

The Particles *lé* and *lá* in the Grammar of Konkomba

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The paper investigates focus marking devices in the scarcely documented North-Ghanaian Gur language Konkomba. The two particles *lé* and *lá* occur under specific focus conditions and are therefore regarded as focus markers in the sparse literature. Comparing the distribution and obligatoriness of both alleged focus markers however, I show that one of the particles, *lé*, is better analyzed as a connective particle, i.e. as a syntactic rather than as a genuine pragmatic marker, and that comparable syntactic focus marking strategies for sentence-initial constituents are also known from related languages.

Keywords: morphological focus marking, syntactic focus marking, conjunction, topic-comment, Konkomba

0 Preliminaries

This paper discusses the divergent status of the two particles *lé* and *lá* in the grammar of Konkomba. The interest in the language and these two particles arose in the course of a broader investigation into focus in several Gur and Kwa languages and the question that came up soon after the first exploration into focus in Konkomba¹ was: How many focus markers are there in Konkomba? Previous studies claim that there are two focus markers, *lá* and *lé*. I am going to argue that only Konkomba's particle *lá* should be analyzed as focus marker

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whereas the use of particle *lé* is due to a bisected syntactic configuration which is required under specific focus conditions.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 1 gives a brief survey on the geography, speakers, genetic affiliation and linguistic documentation of Konkomba and introduces some basic linguistic properties of the language. Section 2 raises the question whether and why Konkomba should need two focus markers. Section 3 concerns the distribution and analysis of the particle *lá* and section 4 that of the particle *lé*. Section 5 reanalyzes the latter and section 6 concludes with some indications where the focus system of Konkomba meets and where it diverges from that of related languages.

1 The Language

Konkomba (language code ISO 639-3: xon) is spoken by about 500,000 speakers (2003) in the North-Eastern parts of Ghana (also scattered throughout North Central Ghana) and by approximately 50,100 speakers in Northern Togo (cf. Gordon 2005). Konkomba, of which the self designation is *likpakpaa* ~ *likpakpaln* is highly split into several clan dialects. Genetically, the language is classified as one of the Gurma subgroup within the Oti-Volta branch of the North Central Gur languages (Manessy 1979, Naden 1989).

Linguistic documentation of Konkomba is extremely scarce, as shown by the following short list. It includes all academic linguistic works on the language I am aware of among which the starred forms could not be consulted for this paper.

Abbott, Mary and Mary Steele. n.d. [1973]. *An introduction to learning Likpakpaln (Konkomba)*. Tamale: Institute of Linguistics.

*Langdon, Margaret A. 1997. The place of mother tongue literacy in social development in three African contexts. *Notes on Literacy* 23(4): 1-44.

- Langdon, Margaret A., Mary Steele, and others, compilers. 1981. *Konkomba-English (Likaln-Likpakpaln) dictionary*. Tamale: Ghana Institute of Linguistics.
- *Ring, J. Andrew. 1991. Three case studies involving dialect standardization strategies in northern Ghana. In Gloria E. Kindell (ed.), *Proceedings of the Summer Institute of Linguistics International Language Assessment Conference*, Horsleys Green, 23-31 May 1989, 281-87. Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics.
- *Steele, Mary and Gretchen Weed. 1967. Collected field reports on the phonology of Konkomba. *Collected Language Notes*, 3. Accra: Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana.
- Steele, Mary. 1977 [pr. 1976]. Konkomba Data Sheet. In *West African Language Data Sheets*, ed. M. E. Kropp Dakubu, 358-364: West African Linguistic Society.
- *Steele, Mary. 1991. Translating the tetragrammaton YHWH in Konkomba. *Notes on Translation* 11(4): 28-31.
- Tait, David. 1954. Konkomba Nominal Classes. *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 24:130-148.

The language data for the focus investigation were elicited by me with a Konkomba speaker from Saboba (Likpakpaa dialect) in Northern Ghana during two short field stays in 2006. Comparison between available and my new data indicates a high degree of (sub-)dialectal variation. To summarize, the general as well as my personal knowledge about basic grammatical properties of Konkomba is rather small and the need for basic grammatical research is still very high, as it also emerges from the brief sketch concerning phonological, morphological and syntactic features of the language in the following subsections.

