A focus grammar of Aja

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1 Introduction

The present paper provides an overview of the formal means used to express the pragmatic category focus in Aja, a language spoken in Southern Benin and Togo by about 1.2 million people (Eberhard et al. 2023). Aja belongs to the Gbe continuum of the Kwa language group (Niger-Congo), and is one of the Gbe languages not very intensively explored so far (the only description is Tchitchi 1984).

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We understand information structure as the way in which information is organized in the utterance (cf. also the description as "information packaging" in Chafe 1976). Following Krifka (2007), it encompasses different notions, the most relevant ones being focus, topic and givenness. The category of Focus is taken here as that part of an utterance which gains special relevance against other parts of it (Dik 1997: 326).

Focus strategies were already well described for other Gbe languages. In his seminal paper on focus constructions in Ewe and Akan, Ameka (1992) analyses in detail different aspects of focus marking in both languages. He restricts, though, his presentation to cases of marked focus constructions. This leads Ermisch (2005: 112) to the conclusion that "there is no in situ or post verbal (argument) focus which leaves focus fronting to the left periphery as the only

option to express focus at all." A comparable observation was made by Aboh (1998) for Gun and Lefebvre and Brousseau (2002) for Fɔn. On the basis of different texts, as narratives, descriptions and interviews, Fiedler (1998) gave a first overview on focus constructions in Aja, but again, only demonstrating marked strategies. In this paper, we will present new results concerning focus strategies in Aja, based on data of the Hwe dialect of Aja, elicited with the Questionnaire on Information Structure (Skopeteas et al. 2006) during field research between 2004 and 2007. Data were gathered with the help of one main language consultant who also assisted in transcribing, glossing and translating them.[1]

The paper is structured as follows: First, the different strategies of focusing in Aja will be presented starting from structural considerations: (i) no special marking, (ii) syntactic, and (iii) morphological devices. This presentation is followed by a conclusion, summarizing the findings from the function-to-form perspective.

2 Focus strategies in Aja

There are different formal means to express focus on an element of an utterance. We find purely morphological marking and/or syntactic marking, as already described for other Gbe languages. As far as we know no phonological marking alone is used as a focusing device, but is attested to support the syntactic marking (cf. Fiedler and Jannedy (2013) for the closely related language Ewe). However, it turns out that formal marking is not obligatory at all.

2.1 Unmarked foci

This kind of focus realization is characterised by the canonical sentence structure S-AUX-V-O without any morphological marking, and, as far as we can say, no special prosody. This structure is typical for sentences which represent the categorical type of judgement. By definition, categorical statements display an internal topic-comment structure as opposed to thetic utterances without any internal information structuring (Sasse 1987). In categorical statements in SVO languages, the postverbal position, i.e. a position within the comment, represents the default focus position.

Focus on non-subjects is most naturally expressed without any formal marking, as a non-subject in basic order already occupies the default postverbal fo-

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cus position. Simple information questions are therefore mostly answered in this way, (1-b) and (2)[2], even though the question itself has to show a marked structure, as in (1-a), exemplifying the question-answer-asymmetry of the language.

(1) a. nyì yí àvù ɔ́ ɖó dó kɔ̀ mɛ́ ɔ̀?
         what FM dog DEF have be.LOC neck in Q
         'WHAT does the dog have around his neck?'
     b. àvù lɔ́ ɖó èkā ɖèká dó kɔ̀ mɛ̀.
         dog DEF have rope one   be.LOC neck in
         'The dog has A ROPE around his neck.'

(2) a. What did they carry?
     b. wó hɛ̀n àcí.
         3PL carry tree
         'They have carried A TREE.'

In the case of wide focus, i.e. focus on the verb phrase or the whole sentence, the focus remains often unmarked as well. Sentence focus is typically triggered in the following two contexts: event-reporting sentences (3) and presentational sentences (4) (cf. Lambrecht 1994: 307). Because of the lack of an argument that could act as topic in such statements, these sentences represent thetic statements without internal structuring into topic and comment. As can be seen, this strategy is applied to utterances with intransitive (4) as well as transitive verbs (3). This is in contrast to previous assumptions suggesting that "sentences with non-topical subjects strongly tend to be intransitive" (cf. Lambrecht 1994: 170).

(3) a. Why is she angry?
     b. àsú ɔ́ nū àhà mù.
         husband DEF drink alcohol get.drunk
         'HER HUSBAND IS DRUNK.'

(4) a. What is going on in this scene?
     b. ŋsú ɖèká lē nyìnɔ́nɔ́ …
         man one   be.LOC ground.rest
         'THERE IS A MAN SITTING (and making a pause).'

