A grammar of Mundabli : a Bantoid (Yemne-Kimbi) language of Cameroon

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CHAPTER 14

Information structure

14.1 Introduction

In the last couple decades, a lot of progress has been made in research on information structure in African languages, cf. e.g., Aboh et al. (2007), Fiedler and Schwarz (2010) and more recently Kalinowski (2015). Among the African languages, Cameroonian languages have attracted considerable attention due to their elaborate focus marking systems. Early works dealing with Cameroonian languages are e.g., Watters (1979) and Hyman and Watters (1984). More recent works include Good (2010), Kießling (2010a) and Lovegren (2013: Chapter 11). Bond and Anderson (2014) deal with cognate head-dependent constructions which can mark focus in African languages, including several Cameroonian languages. See Foley (2007) for a brief typologically oriented overview and Lambrecht (1996) for a more detailed general treatment of information structure. I understand focus as referring to "information judged by the speaker not to be shared by the listener" (Hyman and Watters 1984: 239). I also adopt Hyman and Watters' (1984: 239) notion of assertive vs. contrastive focus. They define assertive focus as "asserted information against a neutral background". In contrastive focus on the other hand, "a non-neutral background is assumed by [speaker$_2$]. That is, [speaker$_2$] judges that [speaker$_1$] has filled the focus slot with a conflicting value." The distinction between these two types of focus is important because in some cases, the two are encoded differently. Hyman and Watters (1984: 240) claim that "in many languages [...] contrastive focus is realized by an addition to, or an operation on, the assertive focus structure." Following Lovegren (2013: 339-340) and Hyman and

Watters (1984), I distinguish between constituent focus on the one hand and auxiliary focus on the other. Just like in Mungbam, auxiliary focus in Mundabli is restricted to truth/verum focus. There are no distinct focused tenses. Like Lovegren, I divide constituent focus into argument focus and verb focus, i.e. focus on the action described by the verb or on the lexical content of the verb.

Informational status in Mundabli is marked by various means including constituent order, dedicated syntactic constructions, and particles. Mundabli has various focus marking strategies.

Mundabli can also defocalize canonically postverbal constituents by moving these to the position immediately before the verbal complex (following the subject if the latter is not moved to immediate after verb (IAV) position).[1] I refer to this construction as defocalization rather than topicalization because the term topicalization is widely used for left-dislocation, i.e. movement to the beginning of the clause rather than to IBV position.

This chapter is intended to provide a first inventory of strategies employed to express the informational status of phrases and clauses. It is based on both spontaneous and elicited data. Its structure is strongly influenced by Lovegren (2013: Ch.11), and is divided into six sections. Following this introduction, there are three sections on the different types of focus: argument focus (§14.2), which also contains sections on canonical (§14.2.1 and non-canonical constituent order (§14.2.2), verb focus (§14.3), and truth focus (§14.4). The two remaining sections deal with thetic sentences (§14.5) and cleft constructions (§14.6).

14.2 Argument focus

The primary means employed to express argument focus are word order alternations. Non-object arguments can be moved to the IAV focus position in order to be put in focus, while non-subject arguments, which follow the verb in the unmarked case, can be moved to IBV position, in order to be defocalized. Another strategy used to defocalize an object is to simply omit it, cf. §14.2.8. Argument focus can also be expressed by using a cleft-construction. As they are not restricted to argument focus, cleft-constructions are dealt with in a separate section §14.6. The remainder of this section starts of with a description of canonical (§14.2.1) and non-canonical (§14.2.2) constituent order. Following this, there is a section on focalization and defocalization for the relevant con-

[1] "Immediate after verb position" (short IAV) and "immediate before verb position" (short IBV) are terms coined by Watters (1979). In Watters' use, they refer to the positions immediately following and preceding the verb. I use these terms with a slightly modified meaning. In this thesis they refer to the positions immediately following and preceding the verbal complex. The verbal complex includes preverbal tense and negation markers, as well as verbal adverbs and the post-verbal negation marker. For details, see §8.3.

stituents (§14.2.3-§14.2.7). The section ends in a subsection on the omission of topical objects (§14.2.8).

