

## CONTRASTIVE FOCUS IN THE GANJA DIALECT OF BALANTA

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This article examines the characteristics of a construction in the Atlantic language Balanta in which a fronted noun phrase is followed by a clitic pronoun that agrees with the preceding noun for noun class. I present arguments that this is an object focus construction, contrasting it with examples of topicalization. I then contrast it with two other constructions, clefts and relative clauses, to show that it differs from both.

On examinera les caractéristiques d'une construction du balante, membre du groupe atlantique (sénégal-guinéen) de langues, selon laquelle un syntagme nominal antéposé est suivi d'un pronom qui s'accorde avec le substantif précédent. Je propose qu'il s'agit ici de la focalisation de l'objet, et je l'oppose à la topicalisation, ainsi qu'au clivages et aux propositions relatives.

### 0. INTRODUCTION

The goal of this article is to examine the characteristics of a contrastive object focus construction found in the Atlantic language Balanta.<sup>1</sup> Contrastive subject focus will be a matter for a separate study. Data comes from the Ganja dialect, spoken on the south bank of the Casamance river in Senegal. Previous descriptive work on Balanta has been conducted by Sousa Bella (1946), Quintino (1951, 1961), Wilson (1961), N'Diaye-Corréard (1969, 1970, 1973), and Fudeman (1999).

Canonical word order in Balanta is SVO, as seen in (1).

- (1) **a-lama womu saa**  
CL1-king eat snake  
The king ate a snake.

In left dislocation of topic (2) and contrastive focus (3) constructions, however, a nominal element may be fronted.

- (2) [**bug fə**]            **n-karaŋ fi**  
book CL5.this I-read CL5.it  
This book, I read it.

- (3) [**saa fi**]            **a-lama womu**  
snake CL5.it CL1-king eat  
The king ate **a snake** (not a toad).

The Balanta left dislocation construction is very similar to left dislocation constructions reported for other languages, being used to mark topics that "have been out of the focus of attention for a while, and are being brought back" (Givón 1990:757), or more generally, ones that are "assumed by the Speaker to be 'known' or 'given' to the Addressee, and about which the predication predicates something." (Dik 1981:92). We see this in the following portion of "The death of Ngana Sira Banna" (Fudeman 1999:336–337). In the first sentence, the speaker tells of a war between the

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<sup>1</sup>All Balanta data in this article comes from my work with Abdoulaye Diatta of Ziguinchor, Senegal, a native speaker of the Ganja dialect. I thank Bill Ham, Wayne Harbert, Magui Sufer, and two anonymous JWAL reviewers for comments on this article, as well as Chris Collins for bringing the Temne data to my attention. Abbreviations used in this article are as follows: ACC=accusative; CL=noun class; COP=copula; DAT=dative; DEF=definite article; LOC=locative pronoun; OBJ=object; POSS=genitive pronoun; PRON=pronoun; SUB=subject.

Balanta and Bainouk tribes. Sentences 2 and 3 are statements about that war; the tribes themselves are not mentioned. In sentence 4, the speaker returns to the Balanta and Bainouk tribes, in the person of their king. Although the king was not explicitly mentioned in the first sentence, his existence was implied by the mention of the Balanta and Bainouk tribes, particularly in the context of war.

- (4) **ugio**      **suumpuugi**      **bitfaa**      **ngi** **bibajnuŋka**      **ma**  
 there.was war.between Balanta.people with Bainouk.people DEF
- wil**      **ma** **wuflu** **ndaani**      **waabo** **wil**      **ma** **gi**  
 thing DEF last much now thing DEF COP
- a-hakilo**      **mban** **aŋ** **waamo**      [**alama**      **bajnuŋka-ma**]  
 LOC-memory our until now king Bainouk.people-DEF
- bin-jaa**      **ma** **ŋana** **sira** **banna**  
 they-call him Ngana Sira Banna

There was a war between the Balantas and the Bainouks. The situation lasted a long time. It is still in our memory. The king of the Bainouks, they called him Ngana Sira Banna.

