

# Focus Expressions in Yom

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Some preliminary remarks

This paper deals with the means for expressing the pragmatic category of focus in Yom, an Oti-Volta language of the Yom-Nawdem group spoken by around 74.000 people (Gordon 2005, online version) in the department of Donga in Northern Benin. It is based on results of my field research carried out in March/April 2005 in Djougou / Benin<sup>1</sup> within the scope of the project “Focus in Gur and Kwa languages”<sup>2</sup>. Main aim of this field work was the study of the expression of focus in Yom; regarding the basic grammatical structure of the language, I mainly rely on different publications of Beacham (cf. bibliographic notes).

The data I will present here were explored using different methods developed together within our SFB 632, especially by project D2 “Typology of Information Structure” (cf. Skopeteas et al., to appear): the major part was elicited with the help of a focus translation task which collects data concerning different focus types (following Dik 1997) by translating sentence pairs whereby the stimulating sentence is given completely and the respective answer / reaction is only presented as key word. A minor part was elicited with materials like pictures and movies as stimulus, creating an atmosphere of “interactive games”. The data were accomplished by some special questionnaires prepared in the field.

The point of departure of my analysis of focus expressions in Yom is a functional rather than a purely morphosyntactic one. I understand focus as pragmatic category which denotes “that information which is relatively the most important or salient in the given communicative setting, and considered by S to be most essential for A to integrate into his pragmatic information.” (Dik 1997: 326). As far as subcategories of focus, like new-information focus and contrastive focus (with their subtypes) are concerned, it seems that they are not definitely related to a special morphosyntactic strategy. In describing the linguistic characteristics of the different focus expressions, I therefore always give the context to make the functional domain of the expression given clear.

The paper is structured as follows: I will first exhibit relevant data of Yom which are presented according to the scope of focus, i.e. term focus, verb focus and sentence focus. I will investigate how the Yom data fit with some statements and observations found within our project concerning the marking of focus in Gur and will argue that most of them are also valid for Yom.

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<sup>2</sup> This project is part of the Collaborative Research Centre (SFB) 632 “Information structure: The linguistic means for structuring utterances, sentences and texts” financed by the German Research Foundation which has made this field research and therefore these insights into Yom possible.

Finally, I will briefly compare the results of the analysis on Yom with those on other Gur languages.

## 2 The data

### 2.1 The unmarked sentence structure

Before I come to the different focus constructions in Yom, let me briefly describe the structure of the canonical sentence. It is characterised by an SVO structure, as shown in examples (1a) and (1b) which display the subject in its pronominal form. In the case of a nominal subject, there is no pronominal marker allowed.

(1a) à b̀̀t́́ś́ sáayà.  
 CL retourner.PF maison  
*He went home.*

(1b) à b̀̀t́́ś́-rá.<sup>3</sup>  
 CL retourner.PF-PRT\_1  
*He went back. (Beacham 1991: 43)*

As we can see from the examples, Yom displays two different inflectional verb forms depending on the syntactic structure of the sentence. If something follows the verb (object, adverbial or other) as in (1a), the verb occurs in its short form which varies in segmental as well as tonal structure according to mood, aspect and polarity. If nothing follows, then the verb is used plus an additional suffix, which is called “completion particle” by Beacham (cf. Beacham 1991: 46f.). It is named as such because of its occurrence in clause-final position, i.e. if nothing follows the verb. Beacham therefore regards it “as completing the phrase” (Beacham 1991: 46). The form of the “completion particle” differs slightly according to the aspect and to the verb class<sup>4</sup>. It is excluded from subjunctive mood, negative and some subordinate sentences.

This feature of displaying two inflectional verb forms in the affirmative resembles strongly the one found in Bantu languages: for several Bantu languages (cf. for instance Doke 1992 (in Güldemann 2003), Meeussen 1959 for Rundi, Creissels 1996 for Setswana and Güldemann 2003, who gives an overview over this phenomenon), an opposition of two conjugational verb forms is reported which show more or less the same morphosyntactic properties like those just described for Yom. They are either called conjunct vs. disjunct (Meeussen, Creissels), short vs. long (Doke) or formally marked vs. formally unmarked (Güldemann 2003). None of these namings is convincing as it is the name “completion particle”; but meanwhile, in seeking for another term, I will maintain the label “completion particle”.