14.2.1 Canonical constituent order

The unmarked word order of an intransitive sentence is Subject-Verb(-other) and that of a transitive sentence is Subject-Verb(-other); see (589) for examples of both. The preverbal field in Mundabli is inherently topical and the IAV position is inherently focused. Thus, in clauses with canonical constituent order, the preverbal subject represents the topic while the postverbal object is focused.

(589) n=sɛ́n bí yə̄ ɲwɛ́n, n=kɔ́ Pɛ̋ ɲwɛ́n
1SG=then exit(b) go_up(c) now 1SG=catch(b) P. now

'I then got up now, I caught Pe now, [...]'

Canonical intransitive sentences express assertive verb focus (590). Contrastive verb focus requires a cognate deverbal noun construction (cf. §14.3.1). Example (590) is uttered after the children in the narrative finally found a pot which was big enough to fit all the beans which they had contributed.

(590) dɔ̄ w-ɔ́ kpán
CL3.beans CL3-DET fit(b)

'The beans fit.'

Transitive sentences with SVO(X) constituent order may express focus on the object, as in (591), on the verb, as in the main clause in (592), or on the whole predicate (verb plus object), as in (593). The focused items in these examples are enclosed in square brackets.

(591) bə̄ kə̀ lə̌ kpɪ̄ [nɪ́ wū] nɔ̌
IMPERS P3 make(b) die(b) mother.3SG.POSS CL1;3SG.POSS QTAG

'They killed the mother, didn't they?'

(592) kə́ bɔ̋ kə̀ mū kpān, wù [tsú] bɔ̋
COND CL2 P3 drink(b) be_full(b) CL1 hit(b) CL2

'When they had drank enough, he beat them.'

(593) bɔ̋ [tsú dɔ̄]
CL2 contribute(c) CL3.beans

'They contributed beans.'

Example (591) is uttered in reaction to an inquiry whether a certain gorilla baby had been killed. The speaker clarifies that it was the gorilla mother who was killed, while the gorilla baby had been brought to the village alive. The focus in this example is on the object. In this case, it is contrastive focus, but assertive focus can be expressed in the same way. Example (593) is taken from a narrative and mentions for the first time that each of the story's children brings beans to cook. Focus is thus on the whole predicate (verb plus object).

14.2.2 Non-canonical constituent order

In addition to canonical SVO word order, other word orders are attested, as well. A non-object constituent may occur in IAV position (§14.2.2.1), in order to be focused. A non-subject constituent can precede the verb complex, which has the effect of defocalization (§14.2.2.2).

14.2.2.1 Immediate after verb (IAV) focus position

The immediate after verb (IAV) position is a focus position in Mundabli. In canonical word order, this position is occupied by the object; see §14.2.1. However, other constituents can occur in IAV position when they are in focus. The non-object constituent which most commonly occupies the IAV position is the subject, as in (594). However, obliques occasionally occur in IAV position, as well; cf. §14.2.6.

(594) bə̄ lə̄ tí āgān, kə̀ lə̌ āká tí gbàm
IMPERS do(a) surprisingly how P3 do(a) like surprisingly CL7.God

'What should we do? It was created by God.'

The passive translation given by a consultant reflects the focus structure of the original example (Mundabli uses an impersonal pronoun where other languages might use a passive construction (cf. §6.3)).

14.2.2.2 Defocalization of canonically postverbal constituents

Object and oblique constituents follow the verb in canonical sentences. They may also occur immediately before the verb complex, which has the effect of topicalization. As the canonical position of the subject is before the verb anyway, this operation is not applicable to subjects. Either a single or multiple non-subject constituents may precede the verb, as in (595) and (596), respectively.

(595) a. ɲām b-ɔ́ yí́ ndɛ̀
CL8a.fufu CL8a-DET eat(b) who

◇‘Who ate the fufu?’

b. ɲām b-ɔ́ yí́ mɪ̄
CL8a.fufu CL8a-DET eat(b) 1SG

◇‘I ate the fufu.’

(596) [kpő̄ w-ɔ́] [í́ ntí lā] fə̄ fə̋ [ndɛ̀]
CL3/7a.money CL3-DET LOC N. DAT P1 give(b) who

◇‘Who gave money to Ntie?’

