The Information Packaging Particle *la* in Dagaare

A wide range of information packaging systems have recently been investigated in the Gur and Kwa families (see, e.g, Fielder & Schwarz 2005, Fielder et al. 2009, Fusheini 2012, Issah 2013). Still, many open questions remain about exactly which information structure categories are encoded and which formal means languages use to encode them. This paper contributes an in-depth examination of the information packaging particle *la* in Dagaare (Gur, spoken in NW Ghana).

Data: The literature assigns divergent functions to the particle *la* according to its clausal position. Bodomo (1997, 2000) considers post-verbal *la* to function as a marker of assertion or "factivity", since, according to him, *la* is obligatory in positive declarative sentences. In a distinct pre-verbal use, *la* serves as a focus marker of subjects or fronted constituents. (See similar proposals in Dakubu & Saanchi 1997 and Dakubu 2005.)

I add to the empirical basis from elicited material via the "Questionnaire on Information Structure" (Skopeteas et al. 2006) and from 1500 sentences of narrative text, yielding further information on a range of other constructions, e.g. frame-setting, presentational sentences, complex clauses, etc. While the new data mainly accords with much of the previous literature, *la* appears in many new, unexpected environments, such as a pre-verbal use with "all new" or thetic sentences whose subject is not previously mentioned in the discourse, as in (1) where the subject is indefinite. In the talk, I also discuss *la'*s use in question/answer congruence.

(1) Q: Boŋ	**la**	e?	A: Baa **la**	dona	dɔɔ.
What	la	COP	dog la	bite	man
"What is happening?"			"A dog is biting a man."		

On the other hand, *la* was not found in many places where it would be expected if obligatory for positive declarative sentences. While the data validates Bodomo's intuition of *la'*s prevalence, many sentences in the narrative occur without *la*---crucially, this is typically when the information contained in the clause is backgrounded, e.g. in temporal clauses.

Analysis: Making use of alternative semantics (Rooth 1985, 1992), I give a unified analysis of *la* as a semantic operator introducing reference to alternatives. Depending on whether *la* scopes over an argument, a predicate or, as in (1A), the whole sentence, the domain of quantification of the focus value will be restricted to individuals, properties, or propositions, respectively. Further effects, such as exhaustivity for pre-verbal *la* or the assertion effect of post-verbal *la*, are shown to arise due to additional factors, e.g. fronting and additional pragmatic reasoning, respectively. Given the textual evidence, *la* is not treated as obligatory for declarative sentences, but occurring only in sentences that address an (often implicit) Question-Under-Discussion (QUD) in the discourse (Roberts 1996, Buering 2003). This immediately covers the particular narrative instances where *la* was observed not to occur: these were backgrounded, viz. providing supplementary information, and did not directly address the QUD. This analysis also extends to *la'*s occurrence in interrogatives, where alternatives must be generated to provide the set of possible answers.