

The thetic/categorical distinction and its impact on nominal predication across Ghanaian languages

Talk or poster

This talk investigates the structural and semantic effects of the pragmatically unstructured thetic statement in several Ghanaian languages of Gur and Kwa affiliation. The major aim is to highlight the relevance of the thetic/categorical distinction in the grammar of these languages and to discuss differences in its expression from other (European) languages (see Wehr 1984, Ulrich 1988, Sasse 1987, 1995, 2006, Güldemann 1996). Particular attention is paid to the impact that the specific thetic sentence configuration has in the field of nominal predication.

First, it is shown that in several Ghanaian languages with basic SVO order the aboutness topic (Reinhart 1982) is typically represented by the subject that is in several environments required in each clause (1a). In some languages (1b), subjects maintaining their topical status across clause boundaries demand specific particles rather than the common pronominal forms. The more general features, however, largely correspond to the cross-linguistically common tendency of sentence topics to be correlated with the subject (Li and Thompson 1976, Lambrecht 1994, among others).

1a. *ɔ̃-tɔ̃ɔ̃ káà nà ɔ̃-kɔ̃ɔ̃-yé.*
 3S-buy:Past car CNJ 3S-go:Past-PTL
 ‘He bought a car and went.’ (Akan: categorical statement)

1b. ... *n=cáɣ tì sáhì ká !káná tì ɣmà.*
 1S=go CONS sharpen PTL come CONS cut
 ‘... I went and sharpened it and then I came and cut it.’ (Dagbani: categorical statement)

It will then be illustrated that the absence of the topic notion yields the pragmatically more marked thetic utterance in several Ghanaian. A sentence containing a subject without topical status is specifically encoded. In Dagbani, for instance, predicates following non-topical subjects in thetic utterances start with a nasal (2a), a particle that has received unsatisfying description so far (see Wilson 1972, Olawsky 1999: 60f.). In Lelemi, as another example, non-topical subjects trigger the misnamed “relative” verb form that distinguishes from the simple verb form by its prefix lacking the more common person-number-gender agreement with the subject (2b). I will show that in several Ghanaian languages the marking of thetic statements is achieved by modifying the predicate, i.e. the syntactic head is marked for not representing a comment on something.

2a. *yíli-!kúrílí n-lú !náhí tìɣà.* (not: **lu-la*)
 house-old N-fall hit ground
 ‘An old house collapsed.’ (Dagbani: thetic statement)

2b. *lɔ̃ɔ̃lì ínɔ̃ ná-sà.* (not: **lé-sà*)
 lorry:P two Past.REL-collide
 ‘Two lorries collided.’ (Lelemi: thetic statement)

With respect to nominal predication, I will indicate that the effects of such a head-marking strategy vary across the Ghanaian languages according to: (i) whether a copula verb or a zero copula is employed, and/or (ii) whether subject expressions are dispensable under certain circumstances. In some languages, for instance, pragmatic markers distinguishing categorical and thetic statements may become reanalysed as copulas (3a) and in others, rare sentence structures are derived, because non-topical subjects are not required with copula verbs (3b).

- 3a. **wà=kà** **bíík.**
 3S="COP" child
 'He is a child.' (Buli: categorical statement)
- 3b. **í=jè** **m=bá.**
 N=be 1S=father
 'Here is my father.' (Dagbani:thetic statement)

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