When multiple non-subject constituents are topicalized, they must occur in the same order as they would if they followed the verb complex.

14.2.3 Subject focus

In clauses with canonical constituent order, the subject is equivalent to the topic of the clause and occurs in IPBV position. When it is in focus, the subject occurs in the IAV focus position, as can be seen in the question-answer pair in (597).

(597) a. tsŭ ndɛ̀ ɲùŋfù
DS.hit(b) who N.

◇‘WHO [did just] hit Nyungfu?’

b. tsŭ ŋkɔ̋ ɲùŋfù
DS.hit(b) N. N.

◇‘NGKO hit Nyungfu.’

When the subject occurs in IAV focus position, followed by the object in the case of a transitive verb, the verb complex is preceded by a purely tonal low tone dummy subject. The low tone causes subsequent superhigh-toned verbs of inflection class B and superhigh-toned tense markers to be realized with a low-high rising tone. When the object is defocalized and occurs in IBV position (cf. §14.2.4), the low tone dummy subject is absent or does not have any perceivable effect. However, when an oblique constituent occurs in IBV position (cf. §14.2.5), the dummy subject is present and has the same effect as before the verbal complex. Spontaneous text examples with VS constituent order and focus on the subject are found in (598)-(599). The focused subject in the examples is underlined.

(598) ʃī k-ɔ́ kǫ́ ʃú mɪ̄ ā
CL3/7a.storm CL7a-DET catch(b).IPFV come(b).IPFV 1SG COM
kē ā́kə́ kǫ́ mbɛ̄
CL10.hand like catch(b).IPFV CL2.person

'The storm was catching me with its hands as if it were PEOPLE catching [me].'

(599) dzɔ̄ y-én, kwɛ́ w-én à, ā́
CL10.houses CL10-DEM.PROX CL3/7a.home CL3-DEM.PROX Q ADVLZ
wú-lō à, wɛ́ à, tá lə mī ɛ̄
CL3-whole Q CL1.sibling Q VER.FOC do(a) 1SG QUOT.Q

'These houses, this whole compound, sister, did *I* do it?'

Interrogative subject pronouns are obligatorily moved to IAV position; see (600)-(602).

(600) fə fə́ ndɛ̀ kpɔ́ ɪ́ ntí lā
DS.P1 give(b) who CL3/7a.money LOC N. DAT

◇'Who gave money to Ntie?'

(601) yɪ́ŋ ndɛ̀ gbɔ̄ w-én
DS.build(c) who CL3.house CL3-DEM.PROX

◇'Who has built this house?'

(602) fə fə́ ndɛ̀ wà ā kpɔ́
DS.P1 give(b) who 2SG COM CL3/7a.money

◇'Who gave you money [earlier today]?'

Another strategy used to focus the interrogative subject pronoun is clefting; see §14.6. However, subject clefts are rare. Clefting is more commonly used to focus on objects or obliques.

14.2.4 Defocalization of objects

The object can be defocalized by moving it to IBV position. When the object precedes the verbal complex, no dummy subject is present. Consequently, there is no formal difference between an OVS clause (with a defocalized object) and a canonical SVO clause. However, in most cases the context suffices to disambiguate between the two possible interpretations. Defocalization of the object often coincides with subject focus, as e.g. in (603), repeated here from (595b). The object in these examples is enclosed in square brackets.

(603) [ɲām b-ɔ́] yí́ mɨ̄
CL8a.fufu CL8a-DET eat(b) 1SG

◇'I ate the fufu.'

However, defocalization of the object is also possible in combination with an in situ subject, as in (604).

(604) mɔ̀ w-ɔ̄ [tʃyē w-ɔ́] kɔ̋ ā kɛ̀
CL1.person CL1-DET CL3.stone CL3-DET catch(b) COM CL10.hand(s)

◇'The man [indeed] caught the stone WITH HIS HANDS.'

In (604) defocalization of the object leaves the oblique constituent in the IAV focus position. According to my consultant, (604) would be an appropriate answer to the question 'Did he really catch the stone WITH HIS HANDS?'.