The zero marking strategy can also be used for predicate-centered focus. This embraces incidences of state-of-affairs (focus on the lexical meaning of

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[2]The following abbreviations are used: AFF – affirmative particle, CNJ – conjunction, DEF – definiteness, FM – focus marker, FUT – future, HAB – habitualis, LOC – locative, NEG – negation, Q – question marker, PL – plural, PROG – progressive, PRT – particle, RED – reduplication, SG – singular.

the verb, (5)) as well as occurrences of verbal operators targeting the tense, aspect and mood value of the predicate (6) or the polarity value (truth value focus, (7)) (cf. Güldemann 2009). Example (5) represents the answer to a yes/no-question about which of two possible actions, both expressed by serial verb constructions, the agent is doing. The actions are expressed by a verb 'to take' plus a second verb expressing the goal or the source of movement what is here pragmatically in focus.

(5)   a.   Is he bringing or sending the table?
      b.   á   sɔ́è   dádá.
           3SG.FUT take.3SG go.away
           'He is SENDING it.'

Example (6) is an instance of focus on the aspect/tense operator of the verbal action, indicating that the action involved is not yet fulfilled but will be done in the near future. Instances of truth value focus, example (7), are not necessarily marked in Aja either.

(6)   a.   The woman has hit Kofi.
      b.   óò, nyɔ́nù lɔ́ á   xóì
           no, woman DEF FUT hit.3SG
           'No, she WILL hit him.'

(7)   a.   When they finish the meeting, are all of the three people looking at their own watches?
      b.   ńǹ, wó kó tòn lɔ́ kpɔ́ gàmè.
           yes, 3PL all three DEF look watch.in
           'Yes, ALL THREE HAVE LOOKED AT THEIR WATCH.'

2.2 Syntactically marked focus

Syntactically marked focus in Aja involves the fronting of the focused element to sentence-initial position. Optionally, the focus marker *yí* can be attached to the focused element, although no additional semantic effects can be traced back. Even though this strategy received much attention in the literature on Gbe languages, focus movement is in no way preferred over other strategies of focus marking.

Non-subject focus is most often coded by the zero strategy, as demonstrated in 2.1. But it is also feasible to front the focused object, optionally followed by the focus marker *yí* and without resumption at its base position. This is often done in case of correction, like in (8), but also as answer to an alternative question, expressing an overt contrast between the two mentioned alternatives. But even as an answer to an information question, without much pressure from the

discourse-context, this structure is found. Adverbial and prepositional phrases might also be fronted for the purpose of focus, a strategy not available for the latter in Ewe (cf. Ameka 1992: 9f).

(8)   a.   Did Maria buy a motorcycle?
      b.   óò, kéké   yí màríà xwlè.
           no, bicycle FM Maria buy
           'No, Maria bought A BICYCLE.'

To express focus on the verb or on some verbal operator, Aja disposes about two different syntactic strategies. In the first one, the verb itself is fronted and in the second, it is the object of the verb which takes sentence-initial position. This structure is restricted to verbs with affected and inherent objects only.

    When the verb is fronted, it leaves a copy in its canonical position. In Gbe languages, it is not possible to have a do-support instead, as for instance in Hausa. As was the case with non-subject focus, the pragmatic conditions which demand the use of this strategy cannot be clearly determined. It is applied in case of information focus and of correction, be it the lexical meaning of the verb (9) or a verbal operator (9) which is touched. The only object allowed to pied-pipe the fronted verb is the pronominal 3rd person singular object, when it refers to animate referents, as exemplified in (9) and (10), even though pragmatically only the verb or the verbal operator is in focus. With inanimate referents, however, this structure is ruled out.

(9)   a.   The woman has hit Peter.
      b.   yɔ̀ɛ̀   yí é yɔ̀ɛ̀.
           call.3SG FM 3SG call.3SG
           '(She did not hit him,) she CALLED him.'

(10)   a.   The woman has hit Peter.
       b.   óò, xóì   á   xóì.
            no, hit.3SG 3SG.FUT hit.3SG
            'No, she WILL hit him.'

Concerning the categorical status of the fronted element, i.e. if it has to be analyzed as nominal or verbal, there was some discussion in the literature concerning different Gbe languages. For Fɔn, Ndayiragije (1993b: 180) argues for its verbal status because the copy does not show any sign of nominal morphology and is identical to the verb. Lefebvre and Brousseau (2002: 504ff), on the other hand, disagree and favour the nominal analysis. Aboh (2006: 24) describes the fronted verb in Gun as a bare non-finite form, which "is by no means a nominalised verb.". This is the case in Aja, too. The verb appears in its bare form identical to the form in the sentence, without any accompanying

tense and aspect markers, and is not allowed to be determined, contrary to Fɔn. If the verb is bisyllabic, the same observation as for Fɔn holds true, i.e. only the first part or an exact copy of the verb appears sentence-initially (Fiedler 2012). Whether this can really be seen as nominal morphology is questionable, as reduplication, and not reduction, is a means for nominalisation.

