

SOME FREQUENTLY NEGLECTED SYNTACTICAL FEATURES OF WEST AFRICAN LANGUAGES

Languages throughout West Africa show a remarkable degree of similarity in features of syntax and means of conveying emphasis. Since, however, all too many grammars encourage the belief that little beyond phonology, morphology and a few basic constructions need be studied in a language, many important means of expressing shades of meaning are overlooked. When a number of stylistic devices are omitted, local speakers come to feel that Europeans 'speak like telegrams', and any of our writings must remain foreign productions. How many translators in West Africa have achieved a standard such that the native readers 'will completely forget that the words are a translation', as J. B. Phillips puts it?

A recent opportunity of sampling versions in several languages has shown that frequently the work is largely a transcription, rather than a translation: that is, it remains a close, clause by clause, even word by word, rendering of the A.V. or Segond, for example. Yet even the best translations do at times show a need for further investigation into the more difficult aspects of syntax.

Two examples from the gospels will serve to illustrate some of the shades of meaning that can be distinguished grammatically:

Matt. 5: 22 'But I say . . .' (Greek: *egō de legō . . .*)

Translating this into Dagbani (Gur group, Northern Ghana), one could say, closely following the English, *amaa n yera*—here *amaa* translates 'but', and *n* is the first person pronoun, but the sentence is incorrect in the context, since it actually would render a Greek form *alla legō*. English 'but' translates both *alla* and *de* in Greek, while, as is usual in West Africa, the Dagbani conjunction corresponds only to *alla*. A truer translation of the verse would be *mani gba yera*, for here *mani* is the emphatic first person pronoun, and *gba* is a contrastive particle very similar to the Greek *de* in its use. Most West African languages have no word that does duty for both *alla* and *de*, and English 'but' should therefore be treated with caution.

For our next example we consider the Moré (Gur group, Upper Volta) rendering of

Luke 15: 12 'Father, give me my portion of the inheritance.'

The present version runs as follows:

Mam ba, koñ mam mam dogem pwiire (My father, give me my birth portion).

The first interesting feature of this sentence is the nuances conveyed by the pronouns. As traditionally described, there are in Moré three grades of pronoun for each person: for the first singular these are given as *maam*, *mam* and *m*, the longest form being emphatic. Each pronoun in this sentence must be considered in turn:

'My father.' In intimate family circles it would be quite natural to address one's father as *m ba*; this term can also, however, be used out of courtesy when addressing a man some years older than oneself, so that to avoid ambiguity when such men are present one would address one's own father by the slightly stronger form *mam ba*, as has been used here.

'Give me.' This should read *koñ maam*, for it happens that after a verb the form *mam* is not used, and the form *maam* is not then emphatic. The short pronoun *m* might be used, but this would not be appropriate at the beginning of a sentence.

'My birth portion.' After *koñ maam* one would expect the short pronoun *m*, but here the phrase *m dogem pwiire* would suggest that the 'portion' was already packed up and waiting to be collected, which is clearly not the implication of the context. The phrase *mam dogem pwiire* is thus correct here.

Even after considering the pronouns, however, this sentence leaves us with a problem. Investigation shows that the simple imperative *koñ maam*, 'give me', is only used when the thing concerned is actually in the hand of the person from whom it is asked. Moré, in common with many Gur and Kwa languages, often uses two verbs to describe an action, where English may need only one. Thus, 'give me that book' is normally rendered by 'pick up that book and give me'; similarly, 'he stood up' is expressed as 'he arose and stopped upright'. In the verse we are considering, then, one should say, 'Gather up my birth portion and give me'. This admittedly sounds wordy when compared with the original, but it is idiomatic Moré. The verse should therefore read:

Mam ba, nyok mam dogem pwiire n koñ maam.