But the story doesn’t end with the similar morphosyntactic behaviour these forms display in the Bantu languages cited above. As Güldemann clearly points out, the use of the forms depends in fact on pragmatic reasons: “the formally unmarked verb [=short; IF] occurs in main clauses with assertive focus on a postverbal non-subject term like a verbal complement or an adjunct; the formally marked verb [=long; IF] marks focus on a predicate component like a predication

<sup>3</sup> The tone marking is as follows: high tone (´), and low tone (˘). The downstep following some high tones is marked by (˘).

<sup>4</sup> It is *-wa* in perfective and imperfective aspect for all verbs which do not have a suffix in the subjunctive mood (so-called root verbs), but *-ra* (with *-la* and *-na* as allomorphs) in perfective and *-wa* in imperfective aspect for all other verbs.

operator and possibly also the lexical meaning of the verb.” (2003: 330) Whether the use of these forms in Yom depends in the same manner on pragmatic reasons, or whether their choice is more grammatically controlled, is a matter of future research.

## 2.2 Term focus

### 2.2.1 Subject focus

As it is reported for many African languages, in Yom, too, subject focus can only be coded by a marked focus construction, which can probably be analysed as syntactically *ex-situ*, cf. example (2a) as an instance of an interrogative and (2b) as instance of a declarative sentence. As can be seen from these examples compared to (1b), there are three differences to the focus unmarked sentence structure:

1. The subject is, obligatorily, additionally marked by FM *-rà*<sup>5</sup>.
2. After subject NP + FM *-rà*<sup>6</sup>, a coreferent anaphoric pronoun has to be used.
3. The out-of-focus-part shows a special tonal pattern which is not identical with that found in focus unmarked sentences, but with that in relative clauses (cf. 3.4) and which can superficially be characterised by a throughout high tone <sup>7</sup>.

question: question word marked by FM

(2a) **Wé-rá 'á bótá kááwô?**  
qui-FM CL retourner.PF derrière?  
*QUI est arrivé en retard?*

answer to the question = subject focus

(2b) **Dóó céé-rá 'á bótá kááwô.**  
homme DEM-FM CL retourner.PF derrière  
*C'est L'HOMME LÀ qui a été en retard.*

It seems that two constraints have an effect on the employment of this construction. Firstly, according to my data, it can only be used with a nominal subject. Secondly, the mood of the verb seems to have an influence. If the event will take place in the future, i.e. the potential verb form appears, no focus marking of the subject and also no focus marking of the whole sentence is possible. This is probably due to the fact that subjunctive mood is often treated (cf. for instance Hyman & Watters 1984) as intrinsic focus form and can be related to the fact that for this mood we only find one conjugational form.

As described above, in the canonical sentence we always find the “completion particle” if nothing follows the verb. In case the subject is focused in an intransitive sentence, i.e. if nothing follows the verb, there is also a particle suffixed to the verb. But as the examples (3b) and (3d) show, in SF constructions the particle taken must always be *-rá*, even if in the non-focused

<sup>5</sup> There is a striking homonymy between the “completion particle” of a subgroup of verbs in the perfective and the focus marker.

<sup>6</sup> FM seems to have lexical low tone, but being between adjacent non-L tones, it's surface melody changes to H with following downstep (cf. Beacham 1991: 13)

<sup>7</sup> The verb bears its basic tone (as in the potential, i.e. High, for some verbs with following downstep) and any verbal particle as well as the anaphoric pronoun are also high

sentence in the progressive (3a) another particle, namely *-wá*, appears. Beacham follows from this fact that the particle found under the condition of subject (or object, see 2.2.2) focus is different to the “completion particle” (here glossed as PRT\_1) (1991: 95), so that I will call - for the purpose of a better understanding - the former “out-of-focus particle” (glossed as PRT\_2).<sup>8</sup>

