Focus Expressions in Yom

1   Some preliminary remarks[1]

Focus is regarded as pragmatic category

"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   Matching of the Yom data to our general observations on focus expressions in Gur

2.1   Means to express focus

Focus can be expressed either *in-situ* or *ex-situ*. Both syntactic constructions can further be characterized by morphological means; at least in the *ex-situ* case, phonological marking is attested, too.

focus unmarked sentence structure

(1a)   à bə̀tɔ́   sáaɣà.   (1b)   à bə̀tɔ́-rá. [2]
        CL retourner.PF maison   CL retourner.PF-COMPL
        He went home.   *He went back. (Beacham 1991:43)*

2.1.1   Subject focus
-    subject is obligatorily marked with the FM -ra
-    after the subject NP + FM -ra, a coreferent anaphoric pronoun has to be used
-    the out-of-focus-part shows a special tonal pattern

(2)   question: question word obligatorily marked by FM

         Wé-rá á bə́tɔ́   kááwə̂r?
         Qui.FM CL retourner.PF derrière?
         QUI est arrivé en retard?

(2a)   answer: subject obligatorily marked by FM

         Dɔ́ɔ̀ cɛ́ɛ́-rà á bə́tɔ́   kááwə̂r.
         homme DEM-FM CL retourner.PF derrière
         C'est L'HOMME LA qui a été en retard.

2.1.2   Non-Subject Focus

in-situ: no morphological, and, to the best of my knowledge, no phonological marking

---

[2] The completion particle is named as such by Beacham because of his position: It is always suffixed to the verb in the imperfective or perfective indicative forms in affirmative sentences, if nothing follows the verb, i.e. the immediate verb-final position is empty and the verb completes the sentence or clause. Otherwise, i.e. if object, adjunct or some particle (like nEE in subordinated sentences) follows, no completion particle is necessary. The form of the completion particle varies according to the aspect and to the verb class. It is excluded from subjunctive mode and negative sentences. The completion particle suffixed to the verb is not used in relative clauses.

ex-situ:
- no resumptive pronoun in its canonical position
- structurally identical with that in sentences not marked for focus (1b), i.e. to the verb the completion particle is suffixed and there is no tone change

(3) *ex-situ* question: FM suffixed to the preposed question word

bɔ́-rá   p!ɔ́ɣá   jǐl-lá
que-FM woman manger.PF-COMPL
QU'a mangé la femme?

(3a) *ex-situ answer*: preposed object marked with FM

tu-bɛɛraa-ra   a   jil-la
haricot-non_mûr CL manger.PF-COMPL
Ce sont des HARICOTS NON- MÛRS qu'elle a mangés.

(3b) *in-situ answer*: no focus marking

à   jír   tú-bèɛráà
CL manger.PF haricot-non_mûr
Elle a mangé des HARICOTS NON-MURS.

2.1.3 Predicate Focus

in-situ:
- FM –ra always occurs at the end of the transitive clause, i.e. after the object, never directly after the verb in focus (4a).
- In sentences with an intransitive verb or when the object of the transitive verb is not spelled out, something has to intervene between verb and FM. This is either the "completion particle" (5a) or the so-called "syntactic unit marker" (6b) or both (7b).

ex-situ:
- nominalized verb at the beginning of the sentence followed by the FM
- a copy of the verb holding its canonical position (ex. 4b)

(4) statement: not focus marked: *La femme a tapé Woru.*

(4a) reaction : FM at the end of the sentence   (4b) reaction : nominalized verb + FM

áawó, à yír   ú-rà   áawó, yíráɲá-rá   à yír   ʋ̀
non,   CL appeler.PF CL-FM   non, appeler.INF-FM CL appeler.PF CL
Non, elle L'A APPELEE.   *Non,c'est l'APPELER qu'elle a fait.*

(5) yes-no-question: no focus marking :   *Es-tu allé nager et manger?*

(5a) answer: focus marking following the first verb+COMPL

ááw!ó, mà dēr-wā-rā   ká bàmbám
non,   1sg aller-COMPL-FM CNJ nager.SER
Non, je SUIS SEULEMENT ALLE nager.

