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

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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) tòol mèél-li.
child dance-AFF
‘The child is dancing.’

(2) a. tòol ?àm dóbán.
child eat polenta
‘The child is eating polenta.’
   b. dóbán ?àm-pì ŋà tòol.
polenta eat-PASS by child
‘The polenta is being eaten by the child.’
c. ɗóbán ʔam-pi-rì.
polenta eat-PASS-AFF
‘The polenta is being eaten.’

(3) a. àʔam ɗóbán.
1SG=eat polenta
‘I am eating polenta.’
b. ɗóbán ʔam-à-gì.
polenta eat-1SG-AFF
‘I am eating the polenta.’
c. ʔam ɗóbán.
eat polenta
‘He/She/It is eating polenta.’
d. ʔam-à-gì.
eat-1SG-AFF
‘I am eating it.’

2.2. Verbal roots

(4) a. ŋá tèc.
not survive
‘He will not survive.’
b. ŋá làac.
not urinate
‘He is not urinating.’
c. ŋá nåaŋ.
not cry
‘He is not crying.’

(5) a. kámál wèl yáawáň.
girl buy oil
‘The girl is buying oil.’
b. kàykòn cùup ðèęŋ.
shepherd milk cow
‘The shepherd is milking a cow.’
Part I: Focus in Surkum (Northern Burun)

2.3. Antipassive

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

(7) a. tōol ʔām ɗóbán.
   child eat polenta
   ‘The child is eating polenta.’

b. tōol ʔām-bī-riŋ.
   child eat-AP-AFF
   ‘The child is eating.’

c. tōol ʔi ʔām-bī.
   child not eat-AP
   ‘The child is not eating.’

d. tōol ʔi ʔām-bī ɗóbán.
   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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Long</th>
<th>Short</th>
<th>Function</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-Cı</td>
<td>Ø</td>
<td>present tense of non-derived intransitive verbs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Cı</td>
<td>-ı</td>
<td>past tense of non-derived intransitive verbs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-oðı, -uðı</td>
<td>-ı, -u</td>
<td>past tense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-aðı, -aðı</td>
<td>-a défini, - défini</td>
<td>habitual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Ciri</td>
<td>-Cı</td>
<td>passive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-(C)iri</td>
<td>-(C)ı</td>
<td>centrifugal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-(C)iri</td>
<td>-(C)ı</td>
<td>antipassive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-uru</td>
<td>-u</td>
<td>centripetal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-uru</td>
<td>-u</td>
<td>multiplicative, antipassive multiplicative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-aqı</td>
<td>-a</td>
<td>1st person singular subject</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ıri</td>
<td>-ı</td>
<td>2nd person singular subject</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ere</td>
<td>-e</td>
<td>3rd person singular subject</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ancre</td>
<td>-anı</td>
<td>1st person plural exclusive subject</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ere</td>
<td>-e</td>
<td>2nd person plural subject</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 rōu-t-ı-rı.**
     tree:PL plant-PASS-AFF
     ‘The trees are being planted.’
   b. **yán ı ráu-t-ı.**
     tree:PL not plant-PASS
     ‘The trees are not being planted.’

(9)  a. **güuc ı rúu-t-ı-rı.**
     young.man plant-AP-AFF
     ‘The young man is planting.’
b. **gu uc ndata rúut-ì.**  
young.man not plant-AP  
‘The young man is not planting.’

(10) a. **gu uc rúu-t-úd-ì.**  
young.man plant:AP-PAST-AFF  
‘The young man planted.’
b. **gu uc nta rúu-ù.**  
young.man not plant:AP-PAST  
‘The young man did not plant.’

(11) a. **ʔiit-ú-rù.**  
cut-M:AP-AFF  
‘He is cutting repeatedly.’
b. **nt tiiit-ú.**  
not cut-M:AP  
‘He is not cutting repeatedly.’