In the focus construction, a focused noun or noun phrase is followed by a high-toned pronoun that agrees with it for noun class. This entire constituent appears to the left of the subject. Since the noun class system in the dialect under investigation is breaking down, more often than not, the class 5 pronoun **fi** is used for non-human nouns, regardless of the noun's original class affiliation. (Examples with full agreement from the Kentohe and Fora dialects can be found in Wilson 1961:157.) We see below that the focused constituent may contain an indefinite (5a), definite (5b), or plural (5c) noun, a conjunction structure (5d), or a quantifier (here, 'all') (5e).<sup>2</sup>

- (5) a. [**saa**      **fi**]      **a-lama**      **womu**  
 snake CL5.it CL1-king eat  
 The king ate **a snake** (not a toad).
- b. [**saa**      **ma**      **fi**]      **a-lama**      **womu**  
 snake DEF CL5.it CL1-king eat  
 The king ate **the snake** (not the toad).
- c. [**bi-saa**      **fi**]      **a-lama**      **womu**  
 CL2-snake CL5.it CL1-king eat  
 The king ate **snakes** (not toads).
- d. [**saa**      **fi**      **ngi**      **baali**      **fi**]      **a-lama**      **womu**  
 snake CL5.it with goat CL5.it CL1-king eat  
 The king ate **a snake and a goat** (not a toad and a sheep).
- e. [**bi-saa**      **bi-nduba**      **fi**]      **a-lama**      **womu**  
 CL2-snake CL2-all CL5.it CL1-king eat  
 The king ate **all the snakes** (not all the toads).

<sup>2</sup>Alternatively, we could translate the examples in (5) NP, S V: A snake, the king ate. I have chosen not to because in my dialect of English, the construction NP, S V does not necessarily convey contrastive focus in the way that the Balanta construction does.

The high-toned pronoun itself can serve as the focused element, as well, as seen in (6) (further examples can be found in Quintino 1951:23–24, although he erroneously identifies them as passive constructions).

- (6) [fi]      a-lama      womu  
 CL5.it CL1-king      eat  
 The king ate it.

I begin by exploring the characteristics of the Balanta focus construction, in part by contrasting it with left dislocation of topic. I then present examples of two other Balanta constructions, clefts and relative clauses, in order to show that the contrastive focus construction differs from both.<sup>3</sup>

### 1. CONTRASTIVE FOCUS

As observed by Givón, the notion of contrast “is founded on the more general cognitive dimension of **informational predictability** or its converse, **counter-expectancy**.” In either case, what matters is the speaker’s assessment of the hearer’s expectations given the local discourse context (Givón 1990:700; emphasis his). In (5a), above, for example, the use of the contrastive focus construction indicates that the speaker judges the object of ‘eat’, ‘snake’, to be contrary to the listener’s expectations, as I have attempted to show by the material in parentheses and the English glosses, which are also marked for focus-stress.

Givón points out that expectations about asserted information range between two extremes: ignorance, in which case the hearer does not know the information, and contrary belief, in which case the hearer’s expectation runs counter to the speaker’s assertion. Contrastive focus is associated with the latter, as seen by the following English examples from Givón (p. 702).

- (7) a. Ignorance  
 CONTEXT:      *When* did she leave?  
 RESPONSE:      She left *at eight*. (non-contrastive)
- b. Contrary belief  
 CONTEXT:      She left *at seven*.  
 RESPONSE:      No, she left **at eight**. (contrastive; focus-stress)

We see the same interplay between an expectation of contrary belief and the use of contrastive focus in the following Balanta dialogue. Mariama enters the room distraught, because she has just heard that a local child was eaten by a lion. Her brother tells her that it was in fact a goat.

- (8) CONTEXT:  
**bəb**    **jaa-ni**    **mbuta**    **loodu**    **dʒato**    **wom-ma**  
 they    tell-me    child    die    lion    eat-him  
 They told me a child is dead. A lion ate him.