(6)   question: no focus marking : *A-t-il mangé ou va-t-il manger?*

(6a)   answer: no focus marking   (6b)   answer: FM after object

á   nà   jí.   á   nà   jí-ú-rà
CL FUT manger   CL FUT manger-SUM-FM
Il va manger.   *Il VA MANGER.*

(7)   statement: no focus marking   (7a) answer: FM following the correcting answer

pɔ́ɣá kòllɔ́-rá   áaw!ó, à yìl-lá-ú-rà
femme parler.PF-COMPL   non, CL appeler.PF-COMPL-SUM-FM
La femme a parlé.   *Non, elle A APPELE.*

2.1.4   Sentence Focus

- primary expression for marking sentence focus: focus marking on subject (8)

answer to the question : Qu'arrive-t-il?: subject is focus marked by FM

(8)   dáfársɔ́-rá sɔ̀ péer   dâr.
       garcon-FM   CL tailler/sculpter.PF bois
       LES *GARÇONS SONT EN TRAIN DE SCULPTER DU BOIS.*

- same construction can be seen as stage-setting device

(9)   sámɔ́ɣá ə̀ǹ kúsámɔ́ɣá-rá bá   zél-lá.
       cheval.sg et velo.sg.FM   CL se_tenir_debout.IPF-COMPL
       C'EST UN CHEVAL ET UN VELO QUI SONT DEBOUT.

- secondary strategy: use of the marked *in-situ* predicate focus form, i.e. the whole sentence
  can be marked with FM –ra at its end (10).

(10)   answer to the question : Qu'est-il arrivé hier ?: FM at the end of the sentence

       bà gbúr   mà   dɔ́ɔ bɛ́ɣá-rà
       CL frapper.PF 1sg.poss ami   enfant-FM
       ILS ONT BATTU L'ENFANT DE MON AMIE.

Summary:
Focus expressions in Yom are characterized by the following features:
1. we can differentiate between *ex-situ* and *in-situ* focus constructions
2. *ex-situ* **constructions** have the following characteristics:
-   the constituent in focus is placed at the beginning of the sentence
-   there exist one single overall FM –rà, which is segmentally identical with a so-called
    identifier and which is postponed after the constituent or sentence which lies in the scope
    of focus
-   FM is obligatory in nearly all occurrences of *ex-situ,* i.e. in affirmative and negative
    sentences – but is excluded from sentence focus constructions in subjunctive mood
    (including imperative).
-   there are special tonal pattern of the predicate in the out-of-focus part of the SF-
    construction.
3. *in-situ* **constructions** at the other hand can be characterized by the following features:
-   only object and predicate focus can be expressed *in-situ*
-   whereas object *in-situ* focus is not marked at all,
-   predicate *in-situ* focus is marked with FM –ra at the end of the whole sentence
-   to the best of my knowledge, there is no phonological marking of *in-situ* constructions

Up to now we have observed that Yom knows *ex-situ* and *in-situ* focus constructions. It deviates from the "Gur pattern" in so far as we do not seem to find object *in-situ* focus constructions with morphological marking and no morphological markers which can directly clitized to the predicate to mark verb focus.

2.2   Asymmetry between SF and NSF

There is an asymmetry found between constructions that focus subjects and non-subjects.
(a)   Subjects are generally only focused via *ex-situ* constructions, non-subjects can be focused *ex-situ* as well as *in-situ*.
(b)   In SF, the use of the morphological marking (focus marker, special out-of-focus verbal morphology) is obligatory, in NSF morphological marking is in some languages optional.
(c)   In SF, the double subject constraint, which disallows a subject pronoun that is coreferent with the focus constituent, is in many languages active.