(12) a. **tòól ʔoot-ú-rù.**  
child go-M-AFF  
‘The child is walking.’
b. **tòól nta ʔoot-ú.**  
child not go-M  
‘The child is not walking.’

(13) a. **dòbán ðam-à-ðì.**  
polenta eat-1SG-AFF  
‘I am eating the polenta.’
b. **dòbán nga ðam-à.**  
polenta not eat-1SG  
‘I am not eating the polenta.’

(14) a. **yán roodoo ʔanó overall.**  
tree:PL plant:PAST-1PLEX-AFF  
‘We planted the trees’
4. Identifying the affirmative suffix

The affirmative suffix in underived intransitive verbs. Illustrated with affirmative and negative declarative clauses in which the verb occurs in the final position:

(15) Long verb forms Short verb forms
a. tôol ƞáaŋ-ĝî. c. tôol ƞáaŋ.  
child cry-AFF child not cry  
‘The child is crying.’ ‘The child is not crying.’
b. tôol ƞáaŋ-ĝ-î. d. tôol ƞáaŋ-ô.  
child cry-PAST-AFF child not cry-PAST  
‘The child cried.’ ‘The child did not cry.’

(16) Long verb forms Short verb forms
a. tôol làaj-ĝî. c. tôol ƞáaŋ.  
child urinate-AFF child not urinate  
‘The child is urinating.’ ‘The child is not urinating.’
b. tôol làaj-ĝ-î. d. tôol ƞáaŋ-ô.  
child urinate-PAST-AFF child not urinate-PAST  
‘The child urinated.’ ‘The child did not urinate.’

(17) High Spread: σ σ σ
| ≪ ≪ ≪ |
H  L  H

(18) a. tôol māaŋ ðàak.  
child drink milk(PL)  
‘The child is drinking milk.’
b. **tòol máaad-ò ?àak.**  
child drink-PAST milk(PL)  
‘The child drank milk.’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>cry-PAST-AFF</th>
<th>urinate-PAST-AFF</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ñáaŋ-öC-ì</td>
<td>làaj-öC-ì</td>
<td>Underlying form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(i)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Deletion of PAST -ö</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ñáaŋ- C-ì</td>
<td>làaj- C-ì</td>
<td>Tone reassignment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(ii)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(19) Kurmuk:  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Long verb forms</th>
<th>Short verb forms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. ñáarák 4 núm-di.</td>
<td>ñáarák 4 áná núm.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>person sleep-AFF</td>
<td>person not sleep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘The man is sleeping.’</td>
<td>‘The man is not sleeping.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. ñáarák 4 núm-ôd-ì.</td>
<td>ñáarák 4 áná núm-ô.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>person sleep-PAST-AFF</td>
<td>person not sleep-PAST</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘The man slept.’</td>
<td>‘The man did not sleep.’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>With affirmative suffix</th>
<th>Without affirmative suffix</th>
<th>Independent personal pronouns</th>
<th>Proclitic personal pronouns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2SG ?àm-ì-rı́</td>
<td>?àm-ı́</td>
<td>?iiníc</td>
<td>(?)ı́</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3SG ?àm-è-ré</td>
<td>?àm-é</td>
<td>d̄aníc</td>
<td>Ô</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1DLIN ?àm-pi-rı́</td>
<td>?àm-pı́</td>
<td>?ıngíc</td>
<td>(?)ı́</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2PL ?àm-ée-ré</td>
<td>?àm-ée</td>
<td>wéegúc</td>
<td>wée</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3PL ?àm-ké-ré</td>
<td>?àm-ké</td>
<td>ǳaägını́</td>
<td>gée</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4. Allomorphy of the affirmative suffix (disregarding a few exceptions)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Allomorph</th>
<th>Morphophonological environment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-C_I</td>
<td>after a root consonant, the value of C being determined by that consonant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-I</td>
<td>after a suffix consonant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-rV</td>
<td>after a suffix vowel, V having the same quality as that vowel</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(20) a. -C_I: tòol ŋáan-gí.  
child cry-AFF  
‘The child is crying’

b. -I: gúuc rúuṭ-úḏ-í.  
young.man plant:AP-PAST-AFF  
‘The young man planted.’

c. -rV: tòol ḷōoṭ-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) ê=ʔám ḷòó?  
2SG=eat what  
‘What are you eating?’
(22)  jinb-í-ci  nà  náa?
    hit-M-PASS  by  who
    ‘By whom is he being beaten?’

(23)  nlag-é  kà  nòò?
    hit-3SG  PREP  what
    ‘With what is he beating him?’

(24)  a.  rá†  ³ád-òó  tòóŋ?
        chief  go-CP:PAST  when
        ‘When did the chief come?’
    b.  tóol  ³ád-òórá.
        child  go-CP:PAST-AFF
        ‘The child came.’

(25)  a.  náa  ³ád-í?
        who  go-CF
        ‘Who will go?’
    b.  tóol  ³ád-í-rà.
        child  go-CF-AFF
        ‘The child will go.’

(26)  náa  ³ád-òó?
    who  go-CP:PAST
    ‘Who came?’

(27)  náa  ³ól-òó-í?
    who  call:M-CONT-2SG
    ‘Whom are you calling?’

(28)  kōlíc  bà  náa  yàlab-í?
    stick  of  who:TERM  want:M?-2SG
    ‘Whose stick do you want?’
‘Why’-questions:

(29) tòol ƞáaŋ-íí tì?  
child cry-AFF why  
‘Why is the child crying?’

(30) ƞìŋá ?ɔɔl tì?  
2SG:not sing why  
‘Why are you not singing?’

5.2. Imperative clauses

(31) a. bòd-é!  
run-2SG  
‘Run!’

b. bòd-ée!  
run-2PL  
‘Run!’

(32) a. ?àm-í!  
eat-2SG  
‘Eat it!’

b. ?àm-ée!  
eat-2PL  
‘Eat it!’

5.3. Cleft sentences

(33) A: ƞáa ?áɗ-í?  
who go-CF  
‘Who will go?’

ISG FOC go-CF:TERM  
‘I will go.’

Cf. relative clause:

(34) gúŋ-íŋ ká núm-ɗíí ƞá ‘ŋór-áŋ.  
dog-PL [PL sleep-AFF:TERM] not bark-HAB  
‘Sleeping dogs do not bark.’
5.4. Yes/no questions

(35) ḭwée=ńın-dî?
    2PL=sleep-AFF
    ‘Are you sleeping?’

(36) ŧāarók ŷmè ḟe̤ed-ŷ-rî?
    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 ḍáa.

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. ꯼óok ŋàn tòol.
    dog bite child
    ‘The dog is biting the child.’
b. **gōok nán-ô tôol.**
   dog bite-PAST child
   ‘The dog bit the child.’

(38) **Mayak:**
   a. **a=caap rîŋ-iṭ.**
      1SG=boil meat-SG
      ‘I am cooking meat.’ ((potential) focus on the patient)
   b. **i=caap ƞa?**
      2SG=boil what
      ‘What are you cooking?’

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

(39) **Mayak:**
   a. **a=câap-i-r rîŋ-iṭ.**
      1SG=boil-AP-AFF meat-SG
      ‘I am cooking meat.’ (focus on the polarity)
   b. **i=câap-i-r rîŋ-iṭ?**
      2SG=boil-AP-AFF meat-SG
      ‘Are you cooking meat?’
   c. **a=câap-i-r.**
      1SG=boil-AP-AFF
      ‘I am cooking.’

(40) **Kurmuk:**
   *tôol ʔâm-bî dûhán.
   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.  töol ṭâm dôbân.  
child eat polenta  
‘The child is eating polenta.’

b.  töol ṭâm bî dôbân.  
child not eat-AP polenta  
‘The child is not eating polenta.’

c.  töol ṭâm bî.  
child not eat-AP  
‘The child is not eating.’

