

## Linking focus and clausal coordination in Mabia languages

Samuel Owahene Acheampong (U Winneba) & Anke Himmelreich (U Bielefeld)

**Summary:** In the Mabia languages (formerly Gur) spoken in Northern Ghana, the clausal conjunction is syncretic with the ex-situ focus marker of the respective language. Additionally, we can observe that focus marking can freely occur in the first conjunct of a clausal conjunction, but it cannot occur at all in the second conjunct. With the non-syncretic clausal disjunction, there is no restriction. We argue that the syncretic marker is an underspecified linking head which receives its full interpretation (focus or conjunction) depending on the structural context.

**Background:** The Mabia family consists of roughly 80 languages spoken in Sahelian West Africa. We concentrate on two languages, Dagbani and Likpakaanl, for which we collected data during fieldwork in Ghana and Germany (2022-2024). Additionally, one co-author speaks both languages natively. Mabia languages are strictly SVO. Importantly, the subject position must always be filled (Issah 2020, Issah & Smith 2020), making it easy to distinguish VP- from clausal conjunction. Concerning focus, there is both ex-situ and in-situ focus, both used freely for new information or contrastive focus and both marked by particles, not intonationally.

**Data (Dagbani):** Likpakaanl data are omitted for reasons of space but show identical patterns.

1. **Markers:** There are different conjunction markers, depending on the phrasal type. Disjunction markers do not differ, see Table (1). For focus, local subject differs from other constituents (objects/adverbials/long-distance subject focus) and ex-situ from in-situ focus, see Table (2).

	Likpakaanl and or		Dagbani and or			Likpakaanl ex in		Dagbani ex in	
(1)	NP/PP-&	ni	bee	(mi)ni	bee	(2)	local subj.	n.a	∅
	VP-&	ki	bee	ka	bee		other	le	le
	CP-&	le	bee	ka	bee			ka	la/mi

2. **Ex-situ focus:** Ex-situ focus is possible in simple and in embedded clauses (3-a), but may also apply long-distance (3-b). Ex-situ questions can be answered by in-situ focus and vice versa. Local ex-situ focus (3-a) shows signs of movement (islands, reconstruction, lack of clause-final *ya*) (data omitted). Multiple focus marking within one clause is excluded (4).

(3) *What did Peter say that John killed?*

- a. *(Peter yeli ni) noo ka John kɔrigi*  
(Peter say c) fowl FOC John kill  
'(Peter said that) John killed a FOWL.'
- b. *Noo ka Peter yeli ni John kɔrigi ya*  
fowl FOC Peter say c John kill YA  
'Peter said that John killed a FOWL.'

c. *Peter yeli ni John kɔrigi la noo*

Peter say c John kill FOC fowl  
'Peter said that John killed a FOWL.'

3. **Interaction of focus and coordination:** (5) shows the core data point. Usually, a narrowly focused element (the object in (5)) is marked by a focus particle. In a clausal conjunction, however, this is only possible in the first clause, not in the second. With disjunction (6), both ex-situ and in-situ focus marking in the second clause is possible (in-situ data omitted). Finally, overt complementizers cannot occur in the second conjunct (7), suggesting a conjunction of TPs rather than CPs. (7) also shows that a conjunction can occur independently of focus marking.

(5) *What did John buy and what did Ama cook?*

- a. *[ Shinkaga ka John da ] ka [ Ama duyi (\*la) sima ]* ⇒ \*in-situ focus  
rice FOC John buy and Ama cook FOC groundnuts  
'John bought RICE and Ama cooked GROUNDNUTS.'

- b. *\*[ Shinkaga ka John da ] ka [ sima ka Ama duyi ]* ⇒ \*ex-situ focus  
rice FOC John buy and groundnuts FOC Ama cook

(6) *What did John buy or what did Ama cooked?*

[ *Shinkaga ka John da ] bee [ sima ka Ama duyi ]* ⇒ ✓(ex-situ) focus  
 rice FOC John buy or groundnuts FOC Ama cook

(7) *John yeli ni Ama mie yili ka (\*ni) Mary da loori* ⇒ \*[CP & CP]  
 John say c Ama build house and c Mary buy car  
 'John said that Ama build a house and (that) Mary bought a car.'

