

Dogon focalization

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last updated December 2014

Constituent focalization is a morphosyntactic process whereby a NP, PP, or adverbial expression is pragmatically highlighted, while the remainder of the clause is treated as background. The concept may be extended to **propositional** (truth-value) focus, as in *Yes I did!*, and to verb or VP focus, as in *Eating fish is what I did*, in languages with relevant constructions.

In English, constituent focalization is expressed either by yelling (*I ate the meat, not the rice!*), or by using any of several cleft constructions: *It was the meat (not the rice) that I ate* (cleft); *What I ate was the meat* (pseudo-cleft); *The meat is what I ate* (inverted pseudo-cleft).

Because of the ambiguity of (written) English ‘It was the meat that I ate’, i.e. bracketable either as ‘It was the meat_x [focus] that I ate \emptyset_x ’ or as ‘It (e.g. the problem) was [the meat_x which I ate \emptyset_x]’, to avoid confusion in free translations of Dogon examples the focalized constituent is underlined, and “[focus]” is added in brackets.

WH questions (i.e. content interrogatives) by their intrinsically focalize the questioned constituent (NP or adverb). For example, in ‘What [focus] did you eat?’ the speaker and addressee share the knowledge or assumption that the addressee ate something, and the identity of this food is the issue. Full-clause responses to WH questions are likewise naturally focalized semantically. However, content questions and responses need not be morphosyntactically focalized.

Constituent focalization is much more common in positive than in negative clauses. For example, *The meat [focus] is what I didn’t eat*, while meaningful and occasionally uttered in special contexts, is unusual.

Most of the following discussion concerns constituent focalization. It is expressed in Dogon languages by one or more of the mechanisms in (1a-b). Processes (a-c) directly affect the form or position of the focalized constituent. Processes (d-f) affect the verb, indexing or presupposing the presence of a distinct focalized constituent.

- (1) a. the focalized constituent...
 - i. adds the ‘it is’ clitic (cleft construction)
 - ii. adds a focus (or subject-focus) marker distinct from the ‘it is’ clitic
 - iii. shifts to clause-initial or preverbal position

- b. the verb...
 - i. remains verb-like in form but syllabic perfective positive aspect suffixes (other than ablaut to E- or I-stem) are deleted or converge on a single form

- ii. has pronominal-subject suffixal agreement neutralized to zero (pseudo-3Sg) for subject focus, at least for 1st/2nd person subjects
- iii. has a lengthened final vowel in subject relatives
- iv. takes endings for subject focus resembling verb-participles in subject relative clauses
- v. replaces the regular pronominal-subject suffixes by pronominal proclitics in nonsubject focalization (as in nonsubject relatives)
- vi. has a tone overlay including a H-tone (i.e. not {L} arguably attributable to downdrift)

The most common constituent-focalizing devices in Dogon languages are clefting with the ‘it is’ clitic (1a.i), verb-suffix modification (1b.i), and neutralization/omission of pronominal-subject suffixation in subject relatives (1b.ii).

subject versus nonsubject focalization

Subject focalization, as in ‘It was Seydou [focus] who hit me’) is most consistently distinguished from nonsubject focalization, as in ‘It was Seydou [focus] who(m) I hit’, by the neutralization of pronominal-subject marking on the verb as 3Sg/zero in the former. However, this only works in languages with pronominal-subject suffixation, and it is reliable only when the focalized subject is a 1st/2nd person pronoun. (3Pl agreement is allowed in some languages.)

In a few languages, there are other indicators of subject focalization. One is the use of a subject-focus marker that is not used in nonsubject focus (Toro Tegu). Another is the use of participle-like verb forms similar to but distinct from those used in relative clauses (Najamba, Tebul Ure).

focalization and relativization

In languages that use verb-marking strategies for constituent focalization, the question arises how focalization relates to relativization. In many languages of the world, including neighboring Songhay languages, focalization and relativization are extractive (preposed focalized constituents, external relative heads). By contrast, Dogon focalization is usually not clearly extractive, and relative clauses almost always have internal heads. The two processes are therefore generally distinct.

The situation must be considered separately for each language and the issue is too complex to be covered here. The languages that appear to have the closest connection between focalization and relativization are the northwestern languages Najamba and Tiranige. In Najamba, subject relatives (except perfective positive) have a participial form similar to that found in relatives. In Tiranige, nonsubject focalization can induce

replacement of pronominal-subject suffixes by preverbal proclitic pronouns, as in nonsubject relatives.

summary of focalization morphosyntax

Omitting many details and nuances, the strategies used by the various Dogon languages are summarized in (2). Parenthesizes indicate that the phenomenon is restricted or unsystematic for the language in question.