In considering this type of sentence, it will be interesting to turn to the following rule of Twi syntax, recently observed by a colleague: In Twi (Kwa group, Southern Ghana) it is not possible for a verb to be followed by two objects, direct and indirect, if both have 'definite' reference. Thus, though one may say *ɔmaa me sika*, 'he gave me money', one cannot say *ɔmaa me sika no*, 'he gave me the money'. To overcome this, use has to be made of an additional verb, such as *de* or *fa* which are translatable as 'take', and the sentence is constructed as follows: *ɔde sika no maa me*, 'he took the money and gave me'; similarly one says *de maa me*, 'he took (it) and gave me' for 'he gave it to me'.

In the sentence 'give me my portion', the two objects of 'give' do have definite reference, and it is not unlikely that the need for two verbs in the corresponding Moré sentence may arise from some rule analogous to the one which obtains in Twi.¹

Types of emphasis

Because certain types of meaning may be expressed in English by a combination of stress and intonation, neither of which is normally shown in writing, one tends to find it difficult to learn to express these nuances in

¹ It should be realized that when confronted by a difficult problem of syntax no informant is likely to give the fundamental rule, since he will naturally discuss each sentence within its own context, and on the basis of its particular meaning, rather than its structure.

other ways, particularly by means of particles and pronoun forms which must be written. Even in English it is not always realized how important is the rôle of intonation; in writing one can indicate stress by underlining or italics, but this is far from expressing meaning unambiguously¹. If one shows the stress in 'I saw *him*', one still has not shown which of the two basic intonation patterns this should be spoken with: the first, [- - ˘], means 'it is him that I saw', and excludes mention of anyone else; the second, [- - ~], implies 'I agree, I did see this person, but . . .' and suggests there were others besides, with whom one might have been concerned.

In certain sentences, even with words underlined, the intonation can actually give opposite meanings; compare this example, spoken on the two intonation patterns shown:

'he did not do that for lack of *money*'
 (a) [- - - - - ˘] (b) [- - - - - ~]

Intonation (a) would indicate that the person did not do 'it', and that the reason was lack of money. Intonation (b) on the contrary would show that the person did do 'it', but that the reason was other than lack of money.

The different meanings that can be attached to the written form give rise to special problems when one is reading the Scriptures. In Matt. 5 one must read, 'But *I* say', and not '*But* I say', which would be the meaning of the first Dagbani version we quoted. In John 1: 1 which is usually read as '. . . the Word *was* God', the more correct reading would be '. . . the Word *was God*'; here the N.E.B., by recasting the sentence, has sought to show the correct emphasis: '. . . what God was, the Word was'.

Our feeling for these subtleties is not sharpened by the traditional method of teaching European languages, especially in the elementary stages, where sentences are set for translation without any thought that they might ever be uttered in any real situation. Such sentences as 'the man went', or 'the man who came yesterday', which at first sight seem quite normal, are not in fact ever spoken as they stand: rather one would say, 'the man has gone' or 'I have seen the man who came yesterday', or the like. This needs to be borne constantly in mind when one is working with an African informant. It is very disconcerting otherwise to find a 'correct' sentence being rejected by an intelligent informant; it may well be that it is rejected, not because of any grammatical error but because it does not seem to fit any realistic context he can think of. This would affect a wrongly emphasized sentence as much as a more obviously meaningless one.

Even the simplest looking sentence can prove quite hard to translate—we say simplest *looking* because most people find it much easier to study by eye than by ear. A short statement such as 'the man has gone' can, in Mandinka (Mande group, the Gambia), be expressed in many different ways, according to the emphasis required:

keo taata le (minimal emphasis, *le* giving colour to the whole statement)

¹ We here follow the traditional orthography and word division though *o* is more correctly to be regarded as a prefix to the verb.

keo le taata 'the man has gone'
wo keo taata le 'the man concerned has gone'
wo keo le taata (ditto, emphasizing the subject)
keo taata le ko 'the man *has* gone' (I told you so!)