In some environments in Aja it is not possible to front the verb in order to focus its lexical meaning. Rather, only the object is fronted and marked with the focus marker. This is the case in figura etymologica, as in (11) and when the lexical meaning of verbs with affected or inherent object is focussed. Example (12) presents such a verb, here 'to drink', with affected object. For focusing the verb phrase, it is possible to front only the verb or to front the object 'water'. The latter construction results in an ambiguity between two readings: first, only the object is to be interpreted as pragmatically focused, thus contrasting water with other drinkable liquids, or second, the whole verb phrase is focused, contrasting the 'drinking of water' with 'eating sth.'.

(11)   a.   Did he win or lose the game?
        b.   èjí yí é   ɖù.
              top FM 3SG eat
              'He WON.'

(12)   a.   They ate the beans.
        b.   èshí yí wó nù.
              water FM 3PL drink
              '(They did not eat the beans, but) they DRANK WATER.'

2.3 Morphological marking

Both focus marking strategies presented so far can be combined with different kinds of morphological markers that show some kind of complementary distribution: The "pure" focus marker *yí* can attach to all types of constituents in the clause provided they are placed clause-initially. Placing it after an object constituent in its canonical sentence position renders the sentence ungrammatical. Besides the focus marker *yí*, Aja possesses other particles which are used to strengthen the affirmation and which are placed in sentence-final position. Some of them can be related to former demonstrative elements, like *nὲ*, for others, like *á*, no relation to another part of the utterance can be drawn.

At first glance, focus on the subject seems to be expressed by morphological means only. The focus marker *yí* is obligatorily inserted directly after the subject phrase in a sentence with canonical word order (13). Furthermore, there is no pronominal resumption of the subject.

(13)   a.   In investigating the person who stole a watch

           b.   nyɔ́nùví lɔ́ yí fì   wɛ́cì lɔ́.
                    girl   DEF FM steal watch DEF
                    'The GIRL has stolen the watch.'

Whether subject focus constructions in Aja reflect pure morphological marking or a special syntactic configuration is treated differently for other Gbe languages. Ameka (1992: 8) analyses all focus constructions in Ewe as involving fronting, but not as clefts. Aboh (1998) for Gun and Ndayiragije (1993a,b) for Fɔn both favour an analysis according to which the focussed element (including the subject) is moved to the left of the respective focus marker (cf. Aboh 1998: 10ff). Schwarz and Fiedler (2007) come to another conclusion for Ewe, due to the difference between subject and non-subject focus, and assume that subject focus cannot be analysed as extra-clausal in that language. For Aja, there are prosodic hints favouring the hypothesis that the subject focus strategy in Aja is purely morphological, but this is still an open question.

The same construction as just described, i.e. marking the subject with the focus marker *yí*, can be employed for event-reporting utterances, as in (14), but is not attested for identificational sentences or scene-setting devices. This isomorphism between subject focus and sentence focus was already described for a number of West African languages (Fiedler et al. 2010). In both cases, the subject fails to represent the topic of the utterance, i.e. the sentence represents a thetic judgment.

(14)   a.   After having watched a film: What happened?

           b.   kɔkpū yí júìn só   jì yí gbán nɔ́ ŋ.
                    glass FM fall come top CNJ break for 1SG
                    'THE GLASS IS BROKEN FOR ME.'

Predicate-centered focus of different kinds can also be expressed morphologically, besides zero-marking or fronting. Either the particle *yɔ* for focus on the lexical meaning of the verb (15), and tense-aspect-mood operator focus (16), or affirmative particles for truth value focus (17), are employed in sentence-final position. Even though these particles mark the whole utterance, their scope is only on part of the predication. In these contexts, the use of the focus marker is not allowed, rendering the sentence ungrammatical, which contrasts with other Gbe languages like Fɔn.

(15)   a.   Did he win or lose the game?

           b.   é   ɖù jī yɔ́.
                    3SG eat top PRT
                    'HE WON.'

(16)   a.   The woman has hit Peter.
        b.   óò, á   xóì   yɔ́.
            no, 3SG.FUT hit.3SG PRT
            'No, she WILL HIT him.'

(17)   a.   He limped (, didn't he)?
        b.   ɛ́ɛ̀n, é   tɔ́n   bú   nɛ̀ / là.
            yes, 3SG limp limping AFF
            'Yes, HE DID LIMP.'

Even though the use of the argument focus marker is not tolerated in Aja in sentence-final position, as in Fɔn, there is a phonetic similarity between both, focus marker *yí* and particle *yɔ*, which was already observed by Tchitchi (1984). In elliptical focus utterances, which reduce the answer to the missed information only, *yí* is also not possible. Either the focussed element constitutes the only part of the sentence or it is followed by *yɔ*, giving the structure as displayed by (18-b). As illustrated in (19), the same structure is found in monadic nominal utterances.