1.1 Tone system

While it is clear that Konkomba *is* a tone language, further information about its features is urgently required, and tone is omitted in most works, only the learning material by Abbott & Steele (1973) represents a partial exception. Tone is occasionally marked there by recognizing the level tones High, Mid, Low, and a downstepped High. It is thus not excluded that Konkomba has in fact three tonemes (High, Mid, Low), although in Steele's contribution to the Data Sheets (1977) only the two level tones High and Low and a Downstep are reported. I am not aware of any "minimal triplet" so far, so that in example (1), only a minimal pair for the lexical function of High and Low tone is given.

- (1) *úpíí* 'woman' vs. *úpìì* 'sheep (sg.)'

For the moment, my tone transcription should be regarded with caution, since it is just based on the auditory impression while the general principles and rules concerning tone have not yet been systematically worked out.

1.2 Vowel system

A similar research need as for tone concerns the vowel system: Most sources² list six short and six corresponding long oral vowels (cf. 2), among which especially the front vowels seem to be subject to heavy centralization and some of the long vowels seem to be subject to diphthongization (/ɔɔ/ = [ʷa]). In Tait's publication on the noun classes (1954), symbols for nine short vowels are used (as indicated in brackets in 2).

- (2) /i, e, a, ɔ, o, u/ + length, including diphthongization, e.g. /ɔɔ/ = [ʷa]
(i, I, e, ε, ə, a, ɔ, o, u)

² Abbott & Steele 1973, Langdon & Steele et al. 1981, Steele 1977

-
- | | | | |
|-----|-------------------|-------------|--------------|
| (5) | ú-já | w-è | ‘that man’ |
| | bú-sù | bw-é | ‘that tree’ |
| | ń-dààm | mw-é | ‘that drink’ |
| | lí-ké!ké-r | l-é | ‘that cloth’ |

As is also known from other languages especially of the Gurma group, Konkomba displays ambilateral nominal affixes, i.e. nouns often contain class prefixes and suffixes at the same time. Comparing both affix types, the prefixes show up as the newer class exponents, while most of the suffixes are subject to heavy erosion.

- | | | |
|-----|------------------------------|---------------------------|
| (6) | ú-já / bí-já-b | ‘man, male’ |
| | lí-díchà-r / ɲí-díchè | ‘compound, building’ |
| | bú-sù / í-swì-ì | ‘tree’ |
| | ń-ɲì / - | ‘water’ |
| | lòò / lóó-tù | ‘car’ (< English ‘lorry’) |

The class prefixes of nouns elide in certain contexts, first of all at the head in an associative construction, where its stem is preceded by the possessor and the possessive morpheme *aa-*.

- | | |
|-----|-------------------|
| (7) | lí-díchà-r |
| | CL-compound-CL |
| | ‘a/the compound’ |

(9)	Perfective	Imperfective	
	ɲar	ɲar	‘sweep’
	ɲa	ɲaa- ni	‘do, prepare, cook’
	ji- n	ji	‘eat’

Also familiar from other Gur languages is the use of preverbal means to express several tense-aspect-modality-polarity features beyond the perfective / imperfective distinction.

- (10) ù **bí** !fín-ní wááwàì.
 3sg be.LOC wash-IPF things
 ‘He is washing things.’

2 Two Focus Markers?

The primary aim of my research into Konkomba was to get a first insight into its focus system. The investigation of focus is not necessarily restricted to identifying marked focus constructions. I rather regard focus as a semantico-pragmatic notion irrespective of its potential or requirements for overt marking. In this respect, I follow the functional definition of focus given by Dik, according to whom “The focal information in a linguistic expression is that information which is relatively the most important or salient in the given communicative setting, and considered by S[peaker, A.S.] to be most essential for A[ddressee, A.S.] to integrate into his pragmatic information.” (Dik 1997: 326). This general notion of focus includes two major subtypes, namely *assertive focus*, also known as *information focus* or *completive focus*, on the one hand, and *contrastive focus* on the other hand, adapting Hyman & Watters (1984). For the elicitation of utterances and short texts which allow the focus identification, I mainly used the Questionnaire on Information Structure (QUIS, cf. Skopeteas et

al. 2006) which was developed within our Research Group (SFB 632) and included some additional language-specific elicitation tasks.

