngamo (all Chadic))
 - NSF is not restricted to *in-situ* positions (Mabia, Kwa, Hausa (Chadic))
- Subject focus must be marked

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- Subject focus must be marked
- Takeaway conclusion: subject focus is different.
- This holds whether focus is prosodically, syntactically or morphologically marked.

Dagbani: Background

- Dagbani is a Mbia (Gur) language spoken in Northern Ghana.

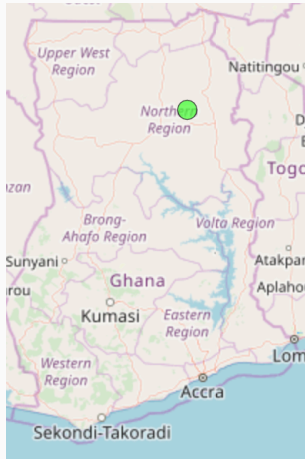


Figure 1: Dagbani: (Hammarström et al., 2018)

Dagbani: Morphosyntactic characteristics

- Strongly analytic morphology
- Rigidly SVO word order

- (2) a. Abu tú bíá máá
Abu insult.PERF child DEF
‘Abu has insulted the child’
- b. * Bíá máá Abu tú
child DEF Abu insult.PERF
‘Abu has insulted the child’
- c. * Abu bíá máá tú
Abu child DEF insult.PERF
‘Abu has insulted the child’

Asymmetry

- Morphological distinction between subjects and non-subjects.

- (3) a. Abu n̄ dá búkù máá
Abu FOC buy.PERF book DEF
'ABU bought the book.' (subject focus)
- b. * Abu kà dá búkù máá
Abu FOC buy.PERF book DEF
intended: 'ABU bought the book.' (subject focus)
- c. Búá máá kà Abu dá
goat DEF FOC Abu buy.PERF
'Abu bought THE GOAT.' (object focus)
- d. * Búá máá n̄ Abu dá
goat DEF FOC Abu buy.PERF
intended: 'Abu bought THE GOAT.' (object focus)

Side note: Gurene (Mabia) is the same

- Dagbani is not alone in this pattern.

- (4) a. a-nɪ n zàa nyé bùdàa lá?
a-WH FOC yesterday see man DEF
Who saw the man yesterday?' [Dakubu 2003, p. 4]
- b. á-nɪ ɲmè ʔì
a-WH beat 3SG.INT
Who beat him?' [Dakubu 2003, p. 4]
- c. bá-nɪ tì fù nyɛ?
ba-WH FOC 2SG see
Who (what group) did you see?' [Dakubu 2003, p. 4]
- d. lòg-kú-nì tì fù nyɛ?
thing-ku-WH FOC 2SG see
Which thing did you see?' [Dakubu 2003, p. 4]

Side note: Kusaal (Mabia) is the same

(5) a. múì kà bà sá dī.

rice FOC 3PL PST eat

It is rice that they ate yesterday (not beans)' [Abubakari 2016]

b. Dáú lá ń dā' búúg lá.

man DEF FOC buy goat DEF

'It is the man that bought the goat (not the woman)'
[Abubakari 2016]

Sisaala (Mabia, Pisaali dialect) is the same

- (6) a. Duma yɔbɔ loori.
Duma buy car.
'Duma has bought a car' [Dumah 2016, p. 6]
- b. Duma rɛ yɔbɔ loori.
Duma FOC buy car.
'It is Duma who bought a car' [Dumah 2016, p. 6]
- c. Emma nyɔɔɔ daasi.
Emma burn sticks
'Emma burnt sticks.' [Dumah 2016, p. 7]
- d. Daasi nɛ Emma nyɔɔɔ
sticks FOC Emma burnt
'It is sticks that Emma burnt.' [Dumah 2016, p. 7]

Subjects vs. Other?

- This looks fairly easy to model.
 - [n] is a focus particle that combines with SUBJECTS.
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(8) **Do so ka** n wum ni o da lorri
man certain; Foc I heard that he buy car
'I heard that A (CERTAIN) MAN bought the car.'