4. Fragments: Unlike other West-African languages, fragments must not be followed by a focus marker (8). Also, two fragments cannot be conjoined (9) (under a non-collective reading).

(8) *Who killed fowl?* (9) *Who bought a car and who cooked food?*  
 John (\*ka)/(\*la)/(\*mi). \*John ka/mini Mary.

**Analysis:** We propose that there are no specified ex-situ focus or conjunction markers. Instead, *ka/le* is an underspecified linker L that receives a specific interpretation depending on the context.

We analyze the data in a minimalist theory (Chomsky 1995 et seq.). We assume the following:

1. Clause structure: The functional sequence in the clause is **(C) > (L(inking)P) > T > Asp > v > (LP) > V** (no immediate recursion of projections allowed). Thus, L can only be merged with TPs, not CPs, deriving (7), cf. (10-b).
2. L(inking)P: A TP can be connected with an L-head that projects a specifier. Either a TP-internal element can move there (10-a) or another clause can be base-generated there (10-b), thereby blocking movement, which rules out (5-b).
3. Form of L: In a realizational morphology (e.g. Distributed Morphology, Halle & Marantz 1993), the variants in Table (1) can be analyzed as allomorphs of L, which are sensitive to the category of L's complement e.g. via context-dependent insertion rules (11). Assuming that fragments are ex-situ focus constructions with an elided TP (cf. Merchant 2001), L is realized as null if it bears an E-feature (11-c), which derives (8). (9) is excluded because a conjunction of ex-situ focus clauses is impossible to begin with (10-b).

(10) a. [LP **fowl<sub>1</sub>** L [TP John killed —<sub>1</sub>]] (⇒ Analysis of (3-a))  
 b. [LP [LP **rice<sub>2</sub>** L J. bought —<sub>2</sub>]<sub>1</sub> L [TP A. cooked groundnuts]] (⇒ Analysis of (5)/(7))  
 c. [LP **rice<sub>2</sub>** L J. bought —<sub>2</sub>] **bee** [LP **groundnuts<sub>1</sub>** L A. cooked —<sub>1</sub>] (⇒ Analysis of (6))

(11) a. L / —TPVVP ↔ /ka/ b. L / —NPVPP ↔ /(mi)ni/ c. L<sub>[E]</sub> / —TP ↔ ∅

4. Interpretation of L: L can also be put in the beginning of sentences to stress urgency. Additionally, NP-conjunction (i.e. the formation of pluralities, Schmitt 2013) are LPs (11-b). If correct, the meaning of L cannot be tied to one feature. Instead, the distinction between focus marking and conjunction could fall out from the parallelism requirement of coordination (Williams 1978): In (10-b), two constituents of the same type are linked, allowing a conjunction interpretation. In the asymmetric (10-a), the NP *fowl* is an argument of the clause. Thus, the structure can be interpreted as linking focus and background. If neither of these is possible (no parallelism, no focus-background), the structure should be ruled out based on interpretation (but not based on syntax).

5. No focus: The ban against multiple focus particles must be structural, since intonation languages allow multiple focus markings. Whatever the exact rule, given (10), we would expect that both clausal conjunctions and ex-situ focus follow the same rule, which derives (5-a).

**Outside of Mabia**: There is a vast amount of literature on semantic maps of conjunctions (see e.g. Haspelmath 2004, Malchukov 2004): In a number of languages, the form of a conjunction is similar or identical to contrastive, consecutive, or comitative markers, or focus-sensitive additive markers ('also'), e.g., Hungarian *-is* or Japanese *-mo*. Note that 'also' is different in Dagbani and Likpakaanl and explicitly demands a focus marker. To our knowledge, there is one other case of syncretism between focus and clausal conjunction, namely with the marker *na* in Akan (Ghana, Niger Congo, Kwa), where we find the same restriction as discussed above. Other West-African languages like Gungbe (Liptak & Aboh 2013), Nupe (Mendes & Kandybowicz 2023) or Yoruba (Acheampong & Aremu 2024) behave differently. Outside of West-Africa, the closest resemblance to the pattern can be found in Bilua (Austronesian), where the narrative sequential marker to connect sentences and the ex-situ focus marker are morphologically identical

(= *nio*) (Obata 2003, Bril 2007). However, we have no data on whether similar restrictions on the co-occurrence of both markers hold in Bilua as well.