

## Focus Expressions in Foodo

### 1 Introduction



- spoken in a relatively small area within the province of Donga in the Northeast of Benin close to the border to Togo
- about 20-25.000 speakers (cf. Plunkett 1990, Ethnologue 2005)
- linguistic island surrounded by various different Gur languages such as Kabiye, Lokpa and Tem
- typological properties:
  - SVO
  - productive noun class system (pre- and suffixes)
  - two distinct phonological tones; downstep, downdrift
  - vowel harmony
- alternate name: Bezantche
- Niger-Congo, Kwa, Potou Tano, Guang

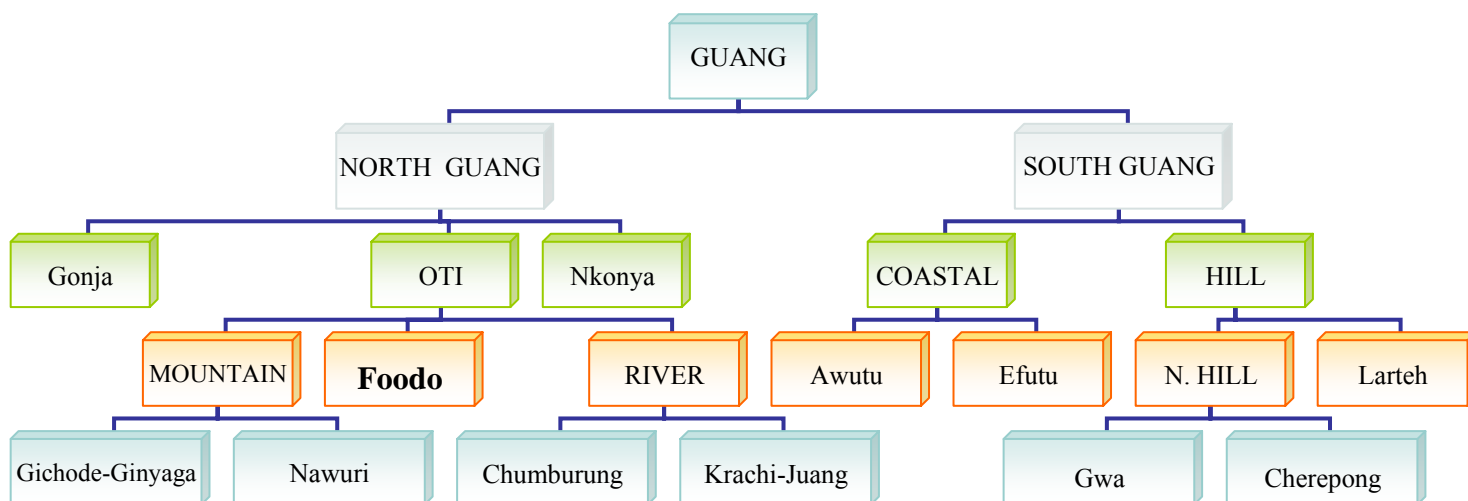


fig. 1: Subclassification of Guang languages (Snider 1990a: 3; cited in Plunkett 1991: 6)

## Data

Within the frame of our project “Focus in Gur and Kwa languages” (director: B. Reineke) the data was elicited during field research in March 2005 in Semere, Bénin, on the basis of the Questionnaire On Information Structure (QUIS) developed by the Collaborative research center SFB 632 “Information structure”, funded by the German Research Foundation.

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## Definition of Focus

„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 to be most essential for A to integrate into his pragmatic information.” (Dik 1997: 326)

## 2 *Marked vs. unmarked focus*

Four strategies for expressing the pragmatic category of focus in Foodo:

- sentence initial position of the focused constituent + FM *N*
- sentence initial position of the focused constituent + FM *m*
- focused constituent/sentence + predicator *gÉ*
- unmarked structure

### 2.1 **Marked focus**

#### 2.1.1 **Sentence initial position + focus marker *N***

The first strategy to mark focus has the following characteristics:

- there is the normal SVO structure
- the subject is marked obligatorily by the FM *N*
- this structure is present in the imperfective as well as in the perfective; but while there are no changes to the out-of-focus part in the imperfective, something exceptional happens in the perfective
- focusing on the subject with *N* is generally not possible in the future tense

Marking the subject with the FM *N* fulfils the following functions:

- it expresses focus on the subject, new information focus as well as contrastive focus
- focusing of all-new sentences as well as expressing text introducing sentences

(1) ‘Who is coming too late?’

ònyírín 'ńj 'mɛ néé bà mánám.  
homme FM NEG IPF venir vite  
‘C’est L’HOMME qui ne vient pas vite.’

(2) ‘THE WOMAN has stolen the watch!’

ònyírín 'ńj cúú wáácì .  
homme FM prendre montre  
‘C’est L’HOMME qui a pris la montre.’

(3) ‘HE ate the beans.’

ààyí, mí 'ńj wî.  
non, 1sg.emph FM manger  
‘Non, c’est MOI.’

(4) ‘What happened?’

mì lóólì jì jándà.  
1sg.poss voiture FM gêter  
‘MA VOITURE EST EN PANNE.’

(5) ób'ílélé 'ókú ò cínâ, mù wòlì ópî.  
vieux\_homme INDEF FM rester/s'asseoir, 3sg seule maison  
‘IL ETAIT UNE FOIS UN VIEIL HOMME, SEUL DANS SA MAISON.’