Yom displays the same asymmetries like other Gur languages treated by us. It deviates only with respect to her focus marker which is obligatory in all instances of *ex-situ* constructions.

2.3   Markedness of Focus and Focus ambiguities

We find focus ambiguities in the following ways:
(a)   SF and sentence focus are often coded in the same way.
(b)   The focus on a NP can have scope over the whole NP or only over part of it.

Yom follows the "Gur" way of dealing with focus expressions insofar as (1) constructions with the subject marked for focus can be used not only for subject focus, but for sentence focus too and (2) it shows up ambiguities concerning the scope of focus if a complex NP is marked with FM -ra.

(11)   example for the ambiguity between complex NP or only part of it:

dáfárɣá cɔcɔkpàríi-rá ì   tɔ́tíi-rá.
garçon   pantalon-FM   CL déchirer.PF-COMPL
Le pantalon DU GARÇON a été déchiré.

2.4   Out-of-Focus marking has relative clause-like morphological features

There are three possible ways to analyze *ex-situ* constructions (cf. BR)
(a)   as simple extraction, without the characteristics of a cleft (monoclausal)
(b)   as cleft (biclausal)
(c)   as narrative clause (biclausal).

-   no relation to narrative structures
-   but: strinking similarities in the marking of the out-of-focus part of SF and relative clauses and homophony between FM and predicator[3] in identificational / presentational predications containing only one argument

---

[3] It is not identical with the 'be'-verb in Yom expressing qualificative / identificational /classificational and locative meaning.

(12)   pɔ́ɣá ná jī   núŋà. / à nà jī   núŋà   affirmative sentence
       femme FUT manger igname / CL FUT manger igname
       la femme va manger de l'igname. / elle va manger de l'igname

(12a) pɔ́ɣá [(dé!ʊ́) á ná jí   núŋá nèè] á jènə̀-wá.   S-REL
       femme (REL) CL FUT manger igname SUB CL être_belle-COMPL
       la femme qui va manger de l'igname est belle.

(12b) pɔ́ɣá-rá   á ná jí   nūŋà.   SF
       femme -FM CL FUT manger igname
       c'est la FEMME qui va manger de l'igname.

(13a) núŋá [(d!ɛ́ɛ́) pɔ́ɣá ná   jī   nèē̄] à kpàrìi-wá.   non-S-REL
       igname (REL) femme FUT manger SUB   CL être_grand-COMPL
       l'igname que la femme va manger est grosse.

(13b) núŋá-rà   pɔ́ɣá ná jī-rā.   NSF
       igname-FM femme FUT manger -COMPL
       c'est l'IGNAME que la femme va manger

question: "Who is eating bananas?"

(14a)   short answer   (14b)   complete answer

       béséfwá-rà.   béséfwá-rá bá jí   ì.
       fille.pl-FM   fille.pl-FM CL manger CL
       Ce sont des FILLES.   *Ce sont les FILLES qui sont en train de les manger.*

Ex-situ focus constructions in Yom can therefore due to their similarities to relative clauses be regarded as structurally comparable to clefts and a grammaticalization path from clefts to focus constructions is therefore not unlikely[4].

3   Conclusions

To sum up, so far we have seen that Yom displays typical features of focus constructions found in other languages of our language sample: It shares with the other languages the following features:
-   it makes use of a FM which shows on one hand similarities to a predicator, but not to the copula verb like in Byali and which is on the other hand homophonous with the completion particle of the perfective aspect.
-   it displays a special tonal pattern of the verb in the out-of-focus part of *ex-situ* constructions comparable to all other languages under study by us – here the same picture shows up as in Byali in using relative-like structures
-   it shows the well-known asymmetry between SF and NSF
-   it employs the subject focus construction to mark sentence focus (i.e. thetic statements)
-   the cleft strategy seems to be relevant for the development of the *ex-situ* constructions, like in Byali.

