

What is it about? The *topic* in some Ghanaian Gur grammars

This talk deals with the pragmatic notion *topic* and its encoding in Buli and some related Ghanaian Gur languages and reveals that it is responsible for several intricate phenomena in the grammar of these languages.

First, it will be explored in which way aboutness topics (in the sense of Reinhart 1982, Lambrecht 1994) are encoded on the sentence level. As known from several languages of the world, in the languages under discussion the sentence-initial position is obviously preferred for the topic role which can be expressed by the subject without any special marking (Lambrecht 1994: 131ff.). Nonetheless, the whole spectrum of encoding topics is much broader, and in Buli for example, it ranges from unexpressed zero-topics, via prosodic or morphological topic indications to topics heavily morphosyntactically marked – the choice being determined by factors like (a) whether the comment is carried out by a verbal predicate or not, (b) whether the topic is accessible, active or not, (c) whether the topic is contrasted with alternatives or not, (d) whether the topic has subject function or not, etc.

Second, an interesting dichotomy emerging among such more or less marked categorical statements (i.e. sentences with topic-comment structure) will be discussed: the comment of the disjoint construction, which is completely restricted to topical non-subjects, has special distinctive features and is the only comment that prohibits the occurrence of the focus marker. The same features apply to sequential clauses headed by the conjunction *tè* ‘and (then)’ in narratives which typically supply focal information and which seem to have served as model for the clausal comment of the disjoint topic construction.

Third, I will show that the absence of a topic-comment organization of the sentence is also reflected by a dedicated clause structure. Contrary to categorical statements, suchthetic statements have no internal information structure but are monomial predications where “the entire situation, including all of its participants, is asserted as a unitary whole” (Sasse 1995: 4f.). In Buli, for example, thethetic utterance is formed with the help of the connective particle *lē* and predicates following it display distinctive features including a ban on the focus marker.

Eventually, the investigation of topics in some Ghanaian Gur languages also corroborates the assumption that the topic-comment structuring, which is presumably based on asymmetric bimanual coordination, is an essential feature in human communication (Krifka 2007) and worthwhile all over the world to be clearly distinguished grammatically from other information structural configurations.

References

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