(2)	eastern	1a.i	1a.ii	1a.iii	1b.i	1b.ii	1b.iii	1b.iv	1b.v	1b.vi
	Toro Tegu	—	—	√	√	√	—	—	—	—
	Ben Tey	(√)	—	—	√	√	—	—	—	—
	Nanga	—	—	—	√	—	—	—	—	—
	Jamsay	√	—	—	√	√	—	—	—	—
	Togo Kan	—	—	√	√	(—)	—	—	—	—
	Tommo So	√	—	(√)	√	√	—	—	—	—
	Donno So	—	—	(√)	n.a.	√	—	—	—	—
	Yorno So	√	—	—	√	√	—	—	—	—
	Tomo Kan	??	??	??	??	??	??	??	??	??
	northwestern									
	Najamba	—	√	√	n.a.	√	√	√	—	—
	Tebul Ure	—	—	—	—	√	√	—	—	—
	Yanda Dom	—	—	(√)	(—)	√	√	—	—	—
	Tiranige	√	—	—	—	√	—	—	√	√
	Dogul Dom	??	??	??	??	??	??	??	??	??
	southwestern									
	Bunoge	(√)	—	—	n.a.	(√)	—	n.a.	√	√
	Mombo	??	??	??	??	??	??	??	??	??
	Ampari	??	??	??	??	??	??	??	??	??
	Penange	√	—	—	n.a.	(√)	—	n.a.	√	√

‘it is’ (identificational) clitic after focalized constituent

Each Dogon language has an **identificational clitic** (see the separate piece on this topic, which includes the forms), often referred to as the ‘it is’ clitic. It is enclitic to a NP or pronoun. In simple identificational predicates, the topic (subject) is jointly understood and unexpressed, corresponding to *it* in English *it’s me!* said after knocking on a door. An overt topical NP can be added to form a copular clause, as in ‘Seydou is a blacksmith’, in Dogon languages more aptly glossed ‘Seydou, it’s (=he’s) a blacksmith’. If the topic is a pronoun other than 3Sg, the ‘it is’ clitic can be conjugated.

The ‘it is’ clitic doubles in most Dogon languages as a constituent focalizer, roughly as in English clefts. In focalizing function, the ‘it is’ particle is not conjugatable.

In Ben Tey, a problem with using the ‘it is’ clitic =*m̄* after a noun or noun-adjective combination is the possibility of confusion with animate singular suffix *-m*. Perhaps as a result, the ‘it is’ clitic is mainly used with certain types of NP that do not allow the AnSg suffix, namely pronouns, demonstratives, and personal names.

focus morpheme other than ‘it is’ clitic after focalized constituent

In Toro Tegu, a **subject-focus** particle *kɔ̄* (optionally *kɛ̄* with plural subject) directly follows a focalized subject, unless this NP is directly adjacent to the verb (proclitics to the verb may intervene). *kɔ̄* and *kɛ̄* are used for subject focus even after focalized 1st/2nd person pronouns. However, they are identical segmentally (albeit not tonally) to nonhuman third person pronouns, singular *kɔ́* and plural *kɛ́*, which occur for example in direct object function preceding verbs.

Najamba has a focus morpheme *yà*: that follows both subject and nonsubject focalized constituents.

absence of ‘it is’ or other focus morpheme on focalized constituent

No ‘it is’ or other focus morpheme was observed in Nanga following a constituent that appears to be semantically highlighted (e.g. the WH interrogative in content questions). There is no explicit morphological marking of the focalized constituent, but a modification of the verbal inflection (as sketched below) may index focalization.

In Toro Tegu, focalized nonsubject constituents have no ‘it is’ or other focus morpheme.

The obligatory structural absence of a focus marker not the same as the situation in some Dogon languages where the ‘it is’ clitic is systematically added to focalized constituents, but where this clitic has two or more surface variants after allomorphic and phonological rules, one of which happens to be zero (no audible change) or consists only of a modification of the final vowel of the preceding word (L-tone and/or lengthening).

See the separate piece on “Dogon identificational ‘it is X’” for the forms of the clitic in various languages.

reordering of focalized constituent

In the majority of Dogon languages, there is no systematic reordering of focalized constituents. With larger textual corpora than are currently available, it is possible that some trends might emerge for these languages. More systematic reorderings are commented on in what follows.

In Togo Kan, the usual SOV order is reversed to OSV when the subject NP is focalized. In other words, the focalized constituent occurs in immediately preverbal position (except that preverbal proclitics may intervene).