14.2.5 Defocalization of obliques

Obliques occur at the end of the clause in the canonical constituent order, but may be dislocated to IBV position for defocalization, as in (605). The oblique constituent in this and the following examples is enclosed in square brackets. While the comitative phrase in this example occurs at the beginning of the clause, examples with an in-situ subject, such as (604), show that it is the position immediately before the verb rather than clause-initial position which defocalized constituents are moved to. When an oblique constituent stands in IBV position, a tonal dummy subject[2] precedes the verb, which causes a subsequent superhigh tone on verbs of the tonal inflection class B in P0 and P1 perfective verbs to change to a rising tone.

(605) [ā nɨ́ŋ k-ɔ́] fə̄ ndɛ̀ wà
COM CL7.thing CL7-DET DS.give(b) who 2SG

◇'Who gave you that thing?'

A sentence as in (605) could be used e.g. when the speaker has seen the listener with some object and wants to know where she got it, suspecting that someone must have given it to her.

14.2.6 Oblique focus

Focused oblique constituents commonly remain in situ at the end of the clause. If an object is present, they usually follow it, as in (606)[3] and (607).

[2]A dummy subject is also present when the subject occurs in IAV focus position, cf. §14.2.3.

[3]Example (606) is ambiguous. It can be interpreted as an inquiry about the gadget used or about the meat or sauce which were served with the fufu.

(606) wù fə́ yí ɲām b-ɔ́ [mán ŋgɔ̀]
CL1 P1 eat(b) CL8.fufu CL8-DET what upon

◇'WHAT did he eat the fufu with?'

(607) wù fə́ yí ɲām b-ɔ́ [tswān ŋgɔ̀]
CL1. P1 eat(b) CL8.fufu CL8-DET CL3.bitter_leaf upon

◇'He ate the fufu with BITTER LEAF.'

However, in order to be explicitly marked for focus, obliques can be clefted (cf. §14.6) or they may occur in IAV position. An oblique constituent may occur in IAV position when no object follows the verb, i.e. in a transitive clause, when the object is moved to IBV position for defocalization, as in (608),[4] when the object is omitted, as in (609) or when the order of object and oblique is inverted, as in (610).

(608) mɔ̀ w-ɔ̄ tʃyē w-ɔ́ kɔ̋ [ā kɛ̀]
CL1.person CL1-DET CL3.stone CL3-DET catch(b) COM CL10.hand(s)

◇'The man [really] caught the stone WITH HIS HANDS.'

(609) yɛ̄ gǎn tsē mɨ́ ā ntsɔ̋m mū-ŋ-gɛ̄-ŋ-gɛ̄ à
COMP go(a) search(a) 1SG COM CL6-soil 6a-N-be_red-N-be_red 2SG
mɨ́ tʃű fə̋ [ndá lā]
CONSEC come(b) give(b) 1SG.PP DAT

'[She said]: go and search for some red soil for me, and then you come and give [it] to me!'

(610) wù tsɔ̀ [mɨ́ lā] dʒɔ̆n
CL1 show(a) 1SG.PP DAT J.

◇'She introduced John to me.' (lit.: She showed John to me.)

14.2.7 Modifier focus

It is also possible to focus on only a part of the subject NP, i.e. on a noun modifier, as done in (611). Here, the numeral modifier **wű́mwó** is focalized by being moved out of the preverbal subject NP to IAV focus position (see also §7.3.1.3). The focused modifier is enclosed in square-brackets.

(611) dɔ̄ gbū bí ʃī [wű́-mwó]
CL3.beans fall(a) exit(b) go_down(a) CL3-one

'One of the beans fell down.'

[4]The first example (608) is repeated from (604). An explanation of the context is given in §14.2.4.

In the more unmarked case, the noun modifier directly follows the noun, as in (612). However, this sentence has no explicit partitive semantics.

(612) dɔ̄ wű-mwó gbū bí ʃī
CL3.beans CL3-one fall(a) exit(b) go_down(a)

◇'One bean fell down.'

14.2.8 Omission of topical objects

The informational status of noun phrases also influences the choice of a noun or a pronoun vs. zero reference to represent the object. In Mundabli topical objects are commonly omitted, as in (613b) and (614b).

(613) a. yǐ ɲùŋfù ɲām
eat(b) N. CL8.fufu

◇'NYUNGFU ate fufu.'

b. yǐ ɲùŋfù
eat(b) N.