The one thing that could not be a full statement is *keo taata*, which would be the equivalent of saying 'the man has gone' on a level intonation with no stress.

When a sentence comprises more than one clause, it is essential to see which of them carries the main focus of interest. In European languages the sequence is not usually fixed, for the main clause may be anywhere in the sentence, and the focus can be emphasized in a number of ways. In West African languages, however, it is usual for the focus, which we may term the main statement, to come at the end of the sentence, whether or not it is the main clause according to traditional terminology. Taking as an example, 'I have seen the man who came yesterday', this could be rendered in two basic ways in Mandinka:

(a) *keo meng naata kunung, ng'a je le*
 (b) *nga wo keo je meng naata kunung*

In (a), which is literally 'the man who came yesterday, I have seen him', the emphasis is on the 'seeing' rather than on the identity of 'the man'. In (b) the emphasis is rather on 'the man's' identity. It will be observed that it is (a) which most resembles the natural emphasis of the English sentence, though (b) is nearer to the English word and clause order. Similarly, though one could translate literally into Mandinka the sentence 'I did not do it because I forgot', one would in fact almost invariably say, 'I forgot: that is why I did not do it'.

1. Emphasizing of nouns and pronouns

In every West African language there are at least two types of personal pronoun, conveying strong or weak emphasis. Often the weak forms are phonetically so hard to perceive that the European learner prefers to use the strong forms all the time. Sometimes, as in languages where the weak pronouns are represented only by a tonal contrast, one may simply be puzzled as to why the language should be so 'ambiguous' in respect of second and third persons, for instance.

Temne (West Atlantic group, Sierra Leone) has three types of pronouns; the nouns have any one of eleven prefixes, and the third person pronouns referring to them must by their form reflect the prefix of the noun concerned, by a process analogous to agreement in the European languages. One therefore has to classify the pronouns both according to type and according to the nouns with which they can agree. The basic sentence pattern in Temne is subject-verb-object, but this may be changed where emphatic pronouns are used in certain ways. The behaviour of these pronouns may be illustrated by the following sentences:¹

ɔbai ɔ təl ampa aŋe 'the chief heard this statement'
ɔ təl ŋi 'he heard it'

Here there is minimal, general emphasis, and the pronouns are unemphatic; *ɔ* is governed by *ɔbai*, and *ŋi* by *ampa*.

Exclusive emphasis is expressed by using a type of pronoun termed disjunctive, which must stand at the beginning of its clause, whether or not it is subject of the verb:

ŋa ɔbai ɔ təl 'it the chief heard' = 'this was what the chief heard'

kɔnɔ təl ampa aŋe 'he heard this statement'

The disjunctive clause may be preceded by the noun to which it refers:

ampa aŋe, ŋa ɔbai ɔ təl 'this was the statement the chief heard'

ɔbai, kɔnɔ təl ampa aŋe 'it was the chief that heard this statement'

An emphasis of prominence is conveyed by placing a noun or pronoun in front of a clause containing a weak pronoun; this process may be termed front-shifting, since it can be regarded as a shifting of the noun or its equivalent to a position earlier than that which it would occupy in the basic sentence structure:

ampa aŋe, ɔbai ɔ təl ŋi 'as for this statement, the chief heard it'

ɔbai, ɔ təl ampa aŋe 'as for the chief, he heard this statement'

When pronouns are front-shifted, a third set is used, and not the two types so far mentioned, though many forms in this set resemble the weak forms; they are frequently used in front of disjunctive clauses:

ŋi, ŋa ɔbai ɔ təl 'as for it, it was what the chief heard'

kɔnɔŋ, ɔ təl ampa aŋe 'as for him, he heard this statement'

Front-shifted nouns can in turn precede one of these pronouns:

ampa aŋe, ŋi, ŋa ɔbai ɔ təl 'this was the statement the chief in fact heard'

And, as yet another stylistic variant, two different nouns may be front-shifted in succession:

ɔbai, ampa aŋe, ŋi, ŋa ɔ təl

This sentence defies translation, for by the time this degree of elaboration is reached, the distinction between the various types of emphasis is hard to maintain. This must be seen rather as a means of avoiding rigidity and bringing life and flexibility into the sentence. Certainly this is far removed from a foreign speaker's 'telegram style'.