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(9) **Do so ka** n wum ni o da lorri
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- This suggests a two-way difference between **matrix** subjects vs. everything else.
- However, syntactic differences do not back up this dichotomy.

Island Violations

- It is possible to extract from a coordination in an embedded subject position:

(10) **Mary_i ka** m wun ni [o_i mini Abu] da loori
Mary_i Foc I heard that [she_i and Abu] buy-PERF car
'I heard that MARY and Abu bought a car.'

- Other islands are able to be violated too.

(11) ɲùní; kà á béhím bòndálí kà ò; kàná?
who FOC 2SG wonder when FOC 3SG come.PERF
'Who do you wonder when she/he came?'

Island Violations: Only embedded subjects

- This is not possible with matrix subjects, or non-subjects.

- (12) a. * Abu_i ñ t_i míní Chentiwuni dá lòòrí
Abu FOC and Chentiwuni buy.PERF a.car
'ABU and Chentiwuni bought a car.'
- b. * Chentiwuni_i ñ Abu míní t_i dá lòòrí
Chentiwuni FOC Abu and buy.PERF a.car
intended: 'Abu and CHENTIWUNI bought a car.'
- (13) a. * Abu_i kà Wumpini nyá [t_i míní Chentiwuni].
Abu FOC Wumpini see.PERF [and Chentiwuni]
'Wumpini saw ABU and Chentiwuni.'
- b. * Chempang_i kà Abu nyá Napari mínì t_i
Chempang FOC Abu see.PERF Napari and
intended: 'Abu saw Napari and CHEMPANG'

Island Violations: Only ESF

- This holds for other islands as well — it is *only* embedded subjects that can violate them.

- (14) a. $\eta\grave{u}n\acute{i}_i$ $k\grave{a}$ Wumpini $t\grave{o}$ $j\acute{i}n\acute{a}$ $n\grave{i}$ \grave{o}_i $ny\acute{a}$
 who FOC Wumpini make.PERF claim that 3SG see.PERF
 $b\acute{u}\acute{a}$?
 goat
 ‘Who has Wumpini made the claim that he has seen a
 goat?’
- b. * $\eta\grave{u}n\acute{i}_i$ $k\grave{a}$ \grave{o} $t\acute{o}$ $j\acute{i}n\acute{a}$ $n\acute{i}$ \grave{o}_i $ny\acute{a}$ $y\acute{a}$ t_i ?
 who FOC 3SG make claim that 3SG see.PERF
 ‘Who has s/he made the claim that he has seen?’

How to focus a coordination

- With matrix subjects and non-subjects, to focus one part of a coordination, you need to put the focus marker after the entire coordination.

- (15) a. Napari míní Mbangba kà tí sà pùhí.
Napari and Mbangba FOC 1PL PST greet.PERF
‘We greeted NAPARI and Mbangba yesterday.’
- b. Napari míní Wumpini n dá lòòrí
Napari and Wumpini FOC buy.PERF lorry
‘NAPARI and Wumpini have bought a car.’

ESF requires resumption

- (16) a. Búá só;_i kà ñ tèhí ñì *(ò_i) kpé dúú máá
goat certain FOC 1SG think.PERF C 3SG enter room DEF
ní
LOC
‘A CERTAIN GOAT I think that it has entered the room’
- b. Abu_i ñ (*o_i) dá búkù máá
Abu FOC he buy.PERF book DEF
‘ABU bought the book.’
- c. Búá máá;_i kà Abu dá (*o_i)
goat DEF FOC Abu buy.PERF it
‘Abu bought THE GOAT.’