(18)   a.   In investigating the person who stole a watch
        b.   ŋsū lɔ́   yɔ́/*yí.
            man DEF PRT
            'It was the MAN.'

(19)   a.   What's that?
        b.   wèmá yɔ́/*yí.
            book PRT
            'It's a book.'

The affirmative particle *nɛ̀* in example (18) as well as the particle *ké* which is not exemplified here, are grammaticalised out of demonstratives. The first one goes back to a long distance demonstrative which is still in use as such in Fɔn but not in Aja, and the second one to a short distance demonstrative. In their use as affirmative particles this deictic value is not reflected anymore (cf. Fiedler 1998 for a more detailed description of these particles). Concerning the other particle present in example (18), *là*, no grammaticalisation path can proposed for the moment.

     Phrases being in the scope of focus-sensitive particles like 'even' and 'only' present another kind of morphological focus marking. This is best exemplified for the additive particle 'also' with its Aja correspondences *cán* and *hɛ̀nnɛ̀*, (20)–(21) as well as for the restrictive particle 'only'. The two equivalents of 'also' in Aja are in complementary distribution with respect to their positional realization in the sentence. Whereas *cán* is restricted to sentence-initial constituents (20), *hɛ̀nnɛ̀* can be found in all other environments (21) and in

combination with the former.

(20) a. The woman ate the beans.
      b. nyɔ́nùví lɔ́   cán hὲnnὲ ɖū àyú.
          girl   DEF also also eat bean
          'THE GIRL ate the beans, too.'

(21) a. The woman ate the oranges.
      b. é   ɖū àyú-wó hὲnnὲ.
          3SG eat bean-PL also
          'She ate THE BEANS too.'

Restrictive focus can also be expressed by more than one morpheme. Arguments in sentence-initial position (subject, objet, verb copy) are marked by *ɖèkɛ*□ and can be followed by the focus marker *yí*, cf. example (22) for focus on the subject.

(22) a. The girl and the woman bought the beans.
      b. óò, nyɔ́nùví lɔ́   ɖēkɛ́ yí xwlè ayú-wó.
          no, girl   DEF only FM buy bean-PL
          'No, only THE GIRL bought the beans.'

When the verb or another sentence-final element (e.g. the object) is affected, the meaning of restriction is expressed by another particle, *kpóŋ*, see example (23).

(23) a. The woman pushed and hit Peter.
      b. óò, é cúìcúì   dàdá   kpóŋ.
          no, 3SG push.3SG.RED go.away only
          'No, he only PUSHED him.'

It becomes clear that *cán* 'also' and *ɖèkɛ*□ 'only' are subject to the same restriction in the clause, namely to attach to the sentence-initial element only. However, they behave differently with respect to the combination with the additional focus marker *yí*. Only the sentence-initial noun followed by the restrictive particle is allowed to be further marked with the focus marker. A similar observation was made by Hartmann and Zimmermann (2007: 252) for Hausa who therefore conclude that the assumed focus marker *nee/cee* should be better analysed as an exhaustivity marker.

3 Summary

The above analysis revealed that the formal realization of focus in Aja involves a number of different strategies, which, next to morphological and syntactic

types of marking, may even involve no formal marking at all. However, no principles governing the choice of one strategy over the others can be detected from the previous analysis. Nearly each formal focusing device can be used to focus on each part of the sentence, and focusing of nearly each part of the sentence occurs with each construction. A prominent exception to this generalisation is provided in cases of subject focus. Aja only allows to focus the subject of a sentence by marking it with the focus marker in its canonical position. We find therefore a strong asymmetry between focusing of subjects and non-subjects, in that the language has at its disposal only one focus strategy to focus subjects, but three different strategies, i.e. the zero, the morphological and the syntactic strategy, to focus non-subjects. The most naturally used strategy is the one involving the default topic-comment structure. It seems to be a question of cost-benefit calculation whether the remaining strategies are used.

Because of the ability to use the same construction to express focus on different sentence parts, we find in the language cases of formal ambiguity, above all in case of the canonical sentence structure without any further markings. First, this structure represents categorical as well as thetic statements. Second, in categorical statements, the default focus position is identical to the object position, the object therefore being in focus by default. And third, predicate-centered focus has also not to be marked. This ambiguity is not surprising, and can be found in many languages.

Another ambiguity is that between focus on subjects and sentence focus, both expressed by adding the focus marker to the subject. As this marking serves to indicate that the subject does not fulfill its prototypical topic function, this structure can be applied in both cases, only the context resolving the ambiguity. This again is not unique for Aja or Gbe as a whole, as shown in Fiedler et al. (2010).

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