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <p>(3a) <b>à mèná-wá.</b><br/>CL faire.PROG-PRT_1<br/><i>He is doing (it).</i></p> | <p>(3b) <b>wèrà á mèná-rá.</b><br/>3sg.emph.FM CL faire.PROG-PRT_2<br/><i>It's HE who is doing (it).</i></p>  |
| <p>(3c) <b>à mèná-rá.</b><br/>CL faire.PF-PRT_1<br/><i>He did (it).</i></p>        | <p>(3d) <b>wèrà á mèná-rá.</b><br/>3sg.emph.FM CL faire.PF-PRT_2<br/><i>It's HE who did (it).</i><br/><i>(all examples from Beacham 1991: 95)</i></p> |

### 2.2.2 Non-Subject focus

I restrict myself here to examples for object focus, but most of the features that I will mention hold true in the same way for adjuncts.

We find *in-situ* and *ex-situ* constructions for the expression of object focus. The *in-situ* construction shows no morphological, and, to the best of my knowledge, no phonological marking. The construction is hence structurally identical with a canonical sentence (4b). Thus, it follows the general, universal constraint that known information comes first, and new information at the end of the sentence (cf. Gundel 1988), the object therefore already holding the unmarked focus position in the sentence.

If the object is focused in an *ex-situ* construction, i.e. it is realised at the beginning of the sentence, opposite to SF, there is no resumptive pronoun in its canonical position. Additionally, the “out-of-focus particle” *-rá* (here again, the form of the particle is not identical to the “completion particle”) is suffixed to the verb showing that nothing follows. The out-of-focus part illustrates the canonical tone paradigm (see (4c) and (4d), which only differs in the form of the object NP), i.e. there is no tone change as we could observe in SF.

*ex-situ* question: FM suffixed to the preposed question word

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <p>(4a) <b>bé-rá 'póyá jí-lá.</b><sup>9</sup><br/>que-FM woman manger.PF-PRT_2<br/><i>QU'a mangé la femme?</i></p> | <p><b>* jí-r-wá</b><br/>manger.PF-PRT_1</p> |
|--|---|

*in-situ* answer: no focus marking

- (4b) **à jí tú-bèèràà.**  
CL manger.PF haricot-non\_mûr  
*Elle a mangé DES HARICOTS NON-MURS.*

<sup>8</sup> Probably there is a relation to the observation of Beacham that in constructions beginning with the particle /lè/ “and then”, the completion clitic is always /-la/, even for “Potential” aspect forms, which do not otherwise appear with a completion clitic.” (Beacham 1991: 47)

<sup>9</sup> Here, the particle *-rá* is used in his allomorphic form *-lá* which can always be found in the context of a verb ending on *-r* (here announcing the perfective aspect of the verb).

*ex-situ* answer: preposed object marked with FM

(4c) **tú-bèeráa-rá à jíl-lá.**

haricot-non\_mûr-FM CL manger.PF-PRT\_2

*Ce sont DES HARICOTS NON- MÛRS qu'elle a mangés.*

*ex-situ* answer: preposed object (with relative clause) marked with FM

(4d) **túrá [á wá bír nè] -ù-rá à jíl-lá.<sup>10</sup>**

haricot [CL NEG être\_mûr SUB]-SUM-FM CL manger.PF-PRT\_2

*Ce sont DES HARICOTS QUI NE SONT PAS MURS, qu'elle a mangés.*

For the question in (4a), which is the only way to ask for an object, the *in-situ* as well as the *ex-situ* strategy are possible in the answer but the exact constraints for the choice are not yet clear.

### 2.3 Focus on the Predicate

The verb or the whole verb phrase can be focused in two different ways, namely *in-situ* and *ex-situ*. If it is focused in an *ex-situ* construction the verb at the beginning of the sentence has to be nominalised whereas a copy of the verb holds its canonical position (5c). The eventual object is then linked to the verb by an associative construction. In the context in (5a), i.e. as reaction to a statement, this construction is very rarely used. My informants accepted it as Yom sentence, but at the same time they stated it doesn't sound natural.