In Toro Tegu, by contrast, a focalized constituent is usually fronting to clause-initial position. Therefore OSV order in this language points to object (not subject) focalization.

An analytical difficulty here is that object fronting within the clause is not always easily distinguishable from preclausal object topicalization. In principle, the two can be distinguished by case-marking and/or resumptive pronouns. A fronted but still clause-internal object NP should show accusative marking under the same conditions as with non-fronted objects. A topicalized NP should lack accusative marking and should correspond to a resumptive object pronoun in the clause proper (‘as for Seydou, I saw him’). However, with nonhuman/inanimate objects these tests are not always reliable.

accusative case-marking on focalized object NP

Most Dogon languages have an accusative marker, often a postposition-like particle or clitic added at the end of the NP. In some languages (Tommo So, Donno So, Yorno So) it is or can be homophonous to the ‘it is’ clitics. For details, see the separate piece “Dogon case-marking.”

Accusative marking is more or less obligatory for pronouns with human reference, and obligatory or very common for human nouns, but inanimates generally avoid it. In the middle, for example names of domestic animals, accusative marking tends to be most systematic when the object is focalized. Therefore accusative marking can overlap with focus marking.

To the extent that the accusative marker in object-focus clauses is still a true case suffix, its presence is an indication that the focalized constituent has not been extracted from its clause.

In Tommo So, ‘it is’ clitic =*ĵ* is homophonous to the accusative clitic =*ĵ*. When a direct object NP is focalized it normally shows this clitic, but it is difficult to determine whether it is a cleft or just a form with accusative marking, or the combination of both

(with double $=\dot{j}=\dot{j}$ simplifying phonologically to $=\dot{j}$). When a subject NP is focalized, it optionally shows $=\dot{j}$ under conditions that are not entirely clear.

morphological modification of aspect suffixation on verb

In languages where (unlike Najamba) the verb remains verb-like, rather than being converted into a participle with nominal/adjective morphological features, the verb may nonetheless be modified in the presence of a focalized constituent. This can sometimes be interpreted as **defocalization** of the verb, and more generally defocalization (backgrounding) of the entire clause with the exception of the focalized constituent.

A pan-Dogon pattern is **dropping of H-tones** in the verb, which is then all L-toned, after a focalized constituent. This may simply be due to the combination of lack of emphasis plus the effects of **downdrift** by which the (usually clause-final) verb has low pitch at the end of a long breath group. H-tone dropping is most common in cases where the full tonal form of the verb would have {L}-toned verb stem anyway before a single H-tone in the suffix, since such forms are particularly vulnerable to downdrift.

More systematic are morphological modifications in perfective positive verbs. This usually takes the form of deleting syllabic perfective suffixes, resulting in an abbreviated perfective positive form consisting of the bare stem, or an E- or I-stem (with stem-final vowel shifted to e/ϵ or i). The normal pronominal-subject suffixes may be added to this abbreviated perfective, except where pronominal-subject categories are neutralized (in subject relatives). **Perfective reduction** occurs, for example, in Jamsay, where verbs in unfocalized clauses may have syllabic perfective suffixes $-t\dot{i}$, $-y\dot{\epsilon}$, or $-s\dot{a}$, all of which are replaced by the bare stem with {L}-tones in clauses with a focalized constituent. To be sure, the reduced perfective can be used whenever the verb is preceding by other elements; in other words, the “focalization” does not have to be emphatic. Similar perfective reduction occurs in Ben Tey, Nanga, and Tommo So. However, in some languages the simple E- or I-stem without further aspect suffixation is the standard perfective positive form, in unfocalized as well as focalized clauses.

A more subtle modification is **perfective neutralization**, whereby multiple perfective positive suffixes are possible in unfocalized clauses, but one of them generalizes when a constituent is focalized. This is the case in Toro Tegu, where perfective $-s\dot{a}$ generalizes at the expense of other perfective positive suffixes that can occur only in unfocalized clauses. In other Dogon languages, perfective neutralization is more typical of relativization than of focalization.

neutralization of pronominal-subject suffix categories in subject-focus clauses

Eastern and northwestern Dogon languages have pronominal-subject suffixes for at least some pronominal categories in unfocalized main clauses. Eastern Dogon languages

Donno So, Yorno So, and Tommo Kan have only skeletal pronominal-subject suffix systems, while northwestern Dogon Tiranige has a mix of suffixes and proclitics. Southwestern languages have proclitics rather than suffixes for 1st/2nd person pronominal-subject marking in unfocalized clauses, and 3Sg is zero, so for these languages the dropping of pronominal suffixes only affects 3Pl.