◇'NYUNGFU ate [it].'

(614) a. tsǔ mɨ̄ wù
hit(b) 1SG CL1

◇'I hit him.'

b. tsǔ mɨ̄
hit(b) 1SG

◇'I hit [him].'

Examples (613) and (614) each contain two alternative answers to the questions **yǐ ndɛ̀ ɲām** 'Who ate fufu?' and **tsǔ ndɛ̀ ɲùŋfù** 'Who hit Nyungfu?', respectively. The preferred option is indeed to omit the object, as in (613b) and (614b).

14.3 Verb focus

Verb focus can be expressed by canonical clauses, i.e clauses with SV(O)(X) word order, cf. §14.2.1. However, explicit focus on the lexical meaning of the verb can only be expressed by a cognate deverbal noun construction.

14.3.1 Cognate deverbal noun constructions

The cognate deverbal noun construction[5] involves the presence of an infinitive deverbal noun (cf. §8.1.4.1) which is cognate with the finite verb of the clause and which follows the verb complex, as in (615), or the object, as in (616), if one is present. It marks contrastive verb focus (cf. §14.1).

(615) dzɔ̄ yī-dzú y-ɔ́ kà bǫ́ m-bǫ̂,
CL10.houses CL10-other CL10-DET P3 burn(b) INF-burn(b)
y-ɛ́n t-án kwā tí ŋ-kwà
CL10-DEM.PROX DIST-here break(a) instead INF-break(a)

'The other houses BURNT DOWN, these ones BROKE DOWN.'

(616) a. à gyà kǐ
2SG steal(a) CL7

◇'You stole it.'

b. ŋgàŋ, n=tấŋ kǐ n-tàŋ
no 1SG=buy(b) CL7 INF-buy(b)

◇'No, I BOUGHT it.'

The fact that the cognate deverbal noun may co-occur with an object, as e.g. in (616b), shows that the cognate deverbal noun is not a direct object of the verb. Mundabli does not allow multiple unflagged objects[6]. Instead, the deverbal noun forms an unflagged oblique constituent, comparable with an unflagged adverbial or locative phrase.

Cognate deverbal noun constructions are also attested in relative clauses, as in (617).

(617) ń=də̀ mɔ̀ nǭ wù fə̀ tấŋ w-ɔ̄ dʒǔ
1SG=see(a) CL1.man SUBORD CL1 P1 buy(b) CL1-DET CL9.goat
ntàŋ, ā dǐ wɔ̄ mɔ̀ nǭ wù fə̀ fān w-ɔ̄
INF-buy(b) NEG be(b) NEG CL1.man SUBORD CL1 P1 sell(a) CL1-DET
yī m-fàn
CL9 INF-sell(a)

◇'I saw the man who BOUGHT the goat, not the man who SOLD it.'

While the use of the cognate deverbal noun construction seems to be preferred in the given context, its use is not obligatory. Contrastive verb focus can also be expressed by an unmarked SVO clause. The presence of the adverbial **mɛ̌** 'only' in a cognate deverbal noun construction, implies exclusive

[5]See Bond and Anderson (2014) for a typology of comparable constructions and their functions in African languages. Bond and Anderson refer to these constructions as "Cognate Head-Dependent Constructions".

[6]see §11.3 for a comment on the term "flag"

focus semantics (Bond and Anderson 2014: 239) rather than verb focus. The examples in (618) and (619) express exclusive situation, indicating that "the situation (i.e., event or state) described by the predicate is in focus, to the explicit exclusion of other (higher-ranked) situations." (Bond and Anderson 2014: 241).

(618) wù kū nɨ̄m mɛ̌ ŋ-kù
CL1 cry(a) sit(a) only INF-cry(a)

'She was still only crying.'

(619) ā́nā wù kə̀ fǫ̰ bī gān áná, kpé w-ɔ̄
like_that CL1 P3 tell(a) go_out(b) go(a) like_that CL1.woman CL1-DET
kpɨ̄ mɛ̌ ŋ-kpɨ̄-n
die(b) only INF-die(b)-INF

'Immediately as she was reporting [that], the woman died on the spot.'