It is much more common to answer a wh-question for the verb phrase with an *in-situ* construction. In this case, FM *-rà* always occurs at the end of the transitive clause, i.e. after the object, never directly after the verb in focus (5b). In sentences with an intransitive verb or when the object of the transitive verb is not spelled out, the same holds true, i.e. something must intervene between verb and FM. This is either the “completion particle” in the indicative mood (6b), or, in the subjunctive mood, the so-called “syntactic unit marker” or, as in (7b), the out-of-focus particle *-rá* combined with the “syntactic unit marker”.

statement: not focus marked

(5a) **póyá 'gbór Wóru.**

femme taper.PF Woru

*La femme a tapé Woru.*

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<sup>10</sup> Sometimes, there is an additionally morpheme *-U-* inserted between noun and FM as in (5b): according to Beacham (1991: 195), it has the function of a “syntactic unit marker”. (1991: 97) It is added to those singular nouns belonging to the person class which have zero suffixes (like proper names); adverbs, numerals, particles and verbs are treated in this respect as person class nouns with zero suffix. Therefore, it does not seem by chance be formally identical to the anaphoric object pronoun referring to nouns of the person singular class. Beacham further comments on that particle: “The /-u/ is a marker to indicate that the preceding construction is considered a single unit to which the morpheme /-rà/ “it is” (the “identifier” or “emphasis” element [=FM; IF]) is added. [...] That is, it marks the grammatical break, separating the /-rà/ from what precedes it, yet at the same time linking it to the preceding construction, marking it as a single unit. Grammatically, this parallels the phrases consisting of Noun-plus-/rà/.” (1991: 51)

reaction : FM at the end of the sentence

- (5b) **áá'wó, à yír ù-rà.**  
 non CL appeler.PF CL-FM  
*Non, elle l'a APPELÉE.*

reaction : nominalized verb + FM

- (5c) **áá'wó, yíráná-rá à yír ù.**  
 Non appeler.INF-FM CL appeler.PF CL  
*Non, c'est l'APPELER qu'elle a fait.*

yes-no-question: no focus marking

- (6a) **dér 'ká bàmám ká jíjí.**  
 aller.PF CNJ nager.SER CNJ manger.SER-Q  
*Es-tu allé nager et manger?*

answer: focus marking on the first verb

- (6b) **áá'wó, mà de'wá-rá ká bàmám.**  
 non 1sg aller.PF-PRT\_1-FM CNJ nager.SER  
*Non, je suis seulement ALLÉ NAGER.*

statement: no focus marking, but long verb form

- (7a) **póyá kòllé-rá.**  
 femme parler.PF-PRT\_1  
*La femme a parlé.*

answer: FM following the correcting answer

- (7b) **áá'wó, à yíl-lá-ù-rà.**  
 non CL appeler.PF-PRT\_2-SUM-FM  
*Non, elle a APPELLÉ.*

(8b) and (8c) are examples for predication focus, the focus lying on the auxiliary. The structure is the same as for verb focus, i.e. there is either no overt marking (8b) or marking of the verb by FM (8c), the scope of the focus being only apparent in regarding the context. Which conditions determine the use of one of these two forms is a question of future research.

question: no focus marking

- (8a) **à jí'wá-á, kèé á nà jí.**  
 CL manger.PF-PRT\_1-Q or CL FUT manger  
*A-t-il mangé ou va-t-il manger?*

answer: no focus marking

- (8b) **á nà jí.**  
 CL FUT manger  
*Il VA manger.*

answer: FM after verb + SUM

- (8c) **á nà jí-ù-rà.**  
 CL FUT manger-SUM-FM  
*Il VA manger.*

The first part of (9) can be seen as focussing on the truth value of the whole proposition. Here, the verb is not followed by the out-of-focus particle *-rá* but rather by the “completion particle”. This is also the case in the second part of the answer, which asserts expanding focus. In (10), on

the other hand, we have selecting focus, marked on the NP by FM, which goes together with a marking on the verb using the out-of-focus particle *-rá*.

context: Nyoo a-t-elle acheté une motocyclette?