- (17) a. Chempang;_i kà ín wún nì *(ò;_i) míní Abu dá
Chempang;_i FOC I heard that he;_i and Abu buy.PERF
lòòrí
car
‘I heard that CHEMPANG and Abu bought a car.’
- b. Chempang;_i kà Abu yèlí nì Napari mínì o;_i
Chempang FOC Abu say.PERF that Napari and 3SG
dá lòòrí.
buy.PERF car
‘Abu said that Napari and CHEMPANG bought a car.’

- (18) a. ɲùnɪ́; kà á béhím bònɔ́lɪ́ kà ò; kàná?
 who FOC 2SG wonder when FOC 3SG come.PERF
 ‘Who do you wonder when she/he came?’
- b. * Bò ká á béhím ní wúlàzùγú ká ó kɔ́hí
 What_{FOC} 2SG that why FOC 3SG sell.PERF
 ‘What do you wonder why he/she sold?’

- (19) a. $\eta\acute{u}n\acute{i}_i$ kà Wumpini tò $j\acute{i}n\acute{a}$ nì \grave{o}_i nyá
 who FOC Wumpini make.PERF claim that 3SG see.PERF
 búá?
 goat
 ‘Who has Wumpini made claim that he has seen a
 goat?’
- b. * $\eta\acute{u}n\acute{i}_i$ kà ò tó $j\acute{i}n\acute{a}$ ní \grave{o}_i nyá yá t_i ?
 who FOC 3SG make claim that 3SG see.PERF
 ‘Who has s/he made the claim that he has seen?’

Summary

	Marker	Resumption?	Island Extraction?
MSF	n/m/η	X	X
ESF	ka	✓	✓
NSF	ka	X	X

Table 1: Interim Summary

- Though characterised above as a difference between matrix subjects and embedded subjects, the reality is that it is length of movement that is the distinguisher.
- When embedded subjects ‘move’ to the embedded left periphery, they appear with *n* and no resumptive.

(20) Wumpini yèlí-yá nì Mbangba ní/*kà dá lòòrí.
Wumpini say.PERF-DJ that Mbangba FOC buy.PERF car
‘Wumpini said that MBANGBA bought a car.’

- **It is then a difference of short vs. long subject movement.**

Why use resumptives for non-local subjects?

Subject Resumption

- Dagbani is far from the only language to use resumption when there is an A'-dependency such as focus.
- A matrix subject vs. embedded subject disparity is also well-attested.
- Irish (McCloskey, 1990):

- (21) a. * **fear** nár fhan **sé** sa bhaile
man C.NEG.PST remained he at home
'a man that didn't stay at home.' [Irish]
- b. **an fear** an dhúirt mé go dtiocfadh **sé**
the man C said I C would-come he
'the man that I said (he) would come.'

Subject only focus

- What is more curious about Dagbani is that resumptives are only allowed in the embedded subject position.
- This is in contrast to many other languages, where resumptives are possible for all positions.

- (22) a. Búá só_i kà ñ tèhí ñì *(ò_i) kpé dúú máá ní
goat certain FOC 1SG think.PERF C 3SG enter room DEF LOC
'A CERTAIN GOAT I think that it has entered the room'
- b. Abu_i ñ (*o_i) dá búkù máá
Abu FOC he buy.PERF book DEF
'ABU bought the book.'
- c. Búá máá_i kà Abu dá (*o_i)
goat DEF FOC Abu buy.PERF it
'Abu bought THE GOAT.'

Elements of the analysis: Subjects in Spec,TP

- We can assume that there is a very strong requirement that the subject move to Spec,TP in Dagbani (= the traditional EPP, of sorts).
- As noted earlier: argument structure is rigidly SVO.
- Subjects appear before tense morphemes:

(23) Ábú sà bú bíhí máa.
Abu PAST beat.PERF children DEF
'Abu beat the children yesterday.'

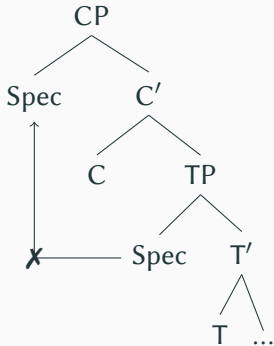
- Subjects therefore can be assumed to canonically raise to Spec,TP.