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

(42)  A:  mín bûdûu càap réŋ-î?  
woman:SG of:2SG:TERM boil meat-SG  
‘Is your wife cooking meat?’

B:  è Cô, ṭâm càap réŋ-î, ṭûr dôbân.  
no not boil meat-SG stir polenta  
‘No, she is not cooking meat, she is cooking polenta.’

(43)  Kurmuk:

a.  töol ṭâm dûbân.  
child eat polenta  
‘The child is eating polenta.’

b.  töol áná ṭâm bî dûbân.  
child not eat-AP polenta  
‘The child is not eating polenta.’  
(‘It is not the case that the child is eating polenta’)  

(c.  töol áná ṭâm dûbân.  
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: tûl-îl mût-áq-î móù?
child-PL drink:AP-HAB-AFF beer
‘Do children drink beer?’
(‘Is it the case that children drink beer?’)

B: â?ë, tûl-îl .nom mât-ât múo,
no child-PL not drink:AP-HAB beer
‘No, children don’t drink beer,’
(‘No, it is not the case that children drink beer.’)

gëa=máad-ât ₂àak.
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 in in focus.

5.6. **Clauses with a postverbal adverbial**

With or without the affirmative suffix:

(45) á=?âq-ú-rù máy-ú.
FUT=go-CP-AFF dry.season-LOC
‘He will come in the dry season.’

(46) a. dôbân ?âm-pî-(rî) ₂ì tôul.
polenta eat-PASS-(AFF) by child
‘The polenta is being eaten by the child.’

b. dôbân ?âm-pî-(rî) ₂ì tôul.
polenta eat:PAST-PASS-(AFF) by child
‘The polenta was eaten by the child.’
In yes/no questions:

(47) "á=túb-ú-rù  ?ànè rùtfii?
FUT=arrive-CP-AFF here tomorrow
‘Will he arrive here tomorrow?’

(48) tòol bàadфи  tóok-úq-í-rí  áʧţinú?
child of:1SG:TERM see:CF-PAST-2SG-AFF yesterday
‘Did you see my son yesterday?’

Elicited dialogues with adverbials in focus:

(49) A: ñáa  cālp-ij-í  ríŋ-ít?
who boil-BEN-2SG meat-SG
‘Whom are you cooking the meat for?’
B: càab-à kà  óow  báadфи.
cook-1SG PREP man of:1SG:TERM
‘I am cooking it for my husband.’

(50) A1: tòol ñáaŋ-ɡí  tín?
child cry-AFF why
‘Why is the child crying?’
B1: jub-í-ci-rí.
hit-M-PASS-AFF
‘He is being beaten.’
A2: jub-í-ci  nà ñáa?
hit-M-PASS by who
‘By whom is he being beaten?’
hit-M-PASS by father-3
‘He is being beaten by his father.’
A3: nàq-é  kà  nūó?
hit-3SG PREP what
‘What is he hitting him with?’
B3:  nga-ä  kà  beel-ët.
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. buugu-wak  ūaarok  dood-ike-r,
   hyena-PL  person  carry:PAST-3PL-AFF
   ‘The hyenas carried the human being,’
2. wà  cok-uð-ike  pii  ūin.
   and  throw:CF-PAST-3PL  water(PL)  LOC
   ‘and threw him into the water.’
3. ūaarok  rińit-ê  tej-i  kà  pii,
   person  body-3SG  revive:PAST-AFF  PREP  water(PL)
   ‘The human being revived with the water,’
4. lëe  ūaar-ë.
   until  breathe-AFF
   ‘until he started breathing.’ (t.)

(52) Mayak
A:  ūn  ūa  ūoot-ùð-i?
   why  not  call:CF-PAST-APPL?:2SG
   ‘Why did you not go and call him?’
B:  ūoot-ùð-a-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