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Focus in the Northern Burun languages (and other Western Nilotic languages)

by

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HANDOUT

Part I: Focus in Surkum (and other Northern Burun languages)

1. Introduction

Northern Burun, Western Nilotic: Surkum, Kurmuk, Mayak.

Spoken in the southern part of Blue Nile State in Sudan.

The issue: Alternation between long and short endings of verbs.

The problem: What is the function of this alternation?

2. Clause structure and verbal morphology

2.1. Constituent orders

(1) **tòul méel-lí.**

child dance-AFF

‘The child is dancing.’

(2) a. **tòul ?àm đóbán.**

child eat polenta

‘The child is eating polenta.’

b. **đóbán ?àm-pì ηà tòul.**

polenta eat-PASS by child

‘The polenta is being eaten by the child.’

- c. **ḏóbán ʔàm-pì-rì.**
 polenta eat-PASS-AFF
 ‘The polenta is being eaten.’
- (3) a. **à=ʔàm ḏóbán.**
 1SG=eat polenta
 ‘I am eating polenta.’
- b. **ḏóbán ʔàm-à-gì.**
 polenta eat-1SG-AFF
 ‘I am eating the polenta.’
- c. **ʔàm ḏóbán.**
 eat polenta
 ‘He/She/It is eating polenta.’
- d. **ʔàm-à-gì.**
 eat-1SG-AFF
 ‘I am eating it.’

2.2. Verbal roots

- (4) a. **ḡá tèc.** (With low-toned short vowel)
 not survive
 ‘He will not survive.’
- b. **ḡá làac.** (With low-toned long vowel)
 not urinate
 ‘He is not urinating.’
- c. **ḡá ḡáaḡ.** (With high-toned long vowel)
 not cry
 ‘He is not crying.’
- (5) a. **kámál wèl yáawáḡ.** (With low-toned short vowel)
 girl buy oil
 ‘The girl is buying oil.’
- b. **kàykòn cùup ḡèeḡ.** (With low-toned long vowel)
 shepherd milk cow
 ‘The shepherd is milking a cow.’

- c. **tòol máaṭ ʔàak.** (With high-toned long vowel)
 child drink milk(PL)
 ‘The child is drinking milk.’

2.3. Antipassive

(6) Root + Derivation(s) + Aspect(s) + Tense + Subject + Affirmative

- (7) a. **tòol ʔàm dʔóbán.**
 child eat polenta
 ‘The child is eating polenta.’
- b. **tòol ʔàm-bì-rí.**
 child eat-AP-AFF
 ‘The child is eating.’
- c. **tòol ʔá ʔàm-bí.**
 child not eat-AP
 ‘The child is not eating.’
- d. **tòol ʔá ʔàm-bí dʔóbán.**
 child not eat-AP polenta
 ‘The child is not eating polenta.’

3. Short and long endings of verbs: The affirmative suffix and its allomorphs

Problem: The existence of long and short endings of verbs, without any apparent difference in the propositional content of the clause.

Table 1. Examples of verb endings with a long and a short form

Long	Short	Function
-Cɪ	∅	present tense of non-derived intransitive verbs
-Cɪ	-ʊ	past tense of non-derived intransitive verbs
-ʊdɪ, -udɪ	-ʊ, -u	past tense
-adɪ, -ʌdɪ	-atɪ, -ʌtɪ	habitual
-Cɪrɪ	-Cɪ	passive
-(C)ɪrɪ	-(C)ɪ	centrifugal
-(C)iri	-(C)i	antipassive
-uru	-u	centripetal
-uru	-u	multiplicative, antipassive multiplicative
-aɣɪ	-a	1st person singular subject
-iri	-i	2nd person singular subject
-ɛɛɛ	-ɛ	3rd person singular subject
-anɔɔrɪ	-anɔ	1st person plural exclusive subject
-ɛɛɛ	-ɛɛ	2nd person plural subject

Apocope or two suffixes?

Analysis: The long endings consist of two suffixes, the last of which I have called “affirmative”.

Hypothesis: The affirmative suffix has a focus function.