It is known that the particles *lé* and *lá* in Konkomba provide important clues for the addressee's pragmatic interpretation of the utterance. Accordingly, the particles are labelled as "focus markers" in the Konkomba-English dictionary by Langdon et al. (1981: 43). Two examples provided in the dictionary are given in (11a) and (12a). As the examples show, both particles follow the focal constituent of the sentence. My own data elicitation confirmed this result, cf. (11b) and (12b). In the context of an information question, the focal status of a postverbal constituent or of the sentence-initial subject respectively is reflected by the postposed particle *lá* or *lé*.

(11) a. m cha kinyan ni **la**.

1sg go market at LA

'It's the MARKET that I am going to.' (Langdon et al. 1981: 43)

b. Context: What did she eat?

ù ηmán !ηítùùn **lá**.

CL chew beans LA

'She ate BEANS.'

→ *characteristic for complement focus (object, adjunct): SVO/A lá*

(12) a. min **le** ban nnyøk.

1sg.DJ LE want medicine

'It is I who want medicine.' (Langdon et al. 1981: 43)

- b. Context: Who ate the beans?

ú-pí wè (lé) ηmàn.

CL-woman DEM LE chew

‘THIS WOMAN ate them.’ ~ ‘It is THIS WOMAN who ate them.’

→ *characteristic for subject focus: \underline{S} (lé) V*

As indicated by the parentheses for particle *lé* in (12), there is a difference concerning the obligatoriness of the two particles: while *lá* seems to be obligatory under focus conditions, *lé* is optional.

The pragmatic interpretation of the particles as focus markers rather than their grammatical interpretation relies on the fact that neither *lá* nor *lé* are grammatically required *per se*. Hence, sentences lacking one or the other particle, as indicated in (3-4) above, are still well-formed, and only inappropriate in certain contexts.

For the moment we can conclude that at first sight, Konkomba seems to provide two focus markers. In order to evaluate this situation, a closer look at the distribution of these particles is required.

3 Particle *lá*

With respect to the particle *lá* we can make the following observations:

First, *lá* marks focus on any single constituent placed after the verb, be it a verb argument or not. The subject, however, is excluded from this option. The focal constituent is typically found in immediate postverbal positions – though this does not seem to be obligatory – and is followed by clause-final *lá*.

(13) a. Do you want the black cloth or the white cloth?

mí bà lí-pí!pín !lá.

1sg want CL-white LA

‘I want the WHITE one.’

b. Do you like him or me?

ń gèè sí lá.

1sg like 2sg.DJ LA

‘I like YOU.’

c. Where did the woman eat?

ù jí !ú-!dó lá.

CL eat CL-house LA

‘She ate AT HOME.’

d. When did you buy the beans?

ń dá-ńì kpíngr !dáá lá.

1sg buy-CL “Monday” day LA

‘I bought them on MONDAY.’

Second, *lá* is also used to mark focus on a part of a complex constituent, like the possessor in example (14). In this case, the particle does not intervene, but is placed after the complex phrase.

(14) Do you want his or my car?

mí bà w-àà-lóó !lá.

1sg want CL-POSS-car LA

‘I want HIS car.’

Additionally, *lá* is also regarded necessary in certain cases of wide focus, namely when focus comprises not only the postverbal complement but the selecting verb as well. This is the case in example (15) where the foregoing question triggers VP-focus.

- (15) a. What did the woman do?

ù ɲmán !ɲí-tùùn **lá.** = example (11)
 CL chew CL-beans LA
 ‘She ATE BEANS.’

- b. What did you do yesterday?

ń fĩ dá !símá **lá.**
 1sg yesterday buy groundnuts LA
 ‘I BOUGHT GROUNDNUTS yesterday.’

Finally, *lá* also occurs when just the verb of the utterance is in focus.

- (16) a. What did they do to the tree?

bí gà-bù **lá.**
 CL cut-CL LA
 ‘They CUT it’

- b. Where did they buy it?

bì sù **lá.**
 CL steal LA
 ‘(But) They STOLE it!’

