PROMINENCE IN NGAMBAY

Ursula Wiesemann and Noël Djemadjioudjiel
SIL, Yaoundé, Cameroon

Ngambay, a Nilo-Saharan language spoken in Chad (as well as in the Central African Republic) has a well structured set of morphemes which are used to add prominence to certain elements of a predication. This set consists of the deictic particles gə , ɓá , and yàá , all of which could be translated as 'that'. They give, however, quite different kinds of prominence to the words (or expressions) they follow. Following the terminology suggested by John Watters ("Focus in Aghem," in Larry M. Hyman (ed.), *Aghem Grammatical Structure*, Southern California Occasional Papers in Linguistics No. 7, Los Angeles: University of Southern California, 1979) their differences in meaning can be explained as follows:

Simple Assertive Focus gə

The particle gə indicates facts from which consequences result. It also has anaphoric function, linking the focused element to a previous mention. The simple assertion

(1) Láwkúrā́ tɔ́l dɔ̀gə̀   'Lawkura killed a buffalo'

can be transformed into

(1) a. Láwkúrā́ gə tɔ́l dɔ̀gə̀   'it was (the already mentioned) Lawkura who killed a buffalo'

   b. dɔ̀gə̀ gə Láwkúrā́ tɔ́l   'it was the (already mentioned) buffalo that Lawkura killed'

   c. tɔ́l gə Láwkúrā́ tɔ́l dɔ̀gə̀   'Lawkura killed a buffalo (and the following is the result of this killing)'

Notice that the focused element is always front shifted, which necessitates the verb to be repeated when it is in focus position.

Exhaustive Listing Focus ɓá

The particle ɓá puts the focused element into a class all by itself, in contrast to all the other elements that could normally be compared with it. The simple assertion (1) can be transformed into

(2) a. Láwkúrā́ ɓá tɔ́l dɔ̀gə̀   'it was Lawkura (not John, nor Peter, it was no other than Lawkura) who killed a buffalo'

b. dɔ̀gè̖ 6á Láwkúrā̄ tɔ̄l   'it was a buffalo (not an antelope, nor a
                                  rabbit, it was no other than a buffalo)
                                  that Lawkura killed'

c. tɔ̄l 6á Láwkúrā̄ tɔ̄l dɔ̀gè̖   'it was killing (not wounding nor seeing,
                                  it was really killing) that Lawkura did to
                                  the buffalo'

Counter-Assertive Focus   yàá

The particle yàá indicates that whatever is asserted about the focalized
element is in contrast to what was to be expected. So the simple assertion
(1) can be transformed into

(3) a. Láwkúrā̄ yàá tɔ̄l dɔ̀gè̖   'Lawkura (the fearful, or the tiny, or the
                                  old one) killed a buffalo'

b. dɔ̀gè̖ yàá Láwkúrā̄ tɔ̄l   'it was a buffalo (that strong, wicked,
                                  huge animal) that Lawkura killed'

c. tɔ̄l yàá Láwkúrā̄ tɔ̄l dɔ̀gè̖ 'it was killing (an exceedingly difficult
                                  task) that Lawkura did to the buffalo'

Defocalization

Another syntactic means of achieving prominence is to defocalize some
elements of the predication, with the effect that the non-defocalized elements
receive prominence without any further marking. Such defocalization is done
by substituting a generic term for a specific one, or by the deletion of one
of the elements, or by applying both transformations at the same time. The
simple assertion (1) can be transformed into

(4) a. Láwkúrā̄ tɔ̄l dā̄   'Lawkura killed an animal'

Here dɔ̀gè̖ 'buffalo' is substituted by dā̄ 'animal', with the result that
the agent receives prominence.

(4) b. tɔ́l̄ dɔ̀gè̖   'someone killed a buffalo'

The agent Láwkúrā̄ is deleted, and dɔ̀gè̖ 'buffalo' receives prominence.

(4) c. tɔ́l̄ dā̄   'someone killed an animal'

By deleting the agent and replacing the specific dɔ̀gè̖ 'buffalo' by the
generic dā̄ 'animal', the act of killing is the only definite information of
this predication and therefore has prominence.