As there is no attested example with a transitive verb in my data, it is unclear whether this construction allows the presence of an object.

Note that a cognate deverbal noun can also be used to describe the manner in which something is done, as in (620).

(620) *or* à sé mű̀ n-sē kwɛ́ mɨ̄
or 2SG heat(c) CL6 CL1.INF-heat(c) CL3/7a.home in

'[...] or you prepare it in the local traditional way.'

This construction is different from the cognate deverbal noun construction. The deverbal noun co-occurs with a modifier and forms part of a locative phrase headed by the postposition **mɨ̄** 'in'.

14.4 Truth focus

Truth focus is focus on the truth value of a clause. In Mundabli, this can be achieved by using a serial verb construction involving the right-modifying coverb **bā́n** 'clearly' (cf. §14.4.1) or the particle **tə́** (cf. §14.4.2).

14.4.1 Serial verb constructions with bā́n 'clearly'

Truth focus can be expressed by use of a serial verb construction involving the right-modifying coverb **bā́n** 'clearly', as in (621)-(623); cf. also §9.1.4.2.

(621) yɛ̄ ń=nɨ́ŋ bā́n yɛ̄ [n=də wú lā]
COMP 1SG=want(c) clearly(b) COMP 1SG=see(a) CL1.PP DAT

'[She said]: I really want to see him.'

(622) wù fə̌ yí bấn ɲām w-ɔ́
CL1PRO P1 eat(b) clearly(b) CL3.fufu CL3-DET

◇'He DID eat fufu.'

The coverb **bấn** which expresses truth focus may be combined with subject focus, see e.g. (623).

(623) (dɨ̌) yíŋ yə́ bấn mɨ̄ gbɔ̄ ŋgɨ́
(F1) build(c) go_up(c) clearly(b) 1SG CL3.house CL3;1SG.POSS

'I will be the person to build my house.' (or rather: It will really be me who will build my house.)

14.4.2 The particle tə́

The particle **tə́**, alternatively pronounced **té** or **tá**, expresses something like truth focus.[7] The particle occurs at the beginning of the verb complex, following the subject and preceding tense and negation markers, as (624)-(626). The particle in the examples is underlined.

(624) tɛ́là mwɔ́m dzé hə̌yì, dzē gbàn ŋgɨ̄ lā yɛ̄
T. M. say(b) INTERJ say(b) CL1.in-law CL1.1SG.POSS DAT COMP
n=<u>tə́</u> tʃʉ́
1SG=VER.FOC come(b).IPFV

'Tela Mwɔm said: No! Tell my in-law that I am coming!'

(625) byé-ā-nɗi bɔ̄ŋ ʃú yɛ̄ bàbə̌ dwò yɛ̄ wù <u>tə́</u> fə̋
B.-COM-N. call(a) come(b) COMP Papa D. COMP CL1 VER.FOC P1
ʃɛ̄ yɛ̄ wù ʃī ɲī fɨ̄, wù <u>tə́</u> wʉ́̄
want(a) COMP CL1. go_down(a) leave(a) pass(b) CL1 VER.FOC hear(b)
tʃʉ́̄ yɔ̀ ŋgɨ̄, k-ɔ́ nɨ́ŋ nɔ̰̄ wù
come(b) CL9/10.voice CL9;1SG.POSS CL7-DET CL7.thing SUBORD CL1.
tʃʉ́̄ k-ɔ́
come(b) CL7-REL

'Bie-a-Ntie called out: Papa Duo! [She said] that she was about to go down when she heard my voice. That is why she came.'

[7] Truth focus is also known as "polarity focus", see e.g., Bond and Anderson (2014: 215).

(626) yɛ̄, kə́ wù tǫ́ mɛ̄ tʃú wù tá ā lá
COMP COND CL1 grow_up(b) finish(a) come(b) CL1 VER.FOC NEG do(a)
kɔ̀ wɔ̄ sǎm, wù dǐ mɔ́sí yíŋ gbɔ̀ áná
catch(b) NEG CL1/2.game CL1 F1 *must* build(c) CL3.house like_that
nǐ́ tʃū nīm
CL1/2.mother.3POSS come(b) sit(a)

'[He said] that once he has grown up fully, he will not play, he will have to build a house and his mother shall come live [there].'

