

# The information packaging particle $la$ in Dagaare

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# Introduction

This talk examines the use of the information packaging 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

# Introduction: Dagaare

## Basic Language Facts:

- Classification: Gur language family, Oti–Volta 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)

## Basic word order:

- S V O X

## Tonal language:

- Two level tones, fall-rise, rise-fall

# Introduction: Dagaare

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

Multiple dialects:

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

# Introduction: 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 sentences) 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

## Introduction: Previous Literature

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

## Basic Distribution of *la*

*la* follows the verb, if transitive, preceding the direct object, unless a pronoun (Bodomo 1997, p. 95)

(3) o da ko **la** Dɛrɛ a gane  
3.SG PST give PART Dere DET book  
'She gave Dere a book.'

(4) \*o da ko Dɛrɛ la a gane  
3.SG PST give Dere PART DET book  
'She gave Dere a book.'

(5) o da ko ma la a gane  
3.SG PST give me PART DET book  
'She gave Dere a book.'

## Basic Distribution of *la*

If intransitive, precedes other adjuncts

- (6) Bayuo da gbiree la velaa  
Bayuo PST go-PFT- PART good  
'Bayuo slept well.'

*la* occurs regularly and is considered by Bodommo (1997) to be obligatory



## Basic Distribution of *la*

An intriguing aspect of *la* is its distribution across clause types

- Occurs in declaratives (as above)
- Occurs with interrogatives:

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

- Does not occur in imperatives or hortative sentences.

(8) Nyu!  
'Drink!'

## *la* as marker of “factivity” and focus

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

- 1 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*”
- 2 Second, as a marker of emphasis (focus)

(9) Badere *la* kpi  
Spider PART died  
'*Spider died*'

(10) Badere kpi *la*  
Spider died PART  
'*Spider died*'

## *la* as marker of “factivity” and focus

This position is echoed by Kropp Dakubu (2005)

- *la* has focal uses as well as an “affirmation” function, which may be related to Predicate Focus

## *la* as marker of “factivity” and focus

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

- (11) te da gaa **la** daa  
1.PL PST go PART market  
'We went to the market.'
- (12) te da **ba** gaa daa  
1.PL PST NEG go market  
'We did not go to the market.'
- (13) \*te da **ba** gaa **la** daa  
1.PL PST NEG go PART market  
'We did not go to the market.'

## Postverbal *la*: Predicative Focus

The postverbal use is ambiguous between (at least) wide VP-focus and all new focus

- (14) Ba      aŋgoole      la      a      naa      wiri.  
3PL.PN decorate.PF PART DET chief horse  
'They have decorated the chief's horse.'

## Postverbal *la*: Predicative Focus

- (15) Boŋ la e?  
What PART COP  
'What happened?'
- (16) Pɔge ŋmɛ la Bayuo  
woman hit PART Bayuo  
'A woman hit Bayuo.'

## Preverbal *la*: In-situ Subject Focus

Subject focus is marked in-situ by preverbal use of *la*.

- (17) An la    ɔ a    bɛŋɛ?  
who PART eat DET beans  
'Who ate the beans?'
- (18) Poge la    ɔ a    bɛŋɛ.  
woman PART eat DET beans  
'A woman ate the beans.'

## Ex-Situ Focus

Focus on elements other than the subject requires movement/bi-clausal structure (see also Bodomo 2000, Kropp Dakubu 2005)

- (19) Boŋ la ka a poge di?  
What PART COMP DET woman eat  
'What did the woman eat?'
- (20) Bɛŋɛ 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:

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

# Ex-Situ Focus

Manner Adverbials:

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

## *la* and exhaustivity

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

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

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

Picture from the literature:

- S V **la** (O) (X)  $\Rightarrow$  Broad/Predicate Focus + “Factivity”
- S **la** V (O) (X)  $\Rightarrow$  Subject Focus (exhaustive)
- X **la** ka S V (O) (X)  $\Rightarrow$  Argument Focus (exhaustive)

# Interim

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.

