

Fronted NPs in a Verb-initial language – clause-internal or external?
Prosodic cues to the rescue!

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This paper presents data from the verb-initial language Gela (spoken by about 16.000 people, one of about 70 Oceanic languages spoken in Solomon Islands), and discusses how prosody provides clues towards the interpretation of fronted constituents as pre-clausal (i.e. external to the following clause, immediately preceding it) or clause-initial (i.e. clause-internal, at the very beginning of the clause). The data used for this study consists of narratives, procedural texts and utterances elicited by means of visual stimuli.

Although Gela's basic constituent order is VOS/PS (Miller 1974), constituents can be fronted, either in pre-clausal (PC) or clause-initial (CI) position. The PC position is used for left-dislocated topics (for which there is a co-referential NP in the following clause, as *gari mane* 'young man' in (1) and *a eni* 'this one' in (2) or for 'free' or 'hanging' topics (Maslova & Bernini 2006). As to the CI position, it can be used for focused constituents (as *na baghea* 'the shark' in (1)) or contrastive topics in a parallel-contrast construction.

- (1) **Gari mane ke,** NA BAGHEA te hola-a **gaia.**
child man EMPH ART shark 3SG.NFUT take-3SG.O 3SG

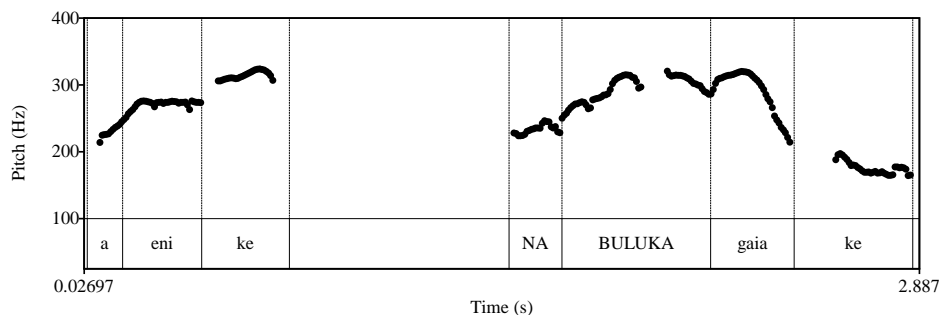
[EG: What does the young man take?]

'**The young man, he** takes **THE SHARK.**' (sj_pictures_nlg_107)

- (2) **A eni ke,** NA BULUKA **gaia** ke
ART 3SG.PROX EMPH ART cow 3SG EMPH

[In a game explaining a set of photos one at a time, moving on to the next picture:]

'**This one, it** (is) **THE COW.**' (ls_ti_mt_3_008)



The intonation contour of (2) shows how the first constituent forms a unit bounded by a pause and ending with a pitch peak, followed by a second unit set off by a pitch reset and displaying a normal clausal contour.

(1) and (2) are clear examples, the PC status of the initial NPs being evidenced by the co-referential pronouns within the clause. However, given that both subject and object NPs are not obligatory in Gela, and that the particle *ke* ‘EMPH’ is not restricted to pre-clausal position (cf. (2)), it is hard to decide for some verbal (3) and non-verbal (4) clauses whether the initial NP should be analyzed as part of the clause.

- (3) **Gaia na gari pile ke e vili-ra na ngali...**
 3SG ART child small EMPH 3SG.PST choose-3PL.O ART ngali.nuts

[EG: What is the small child doing?]

'**The young child (it)** is picking out the ngali nuts...' (dp_clips_nlg_089)

- (4) **Inau ke na poli.**
 1SG EMPH ART snake

'**I** am a snake.' or '**Me, (I)** am a snake. (rr_cs_likuliku_023)

In this talk, we will discuss the prosodic properties of these two syntactic positions, and argue for the possibility of using prosodic criteria established on clear examples to help analyze ambiguous cases, thus contributing to the discussion whether prosody can be used to help distinguish between competing syntactic accounts of how word order is derived.

References

- Maslova, Elena & Bernini, Giuliano. 2006. Sentence topics in the languages of Europe and beyond. – Giuliano Bernini & Marcia L. Schwartz (eds.), *Pragmatic organization of discourse in the languages of Europe. Empirical approaches to language typology* 20-8. Berlin – New York: Mouton de Gruyter. 67–120
- Miller, Ingrid. 1974. *Gēla syntax*. Doctoral Thesis. University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies.