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**Verb apocope as a marker of predicate backgrounding in Yulu  
(Central Sudanic, C.A.R./South Sudan/Sudan)**

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“In a number of related and unrelated African languages, a curious interplay is observed between tense-aspect and focus. While the exact realization of this interplay varies from language to language, in each case some parameter of focus determines which of two corresponding sets of tense-aspect markers is used in a given instance. The well-reported occurrence of "main" vs. "relative" (clause) tenses is a case in point and has been documented from one extreme of the African continent to the other, e.g. Fula in the West and Nguni Bantu in the South(east).” (Hyman & Watters 1984: 233-234)

**1. The language**

Yulu (tāà yúùl): two smaller groups (10 to 20.000 speakers in all) living in the Central African Republic (East), South Sudan (West), and Sudan (Khartoum, Nyala).

Sara-Bongo-Bagirmi (SBB) < Central Sudanic < Nilo-Saharan.

4 contrastive tones with heavy functional load (lexical and grammatical); compound verbs; SVO-type.

**2. Topic and goals**

In specific contexts (namely prepausal position) some verb forms systematically undergo elision of their final vowel. This apocope is directly related to information structure and functions as an evidence of some kind of information backgrounding. Such an interaction between verb morphology and discourse function is not uncommon in African languages. Now two questions arise: 1. Should one consider the Yulu apocope as a real marking device or rather as a fortuitous consequence of a situation that goes before it? and 2. Is the interaction between verb morphology and information structure as common outside Africa?

**3. Research framework**

This paper has been prepared in connection with the following research projects:

1. “Mise en relief et mise en retrait : le marquage morphologique de la hiérarchie discursive” [Foregrounding and backgrounding: the morphological marking of discourse hierarchy] (2010-2013, p.h. P. Boyeldieu), a programme of the Fédération de Recherche FR 2559 *Typologie et Universaux Linguistiques* (CNRS). See <http://www.typologie.cnrs.fr/>.

2. “Predicate-centered focus types: A sample-based typological study in African languages”, Programme SFB 632 B7 (Project Phase II: 2011-2015, p.h. T. Güldemann). See [http://www2.hu-berlin.de/predicate\\_focus\\_africa/en/index.php](http://www2.hu-berlin.de/predicate_focus_africa/en/index.php). (Part of SFB 632 (Univ. Potsdam & Univ. Humboldt) “Information structure: the linguistic means for structuring utterances, sentences and texts”)



- (10) a. mēsó àayā  
chief.DEF 3.come  
'The chief came.'
- b. nínā k-āay\_  
who? FOC-come  
'who came?'
- (11) a. ɲòɔ-î àayā-kē  
child-PL 3.come-PL  
'The children came.'
- b. ɲòɔ-î k-āayā-k\_  
child-PL FOC-come-PL  
'THE CHILDREN came.'
- (12) a. mēsó à-lèʔā  
chief.DEF 3.FUT-go  
'The chief will go.'
- b. mēsó à-cē lèʔ\_  
chief.DEF 3.FUT-NEG go  
'The chief will not go.'
- (13) a. àayā nèe  
3.come Q  
'Did he come?'
- b. nāanē k-āay\_ ēe  
he FOC-come Q  
'Did HE come?'
- (14) a. à-lāayā nèe  
3.FUT-come Q  
'Will he come?'
- b. à-cē làay\_ ēe  
3.FUT-NEG come Q  
'Won't he come?'

#### 4. Verb forms concerned

Provided that the context meets the restrictive conditions mentioned above (final or prepausal position and pre-final position before the polar interrogative)<sup>1</sup>, apocope systematically takes place with the following verb forms:

- The *S-Focalizing* forms (expressing contrastive focalization of the subject); they are complementarily marked either by the verb prefix k(ā)- (see (10-11b), (13b) above), or by the modifier -ndé suffixed to the verb (15-16) or the auxiliary (17):

- (15) a. àadā nā-t-òosà-ndé jùmó  
3.say LOG-DEP-eat-FOC polenta.DEF  
'He said that HIMSELF ate the polenta.'
- b. àadā nā-t-òosà-nd\_  
3.say LOG-DEP-eat-FOC  
'He said that HIMSELF ate (it).'
- (16) a. kàalà mēsó k-āay\_  
uniqueness chief.DEF FOC-come  
'Only THE CHIEF came.'
- b. kàalà mēsó k-āayā-nd\_  
uniqueness chief.DEF FOC-come-FOC  
'idem' [emphasis?]
- (17) àadā nā-t-à-ndá-kē ndōog\_  
3.say LOG-DEP-FUT-FOC-PL buy  
'He said that THEMSELVES will buy (it).'

