

The discourse particle */a* in Dagaare

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Introduction

Increasing interest in how African languages manifest categories related to information structure

Broad set of grammatical strategies to signal information structure:

- intonation
- syntactic movement
- discourse particles

Many languages use a synthesis of these strategies

- often in ways that challenge theoretical suppositions from the information structure literature developed (primarily) on European languages, viz. English

Introduction

This talk examines the use of the discourse particle *la* in Dagaare

- the exact function(s) of these particles can be difficult to pin down

Method: Beginning from clues in the grammatical descriptions of Dagaare, will proceed to examine a wide range of elicited and naturally-occurring data, and develop a general meaning

Dagaare

Basic Language Facts:

- Classification: Member of Gur language family, Niger-Congo branch
- Region: Spoken in northwest corner of Ghana, western part of Upper West Region
- Population: 700,000 (1,000,000 including Northern Dagara in Burkina Faso) (2003 figures)

Based on data obtained in field trip in 2011

- would not be possible without Mark Ali (College of Education, Winneba, Ghana)
- currently completing a Dagaare-English dictionary together

Dagaare

Basic word order:

- S V O X

Multiple dialects:

- all data is from Central dialect
- differs substantially from what is spoken around Wa or Ndole or further North in Burkina Faso

Data and Sources

The data comes from multiple sources:

- elicitations based on the “Questionnaire on Information Structure” (Skopeteas et al. 2006)
- a portion of a novel (1500 clauses) written in Dagaare by Mark Ali
- various short texts elicited in the field (folk tales, folk definitions)
- examples sentences from the forthcoming Dagaare-English dictionary

Previous Literature: *la*

Bodomo 1997 provides an early discussion of *la* in Dagaare, who terms it a post-verbal particle, and notes a variant *-ŋ*.

- (1) n gɛ-rɛ **la**
 1.SG go-IMP PART
 'I am going'
- (2) n gɛ-rɛ-**ŋ**
 1.SG go-IMP-PART
 'I am going'

Previous Literature: *la*

Bodomo (1997) considers *la* to have two functions:

- First, as a marker of an affirmative statement, or of factivity:
 - “One can then say that the factive aspect of every Dagaare declarative or interrogative sentence is signaled or even affirmed by *la*”
- Second, as a marker of emphasis (focus)

(3) Badere *la* kpi
 Spider PART died
 ‘*Spider died*’

(4) Badere kpi *la*
 Spider died PART
 ‘*Spider died*’

Previous Literature: *la*

This position is echoed by Kropp-Dakubu (2005), who conflates Predicate Focus and an “affirmation” function
Also indicates that *la* contributes an exhaustive reading

Support for viewing the contribution of *la* as having to do with factivity or affirmation comes for a contrast with negative sentences where the particle *ba* occurs preverbally (exs from Bodomo 2000 p.37)

- (5) te da gaa la daa
 1.PL PST go PART market
 ‘We went to the market.’
- (6) te da ba gaa daa
 1.PL PST NEG go market
 ‘We did not go to the market.’
- (7) *te da ba gaa la daa
 1.PL PST NEG go PART market
 ‘We did not go to the market.’

la may appear with interrogatives:

- (8) A woɔŋ la be?
 DET bag inside PART exist
 Is it in the bag? (Ali 0074)

la does not appear in imperative or hortative sentences.

- (9) Nyu!
 'Drink!'

- (10) Vɛŋ ka saa mi ansaŋ ka fo bore a kamaana.
 - - - - - -
 Let it rain before you sow the maize. (Ali and Grimm)

Preverbal *la*: In-situ Subject Focus

Translation tasks confirm that subject focus would appear to be marked in-situ by preverbal use of *la*.

- (11) *An la ɔɔ a bɛŋɛ?*
 who PART eat DET beans
 ‘Who ate the beans?’
- (12) *Poge la ɔɔ a bɛŋɛ.*
 woman PART eat DET beans
 ‘A woman ate the beans’

Ex-Situ Focus

Focus on elements other than the subject requires movement

(13) Boŋ la ka a poge di?
What PART COMP DET woman eat
'What did the woman eat?'