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

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

# What kind of focus?

The grammatical descriptions discuss focus constructions involving new information

- much wider set of uses associated with focal position

## Selective Focus

Selective focus (value is chosen from explicit list of alternatives):

- (26) Aη la ημε Bayoo? Ayuo bee Ayoo la?  
Who PART hit Bayoo? Ayuo DISJ Ayoo PART  
'Who hit Bayoo? Ayuo or Ayoo'
- (27) Ayuo la ημε Bayoo.  
Ayuo PART hit Bayoo  
'Ayuo hit Bayoo'

- Same preverbal use of *la* as for new information focus
- Similar parallel with *ex situ* cases

## Corrective Focus

- (28) A poge la ə a bɛŋɛ.  
woman PART eat DET beans  
'The woman ate the beans'
- (29) bɛŋɛ nanne, mui la ka o ə.  
beans neg.PART rice PART COMP 3.PN eat  
'Not beans, she ate RICE.'

- Similar parallel with in situ cases



## Frame-Setting Adverbial

First line of the novel uses frame-setting adverbial in ex situ position:

- (30) Sokɔɔre sokyara      pɔɔ kyerpon      kaɲa      pare  
road      intersection in      archie-big SPECIFIC under  
**la      ka      saandɔɔ      kaɲa      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)

# Narrative Chaining

- (31) Lɛ la ka ba teere a gbaŋ  
so PART COMP 3PL.PN shoot.IMPF DET gambling  
wa ta Paryeli  
come arrive Paryeli  
So they gambled until it got to the turn of Paryeli.

## Uses of focus: Conclusions

Identified focus positions correspond to many types of focus.

## Re-examining the Distribution of *la*

Recall Bodomo (1997) claimed that *la* is obligatory for declarative and interrogative sentences

- further examination of elicited and textual data indicates that *la* is *nearly* obligatory
- the interest lies in where it doesn't show up or shows up more than one would expect

## Conjunction

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

- (32) A pəge daa la a dɔɔ ane o  
DET woman push PART DET man PREP 3SG.POSS  
faŋa zaa ka o te le.  
strength all CONJ 3SG.PN ADVfall  
'The woman pushed the man with all her strength and he  
fell over.'
- (33) A peroo dɔgɛɛ la kye mere bare ka  
A sheep give-birth.PRF PART CONJ still birth COMP  
a bilii kpi.  
DET lambs die  
'The sheep littered but deserted the lambs and they died.'

# Conjunction

Indicates that *la*:

- differs from negation morphemes, which would appear on each clause
- *la* cannot be straightforwardly analyzed as a clause-level operator

# Disjunction

Disjunctive sentences may contain more than one *la*:

(34) Ba die la bee ba ba di la a  
3PL.PN win PART DISJ 3PL.PN NEG win PART DET  
deene?

game

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

(35) Ba koora la a baa bee ba koε  
3PL.PN kill.IMPf PART DET dog DISJ 3PL.PN kill.PF  
la?

PART

Are they killing the dog or did they kill it?

# Disjunction

Implication for factive analysis:

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



# Complex Sentences

Similar to conjunctions, complex sentences often contain only one *la* or *ba*

- unlike conjunctions, *la* is absent in the initial clauses in these examples

# Complex Sentences

*When* clause:

- (36) O            ma        naŋ    da    kpi    o            dee  
3SG.POSS mother when PST die 3SG.PN just  
kono            la        nentaŋ    maa.  
cry.IMPFPART tears flowing  
'When her mother died, she was shedding tears  
uncontrollably.'

# Complex Sentences

*Temporal* clause:

- (37) Te      na    wa    tara    ka      zie    nyaae    la.  
1PL.PN FUT ADV arrive COMP day break PART  
By the time we arrive, it will be daybreak.