<sup>3</sup>I should mention one other construction in Balanta that might be considered as focus. A noun, adjective, pronoun, or question word may be made more emphatic with the addition of the definite article **ma**. Examples can be found in Wilson (1961:157) and Fudeman (1999:310–331). Fudeman suggests that **ma** is a portmanteau morph that conveys both definiteness and focus. I refer the reader there for discussion and analysis.

## RESPONSE:

[**baali hi**]      **dzato**      **ma**      **womu** **ngetta**      **mbuta**      **hi**  
 goat    CL1.it    lion            DEF      eat      not            child      CL1.it  
 The lion ate **a goat**, not **a child**.

In this example, we find the class 1 focus marker **hi** with **baali** instead of **fi**, as in (11b). This variation is typical with the larger domestic animals.

One characteristic of contrastive focus constructions is that the focused constituent is interpreted as performing exhaustive identification (Kiss 1998:249; she uses the term 'identificational focus'). We see this in the English cleft examples below. First, (9b) is not a logical consequence of (9a); it contradicts it.

- (9) a. It was Margot and Joe that put together the volume.  
 b. It was Margot that put together the volume.

Likewise, in a test that Kiss attributes to Donka Farkas, the negation of an informational focus may only be interpreted as the negation of its exhaustivity.

- (10) a. It was hippos we saw by the shore.  
 b. No, we saw crocodiles, too.

In the Balanta focus construction, we get the same results. Example (11b) is a contradiction of (11a), not a logical consequence.

- (11) a. [**saa fi nggi baali fi**]      **a-lama**      **womu**  
 snake    CL5.it    with    goat    CL5.it    CL1-king      eat  
 The king ate a snake and a goat.  
 b. [**baali fi**]      **a-lama**      **womu**  
 goat    CL5.it    CL1-king      eat  
 The king ate **a goat**.

As further evidence of this, note that the negation of (12a) is a negation of its exhaustivity.

- (12) a. [**saa fi**]      **a-lama**      **womu**  
 snake    CL5.it    CL1-king      eat  
 The king ate **a snake**.  
 b. [**hani?**]      **a-womu**      **baali**      **ma**      [**fanaj**]  
 no            3SG.SUB-eat    goat      DEF      also  
 No, he **also** ate a **goat**.

Besides exhaustivity, another characteristic of contrastive focus constituents is that 'also' phrases are prohibited from occurring within them (examples from Kiss 1998:252).

- (13) a. Hungarian  
 \***Mari egy kalapot is nézett ki magának**  
 Mary    **a hat.ACC**    also    picked    out    herself.DAT  
 It was also a hat that Mary picked for herself.

- b. English  
 ? It was also **a hat** that Mary picked for herself.

The Balanta contrastive focus construction is equally unacceptable with 'also'.

- (14) a. \*[**saa**    **fi**            **fanaj**]    **a-womu**  
          snake    CL5.it        also        3SG.SUB-eat  
          It was also a **snake** that he ate.
- b. \*[**saa**    **fanaj**    **fi**]    **a-womu**  
          snake    also        CL5.it    3SG.SUB-eat  
          It was also a **snake** that he ate.

## 2. TOPIC VERSUS FOCUS

Topic and focus constructions are often contrasted in the literature, partially because they are structurally similar: in many languages both involve fronting to the left edge of the clause (see, e.g., Rizzi 1997 on Italian). In addition, as observed by Givón (1990:699), the functional domain of 'contrast' may sometimes overlap with that of 'topic'.

The left dislocation of topic and contrastive focus constructions in Balanta exhibit a number of differences. To begin, note that examples of contrastive focus in (5), above, are characterized by the lack of an object pronoun. Examples with a resumptive pronoun in (15) are ungrammatical.

