Prenominal *a* and aspects of nominal syntax across three Mabia/Gur languages

Georg F.K. Höhn (Georg-August-University Göttingen) & Alain N. Hien (Tohoku University)

This talk provides a comparative analysis of the syntax of the prenominal marker *a* occurring in three Mabia/Gur languages of Burkina Faso – Dagara (1a), Mooré (1b) and Koromfe (1c) – and its interaction with other parts of (higher) of nominal structure, such as possessors and demonstratives. The Dagara and Mooré data are largely new (introspection and elicitation), while the Koromfe data are based on Rennison (1997) and John Rennison (personal communication).

(1) a. **A** pʋale zɔ-rɔ na.   Dagara
        DET boy   run-IPFV DECL
        'The boy is running.'

    b. **A** Madou yiid-ame.   Mooré
        ART Madou   sing-DECL
        'Madou is singing.'

    c. **a** kɛ̃ɔ̃   Koromfe
        ART woman
   'a woman'   Rennison 1997:81

Aspects of the distribution of prenominal *a* in the three languages are summarised in Table 1 and will be illustrated in more detail in the talk.

	Dagara	Mooré	Koromfe
with common N	possible	no	required
with proper N	possible	required	no
discourse marking	yes	no	no
with possessors	yes	no	no
with demonstratives	yes	yes	yes

Table 1: Properties of prenominal **a**

We argue that prenominal *a* in Dagara realises the head of a head-initial DP with possessors and demonstratives occupying lower positions in the nominal spine (2).
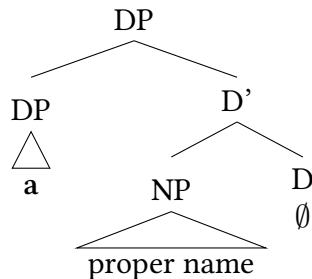
(2) Determiner in Dagara
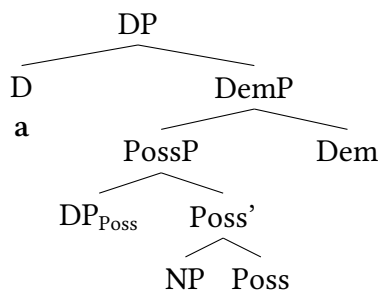
Mooré and Koromfe, on the other hand, display consistently head-final DPs and prenominal *a* is not a determiner in these languages.
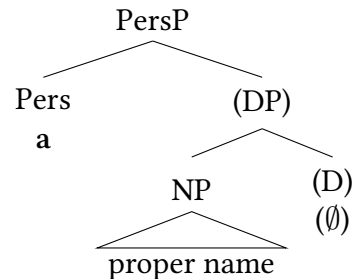
In Mooré, prenominal *a* only occurs with person names (cf. Musah 2018:82 on closely related Kusaal). Given its homonymy with the Mooré short third person pronoun, it may be an adnominal pronoun functioning as proprial article, occupying either a distinct (specifier) position (3a) instead of the language's normal postnominal determiner position or the head

position of a distinct, high person-related projection (3b). For common nouns we take a structure along the lines of (4) to be on the right track, although the exact attachment site of the prenominal possessors remains speculative.
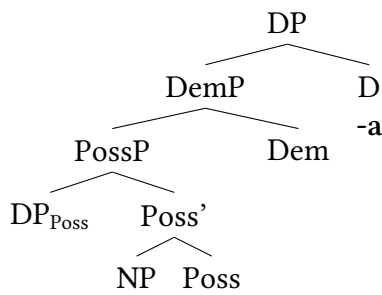
(3) a. Proprial article in Mooré (phrasal)

```
            DP
          /    \
        DP      D’
        /\     /  \
        a     NP    D
             /\     ∅
       proper name
```

b. Proprial article in Mooré (head)

```
          PersP
         /     \
       Pers    (DP)
        a      /   \
             NP    (D)
            /\     (∅)
       proper name
```

(4) Sketch of Mooré DP structure

```
              DP
            /    \
         DemP      D
         /   \     -a
      PossP   Dem
      /   \
  DP_Poss  Poss’
          /    \
        NP     Poss
```
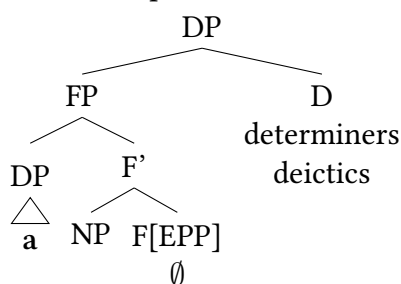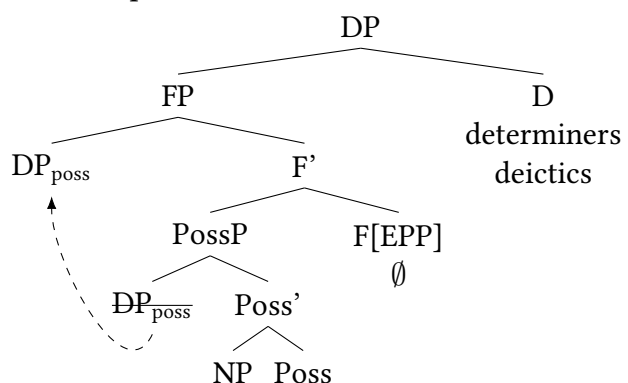
In Koromfe, prenominal *a* occurs with all common nouns in most contexts, while lacking a detectable meaning contribution (Rennison 1997:81). The marker is absent when there is a (pronominal or lexical) possessor in front of the possessed noun. We take Koromfé to have developed a formal requirement for a filled possessor position in the nominal domain, similar to the EPP in the sentential domain. Prenominal *a* acts as an expletive to fill this specifier position when there is no possessor, see (5). Overt possessors seem to be base-generated in a lower position and obligatorily move into a higher specifier position in most contexts (6).

(5) Nominal expletive in Koromfe

```
              DP
            /    \
          FP       D
         /  \    determiners
       DP    F’    deictics
       /\   /  \
       a  NP  F[EPP]
              ∅
```

(6) Sketch of possessed DP in Koromfe

```
                 DP
               /    \
             FP        D
           /    \    determiners
      DP_poss    F’    deictics
               /   \
           PossP   F[EPP]
           /   \     ∅
       DP_poss  Poss’
               /   \
             NP    Poss
```

If there remains enough time, we will provide some speculation as to how, in spite of these clear differences in their function and syntax, the prenominal **a** a markers in these languages may be related to a common, possibly pronominal source.

References

Musah, Anthony Agoswin (2018). *A Grammar of Kusaal. A Mabia (Gur) Language of Northern Ghana.* Berlin: Peter Lang.

Rennison, John R. (1997). *Koromfe.* London: Routledge.