While Temne is remarkably rich in emphatic constructions, many parallel devices are met elsewhere. In Dagbani prominence is shown by front-shifting, but a particle must be placed after the words concerned. In some instances the front-shifting is obligatory, as:

do so n ka na zuŋo 'someone came today'

The omission of the *n* which marks the prominence of the first two words would make the sentence as meaningless as would a flat monotone on the corresponding English statement.

2. Emphasizing of verbs

In Dagbani there is a particle that can be included in a verbal group, which is purely emphatic. Its behaviour in the verbal system is comparable to that of such particles as *pun*, 'already', or *firi*, 'actually', but no meaning other than emphasis can be attributed to it. This element, *kul*, may contrast one verb with another, or it may draw special attention to the process denoted by the verb:

n ku tooi yiysi zani, n kul ni tooi 3ini mi 'I cannot stand, [but] I can sit'
o kul tʃanjia 'he has gone'

In an account of a motorcade in the Dagbani monthly newspaper it was said of the leading car:

di daa kul tʃan la biela biela 'it was going really slowly'

Here the use of *kul*, by highlighting the verb, draws attention to the phrase describing the manner of accomplishing the action it refers to. (N.B. *daa* here indicates remote past.)

It is striking that, frequent though the use of *kul* is in Dagbani, it has seemingly no counterpart in the related languages.

3. Emphasizing of statements

In any English sentence where there is no especial emphasis, colour is given to the statement by means of an intonation pattern which conveys what one may call general emphasis. In most West African languages there is a tonal system which prevents any great flexibility of intonation, so that general emphasis is often given to a statement by means of a particle.

In Mandinka the emphatic particle, when placed after anything but the verb, gives special emphasis to what it follows; when it follows the verb, on the other hand, it gives general colour to the whole statement:

keo naata kunung ne 'the man came yesterday'
keo le naata kunung 'the man came yesterday'
keo naata le kunung 'the man came yesterday'

(N.B. *le* and *ne* are variant forms of the same particle.)

A Mandinka sentence, however long, can never have more than one *le* or *ne*. No emphatic particle is used in a sentence containing a negative.

In Dagbani the particle *la* is similar in use to Mandinka *le*, in giving particular emphasis to any member of the sentence it may follow, but in giving general emphasis when it follows the verb:

o tʃan Tamali la 'he has gone to Tamale'
o tʃan la Tamali 'he has gone to Tamale'

In Dagbani *la* may be used in a sentence where there is a negative, but this is not possible for the corresponding particle in the related languages Wali and Dagaari (N.W. Ghana).

Referentials and connectives

Here we are concerned with those elements of a connected series of sentences which enable the hearer to relate each topic to the overall context.

These include items meaning 'the one concerned', 'the latter', 'the following', and the like, and clause connectives such as 'but', 'and', 'and then' or their equivalents. These again cause a certain amount of difficulty to the learner, and also to the translator, since it is too easy to take each sentence on its own, or a verse of the Bible at a time, and transpose them into their equivalent in the language being studied, while overlooking the need to ensure that the whole passage should form an integrated whole.

The referential is of particular importance, but from language to language it varies considerably in its grammatical status.

In Mandinka it is the demonstrative *wo*, 'that', which also serves as a referential: it refers the noun concerned to a previous context, being then translatable as 'the latter' or 'the one in question', according to its use. We may mention that the word *nying*, 'this', is used figuratively to mean 'the following'.

