

## On the (re)presentation of topics in some Gur languages (Niger-Congo)

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This talk deals with topic occurrences – their encoding and interpretation – in some African tone languages of the Gur family (Buli, Konni, Dagbani, Gurene) where topicality represents a discreet but nonetheless important pragmatic notion also affecting the grammar of these languages. The fundamental role of sentence topics in the languages concerned with becomes most obvious in those cases where there is actually no topic at all. Suchthetic utterances (cf. Sasse 1987, 1995) display predicates with special morphosyntactic features. I am going to show that the same structural features are shared by several subordinate clause types which provide (presupposed) background information for the following predications and that they are also reminiscent of comitative and imperfective language structures. The subordinating/comitative/imperfective structural features of the predicate inthetic statements suggests some intersection between sentence topic and discourse organizational parameters, as the lack of the sentence topic is correlated with hypotactic and aspectual structures which are characteristic for background information in discourse (cf. Hopper 1979).

With respect to *aboutness* topics in the sense of Reinhart 1982, Lambrecht 1994, Dik 1997, Lambrecht and other authors assume (i) that the unmarked pragmatic sentence articulation has a topic-comment structure and (ii) that the constituent cross-linguistically “most readily identified with the pragmatic role of topic” is represented by the subject (1994: 131ff.). Both is also true for the Gur languages under investigation. Buli example (1) illustrates how the topic function is carried in an unmarked canonical SV(O) sentence by the nominal or by the pronominal subject.

### (1) Buli

nípōō-wá	ηðb	kà	túé.	ð	ηðb	kà	túé.
woman-DEF	eat	FM	bean.PL	CL:3s	eat	FM	bean.PL
‘[The woman] <sub>T</sub> ate beans.’				‘[She] <sub>T</sub> ate beans.’			
(reply on: ‘What did the woman eat?’)							

Whenever overtly expressed, arguments in agentive role always take over subject function in Gur languages, hence there are no passive constructions with demoted agents nor has there any passive morphology developed. With a minor subgroup of verbs, the complete suppression of the agent in favour of a subjectival theme is however allowed, resulting in the “intransitive-passive” use of verbs not undergoing any morphological change (cf. Reineke & Mieke 2005 for some Gur languages). Example (2) illustrates that Buli also has “flexible” verbs with respect to their valency which allow a topical theme to acquire subject function.

### (2) Buli

A:	būgsī	jígsá-ηá.
	pound	sheanut.PL-DEF
	‘Pound the sheanuts!’	
B:	jígsá-ηá	bùgsì-yā.
	sheanut.PL-DEF	be.pounded-ASS
	‘[The sheanuts] <sub>T</sub> have been pounded.’ (reply after having fulfilled the order)	

It will be shown that apart from the above cases, marked topic constructions do also exist in the languages under investigation. There are free, but rather uncommon marked topical subject variants, while non-subjectival topics as well as to contrastive subtypes of topics are commonly marked by several syntactic and/or morphological means.

Of major interest however are topicless sentence configurations. Although they have the same surface order SV(O) as categorical statements, special structural features indicate that the constitutive relation between subject and predicate inthetic statements is not identical with that in the former. In Buli for example (cf. 3), non-topical subject and verb need to be connected by a particle (*à*)*lē* which also occurs in several subordinated clause types and which differs from the comitative conjunction (*à*)*lè* ‘with, and’ only prosodically. Furthermore, verb forms in perfectivethetic statements display special tonal properties in sentence-final position compared with their categorical counterpart. Hence, the languages under consideration retain the linear SVO order of categorical sentences but inthetic utterances they display some kind of predicate demotion where other (tone) languages exhibit linear word order changes in form of subject-predicate inversion or where several intonational languages retreat to single subject accentuation (cf. Sasse 1995: 4, Lambrecht 1994: 137).

### (3) Buli

lóórá ñàyè lē nàgì chāāb.

car.PL CL.two PTL hit each.other

‘Two cars crashed into each other.’ (reply on: ‘What happened?’)

The special morphosyntactic encoding occurs with focal and at the same time non-topical subjects (subject focus, sentence focus), and is quasi-automatically employed with indefinite subjects. I am therefore going to argue that we deal with special morphosyntactic presentational structures that shall compensate for the lack of topic-suitable discourse referents in Buli and the other languages studied.

### References

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