The sentence in (624) quotes Tela Mwom's words to his wife uttered after a lively discussion finally agreeing to meet his mother-in-law. The particle emphasizes that he *will* ultimately come to meet her, even if he does not think that this is a good idea. In (625), the speaker stresses that Bie-a-Ntie had not been planning to come, but that she was (really) on the way to somewhere else and that she only came to meet the speaker because she had (really) heard the speaker's voice. Here the focus in the first clause is on the truth of the claim that she was on the way down, and the focus in the second clause is on the truth of the claim that she had heard the speakers voice. Finally, in (626), the particle serves to emphasize the truth of Dya's claim that he will not play - even if this is contrary to what people expect from a young boy.

14.5 Thetic sentences

Thetic sentences have unmarked SV(O)(X) constituent order. Syntactically, they are not different from canonical sentences. However, when the topic of a narrative is introduced or when the topic of a conversation is (abruptly) changed, the noun phrase referring to the newly introduced topic commonly contains the modifier **dzū** 'a certain', as in (627) and (628).

(627) kpé dzū kə̀ dɪ̄ fǐn
CL1.woman CL1.certain P3 be(b) there

'There [once] was a woman.'

(628) kyɛ́ yá gān fā́ ywṵ́, fì-yā́n
look(c) go_up(c) go(a) there CL1/2.hanging_dryer CL19-CL3/7a.leaf
dzú dǐ fǐ́n, ā mū ʃī
CL19.certain be(b) there 2SG take(a) go_down(a)

'Look up at the hanging dryer! There is a leaf. You should take [it] down!'

14.6 Cleft constructions

Another strategy for expressing constituent focus is to use a cleft construction. This way, not only can the subject be explicitly focused on, as in (629), but also other constituents like the object, as in (630), or an oblique constituent, as in (631). Cleft constructions require the use of an impersonal dummy subject consisting only of a low tone which causes a subsequent superhigh-toned Class B verb, like the copula verb **dǐ́**, or a superhigh-toned tense marker, like the P1 marker **fə̋**, to be realized with a LH rising tone.

(629) dǐ ɲùŋfù wù yí́ w-ɔ̄ ɲām
DS.be(b) N. CL1 eat(b) CL1-REL CL8.fufu

◇'It is Nyungfu who ate the fufu.'

(630) dǐ ɲām wù fə̄ yí́
DS.be(b) CL8.fufu CL1 P1 eat(b)

◇'It is fufu he ate.'

(631) dǐ ā kɛ̀ wù fə̄ yí́ ɲām
DS.be(b) COM CL9/10.finger CL1 P1 eat(b) CL8.fufu

◇'It is with his hands that he ate fufu.'

In content questions, the focus on the question word may also be expressed by use of a cleft construction, as in (632) and (633).

(632) dǐ kì-mān nǫ̀ à yē kɛ̄ dzɔ̄ŋ k-ɔ́ kí́
DS.be(b) CL7-what SUBORD 2SG start(a) return(c) again CL7-REL CL7
ǐ́ tán mɪ̄
LOC there in

'What is it that you are starting again in here?'

(633) dǐ ŋgwò mɔ̀nɔ̄ mān à mū w-ɔ̄ wù yɛ̄
DS.be(b) CL1/2.sort CL1.man what 2SG take(a) CL1-REL CL1 COMP
mɔ̀ kə̌ dyà wɔ̄ wú lā yɛ̄
CL1.person HAB see(a).IPFV NEG CL1.PP DAT QUOT.Q

'What sort of husband is it that you have married, so that nobody sees him?'

A cleft construction can also be used to express truth focus. In this case a whole complement clause is clefted. This is mostly done to express negative truth focus, as in (634).

(634) ā dɨ́ wɔ̄ yɛ̄ bì-lʊ̀ŋ dɨ̌ ʃí
NEG be(b) NEG COMP CL8-CL7/8.suffering F1 go_down(a).IPFV
yɨ́ wù t-án áná, w-én
eat(b).IPFV CL1SG DIST-here like_that CL3-DEM.PROX
lyɛ́
CL3/7a.impertinence

'Not that he will be suffering there like that. [Saying] this [would be] impertinent.'