As 'the latter', *wo* serves to distinguish two nouns that are referred to in one context, as for instance in a reported conversation. In a passage such as

'the youth met an old man; he said to him . . .'

wo is used as a kind of pronoun to refer to the last noun mentioned, while the regular third person pronoun will refer to the previous noun: throughout the passage, the *wo* and the pronoun will each be used to refer to the relevant noun, and there will thus be no ambiguity.

As 'the one in question', *wo* can either stand alone or accompany a noun to identify it in relation to an earlier context, as in:

i ye wo keo meng je kunung, a naata n yaa le bii 'that man you saw yesterday, he came to my place today'

In Temne it is the demonstrative 'this' which can have past reference, as was seen in the set of examples discussed earlier, where *ampa aye* meant 'the statement in question'. Besides the word 'this', Temne has a special category of word with referential use, translatable as 'the very one'. For emphasis, the two types of referential can occur together:

ampa ηati 'the very statement'

ampa ηati aye 'this very statement'

In Dagbani the referential is a particle *maa* which is used after nominal words and after clauses:

paya maa 'the woman' = 'the woman concerned'

o ni kpe maa, . . . 'when he entered, . . .'

o ni kpe zuyu maa, . . . 'because he entered, . . .'

In these examples *maa* shows that both speaker and hearer know the person or the incident referred to. The incident could either have been witnessed by speaker and hearer, or it could have been described in a previous sentence. (N.B. The word *ni* here indicates a verb in a subordinate clause.)

The following sentence shows how emphatic particles and the referential may be used in conjunction in Dagbani:

ti kul kuni mi maa 'we are going home just the same'

These are the closing words of a dialogue: a trapped lion has been receiving help from a wild boar and his family, but has abused their kindness; as they

go home in disgust, the lion begs them to come back and help him further, but the wild boar answers with the words quoted.

In this sentence *ti* is the first person plural pronoun, and *kuni*, a variant of *kuna*, is the imperfective of the verb *kuli*, 'to go home'. The other three words are particles with the following functions: *kul* stresses the verb, contrasting it with the 'remaining and helping' which has been requested instead; *mi*, which is used for general emphasis, here also serves to indicate that an imperfective verb form denotes an action actually in progress (as distinct from a potentiality or habit); *maa* serves to remind the hearer that he knows what the speaker has in mind, having already seen him begin the process described.

There is a sense in which it would have been 'correct' to say

ti kuni mi 'we are going home'

and this is what a foreign speaker would probably have said; but, giving due heed to the whole situation described, this bare sentence would have been inadequate in the context.

In considering connectives we would mention two in particular which have seemed to escape the attention of some Europeans. In a great many languages, 'and then' is expressed by a verb or an auxiliary verb. This is often related to the verb 'to come' but in many contexts the notion of 'coming' is absent. Temne uses *re* (<*der*) both as 'come and' and as 'and then'; there need be no connective particle at the beginning of a clause when *re* is used:

ɔ *re der* 'and then he came'

ɔ *re kɔne* 'and then he went'

The second connective device we would mention is what may be called the 'echo'. This consists in summing up, or quoting, the last clauses uttered, before going on to some new incident or topic, as in:

'they asked him and he then agreed; when he had agreed, they went on and asked someone else'

The clause 'when he had agreed' is not essential to understanding the whole, but serves as an expanded connective to make the narrative more graphic. This 'echo', if not used too often, can be very effective.

Conclusion

With so much that is new and unaccustomed in West African languages, the learner must avoid the temptation of confining himself to a few simple sentence patterns and basic constructions, or of relying on English-like constructions which, though possible, are not common in the language concerned. There are many means of bringing vividness and interest into one's speech, and one must therefore probe deeply and seek to find out what are the factors which make for good style and imaginative skill in the language that is to be mastered. If we are content merely to remain competent and try to avoid obvious grammatical blunders, then we can never rid ourselves of the stigma that 'only a foreigner would say that', and when we put out a version of the Scriptures, our readers will not be able to forget that it is a translation.