### 2.1.2 Sentence initial position + focus marker *m*

The second strategy to mark focus has the following characteristics:

- sentence initial position of the focused element and its additional marking with the FM *m*
- it is viable in all forms of tense and aspect; there are no changes to the out-of-focus part in the imperfective but in the perfective and the future.

By employing this strategy:

- mostly non-subject focus is expressed and this again is used to express new-information focus as well as contrastive focus (correction, selection, reduction – not expansion though)
- subject-focus in future tense sentences and the topicalization of subjects out of embedded structures is expressed

(6) question:

mìné nì òcìím wî?  
que FM woman manger  
'QU'a mangé la femme?'

(7) reply:

àcécé nì ò wî.  
haricot FM 3sg manger  
'Ce sont DES HARICOTS qu'elle a mangés.'

(8) 'Where did the woman go?'

túúlé nì ò náá.  
Europe FM 3sg aller  
'Elle est allée en EUROPE.'

(9) 'For whom do you wash the car?'

mí sí nì n' 'nécé f'ólí sà  
1sg.poss père FM 1sg IPF laver pour  
'Pour MON PERE je (le) lave.'

(10) 'What do you need the bricks for?'

óbóó nì yè á pólí là.  
case FM SUB 1pl.FUT construire avec  
'C'est LA CASE que nous allons construire avec.'

(11) 'It's the man who will eat the yams.'

òcìím nì yè ó 'wí 'kújòò.  
femme FM SUB 3sg.FUT manger igname  
'C'est LA FEMME qui va manger de l'igname.'

(12) 'Who did she say cut the trees?'

Gbání nì ò káŋ yè òó kùù kúyúù  
Gbani FM 3sg parler SUB 3sg.PF couper arbre  
'C'est GBANI, qu' elle a dit, qui a coupé l'arbre.'



(17) ‘Where did the woman go?’

òs náá túúlé.

3sg PF aller Europe

‘Elle est allée en EUROPE.’

cf. (8)

túúlé nì ò náá.

Europe FM 3sg aller

(18) ‘What will happen?’

kpìdéeé í yílàà òfólí.

chien FUT attraper garçon

‘LE CHIEN ATTRAPERA LE GARÇON.’

(19) ‘What happened?’

bàá kúlù 'óbéè.

3pl.PF accoucher enfant

‘UN ENFANT EST NE.’

(20) ‘What did Gbanaa do?’

Gbànáá à sòò mótô

Gbanaa PF acheter moto

‘Gbanaa A ACHETÉ UNE MOTOCYCLETTE.’

(21) ‘The woman hi the boy.’

ààyí, ó 'béé 'dá òŋ.

non, 3sg FUT frapper 3sg.OBJ

‘Non, elle le frappeRA.’ (focus on auxiliary)

### 3 Analysis

Homophone occurrence of *ni*:

- sentence connecting conjunction in the perfective
- predicator meaning „voici“

#### Sentence connecting conjunction in the perfective

(22) òcím 'ń bà nì ò cúú w'áácì .

femme FM venir CNJ 3sg prendre montre

‘C'est LA FEMME qui est venu et pris la montre.’

(23) òó bà ní ò jì bìlǐjáá.  
 3sg.PF venir CNJ 3sg manger pâte  
 ‘Il est venu et a mangé la pâte.’ (Plunkett 2005: 2f.)

- In perfective sentences with sentence-initial focused constituent + *N* / *m* and in sequential expressions in the perfective introduced by *m* the same restrictions on marking with the perfective morpheme *a-* apply.
- The conjunction as well as the entire narrative structure is a possible source of the development of marked focus structures.
- Both FMs can be traced back to the same morpheme, namely *m* - the form *N* that is used for subject focus therefore represents a grammaticalised, reduced form of *m*.

### Focus marking in the future tense

Restriction concerning *m* in the future tense demands another sentence-initial/introductory element  
 → after focus marker *m* a subordinator / complementiser follows:

(24) òcǐím í wì kújódò.                      ó wì kújódò.  
 femme FUT manger igname                      3sg.FUT manger igname  
 ‘La femme va manger de l’igname.’                      ‘Elle va manger de l’igname.’

(25) òcǐím nì yè ó wì kújódò.                      (= 11)  
 femme FM SUB 3sg.FUT manger igname  
 ‘C’est LA FEMME qui va manger de l’igname.’

## 4 Conclusion

- ⇒ Focus in Foodo does not have to be marked - if it is marked, then it is expressed by morpho-syntactic means.
- ⇒ Both the FM *N* and *m* as well as the fact that subject focus in contrast to non-subject focus has to be marked obligatorily manifest a subject-non-subject-asymmetry.
- ⇒ The fact that the same construction can be used to express subject as well as sentence focus including stage setting is an interesting observation because this feature is constitutive to the Gur languages of the Oti-Volta family which we have been working on so far. It has been observed among the Kwa languages only in Lelemi, a Togorest language, while it seems to be less viable in Akan and Gbe.

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### Abbreviations

CNJ	conjunction	OBJ	object
DEM	demonstrative pronoun	PF	perfective
emph	emphatic pronoun	pl	plural
FM	focus marker	poss	possessive pronoun
FUT	future	PRED	predicator
INDEF	indefinite	SF	subject focus
INF	infinitive	sg	singular
IPF	imperfective	SUB	subordinator / complementizer
NEG	negation		

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