Examples of the alternation between long and short endings, illustrated with affirmative and negative clauses with the verb in final position:

- (8) a. **yán** **ròʊt-tɪ-rì.**
tree:PL plant-PASS-AFF
‘The trees are being planted.’
- b. **yán** **ɲá** **ròʊt-tɪ.**
tree:PL not plant-PASS
‘The trees are not being planted.’
- (9) a. **gúuc** **↓rúʊt-í-rí.**
young.man plant-AP-AFF
‘The young man is planting.’

- b. **gúuc** **ηά** ↓**rúuṭ-í.**
 young.man not plant-AP
 ‘The young man is not planting.’
- (10) a. **gúuc** ↓**rúuṭ-úḍ-ì.**
 young.man plant:AP-PAST-AFF
 ‘The young man planted.’
 b. **gúuc** **ηά** ↓**rúuṭ-ú.**
 young.man not plant:AP-PAST
 ‘The young man did not plant.’
- (11) a. **ḡiid-ú-rù.**
 cut-M:AP-AFF
 ‘He is cutting repeatedly.’
 b. **ηά ḡiid-ú.**
 not cut-M:AP
 ‘He is not cutting repeatedly.’
- (12) a. **tòol ḡòoṭ-ú-rú.**
 child go-M-AFF
 ‘The child is walking.’
 b. **tòol ηά ↓ḡòoṭ-ú.**
 child not go-M
 ‘The child is not walking.’
- (13) a. **ḍóbán ḡàm-à-gì.**
 polenta eat-1SG-AFF
 ‘I am eating the polenta.’
 b. **ḍóbán ηά ḡàm-à.**
 polenta not eat-1SG
 ‘I am not eating the polenta.’
- (14) a. **yán** **rööd-↓ḍ-ánóṭ-rì.**
 tree:PL plant-PAST-1PLEX-AFF
 ‘We planted the trees’

- b. **tòul máaḡ-ò ʔàak.**
 child drink-PAST milk(PL)
 ‘The child drank milk.’

Table 2. Phonological derivation of the long past tense forms of ‘cry’ and ‘urinate’

	cry-PAST-AFF	urinate-PAST-AFF	
	ḡáaḡ-òC-í	làaj-óC-ì	Underlying form
(i)	ḡáaḡ-`C-í	làaj-`C-ì	Deletion of PAST - o
(ii)	ḡâaḡ-C-í	lăaj-C-ì	Tone reassignment

(19) Kurmuk:

- | | Long verb forms | | Short verb forms |
|----|---|----|--|
| a. | ḡáarák ↓ nín-dí.
person sleep-AFF
‘The man is sleeping.’ | c. | ḡáarák ↓ áná nín.
person not sleep
‘The man is not sleeping.’ |
| b. | ḡáarák ↓ nín-óḡ-ì.
person sleep-PAST-AFF
‘The man slept.’ | d. | ḡáarák ↓ áná nín-ó.
person not sleep-PAST
‘The man did not sleep.’ |

Table 3. Subject suffixes with and without a following affirmative suffix in present tense forms with the transitive root ʔám ‘eat’ from class **c̣vc̣**, compared with independent and proclitic personal pronouns

	With affirmative suffix	Without affirmative suffix	Independent personal pronouns	Proclitic personal pronouns
1SG	ʔám-à-gì / ʔám-àg-ì	ʔám-à	ʔáaníc	(ʔ)à
2SG	ʔám-ì-rí	ʔám-ì	ʔiiníc	(ʔ)ì
3SG	ʔám-è-ré	ʔám-é	ḡáaníc	Ø
1DLIN	ʔám-pì-rì	ʔám-pì	ʔugíc	(ʔ)í
1PLIN	ʔám-pìni-rì / ʔám-pìní-irì	ʔám-pìní	ʔii[↓]gíjní	(ʔ)in
1PLEX	ʔám-ànó[↘]-rì / ʔám-ànó[↘]-rì	ʔám-ànó	ʔónók	(ʔ)án
2PL	ʔám-éε-ré	ʔám-éε	wéegúc	wée
3PL	ʔám-ké-ré	ʔám-ké	ḡáa[↓]gíná	gèe

Table 4. Allomorphy of the affirmative suffix (disregarding a few exceptions)

Allomorph	Morphophonological environment
-Cɪ	after a root consonant, the value of C being determined by that consonant
-ɪ	after a suffix consonant
-rV	after a suffix vowel, V having the same quality as that vowel

- (20) a. **-Cɪ:** **tòʊl ɲáaŋ-gí.**
 child cry-AFF
 ‘The child is crying’
- b. **-ɪ:** **gúuc ʔrúuʔ-úʔ-ì.**
 young.man plant:AP-PAST-AFF
 ‘The young man planted.’
- c. **-rV:** **tòʊl ʔòoʔ-ú-rú.**
 child go-M-AFF
 ‘The child is walking.’

5. Grammatically conditioned distribution of the affirmative suffix

The affirmative suffix is obligatory in the final position of affirmative clauses that are either declarative or polar interrogative (yes/no-questions).

The affirmative suffix is excluded from the following constructions:

- negative clauses
- constituent questions, except for ‘why’-questions
- imperative clauses
- cleft sentences
- clauses with a postverbal object

5.1. Constituent questions

- (21) **ì=ʔàm ɲòo?**
 2SG=eat what
 ‘What are you eating?’

- (22) **ᵿᵿᵿ-ᵿ-ᵿ** **ᵿᵿ ᵿᵿᵿ?**
 hit-M-PASS by who
 ‘By whom is he being beaten?’
- (23) **ᵿᵿᵿ-ᵿ** **ᵿᵿ ᵿᵿᵿ?**
 hit-3SG PREP what
 ‘With what is he beating him?’
- (24) a. **ᵿᵿᵿ ᵿᵿᵿᵿ-ᵿᵿ ᵿᵿᵿᵿ?**
 chief go-CP:PAST when
 ‘When did the chief come?’
 b. **ᵿᵿᵿ ᵿᵿᵿᵿ-ᵿᵿᵿᵿ-ᵿ.**
 child go-CP:PAST-AFF
 ‘The child came.’

With the verb in clause-final position:

- (25) a. **ᵿᵿᵿ ᵿᵿᵿᵿ-ᵿ?**
 who go-CF
 ‘Who will go?’
 b. **ᵿᵿᵿ ᵿᵿᵿᵿ-ᵿ-ᵿ.**
 child go-CF-AFF
 ‘The child will go.’
- (26) **ᵿᵿᵿ ᵿᵿᵿᵿᵿ-ᵿᵿ?**
 who go-CP:PAST
 ‘Who came?’
- (27) **ᵿᵿᵿ ᵿᵿᵿᵿ-ᵿᵿᵿ-ᵿ?**
 who call:M-CONT-2SG
 ‘Whom are you calling?’
- (28) **ᵿᵿᵿᵿ ᵿᵿ ᵿᵿᵿ ᵿᵿᵿᵿᵿ-ᵿ?**
 stick of who:TERM want:M?-2SG
 ‘Whose stick do you want?’

5.4. Yes/no questions

(35) ↑wée=ním-dí?

2PL=sleep-AFF

‘Are you sleeping?’

(36) táarók ʔmè ɲèed-↑i-rí?

person D1:SG know-2SG-AFF

‘Do you know this person?’

5.5. Clauses with a postverbal patient

Conclusion so far: The affirmative suffix is absent in (i) clauses that contain an element which is inherently in focus by virtue of its meaning, namely a question word, a negation, or the imperative mood, and (ii) in cleft sentences in which a focalized constituent is marked by the particle **dáa**.

Hypothesis: The affirmative suffix is a default focus marker which focalizes either the verb or the polarity. It is used if and only if no other constituent or element is in focus.

Implication: A postverbal object is inherently in focus, by virtue of its position and its syntactic function.

Independent evidence: Defocalization of postverbal objects: In negative clauses and in yes/no-questions, a postverbal object is demoted to oblique status via antipassivization, unless it is contrastively in focus.

5.5.1. Affirmative declarative clauses with a postverbal patient

The affirmative suffix is never present before an object:

(37) a. góok nàt tòul.

dog bite child

‘The dog is biting the child.’

- b. **góok nán-ò tòol.**
 dog bite-PAST child
 ‘The dog bit the child.’

(38) **Mayak:**

- a. **a=caap riŋ-ī.**
 1SG=boil meat-SG
 ‘I am cooking meat.’ ((potential) focus on the patient)
- b. **i=caap ŋʌ?**
 2SG=boil what
 ‘What are you cooking?’

The affirmative suffix is always (?) present before a demoted patient:

(39) **Mayak:**

- a. **a=cʌʌp-i-r riŋ-ī.**
 1SG=boil-AP-AFF meat-SG
 ‘I am cooking meat.’ (focus on the polarity)
- b. **i=cʌʌp-i-r riŋ-ī?**
 2SG=boil-AP-AFF meat-SG
 ‘Are you cooking meat?’
- c. **a=cʌʌp-i-r.**
 1SG=boil-AP-AFF
 ‘I am cooking.’

(40) **Kurmuk:**

- *tòol ʔʌm-bí dúbán.**
 child eat-AP polenta
 ‘The child is eating polenta.’

Interpretation: A postverbal object is (potentially) inherently in focus, and the antipassive derivation defocalizes the object by demoting it to oblique status.

5.5.2. Negative declarative clauses with a postverbal patient

In negative declarative clauses with a postverbal patient, the verb is normally antipassive:

- (41) a. **tòul ʔàm dúbán.**
 child eat polenta
 ‘The child is eating polenta.’
- b. **tòul ɲá ↓ʔám-bí dúbán.**
 child not eat-AP polenta
 ‘The child is not eating polenta.’
- c. **tòul ɲá ↓ʔám-bí.**
 child not eat-AP
 ‘The child is not eating.’

But the verb can be transitive, with focus on the object:

- (42) A: **mín ↓bíidûu càap ↑ríŋ-ít?**
 woman:SG of:2SG:TERM boil meat-SG
 ‘Is your wife cooking meat?’
- B: **èʔé, ɲá càap ríŋ-ít, ʔúur dúbán.**
 no not boil meat-SG stir polenta
 ‘No, she is not cooking *meat*, she is cooking *polenta*.’

- (43) Kurmuk:
- a. **tòul ʔàm dúbán.**
 child eat polenta
 ‘The child is eating polenta.’
- b. **tòul áná ʔám-↓bí dúbán.**
 child not eat-AP polenta
 ‘The child is *not* eating polenta.’
 (‘It is not the case that the child is eating polenta’)
- c. **tòul áná ʔám ↓dúbán.**
 child not eat polenta
 ‘The child is not eating *polenta*.’
 (Presupposition: ‘The child is eating something’)
 (‘What the child is eating is not polenta’)

Interpretation: The antipassive derivation defocalizes the patient, so that only the negation is in focus.

5.5.3. Affirmative yes/no questions with a postverbal patient

In affirmative yes/no questions with a postverbal patient, the verb is normally antipassive if followed by a patient, and it has the affirmative suffix:

- (44) A: **tùl-ìl mál̩t-áḏ-ʔì mòu?**
 child-PL drink:AP-HAB-AFF beer
 ‘Do children drink beer?’
 (‘Is it the case that children drink beer?’)
- B: **èʔé, tùl-ìl ḡá mál̩t-áḏ mòu,**
 no child-PL not drink:AP-HAB beer
 ‘No, children *don’t* drink beer,’
 (‘No, it is not the case that children drink beer.’)
- ḡèe=máaḏ-áḏ ʔàak.**
 3PL=drink-HAB milk(PL)
 ‘they drink *milk*.’
 (‘What they drink is milk’)

Interpretation: The antipassive derivation defocalizes the patient, and the affirmative suffix indicates that polarity is in focus.

5.6. Clauses with a postverbal adverbial

With or without the affirmative suffix:

- (45) **á=ʔáḏ-ú-rù mál̩y-ú.**
 FUT=go-CP-AFF dry.season-LOC
 ‘He will come in the dry season.’
- (46) a. **ḏóbán ʔàm-pì-(rì) ḡà tòul.**
 polenta eat-PASS-(AFF) by child
 ‘The polenta is being eaten by the child.’
- b. **ḏóbán ʔàm-pí-(rí) ḡà tòul.**
 polenta eat:PAST-PASS-(AFF) by child
 ‘The polenta was eaten by the child.’

In yes/no questions:

- (47) **á=túb-ú-rù** **?ànè rùttii?**
 FUT=arrive-CP-AFF here tomorrow
 ‘Will he arrive here tomorrow?’
- (48) **tòul bàadfi** **↑?óok-↓úd-í-rí** **át↓fiinú?**
 child of:1SG:TERM see:CF-PAST-2SG-AFF yesterday
 ‘Did you see my son yesterday?’

Elicited dialogues with adverbials in focus:

- (49) A: **ηάα ↓cáap-íj-í** **ríη-ít?**
 who boil-BEN-2SG meat-SG
 ‘Whom are you cooking the meat for?’
 B: **càab-à** **kà ?óow ↓báadfi.**
 cook-1SG PREP man of:1SG:TERM
 ‘I am cooking it for *my husband*.’
- (50) A1: **tòul ηάaη-gí tii?**
 child cry-AFF why
 ‘Why is the child crying?’
 B1: **jiib-í-cí-rí.**
 hit-M-PASS-AFF
 ‘He is being beaten.’
 A2: **jiib-í-cí** **ηà ηάa?**
 hit-M-PASS by who
 ‘By whom is he being beaten?’
 B2: **jiib-í-cí** **ηà wèr-ò.**
 hit-M-PASS by father-3
 ‘He is being beaten *by his father*.’
 A3: **nàg-é** **kà ηòo?**
 hit-3SG PREP what
 ‘What is he hitting him with?’

- B3: **nàg-é kà béel-èet.**
 hit-3SG PREP cane-SG
 ‘He is hitting him *with a cane*.’

Hypothesis: The affirmative suffix is used if the adverbial is not in focus.

6. Conclusion

The affirmative suffix is a focus marker which indicates that the scope of the focus is either the verb or the polarity or both. This focus marker is used whenever nothing else is in focus. Hence, it is largely grammatically rather than pragmatically controlled.

Examples from Mayak texts:

(51) Mayak

1. **buuŋu-wak ʔaarək dʔood-ikε-r,**
 hyena-PL person carry:PAST-3PL-AFF
 ‘The hyenas carried the human being,’
2. **wà cok-uð-ike pii ʔin.**
 and throw:CF-PAST-3PL water(PL) LOC
 ‘and threw him into the water.’
3. **ʔaarək riŋit-ε tej-i kà pii,**
 person body-3SG revive:PAST-AFF PREP water(PL)
 ‘The human being revived with the water,’
4. **lεε ʔaar-i.**
 until breathe-AFF
 ‘until he started breathing.’ (t.)

(52) Mayak

- A: **tu ŋà ʔoot-uð-i?**
 why not call:CF-PAST-APPL?:2SG
 ‘Why did you not go and call him?’
- B: **ʔoot-uð-à-r.**
 call:CF-PAST-1SG-AFF
 ‘I did go and call him.’ (t.)

Abbreviations

1DLIN	=	first person dual inclusive
1PLEX	=	first person plural exclusive
1PLIN	=	first person plural inclusive
1SG	=	first person singular
2PL	=	second person plural
2SG	=	second person singular
3	=	third person
3PL	=	third person plural
3SG	=	third person singular
AFF	=	affirmative
AP	=	antipassive
APPL	=	applicative
BEN	=	benefactive
CF	=	centrifugal
CONT	=	continuous
CP	=	centripetal
D1	=	first person demonstrative
FOC	=	focus
FUT	=	future
HAB	=	habitual
LOC	=	locative
M	=	multiplicative
PASS	=	passive
PAST	=	past tense
PL	=	plural
PREP	=	preposition
SG	=	singular or singulative
TERM	=	terminator