- (15) a. \*[**saa**    **fi**]        **a-lama**        **wom-ma**  
          snake    CL5.it    CL1-king        eat-3SG.OBJ
- b. \*[**saa**    **ma**    **fi**]        **a-lama**        **wom-ma**  
          snake    DEF      CL5.it    CL1-king        eat-3SG.OBJ

The left dislocation of topic construction seen below, on the other hand, requires the presence of a resumptive pronoun within the comment. This is consistent with the characteristics reported for left dislocation in other languages (Givón 1990:759; Cinque 1990:63):

- (16) a. [**Sadio**]    **Mariama**    **kano-ma**  
          Sadio        Mariama        love-3SG.OBJ  
          Sadio, Mariama loves him.
- b. [**bug**    **fɔ**]        **n-karaj**    **fi**  
          book        CL5.this    I-read        CL5.it  
          This book, I read it.

The contrastive focus construction leads to awkwardness in structures like (17a), where a fronted referential expression, **Sadio**, precedes a co-indexed genitive pronoun, **hilli**, in the subject noun phrase. The left dislocation construction does not. (For the same results presented within a Chomskian framework, see Rizzi 1997 on Italian).

- (17) a. ?? [**Sadio**    **hi**]            **mbarimuso**    **hilli**        **kano**    **ndaani**  
          Sadio        CL1.PRON    sister        3SG.POSS    love    a.lot  
          It's Sadio<sub>i</sub> that his<sub>i</sub> sister loved a lot.
- b. [**Sadio**]    **mbarimuso**    **hilli**            **kano-ma**    **ndaani**  
          Sadio        sister        3SG.POSS    love-3SG.OBJ    a.lot  
          Sadio<sub>i</sub>, his<sub>i</sub> sister loved him a lot.

Furthermore, left dislocation of more than one element is possible (18), but focalization of more than one is not (19) (on other languages, see Benincà 1988, Rizzi 1997).

- (18) a. [**Sadio bug ma**] **a-deen hilli wun-ma fi**  
 Sadio book DEF CL1-mother 3SG.POSS give-3SG.OBJ CL5.it  
 Sadio, the book, his mother gave it (to) him.
- b. [**Sadio**] **bug ma a-karaŋ fi**  
 Sadio book DEF 3SG.SUB-read CL5.it  
 Sadio, the book, he read it.
- (19) a. \***[Sadio hi bug ma fi]** **a-deen hilli wun**  
 Sadio CL1.PRON book DEF CL5.it CL1-mother 3SG.POSS give  
 It's to Sadio and it's the book that his mother gave.
- b. \***[Sadio hi bug ma fi]** **a-karaŋ**  
 Sadio CL1.PRON book DEF CL5.it 3SG.SUB-read  
 It's Sadio and it's the book that (he) read.

Finally, as seen below, a wh-operator is compatible with a left dislocated topic (with the order Top Wh) (20), but not with a focus (21) (see, e.g., Rizzi 1997). Examples (21a)–(21b) would be equally unacceptable if **-ma** were omitted.

- (20) [**Sadio bug fila**] **u-karaŋ-ma**  
 Sadio book CL5.which 2SG.SUB-read-3SG.OBJ  
 Sadio, which book did you read to him?
- (21) a. \* [**Sadio hi bug fila**] **u-karaŋ-ma**  
 Sadio CL1.PRON book CL5.which 2SG.SUB-read-3SG.OBJ  
**Sadio**, which book did you read to him?
- b. \* [**bug fila Sadio hi**] **u-karaŋ-ma**  
 book CL5.which Sadio CL1.PRON 2SG.SUB-read-3SG.OBJ  
 Which book **to Sadio** did you read?

Before moving on to clefts and relative clauses, note that Temne, which belongs to the Southern branch of West Atlantic, has a very similar construction, illustrated below with examples from Hutchinson (1969:40, 44).

- (22) a. **i nəŋk u-tik**  
 I saw CL1-stranger  
 I saw a stranger.
- b. [**u-tik kənə**] **i nəŋk**  
 CL1-stranger him I saw  
 It was a stranger I saw.<sup>4</sup>
- (23) a. **i nəŋk ka-bap**  
 I saw CL3-ax  
 I saw the ax

<sup>4</sup>Hutchinson's gloss here is 'I saw a stranger', but I have changed it to be consistent with the gloss of (23b), 'It was the ax I saw'.