(9) **íńń, à dárwá, Bó'ná tó 'dárwá.**

oui CL acheter.PF-PRT\_1 Bona aussi acheter.PF-PRT\_1

*Oui, ELLE A ACHETE, mais BONA AUSSI a acheté (une motocyclette).*

context: Bona et Nyoo ont-elles acheté une motocyclette?

(10) **áá'wó, Nyóó séné-rá 'á dál-lá.**

non Nyo seule-FM CL acheter.PF-PRT\_2

*Non, SEULE NYOO a acheté une motocyclette.*

## 2.4 Sentence Focus

There exist two expressions to denote sentence focus.

Generally, the same construction as for subject focus is applied to mark focus on the whole sentence. This is exemplified in (11) as answer to a question “What happened?” The two constraints already mentioned for subject focus (nominal subject requirement, no focus marking in subjunctive mood) are valid in the context of sentence focus, too.

answer to the question : Qu'arrive-t-il?: subject is focus marked by FM

(11) **dáfársé-rá sè péer dâr.**

garçon-FM CL sculpter.PF bois

*LES GARÇONS SONT EN TRAIN DE SCULPTER DU BOIS.*

This construction can also serve to introduce a protagonist or some important element on the stage. This is shown by (12) which is the first sentence of a short narration.

stage-setting: all-new: subject is focus marked by FM

(12) **sámóyá àn kúsámóyá-rá bá zél-lá.**

cheval et vélo-FM CL se\_tenir\_debout.PF-PRT\_2

*C'EST UN CHEVAL ET UN VELO QUI SONT DEBOUT.*

The second strategy to mark sentence focus is to mark the whole sentence with FM *-rà* at its end (13). This seems to be only an escape in the case of impersonal pronominal clitic subjects which can not be in focus and therefore the predicate must be marked for focus<sup>11</sup>. On the other hand, it has to point out that this construction can never be understood as NSF focus construction by my informants.

answer to the question : Qu'est-il arrivé hier ?: FM at the end of the sentence

(13) **bà gbúr mà dós béyá-rà .**

CL frapper.PF 1sg.poss ami enfant-FM

*ILS ONT BATTU L'ENFANT DE MON AMIE.*

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<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, I don't have any examples of 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> person subject pronouns in an answer to the question “What happened?”

### 3 Analysis

From the research work done during the last two years within our project on focus expressions in Gur and Kwa, four hypotheses could be worked out as valid for focus phenomena in our sample of Gur languages of the Oti-Volta branch, such as Buli, Konni, Dagbani, Gurene, Ditammari, Byali and Nateni. In the following, I will rely on them.

#### 3.1 Morphosyntactic focus expressions

Some of the Gur languages allow to express focus either by an *in-situ* or by an *ex-situ* construction (cf. Fiedler, Reineke & Schwarz 2005). Both syntactic strategies can, depending on the language, further be characterized by morphological means, as for example with the aid of focus markers and/or by a special out-of-focus morphology on the VP. At least in the *ex-situ* case, phonological marking is attested in some languages, too.

As we have seen in section (2), Yom also has *ex-situ* and *in-situ* focus constructions. The *ex-situ* constructions are characterised by the following features: firstly, the constituent in focus is placed at the beginning of the sentence – be it subject, object, adjunct or nominalised verb - and secondly, they are all obligatorily marked by the postponed FM *–rà*, which is the same in all occurrences.

*In-situ* constructions at the other hand are restricted to object and predicate focus. Whereas object *in-situ* focus is not marked at all, predicate *in-situ* focus is marked by FM *–rà* at the end of the whole sentence, sometimes there is the “syntactic unit marker” intervening.

We can observe that Yom deviates from the “Gur pattern” in so far as we do not find object *in-situ* focus constructions with morphological marking and no morphological markers which can directly be cliticised to the verb to mark verb focus. This could be linked to the already mentioned existence of two conjugational verb (short and long) forms which seem to serve the differentiation between assertive focus on the object and assertive focus on the predicate.

#### 3.2 Asymmetry between SF and NSF

In many African languages, there is an asymmetry found between constructions that focus subjects and those that focus non-subjects.