N.B. The *S-Focalizing* form in k(ā)- is a non finite verb form that lacks any segmental and/or tonal marking of the personal index. Compare with the Aorist forms in the singular:

<sup>1</sup> This fact explains that instances of apocopated verb forms are in fact very limited in texts (see section 6 below).

(18) Aorist	S-Focalizing in k(ə)-
(màanē) m-āayā 'I came.' (me) 1S-come	màanē k-āay_ 'I came' me FOC-come
(kìinē) āayā 'You came.' (you) 2.come	kìinē k-āay_ 'YOU came' you FOC-come
(nàanē) àayā 'S/he came.' (s/he) 3.come	nàanē k-āay_ 'S/HE came' s/he FOC-come
màá àayā 'The woman came.' woman.DEF 3.come	màá k-āay_ 'THE WOMAN came.' woman.DEF FOC-come

The *S-Focalizing* form in -ndé is used with verb forms that are already prefixed (15a/b). Both k(ə)- end -ndé may appear simultaneously (16b).

- The *Purposive* forms (marked by prefixing tə-/tā- to the purposive infinitive):

(19) tīcā nà mèmó tə-lóoy\_  
2.pour him water.DEF 3.PURP-drink  
'Pour him water so that he drinks!'

(20) kīinē sūukā` ká tātè tā-lée láad\_ ée  
you 2.trap.PROG with mouth.my 2.PURP-go say Q  
'Are you trapping my words so that you will go and tell (them)?'

Nevertheless the *Negative Purposive* forms are *not* affected by apocope:

(21) ècēbè ngútá jòo-î təlákó lūumó  
3.shut door.DEF child-PL 3.NEGPURP.PL enter  
'He shut the door to prevent the children to come in (so that the children should not come in).'

- The *Sequential* forms (expressed by auxiliaries bàlós/bālós or gāmós/gāmós, followed by the simple infinitive):

(22) m-ēegō mō-ndáanè nàakè bàlós-kē lè?\_  
1S-want 1S-greet them 3.SEQU-PL go  
'I want to greet them before they go (~ and they will go).'

(23) jàanó náhó kīinē ēegō t-ā-lóoyā m̀̀̀ndó ngòm  
occasion.DEF some.DEF you 2.want DEP-2.FUT-smoke tobacco.DEF first  
gāmó j̀̀̀et\_  
2.SEQU work  
'Sometimes you need to smoke before you work.' (taken on the spot)

- The *negative* forms; the apocope may affect the negation particle -cē that is suffixed to the verb (contrast (24) and (25)):

(24) kōofā tékómbē ùudá b̀̀it àanè-cē mà  
kind turning speech.DEF like\_this 3.please-NEG me  
'Such a kind of changing mind does not please me.'

(25) kōofā náa làá b̀̀iti àanè-c\_  
kind doing thing.DEF like\_this 3.be\_pasant-NEG  
'This way of doing is not nice.'

or the infinitive forms following the future auxiliary marked by the negation (26a/b):



## 5. Function of verb apocope, verb morphology and information structure in African languages

Yulu verb apocope is clearly related to information structure: its function may be defined as *expressing backgrounding of the verb predicate* as a consequence of one of the three following elements being promoted to the foreground:

- i.) part of the verb predicate itself: focus on the negative truth value,
- ii.) constituent of the main clause: focused subject
- iii.) main clause vis-à-vis *Purposive* or *Sequential* in the dependent clause.

In its specific manner Yulu illustrates a feature that is quite common in Africa. As Hyman & Watters (1984) pointed out (see inscription above), many languages display two types (or more) of verbal inflections, one type consisting of usually shorter verb forms that are put *out of focus* (i.e. *out of assertion*, or *backgrounded*) in the utterance hierarchy, may or may not be optional, and are frequently observed – be they free or compulsory – in the following contexts:

- a) constituent focalization (term focus)
- b) constituent questions (WH-questions)
- c) negation
- d) imperative
- e) relative clauses
- f) consecutive clauses

Situations of this type may be observed for instance in Wolof ('emphatic' verb forms: Creissels & Robert 1998), in Tswana ('conjoint/disjoint' verb forms: Creissels & Robert 1998), in Ibibio ('conjugation types I/II': Oliveira 2007, 2009), or in Surkum ('affirmative' suffix: Andersen 2009).