(14) Beŋe la ka a poge di
Beans PART COMP DET woman eat
'The woman ate beans'

Ex-Situ Focus

Practically any element can move to this focus position:
Time Adverbials:

- (15) Boŋ saŋ ka a poŋe da di?
 What time PART COMP DET woman PAST eat
 'When did the woman eat?'
- (16) Zaameŋ la ka a poŋe da di
 Yesterday PART COMP DET woman PAST eat
 'The woman ate yesterday'

Ex-Situ Focus

Instruments:

- (17) Boŋ ka a poge di ne?
What PART COMP DET woman eat
'With what did the woman eat?'
- (18) Suree la ka a poge di ne
Spoon PART COMP DET woman eat PREP
'She woman ate beans'

Manner Adverbials:

- (19) Wola ka a poge di?
How PART COMP DET woman eat
'How did the woman eat?'
- (20) Gboragbora la ka a poge di
greedily PART COMP DET woman eat
'The woman ate greedily'

Question and Answer Congruity

Note that Dagaare has a particularly clear relation between questioned elements and focus elements in the answers.

(21) Who ate the beans?
John_F ate the beans.

(22) What did John eat?
John ate the beans_F.

Question and Answer Congruity

- (23) Ang la ၊ a bεηε?
who PART eat DET beans
'Who ate the beans?'
- (24) Poge la ၊ a bεηε.
woman PART eat DET beans
'A woman ate the beans'
- (25) Boη la ka a poge di?
What PART COMP DET woman eat
'What did the woman eat?'
- (26) Bεηε la ka a poge di
Beans PART COMP DET woman eat
'The woman ate beans'

Picture from the literature:

- S V la (O) (X) \Rightarrow Broad/Predicate Focus
- S la V (O) (X) \Rightarrow Subject Focus
- X la ka S V (O) (X) \Rightarrow Argument Focus

Clearly *la* is involved in how focus is coded in Dagaare
Yet, data from various textual sources indicate a more nuanced story than reported in the literature.

- *la* is less obligatory than proposed by Bodomo (1997)
- not necessarily exhaustive
- not necessarily “factive” or “assertive” in and of itself

More generally, *la* shows sensitivity to the question-under-discussion (QUD)

Conjunction

Sentences made up of conjoined clauses only have *la* in the first conjunct:

(27) O pɔge daa la a dɔɔ ane o faŋa zaa ka o te le.

- - - - -

‘The woman pushed the man with all her strength and he fell over.’

(28) A peroo dɔgɛɛ la kye mere bare ka a bilii kpi.

- - - - -

‘The sheep littered but deserted the lambs and they died.’

If *la* is a factive or affirmative marker attached at the predicate level (Dakubu), unclear what the status of the further conjuncts are (are they affirmed?)

Disjunction

Disjunctive sentences may contain more than one *la*:

(29) Ba die la bee ba ba di la a deene?

- - - - -

Did he win or lose (lit. not win) the game?

(30) Ba koora la a baa bee ba koε la?

- - - - -

Are they killing the dog or did they kill it?

Neither of the conjuncts is being affirmed (nor is a fact), so odd to consider that the contribution of *la* is that of an affirmative/factive.

Complex Sentences

Similar to conjunctions, complex sentences contain only one *la* *When* clause:

(31) O ma naŋ da kpi o deɛ kono la nen- taŋ maaa.

- - - - -

When her mother died, she was shedding tears
uncontrollably.

Because clause:

(32) N naŋ pãã nyu dabiltuuri læ ka n nyaga zaa te zɛle ŋa

- - - - -

kyɛ toɔre kyɛ ka baa **ba** wuoli a poɔ.

'Because I have taken bitter herbs and my intestines have become as bitter as that of a ground squirrel but without results.' (Ali 0023)

Embedded clauses

la may occur within an embedded clause:

- (33) Maa teere ka a pəge-ba laŋ boe
1.PL.STRONG think COMP DET woman-PL gather plan
la beri ayi ŋa ŋ.
PART day-pl two 3.DEM inside
I think the women have planned of late.

Yet, this is variable.

Embedded clauses

- (34) Yε baŋ ka n ma yi-deme,
2.PL know COMP 1POSS.SING mother house-owner.pl
Sawɔləŋ, bore kyerre wuli no-ba?
Sawoleen plant archie-pl show person-pl
Do you know that it is my mother's family from Sawoleen
that have taught people how to plant archie trees? (Ali
0052)
- (35) Yε baŋ ka a dɔɔ sereŋ yi /a tammo?
2pl know COMP det man really go-out PART bow
Do you know the man is really on the rampage?

Relevant contrast: whether the complement is presupposed by the speaker.