With respect to verb focus, it has to be noted however, that in certain contexts other particles (like *ya*) are regarded as appropriate while *lá* is not accepted. Such cases need more investigation and have been omitted here.

The particle can also be used in elliptic utterances, as they may occur in answers to a question or in dispute. As example (17a) illustrates, the particle is however not necessary to render the verbless utterance a predication, i.e. it doesn't function as copula or as predicative element. Rather, it seems to add some special emphasis to the meaning conveyed by the focal constituent.

(17) How many houses collapsed?

a. tì-wéé.

CL-many

'MANY.'

b. tì-wéé **lá**.

CL-many LA

'Unnecessarily MANY.'

Since the particle *lá* is not a copula itself, as is reported for some related languages (cf. Reineke, to appear), it can also appear in copular constructions as exemplified in (18). The same example also demonstrates that the particle is typically absent under negation.⁴

⁴ Whether it is completely excluded throughout negation has still to be checked.

(18) S1: There are three yams.

S2: *nà-á !yé ñì-tá, nì yé ñì-nàà lá.*
 CL-NEG COP CL-three CL COP CL-four LA
 ‘It is not three yams, it is FOUR (yams).’

It is important to set the focus marker *lá* apart from similar particles with a rather different function. These are both functioning as interrogatives: one represents a locative interrogative particle with the meaning ‘where?’ and the other one serves the formation of the specifying interrogative ‘which’, as shown in (19).

- (19) a. *ù bí là?*
 CL be.LOC where
 ‘Where is he?’
- b. *kí-!lá-díí wò ...?*
 CL-which-house collapse
 ‘Which house collapsed ...?’

From these observations I conclude that the particle *lá* is indeed best to be analyzed as a focus marker, regardless of its restriction to the postverbal position and of the presence of competing devices in the case of narrow verb focus. The focus marking particle *lá* follows a focal constituent, whether it is new or contrastive focus, whether the focus is quite narrow or whether it is as wide as a complex VP.

4 Particle *lé*

Turning to particle *lé*, the following observations can be obtained:

The particle *lé* always occurs in the preverbal field, which is the immediate preverbal position in case of subject focus, as can be seen in (20). Example (20b) further illustrates that narrow focus on a part of a complex subject phrase is formally not distinguished from focus extending over the whole subject constituent.

- (20) a. Who prepared the beans, the woman or the man?

ú-pí **!lé** ɲà.
 CL-woman LE prepare
 ‘The WOMAN cooked them.’

- b. How many tyres spoilt?

(ɲí-tà) ɲì-lé **lé** pù.
 (CL-tyre) CL-two LE spoil
 ‘TWO tyres spoilt.’

The particle *lé* may also be used when a sentence-initial constituent which is *not* the subject represents the focal information, as in example (21a/b). These sentences represent pragmatically more marked variants of the examples (13c) and (13d) above, where the same sentence constituent was focussed in its canonical postverbal position.

- (21) a. ú-!dó, **lé** ù jì.
 CL-house LE CL eat
 ‘She ate AT HOME.’

- b. kpíngír **!dáá,** **lé** ò dá !ɲí-tùùn.
 “Monday” day LE 1sg buy CL-beans
 ‘I bought them on MONDAY.’

Note however that sentence-initial focus on non-subjects is not just triggered by a WH-question or a simple contradiction, but is subject of further requirements present in the context.

Compared to some other African languages in which the formal realization of information structural categories has been investigated so far, WH-questions and their answers are not regularly formed in the same way in Konkomba. In Konkomba, the particle *lá* does not show up in WH-questions, as focus markers in other African languages typically do. The particle *lé*, on the other hand, does occur with WH-questions, although not obligatorily. Its presence however does not seem to change the meaning of the utterance.

- (22) $\eta\acute{m}\acute{a}$ (**lé**) ! $\eta\acute{m}\acute{a}n$! $\eta\acute{í}$ -tùùn?
 who (LE) chew CL-beans
 ‘Who ate the beans?’

Another difference between *lé* and *lá* concerns their behaviour in elliptic constructions. Unlike *lá*, *lé* is not even *optionally* allowed to be used, as illustrated in example (23b).