Whereas subjects are generally only focused in heavily marked focus constructions (which are in most of the cases analysable as *ex-situ* constructions), non-subjects can be focused *ex-situ* as well as *in-situ*. This is the case in Yom too, as the data have shown. But in comparing SF and NSF *ex-situ* constructions in this language, a second asymmetry which concerns the morphological marking can be found, which shows up in the different tonal behaviour of the out-of-focus part in SF and NSF. While in SF *ex-situ* constructions the tonal pattern of the out-of-focus part changes, this is not the case in NSF *ex-situ* constructions. On the other hand, in both constructions the use of the FM is obligatory.

In some of our sample languages, the double subject constraint, which disallows a subject pronoun that is coreferent with the focus constituent, is active in SF (cf. Fiedler & Schwarz, to appear). Contrary to this observation, Yom SF constructions require a pronominal subject anaphor following the focused nominal or pronominal subject NP.

### 3.3 Markedness of Focus and Focus Ambiguities

For some of the constructions described, the Yom data display certain asymmetries concerning the functional domain of these expressions.

Firstly, SF and sentence focus are often coded in the same way as in all other Gur languages treated by us and as in some Kwa languages. Under the label sentence focus, I subsumethetic sentences, as in answers to a question “What happened”, out-of-the-blue-utterances and text-initial sentences. In such sentences, it is excluded that the subject which has normally the status of the (unmarked) sentence topic, fulfils this topic function. This is expressed by marking the subject for focus.

Secondly, Yom displays ambiguities concerning the scope of focus if a complex NP is marked by FM *-rà*. It is not possible to mark focus only on part of a complex NP; even if only one part of it is semantically in focus, the whole NP has to be marked by *-rà* as in (14).

context : L'homme a pris le livre de la fille.

- (14) **áá'wó, dáfáará dákú-rá à záné-rá**  
non garçon ?.CL-FM CL prendre.PF-PRT\_2  
*Non, c'est celui DU GARÇON qu'il a pris.*

A third ambiguity shows up in constructions with sentence-final FM thus indicating predicate focus and sometimes sentence focus. The latter case is restricted to cases of impersonal subjects in the sentence which, for this reason, can not be marked by FM.

### 3.4 Out-of-Focus marking has relative clause-like morphological features

In general, there are at least three possible ways to analyse *ex-situ* constructions (cf. Reineke, this volume). They can be seen firstly as simple extraction, without having the characteristics of a cleft (monoclausal), or secondly as developed out of a cleft (therefore being biclausal), or, thirdly, as developed out of a narrative structure (biclausal).

For Yom, there is no relation to the last mentioned structure, i.e. there is no resemblance between a clausal conjunction also used in narrative contexts on the one hand and the focus marker on the other hand, and the morphological marking of the out-of-focus part is not found in narrative clauses either.

But with regard to the cleft hypothesis we can present the following arguments:

As shown, there exist striking similarities in the marking of the out-of-focus part of SF and relative clauses. In Yom, the relative clause follows its head. It is introduced by an optional relative pronoun (*de* + CL) and is completed by the subordinating particle *nèè*. This particle is mutually exclusive with the completion particle. If the head of the relative clause is identical with its subject, an anaphoric pronoun has to be used in the relative clause as well as in the focus construction. Additionally, we find the same tonal pattern, i.e. an overall high intonation. If the head respectively the focused element is represented by a non-subject, relative clause as well as out-of-focus clause display the same tonal pattern as in unmarked affirmative sentences and there is no resumptive pronoun used.

In (15) and (16) these constructions are compared, and the similarities as far as the tone pattern and the use of the pronouns concerned can be seen.

affirmative main sentence

- (15) **póyá ná jī núnà. / à nà jī núnà.**  
 femme FUT manger igname / CL FUT manger igname  
*La femme va manger de l'igname. / Elle va manger de l'igname.*

S-REL

- (15a) **póyá [(d!é!ú) á ná jí núná nèè] á jènò-wá.**  
 femme (REL) CL FUT manger igname SUB CL être\_belle-PRT\_1  
*La femme qui va manger de l'igname est belle.*