It does not share the following features:
-   there seems to exist only one overall used FM, the other languages use more than one.
-   it displays, like Bantu languages, two different verb forms: these were explained by Beacham in syntactic terms, but it is also possible to relate them to pragmatics, i.e. to

---

[4] There is a difference in the use of the verb form, and in the existence / non-existence of FM resp. relative pronoun + subordinating particle in each of the compared constructions.

predicate focus marking – this is a question for further research, but could explain why Yom doesn't have special morphological markers for object *in-situ* focus and why there are no special particles to mark predicate focus.

- Yom doesn't accept the double subject constraint, and even opposite to this, it asks obligatorily for an anaphoric / resumptive subject clitic in the out-of-focus part of the construction.

Despite of these pecularities of the language, Yom focus constrcutions behave much like other Gur languages. At the same time, these special features in Yom ask for a clarification in order to know how they can fit into the Gur language group or in the wider Niger-Congo group.

4   References

Beacham, Charles Gordon. 1968. *The phonology and morphology of Yom*: Hartford Seminary Foundation. Ann Arbor: UMI.

Beacham, Charles Gordon. 1991. *Learning Yom: a voltaic language of the Atakora Province. (The republic of Benin, West Africa)*. Dallas: SIL.

Beacham, Charles Gordon. 1997. Vocabulaire: Yom - Francais - Anglais. Ms., *YOM KOKORII NYII BOOR*.

Bearth, Thomas. 1999. The contribution of African linguistics towards a general theory of focus. Update and critical review. *Journal of African Languages and Linguistics* 20:121-156.

Dik, Simon. 1997. *The theory of functional grammar I. The Structure of the Clause*.vol. 1: Functional Grammar Series 20. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Fiedler, Ines, Reineke, Brigitte, and Schwarz, Anne. to appear. Let's focus it: Fokus in Gur- und Kwasprachen. In *Sprach- und literaturwissenschaftliche Beiträge zum 16. Afrikanistentag*, ed. Gerald Heusing. Hamburg: LIT Verlag.

Fiedler, Ines, and Schwarz, Anne. to appear. Focus or Narrative Construction? . In *Focus Strategies: Evidence from African Languages*, eds. Enoch Aboh, Katharina Hartmann and Malte Zimmermann. Berlin: de Gruyter.

Fiedler, Ines, and Schwarz, Anne. to appear. Focus constructions and relative clauses. In *Interdisciplinary Studies on Information Structure*, eds. Shinichiro Ishihara, Michaela Schmitz and Anne Schwarz. Potsdam: Potsdam University.

Gasser, Marcel. 1988. The use of completive and incompletive aspect in Nawdm narrative discourse. *Journal of West African Languages* 18:73-88.

Gundel, Jeanette K. 1988. Universals of topic-comment structure. In *Studies in Syntactic Typology*, eds. M. Hammond, E. A. Moravcsik and J. R. Wirth, 209-239. Amsterdam: J. Benjamins.

Lambrecht, Knud. 1994. *Information structure and sentence form. Topic, focus, and the mental representations of discourse referents*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nicole, J. 2000. "La chèvre ne me mange pas bien". Syntaxe et discours dans la phrase simple en nawdem. *Gur Papers / Cahiers Voltaïques* 5:115-121.

Johnstone, Patrick and Jason Mandryk. 2001. *Operation World*. Carlisle, UK: Paternoster. – cf. Ethnologue, web version 2005.

Prost, André. 1973. Les langues de l'Atakora V: Le yom, langue des yoowa dits Pila-Pila. *Bulletin de l'IFAN* 35:323-413.

Abbreviations :

CL	class pronoun	NEG	negation
CNJ	conjunction	PF	perfective
COMPL	completion particle	Q	question marker
DEM	demonstrative pronoun	REL	relative (pronoun)
FM	focus marker	SER	verb in serial verb form
FUT	future	SUB	subordinating particle
INF	infinitive	SUM	"syntactic unit marker"
IPF	imperfective		