With the exception of Nanga, 1st/2nd person pronominal-subject suffixes are dropped in subject focus clauses in the relevant languages. In eastern Dogon, the resulting verb consists of the stem plus aspect marker, and it is identical to the (zero) 3Sg subject form in unfocalized clauses (except that perfective positive aspect markers may be omitted or neutralized). Overt 3Pl subject suffixation is allowed in some languages. In most northwestern languages (Najamba, Tebul Ure, Yanda Dom), and in the southwestern languages, the verb is further modified by lengthening the final vowel, by tone overlays, or by addition of a participial suffix.

subject-focus verb endings with lengthened final vowel

In the northwestern languages Najamba, Tebul Ure, and Yanda Dom, the verb in a subject focalized clause has an invariant form with lengthened final vowel.

In Najamba, the optional focus particle *yà:* follows the focalized constituent (subject or nonsubject). As in other Dogon languages, with nonsubject focus the verb has the same form (aspect suffixes, pronominal-subject suffixes) as in unfocalized clauses.

In Najamba subject relatives (‘it was Seydou [focus] who hit me’), if the verb is a perfective positive, it is modified into a reduced perfective stem with invariant zero (pseudo-3Sg) pronominal-subject regardless of subject category, as in most Dogon languages. In other inflectional categories (perfective negative, imperfective positive or negative), and in constructions including auxiliaries, the inflectional suffix changes its final vowel to -e: ~ -ε: (depending on ATR-harmonic class of the stem). This can be modeled as suffixation of /-E/, mid-height and front vowel unspecified for ATR, which contracts with the final vowel of the preceding inflectional suffix to produce a long vowel. Such subject-focus forms resemble, but are not identical to, participles that occur in subject relatives. Of the two, only subject-relative participles have two forms, agreeing in noun-class and number, with the head NP.

Similar systems with lengthened final vowel occur in Tebul Ure and Yanda Dom.

subject-focus verbs with participial morphemes as in relative clauses

In the southwestern languages Bunoge and Penange, and in a neighboring northwestern language (Tiranige), the verb in a subject-focus clause may have participial suffixes (other than vowel lengthening) that resemble those in relative clauses.

tone overlay on verb

In Tiranige (northwestern), the verb has a {H} tone overlay in subject focalization, and {LH} in nonsubject focalization. Because these overlays contain at least one H-tone, they are clearly grammatical tone overlays, unlike the apparent {L} overlay in other Dogon languages which is arguably attributable to normal downdrift.

The historical relationship between the forms of subject-focus verbs, with {H} overlay in Tiranige but with final vowel lengthening in other northwestern languages (Najamba, Tebul Ure, Yanda Dom), remains to be clarified.

The southwestern languages have complex tonal patterns, sensitive to pronominal-subject category, in unfocalized main clauses. They have further tonal complexities in subject-focus and nonsubject-focus clauses. For example, in Bunoge 3Sg and 3Pl subjects are distinguished in unfocalized main clauses by presence/absence of a 3Pl subject suffix, but in subject-focus clauses the suffixal distinction is replaced by tone overlays: {HL} for 3Pl (like 1Sg and 2Sg), {LHL} for 3Sg (like 1Pl and 2Pl).

verb and VP focalization

Initial *Cv-* reduplication can occur with perfective, imperfective, and derived stative verbs in several Dogon languages, the details differing from one language to another. The reduplication can be interpreted as verb (or VP) focalization, though the “focus” need not be emphatic.

Another element with similar functions is the existential proclitic (*yé* or variant, which is especially common preceding stative quasi-verbs ‘be’ and ‘have’, but can also occur before other statives (including derived statives) as an alternative to reduplication.

Initial reduplication and the existential proclitic are disallowed when any other constituent is focalized, for example in WH-questions.

proposition (truth-value) focalization

Clausal focalization in a main clause is equivalent to epistemic emphasis, i.e. insisting on the truth (or falseness) of an assertion: *I did deliver the package; I did not deliver the package.*

Each Dogon language has a few clause-final emphatic morphemes of this pragmatic type, with various nuances including agreement/confirmation and challenge. These morphemes are added to ordinary clauses, and have nothing to do with the morphosyntax of constituent or verb/VP focalization.

It is possible to focalize a subordinated clause that functions as a NP-like or adverb-like function in the larger sentence. This is unsurprising, and can be considered

just a special case of NP or adverb focalization. Textual examples of focalized subordinated clauses are rare.