SF

- (15b) **póyá-rá á ná jí núnà.**  
 femme -FM CL FUT manger igname  
*C'est LA FEMME qui va manger de l'igname.*

non-S-REL

- (16a) **núná [(d!éé) póyá ná jī nèè ] à kpàrì-wá.**  
 igname (REL) femme FUT manger SUB CL être\_grand-PRT\_1  
*L'igname que la femme va manger est grosse.*

NSF

- (16b) **núná-rá póyá ná jí-rá.**  
 igname-FM femme FUT manger -PRT\_2  
*C'est L'IGNAME que la femme va manger.*

Further support for the hypothesis of the development of the *ex-situ* focus construction out of the cleft comes from the fact that the FM has a homophonous counterpart which functions as predicator<sup>12</sup> in identificational and presentational predications containing only one argument. In (17) this is demonstrated: (17a) exemplifies an identificational predication with *-rà* as predicator and (17b) a verbal predication within which *-rà* functions as focus marker. Both sentences can serve as answer for a question like “Who is eating bananas?”

short answer

- (17a) **bésérwá-rà.**  
 fille-FM  
*Ce sont LES FILLES.*

complete answer

- (17b) **bésérwá-rá bá jí ì.**  
 fille-FM CL manger CL  
*Ce sont LES FILLES qui sont en train de les manger.*

Despite the differences between relative clauses and *ex-situ* focus constructions, which show up in the employment of the verb form (insofar as the verb + completion particle is excluded from relative clauses) and in the existence / non-existence of FM respectively relative pronoun + subordinating particle in each of the compared constructions, I conclude that the focus constructions in Yom can be structurally regarded as comparable to relative clauses: whether the relative clause can be considered as a good candidate for being the source for the development of

<sup>12</sup> It is not identical with the ‘be’-verb in Yom expressing qualificative / identificational /classificational and locative meaning.

the *ex-situ* focus construction or whether both (relative and focus) constructions should be seen as “sisters” derived from the same source must remain open.

#### 4 Conclusions

Summing up, so far we have seen that Yom displays typical features of focus constructions found in other languages of our language sample:

- It makes use of a FM which is on one hand identical with a predicator, but not with the copula verb like in Byali, Ditammari and other languages and which is on the other hand homophone with the completion particle of the perfective aspect.
- It shows the widely attested asymmetry between SF and NSF.
- It employs the subject focus construction to mark sentence focus (and thereforethetic statements).
- It displays a special tonal pattern of the verb in the out-of-focus part of subject *ex-situ* constructions comparable to all other languages under study by us – here the same picture shows up as in Byali in using relative-like structures.
- The cleft strategy seems to be relevant for the development of the *ex-situ* construction, like in Byali.

But on the other hand, it does not share the following features with the other Gur languages:

- There seems to exist only one overall used FM, some of the other languages use more than one.
- It displays, like Bantu languages, two different verb forms which play also a role in different (marked and unmarked) focus constructions<sup>13</sup>. It seems therefore reasonable to relate them to pragmatics, but I am not able to determine the exact constraints for their use. This is still a question for further research, but could explain why Yom does not have special morphological markers for object *in-situ* focus and why there are no special particles to mark predicate focus.
- Yom does not accept the double subject constraint, and even opposite to this, it asks obligatorily for an anaphoric subject clitic in the out-of-focus part of the construction.

We can therefore conclude that, despite of these peculiarities, Yom focus constructions behave much like those of other Gur languages. Nevertheless, these special features in Yom ask for further clarification, especially concerning the relation between focusing in general and the exact conditions for applying the two different verb forms.

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<sup>13</sup> The similarities between the out-of-focus particle and the completion particle are very strong; whether they can be regarded as one and the same, or whether they have to be analysed as two different particles is a question for future research.

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**Abbreviations :**

CL	class pronoun
CNJ	conjunction
DEM	demonstrative pronoun
FM	focus marker
FUT	future
INF	infinitive
IPF	imperfective
NEG	negation
PF	perfective
PRT_1	“completion particle”
PRT_2	out-of-focus particle
Q	question marker
REL	relative (pronoun)
SER	verb in serial verb form
SF	subject focus
SUB	subordinating particle
SUM	“syntactic unit marker”

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