Elements of the analysis: Antilocality

- Antilocality: movement cannot be too short.
- Range of proposals: Schneider-Zioga (2007), Grohmann (2011), Erlewine (2016), and Douglas (2017).

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- Antilocality: movement cannot be too short.
- Range of proposals: Schneider-Zioga (2007), Grohmann (2011), Erlewine (2016), and Douglas (2017).
- Key idea for us:



- It is not possible to move from the specifier of a projection to the specifier of the immediate projection above it.
- Movement from Spec,TP to Spec,CP violates this.

Elements of the analysis: Embedded Subjects

- Combining these, a possible way to solve the problem presents itself.:
 - The subject DP is directly generated in Spec,CP
 - ⇒ *licenses the information structure feature on C*
 - A resumptive fills Spec,TP
 - ⇒ *fulfills the EPP.*
 - A'-binding between the two ensures the resumptive is interpreted correctly.

(24) [_{CP} Focus_i [_{C'} ka [_{TP} Subj [_{VP} V Obj [_{TP} ResPr_i [_{VP} V Obj]]]]]]]

Embedded Subjects

- So, why not do this with a matrix subject?
- McCloskey (1990): resumptive pronouns cannot be bound too closely.

⇒ *The Highest Subject Restriction.*

- (25) a. * **fear** nár fhan sé sa bhaile
man C.NEG.PST remained he at home
'a man that didn't stay at home.' [Irish]
- b. **an fear** an dhúirt mé go dtiocfadh sé
the man C said I C would-come he
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Elements of the analysis

- If we try to repeat the trick for matrix subjects:
 - The subject DP is directly generated in Spec,CP
 - ⇒ *licenses the information structure feature on C*
 - A resumptive fills the matrix Spec,TP
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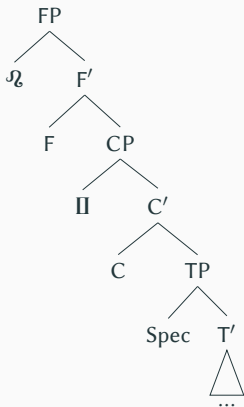
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 - A'-binding needed between the two ensures the resumptive is interpreted correctly.
 - ⇒ This is problematic, since the resumptive would be bound too closely and violate the Highest Subject Restriction.
- Matrix subject focus is then stuck.
- There is seemingly no way to reconcile moving between Spec,TP and Spec,CP.

Why are there two focus markers?

Proposal: Outline

- We propose that Dagbani resorts to generating an extra projection above Spec,CP to give the subject room to move.

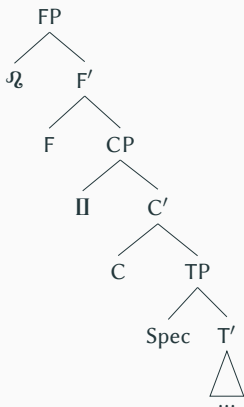


ℳ = position for (locally) moved subject foci
Π = position for other focus arguments

****This will be immediately revised****

Proposal: Outline

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\mathcal{Q} = position for (locally) moved subject foci

Π = position for other focus arguments

F = n

C = ka

****This will be immediately revised****

- What could FP be?
- It is in complementary distribution to *ka*.
- This suggests that it is related to the head that *ka* expresses.
- Let's assume then that it is the same type of head as the one that expresses *ka*, that is, a C head with an interpretable focus feature.
- Proposal: In order to give the subject space to move, Dagbani allows the CP to be iterated.