- (23) Who ate the beans?
- a. $\grave{a}\acute{j}\acute{u}\acute{a}$ **lé** ! $\eta\acute{m}\acute{a}n$ $\eta\acute{í}$ -tùùn.
 Ajua LE chew CL-beans
 ‘AJUA ate the beans.’
- b. $\grave{a}\acute{j}\acute{u}\acute{a}$. not: * $\grave{a}\acute{j}\acute{u}\acute{a}$ **lé**.
 Ajua
 ‘AJUA’

Restrictions also exist concerning the combination of both particles within one clause. It is not allowed to use both together, as indicated in example (24).

(24) What happened?

ú-pí **!lé** ɲmán ɲí-tùùn. not: *úpí **!lé** ɲmán ɲítùùn **lá**.

CL-woman LE chew CL-beans

‘A WOMAN ATE BEANS.’

Multiple occurrences of *lé* on the other hand are allowed within a sentence, although not in a single clause. Furthermore, the co-occurring particles *lé* cannot all be attributed a focus marking function. The sentences in (25) provide examples for such multiple *lé*'s in a complex sentence. The first occurrence of *lé* in (25a) follows the focal subject, while the second use of *lé* joins another clause to the preceding one. Here, all conjuncts share the same subject reference, so the subject identity is expressed by *kí* in the last conjunct. In addition, in (25b), *lé* is also used in a case of subject change.

(25) a. ú-pí-nè-kpír **lé** !dá ɲí-tùùn, **lé** !kí ɲàà.
 CL-woman-?-old LE buy CL-beans LE SID prepare
 ‘The OLD WOMAN bought the beans and cooked them.’

b. ú-pí-nè-kpír !dá ɲí-tùùn, **lé** !kí ɲàà, **lé** !tí ɲmàn.
 CL-woman-?-old buy CL-beans LE SID prepare LE 1pl chew
 ‘The old woman bought beans, cooked them and we ate them.’

Obviously, the second occurrence of *lé* in (25a) is a conjunction that links together two related conjuncts. The same holds for all uses of *lé* in (25b). The conjunction conveys a sequential meaning, in that the actions encoded by the

joined clauses never overlap and imply temporal succession. Unsurprisingly, a corresponding conjunction ‘and, and then’ is also listed in the dictionary.

The question arising here is of course: How justified is it to distinguish between a clause-initial conjunction *lé* and post-focal particle *lé* or how close might they be related?

Structurally, both *lé* occurrences can not be distinguished when the subject of the *lé*-clause has no co-referential expression in the preceding part of the sentence, i.e. when the sentence-initial focus constituent is not the subject, respectively when the subject is changed in the sequential clause. The parallel structures in both cases are illustrated in (26). The focus configuration with a sentence-initial non-subject can therefore be regarded as a bisected construction which always contains a clause boundary before particle *lé*.

- (26) NP_i (predicate) # *lé* NP_j predicate
 (*lé* as clausal conjunction & *lé* after non-subject focus constituent)

When there is co-referential relationship across *lé*, focus construction and sequential clause construction are however structurally different from each other, as illustrated in (27a/b). In sequential environments, the subject identity indicating particle *ki* is required to follow the conjunction *lé* (27a), but after a subject focus constituent, no additional subject indication occurs (27b). Hence, the syntactic configuration between focused subject and non-focal predicate seems different from that between sequential same-subject clauses and it is not clear, whether the subject focus construction should really be regarded as extra-clausal.

- (27) a. NP_i predicate # *lé* *ki*_i predicate (*lé* as clausal conjunction)
 b. NP #? *lé* predicate (*lé* after subject focus constituent)

Despite this lack of congruence, it seems obvious that there is a close structural correspondence between *lé* as a clausal conjunction and as a post-focal particle. In most cases the particle has to be followed by a predicate provided with a subject reference. Such a reference is only missing in those cases where there is no predicate at all preceding particle *lé*, i.e. in the focus subject construction.