# Complex Sentences

*Because* clause:

- (38) N        naŋ    pãã    nyu    dabiltuuri    læ    ka  
1SG.PN CONN then drink stick-bitter-PL until CONN  
n        nyaga        zaa te    zele    ŋa  
1SG.POSS intestine-PL all COP be.bitter SIM  
kyeε        toore    kye    ka    baa **ba**    wuoli  
ground.squirrel portion CONN CONN dog NEG bark  
a        poɔ.  
3PL.PN PREP  
'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:

- (39) 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

- (40) 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)
- (41) 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?

# Embedded clauses

**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 *I*<sub>a</sub>

## Conclusions: *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* as an information packaging particle

Proposal:

- *la* serves to mark 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

This is a very weak semantics

- only information packaging component, no direct effect on truth-conditions (cf. *too*)
- corresponds to the broad range of uses
- equivalent to contributing an overt Roothian F-marker and a Roothian squiggle operator (see Hartmann and Zimmermann 2012 on Bura)

## la as an information packaging particle

- (42) Badere la kpi  
Spider PART died  
'Spider died'

Ordinary meaning: DIED(SPIDER)

Focus-induced alternative:  $ALT(SPIDER) = \{x \in ENTITY\}$

Focus-induced alternative propositions:  $\{DIED(x) \mid x \in ENTITY\}$

- (43) Pɔge ηmɛ la Bayuo  
woman hit PART Bayuo  
'A woman hit Bayuo.'

Ordinary meaning:  $p = HIT(WOMAN)(BAYOU)$

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

## *la* as an information packaging particle

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

## Return to the data

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

(44) Ἀη *la*    ὠ *a*    βηηε?  
who PART eat DET beans  
'Who ate the beans?'

(45) Πογε *la*    ὠ *a*    βηηε.  
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.

- For *la* in interrogatives, the active QUD is the question itself

## 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

- (46) A pɔge daa la a dɔɔ ane o  
DET woman push PART DET man PREP 3SG.POSS  
faŋa zaa ka o te le.  
strength all CONJ 3SG.PN ADVfall  
'The woman pushed the man with all her strength and he  
fell over.'

## Return to the data

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.

- (47) O            ma        naŋ    da    kpi    o        dee  
3SG.POSS mother when PST die 3SG.PN just  
kono                la        nentaŋ    maa.  
cry.IMPFPART tears flowing  
'When her mother died, she was shedding tears  
uncontrollably.'

# Consequences

Exhaustive interpretations are not hard-wired, but arise by pragmatic reasoning (Rooth 1992)

(48) A bie la tu a zie  
The child (and nobody else) dug up the place (Kropp  
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 *la* provide an answer to a question under discussion which is not negative

- the negation of the asserted proposition will belong in the alternative set

## Conclusion and future work

- Textual data allowed us to see a range of additional uses and functions of *la*
- Able to give a simpler account of *la*, 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

Much to do!

## Preverbal *la*

Further, the preverbal use of *la* sometimes also occurred in all-new environments in elicitation

(49) *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'

(50) *Boŋ la e? Pɔge la ɔɔ a beŋε.*  
what PART be? woman PART eat DET beans  
'What happened? A woman ate the beans'

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

## Observation: Question and Answer Congruity

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

- (51) Who ate the beans?  
John<sub>F</sub> ate the beans.
- (52) What did John eat?  
John ate the beans<sub>F</sub>.

## Observation: Question and Answer Congruity

- (53) An la    ɔɔ a    bɛŋɛ?  
who PART eat DET beans  
'Who ate the beans?'
- (54) Poge la    ɔɔ a    bɛŋɛ.  
woman PART eat DET beans  
'A woman ate the beans'
- (55) Boŋ la ka a    poge di?  
What        PART COMP DET woman eat  
'What did the woman eat?'
- (56) Bɛŋɛ la ka a    poge di  
Beans        PART COMP DET woman eat  
'The woman ate beans'