Furthermore, compatibilities of tenses/aspects with forms of either type may be restricted and some TAM forms prove to be inherently focused (Güldemann 2003).

## 6. Yulu verb apocope: genuine marking or epiphenomenon?

Text (number of 'sentences')	'Senusi' (283)		'Caméléon' (170)		'Resma' (290)	
	no	yes	no	yes	no	yes
Actual apocope						
Purposive	7	–	–	–	–	–
Sequential	gàmé	–	–	–	1	1
	bàlé	–	–	–	–	–
S-Focalizing	k(ə)-	9	1	2	–	1
	-ndé	1	–	–	–	–
Negation	postverbal	13	7	–	–	15
	resumptive	4	4	–	–	1
Total	34	12	2	–	18	14

Table 1. Potential/actual occurrences of verb apocope throughout 3 texts.

Discourse frequency: in all, potential apocope is actually realized in 26 cases again 54 cases where it doesn't show up.

Although strongly iconic (> backgrounding), apocope then looks much more like a lack or deficiency, a negative or counter-relief 'marking' that is furthered by a specific discourse context (compare for instance phonemic accidents – sandhi, tonal spreading – that may occur at syntactic weak boundaries but often remain virtual).

In some way the verb apocope represents a fortuitous result of the predicate backgrounding rather than an actual marking of this backgrounding. This view could hold for some of the

above-mentioned contrasts in other languages. See for instance the frequent neutralization of the conjoint/disjoint distinction in Tswana (D. Creissels, pers. comm.).

## 7. Verb morphology and information structure outside Africa?

Using particular, underspecified verb forms in dependent clauses is apparently a common device crosslinguistically (see for instance discussion on ‘deranked’ verb forms in Croft 2003: 217-18). Using similar forms when putting focus on a constituent or a component of the verb predicate *in the main clause* is well attested in different African languages (see above) but could be more limited in other languages of the world. An exception at least is the use of ‘do’ +infinitive in English (amply cited by Hyman & Watters 1984). Examples of a WH-question (35), negation (36) and focus on the truth value (37):

(35) What DID you do yesterday?

(36) The child DID not wake up early.

(37) Yes, the princess DID kiss the frog.

After all, should the interaction between verb morphology and information structure be considered as an African speciality?

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## Abbreviations

1S	1 <sup>st</sup> person sg. index	LOG	Logophoric
2	2 <sup>d</sup> person index	NEG	Negation/Negative
3	3 <sup>d</sup> person index	NEGPURP	Negative purposive
COND	Conditional	PL	Plural
CPT	Completed	PRHB	Prohibitive
DEF	Definite	PROG	Progressive
DEP	Dependent	PURP	Purposive
FOC	Focus/S-Focalizing	Q	Polar interrogative
FUT	Future	SEQU	Sequential
LOC	Locative	TEMPFUT	Temporal future

Appendix: Table of Yulu verb forms

	I	II			III	
	non-prefixed	Dependent (T-)	Relative (K-)	Conditional (G-)	non-prefixed	S-Focalizing (k(ḡ)-)
Conjugated or invariable (S-Focalizing) verb	Aorist	Dependent–Aorist	Relative–Aorist	Conditional–Aorist	–	<b>S-Focalizing–Aorist</b>
(Pref. + ) Aux. + Infinitive	Future	Dependent–Future	Relative–Future	Conditional–Future	–	<b>S-Focalizing–Future</b>
	Virtual	Dependent–Virtual	Relative–Virtual	(?)	–	(?)
	–	–	–	–	<b>Sequential 1/2</b>	–
	–	–	Future Temporal	–	–	–
Pref. + Purposive infinitive	–	<b>Purposive</b>	Temporal	–	–	–
Aux. + Definite infinitive	–	Prohibitive	–	–	–	–
	–	Negative Purposive	–	–	–	–

**Apocopated form**

Aux. = Auxiliary; Pref. = Prefix.

Types I / II condition two different sets of personal indices marked by segmental prefixation and/or tonal alternations. Type III excludes personal indices and tonal alternation.

Type II forms represent the subordinate forms ('dependent' in the broadest sense).

S-Focalizing forms (type III as well as suffix -ndé (not represented here) focalize the subject.

Imperative forms (2 sg./pl.) are drawn from the Aorist paradigm.