Proposal: Iterate CP

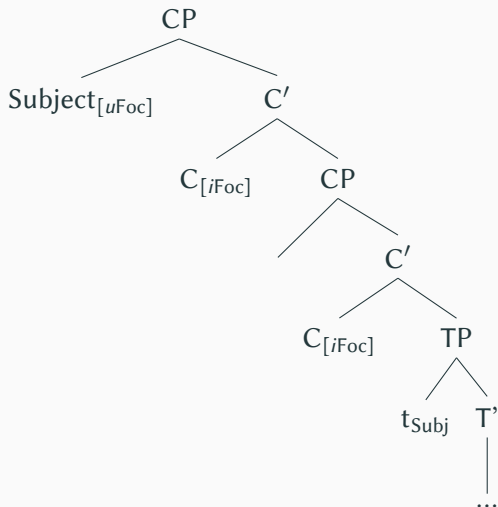
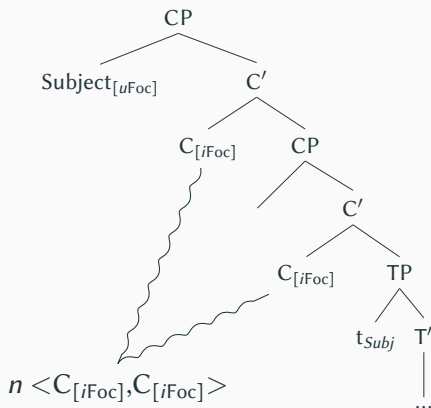


Figure 2: An iterated CP

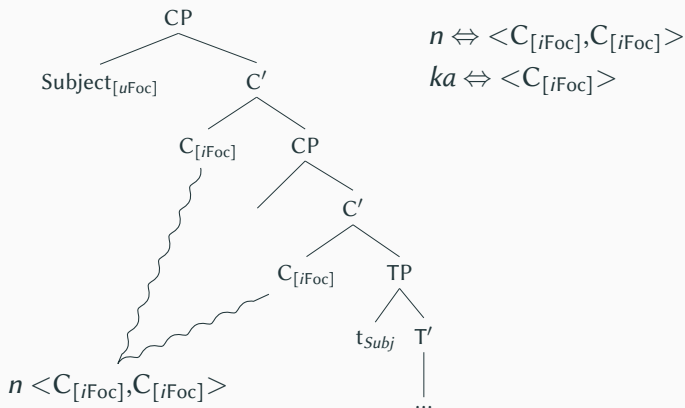
Iterating CP: More useful than you'd think

- This allows us to model the difference between *n* and *ka*.



Iterating CP: More useful than you'd think

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- The two focus marker strategy then is the result of a conspiracy of factors:
 1. Subjects **have** to move to Spec,TP.
 2. Subjects have to move to Spec,CP if focussed.
 3. A resumptive pronoun cannot violate the HSR.
 4. Movement must obey antilocality.
- Iterating the CP then allows for enough syntactic distance for local subjects to move without needing a resumptive pronoun, and not violating antilocality.

Could it be *anything* else?

- Not that we can think of.
- In Issah and Smith (To Appear), we show that the following do not work:
 - C-T bundling (where T and C combine to form a single head, *à la* Bennet, Akinlabi, and Connell, 2012; Martinović, 2015; Erlewine, 2018).
 - *n* as a marker of *in-situ* focus.
 - *n* as an exceptional licenser of nominative case.
- There is empirical evidence and conceptual arguments against all of these.

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 - *n* as a marker of *in-situ* focus.
 - *n* as an exceptional licenser of nominative case.
- There is empirical evidence and conceptual arguments against all of these.
- Although the CP-iteration is not pretty, it at least works, is empirically supporting, and offers an explanation of the two focus markers.

Conclusions

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- Dagbani obeys the requirement in West African that subject focus must be marked (Fiedler et al., 2010).
- Dagbani somewhat unique in how it resolves subject focus marking.
- Iterating the CP allows distance.
- Voabularly Insertion and allomorphy can be sensitive to the number of instances of a given feature (Moskal and Smith, 2016; Smith et al., 2019)

Outstanding Questions

- Why is CP-iteration to resolve this situation so rare?
- The same confluence of factors is found in many other West African languages (Issah and Smith, in prep): without

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