I conclude from these observations, that the far-going structural correspondences between particle *lé* occurrences in both functions indicate that there is indeed a close relationship between clausal conjunction and focus marking particle *lé* and that it is only the particle *lé* following a focused *subject* which creates difficulties for the analysis of *lé* as clausal conjunction. Therefore, it remains suspicious whether *lé* really constitutes a genuine second focus marker restricted to focus constituents in sentence-initial position, i.e. a place where it is always followed by more verbal information. I propose to analyze particle *lé* better as a connective particle that is used to link a clause to the previous context – whether focal or not – rather than regarding it as a focus marker. Hence, particle *lé* occurs in *syntactic* focus marking configurations, in which the focus constituent is in sentence-initial position rather than somewhere near the verbal predicate in non-initial position.

5 Reanalysis

We have seen that focal information in Konkomba is often morphologically indicated, using particles *lé* and *lá*. Within a simple sentence, these particles exclude each other and their complementary distribution is determined by the position of the focal information within the sentence: *lé* occurs only when sentence-initial information is in focus while *lá* occurs elsewhere, as sketched in (28a/b).

new or even controversial information is supplied in connection with the predicate. Hence, the predicate commenting about a topical subject represents the basic domain for focus.

(29a) illustrates the assumption that in Konkomba, focus marker *lá* seems to signal the fact that the focal information is part of the comment, while it may remain ambiguous whether the focal information comprises the verb, a post-verbal complement or all together. Particle *lé* on the other hand (29b) signals the absence of a topic-comment structure based on a topical subject. In these deviating configurations, the sentence-initial constituent is in the realm of focus which can even expand over the whole sentence. The predicate is linked to the sentence-initial constituent with the help of the connective particle *lé*.

(29) a. [S]_{topic} [V (O) *lá*]_{comment = focus domain}

b. [X]_{focus} *lé* (S) V (O)
 [X *lé* (S) V (O)]_{focus}

What appears as subject/non-subject asymmetry in the focus marking of sentence constituents in Konkomba – namely the use of connective particle *lé* but not of *lá* with focal subjects versus focal non-subjects – is according to the hypothesis in (29) just a consequence of the fact that in Konkomba the subject is restricted to the preferred sentence-initial topic position and is excluded from the comment where focus marker *lá* could apply (ruling out a configuration with sentence-final focal subject: *V(O)[S]_{focus} *lá*).

6 Comparative Remarks

Comparing the findings in Konkomba with the focus systems of some related Gur languages of the Oti-Volta group, we face several parallels, but also

appealing differences to be pursued in future research. Two aspects shall be mentioned here:

First, Konkomba provides a focus marking morpheme with a structure identical to that of *lá* which is widely attested among its relatives. Several Oti-Volta languages have a particle with a similar function and some parallel, but not identical restrictions, among them Dagbani (Olawsky 1999), Gurene (Dakubu 2000), Dagaare (Bodomo 2000), Yom (Fiedler 2006) and others. Interestingly, the position of the focus marker with respect to postverbal focus constituents differs, in that the focus marker must precede, rather than follow it in part of the languages. Furthermore, the distribution of the assumed cognate focus marker may differ among the languages with respect to its use under negation or in WH-questions.

Second, several related languages of the Oti-Volta group display a subject/non-subject asymmetry with respect to sentence-initial focus constituents similar to the one we found in Konkomba, and they also require a special focus marking device for the sentence-initial focal subject. Interestingly, however, sentence-initial subject and non-subject constituents are often treated less homogeneously than they are in Konkomba, as demonstrated in (30). This table displays the particles in Buli and Dagbani which follow sentence-initial focus constituents.

(30) Focus on sentence-initial:	Subject	Non-subject
Followed by particle:		
Konkomba	<i>lé</i>	<i>lé</i>
Buli	<i>lē</i>	<i>lē, tē</i>
Dagbani	<i>N</i>	<i>kà</i>

Interestingly, while these particles have a special distribution in Buli and Dagbani in the sense that they differentiate stronger between subject and non-

subject than in Konkomba, I have shown that they are also better analyzed as syntactic rather than as pragmatic markers (Fiedler & Schwarz 2005). They indicate sub- or coordination in the language and are *also* applied in syntactically derived focus configurations. Like *lé* in Konkomba, the nature of these particles following sentence-initial focus constituents is primarily a syntactic one and is not simply restricted to the function of focus marking.

Abbreviations in Glosses

CL	class
COP	copula
DEM	demonstrative
DJ	disjunctive pronoun
NEG	negative marker
POSS	possessive marker
SID	subject identity

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