Opposite of what one would expect from an affirmative marker:
the proposition which is known for certain by the speaker does not
contain /a

la and “factivity”

There is a strong speaker intuition, as witnessed by the grammatical descriptions, that *la* indicates that the speaker is affirming the content of a sentence:

- seems clear for the simple cases
- runs aground on more complicated data

We will see that even if it is too strong to say that *la* asserts affirmation, this arises through *la*'s contribution

la and exhaustivity

Bodomo (2000) and Dakubu (2005) indicate the preverbal *la* gives rise to exhaustive interpretations:

- (36) A bie *la* tu a zie
The child (and nobody else) dug up the place (Dakubu 2005, p. 18)

Under this view, preverbal *la* is interpretationally equivalent to clefting in English

This would appear to strong, as many utterances appear more neutral than clefting

Preverbal /a

Further, the preverbal use of /a sometimes also occurred in all-new environments in elicitation

- (37) Boŋ la e? Neε-kaŋ la age-kyinni koɔ
what PART be? person-INDEF PART jump-land water
poɔ.

PREP

‘What happened? Somebody jumped into water’

- (38) Boŋ la e? Pɔge la ɔɔ a beŋɛ.
what PART be? woman PART eat DET beans
‘What happened? A woman ate the beans’

Implies that preverbal /a does not always align with subject focus in a straightforward manner.

Frame Adverbials

Other uses of erstwhile argument focus structures occur with frame adverbials:

- (39) Sokoore sokyara poɔ kyerpoŋ kaŋa pare
road intersection in archie-big SPECIFIC under
la ka saandoɔ kaŋa da zeŋ.
PART COMP strange-man SPECIFIC PST sit
Under a big archie tree by an intersection of a road sat a
strange man. (Ali 0001)

Fronting + *la* has a wider range of uses.

la as a focus-sensitive discourse particle

Proposal: *la* serves to bind the focus of a sentence, inducing alternatives.

Discourse coherence ensures that the focus alternatives induced by *la* corresponds to a Question Under Discussion (QUD) (Roberts 1996, Buring 2003)

- this QUD may often be implicit

la as a focus-sensitive discourse particle

Connecting to the literature on information structure on English and other well-studied languages,

- *la* differs from well-known focus sensitive particles, such as *only*, in that there is no secondary meaning beyond indicating certain alternatives are in play.

la as a focus-sensitive discourse particle

- (40) Badere la kpi
 Spider PART died
 '*Spider died*'

Ordinary meaning: DIED(SPIDER)

Focus-induced alternatives: $\{ \text{DIED}(x) \mid x \in \text{ENTITY} \}$

- (41) Badere kpi la
 Spider died PART
 '*Spider died*'

Ordinary meaning: DIED(SPIDER)

Focus-induced alternatives: $\{ p \mid p \in Q \}$

Parallel analysis for the negative marker *ba*

la as a focus-sensitive discourse particle

Congruence condition: use of *la* presupposes that focus alternatives correspond to an active QUD.

Return to the data

This clearly covers the basic cases show for question-answer congruence:

(42) Aṇ la ၵ ၵ a bḗṇḗ?
who PART eat DET beans
'Who ate the beans?'

(43) Poge la ၵ ၵ a bḗṇḗ.
woman PART eat DET beans
'A woman ate the beans'

The focus alternatives induced by *la* in the declarative sentence correspond to the meaning of the question which it answers.

Return to the data

The fact that *la* only appears once in multiple clauses does not pose a problem

- scope of this discourse-based analysis of *la* is on speaker contributions, not a particular syntactic construct

(44) O pɔge daa la a dɔɔ ane o faɲa zaa ka o te le.

— - - - -

‘The woman pushed the man with all her strength and he fell over.’

Interrogatives with disjunctions query two distinct propositions and thus have two distinct QUDs \Rightarrow two occurrences of *la*

Return to the data

When or *because* clauses contain backgrounded information, *la* does not need to appear since it does not address an active QUD.

(45) O ma naŋ da kpi o deε kono la nen- taŋ maaa.

— - - - -

When her mother died, she was shedding tears uncontrollably.

Consequences

Exhaustive interpretations are not hard-wired, but arise by pragmatic reasoning

(46) A bie la tu a zie The child (and nobody else) dug up the place (Dakubu 2005, p. 18)

- Hearer assumes that speaker is being informative and relevant and would have mentioned if others were involved in digging up the place

Consequences

Affirmative quality also need not be hard-wired, but can be derived simply by noting that contributions with *Ia* provide an answer to a question under discussion which is not negative.

Conclusion and future work

- Textual data allowed us to see a range of additional uses and functions of *Ia*
- Able to give a simpler account of *Ia*, which fits in with broad views of discourse structure

Future work

- Compositional account
 - requires a better understanding of the syntax of Dagaare
- Interaction with phonology
 - requires a better understanding of intonational structure in Dagaare
 - may be less relevant for languages with particles devoted to discourse structure (see Schwartz XXXX on other Gur languages)

Much to do!