- b. [ka-bap ka] i nɔŋk  
 CL3-ax CL3.it I saw  
 It was the ax I saw

One wonders whether the Balanta contrastive focus examples are related to this Temne construction, which, judging by Hutchinson's glosses, is similar in both form and function.

### 3. CLEFTS AND RELATIVE CLAUSES

A question that arises when examining the Balanta focus construction is whether it is simply a cleft. After all, Balanta equational sentences containing a noun and a pronoun typically do not contain a copula.

- (24) saa fi  
 snake CL5.it  
 It's a snake.

This type of example makes it appear as though the bracketed constituent in the contrastive focus example below is a cleft.

- (25) [saa fi] a-lama womu  
 snake CL5.it CL1-king eat  
 It was a **snake** the king ate (not a toad).

Historically, examples like (25) probably derive from clefts. But synchronically, there is evidence that they instead consist of a noun phrase followed by a pronoun functioning as a focus marker.

First, note that Balanta has a clear cleft construction, and that it contains an overt copula.

- (26) [u-gi saa] alama womu  
 it-COP snake king eat  
 It was a snake (that) the king ate.

Furthermore, while the contrastive focus construction can occur after the constituent negator *ŋgetta*, the cleft construction is ungrammatical.

- (27) a. [u-gi saa] alama womu [ŋgetta gsel gi]  
 it-COP snake king eat not CL4.fish CL4.it  
 It was a snake that the king ate, not a fish
- b. \*[u-gi saa] alama womu [ŋgetta u-gi gsel]  
 it-COP snake king eat not it-COP fish

The contrast in grammaticality between (27a) and (27b) suggests that [gsel gi] and [ugi gsel] are constituents of different types. While the evidence is not conclusive, I believe that the former is best analyzed as a noun phrase containing or followed by a focus marker.

A reviewer points out that it is hard to accept that *gi* in (27a) is CL4.IT, when in other examples, it has been the copula. In fact, if we replace *gsel* 'fish', which consists of the class 4 prefix *g-* plus the noun stem *sɛl*, with a noun from another class, such as *baali* 'goat' (class 5), we find that this objection disappears, because we then find that *gi* is replaced by *fi*, which is unambiguously a pronoun.

- (28) [u-gi saa] alama womu [ŋgetta baali fi]  
 it-COP snake king eat not CL4.goat CL4.it  
 It was a snake that the king ate, not a goat.

Let us now turn to relativization, which has been shown in some languages, mainly European, to have a structural connection with certain focus constructions, including cleft and pseudo-cleft (see especially Schachter 1971, Givón 1990). Given English examples like the ones in (29), we might expect the Balanta relative pronoun to be homophonous with the pronoun found in contrastive focus constructions.

- (29) a. The student *who* won the contest...  
 b. It's Selina *who* won the contest...  
 c. The test *that* she took...  
 d. It's the test *that* she took...

Incidentally, we would especially expect syntactic parallelism between the contrastive focus construction and relative clauses if the former were a type of cleft (see Givón 1990:717–718).

It is significant, therefore, that relative clauses do not contain the high-toned pronoun found in focus constructions. In fact, they contain no overt relative marker at all. Compare (30) and (31).

- (30) Focus construction  
 [saa fi] a-lama womu  
 snake CL5.it CL1-king eat  
 It was a **snake** the king ate (not a toad).

- (31) Relative clause  
 a. saa ma [∅ alama womu] gi ŋgi gunu  
 snake DEF that king eat COP with poison  
 The snake that the king ate is poisonous.  
 b. bug [∅ n-wus-t´] gi a-gbaal´  
 book that 1SG.SUB-buy-PAST COP LOC-house  
 The book that I bought is at home.

The comparison with clefts and relative clauses demonstrates that, whatever its origins, the Balanta contrastive focus construction presented here differs structurally from both cleft and relative clause constructions.

This finding is supported by Wilson (1995). When comparing the copula in six West-African languages, including Temne, he found that only one used a relative marker in a cleft construction, namely Kriol of Guinea-Bissau, whose lexical base is Portuguese.

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