

# Focus particles in Dagbani and Likpakpaani

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# Introduction

In this talk, we:

- ▶ introduce the Dagbani and Likpakpaanl languages
- ▶ discuss focus marking in wh-questions and their respective answers (left peripheral focus)
- ▶ discuss focus marking in clause-internal positions
- ▶ discuss some (non-)interactions of the focus markers

# Background

- ▶ Mabia (Gur) languages
- ▶ spoken in northern Ghana
- ▶ roughly 2 Mio. (Dagbani) and 1 Mio. (Likpakpaanl) speakers
- ▶ generally rather rigid SVO syntax
- ▶ data sources if not otherwise indicated
  - ▶ Dagbani: Samuel A. Issah
  - ▶ Likpakpaanl: Samuel O. Acheampong

## Basic syntax – Dagbani

- ▶ The basic word order is S-V-O with IO > DO:

- (1) a. Dawuni kú-r-í            sòònsí máá.  
Dawuni kill-IPFV-CJ rabbits DEF  
'Dawuni kills the rabbits.'
- b. Páyà    máá tí            bíhí    nyùlí zùṇò.  
woman DEF give.PFV children yam today  
'The woman has given the children yam today.'

- ▶ Aspect is a verbal suffix, the perfective is unmarked.
- ▶ The verb indicates conjoint vs. disjoint construal by suffixes following the aspectual markers.
- ▶ Tense may be indicated by a free morpheme preceding V:

- (2) Doo maa **sa** ti    paya    maa sima            sohila.  
man DEF TNS give woman DEF groundnut yesterday  
'The man gave the woman groundnuts yesterday.'

# Conjoint - disjoint in Dagbani

- ▶ The Dagbani verb is sensitive for its linguistic context as reflected by the verbal morphology.
- ▶ If the verb is in final position, the suffix *-(y)á* is added; we call this suffix *disjoint* (DJ).
- ▶ If the progressive verb is in non-final position, the suffix *-í* is added; we call this suffix *conjoint* (CJ).

- (3) a. B́hí máá dí-r-í \*(b́índírígú).  
 children DEF eat-IPFV-CJ food  
 'The children eat/are eating food.'
- b. B́hí máá dí-r-á (\*b́índírígú).  
 children DEF eat-IPFV-DJ food  
 'The children eat/are eating.'

# Conjoint - disjoint in Dagbani

- ▶ The CJ/DJ system is very much surface oriented.
- ▶ CJ can be triggered by a postverbal element outside VP:

(4) [DP Bù sò bíhí nì yú-r-í **máá**]  
 goat INDF children COMP like-PROG-CJ DEF  
 kpí-yá.  
 die.PFV-DJ  
 'The goat that the children like, died.'

- ▶ (4) illustrates a (head internal) relative clause with *máá* being the head of the DP.
- ▶ The determiner triggers conjoint marking on the verb.

## Basic syntax – Likpakpaanl

- again, SVO with IO > DO:

- (5) a. Adam fé                      kɔr                      ukɔla fénnà.  
Adam HEST.PST slaughter fowl yesterday  
'Adam slaughtered fowl yesterday.'
- b. Konja mèè Sam ki-gban    dín.  
Konja beg Sam NC-book today  
'Konja begged a booked from Sam today.'

- Tense (5) and also aspect (6) can be indicated by a free morpheme preceding V.

- (6) Ù-píí                      gbààn **bī**                      ɲáál lòòr.  
CL-woman DEF IMPF drive car  
'The woman is driving a car.'

# Completion in Likpakpaanl

- ▶ The Likpakpaanl intransitive verb may indicate completed actions, indicated by the suffix *-a* (COMPL).
- ▶ Completion of an action cannot be marked with transitive verbs.

- (7)
- a. N    jín / jín-**a**.  
       1SG eat / eat-COMPL  
       'I ate / have eaten.'
  - b. N    jín(\*-**a**)       sakɔla.  
       1SG eat(-COMPL) fufu  
       'I ate / \*have eaten fufu.'
  - c. \*N    bì    jín-**a**.  
       1SG IPFV eat.COMPL



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# Left Periphery

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## Left-peripheral focus – Dagbani

- ▶ Object wh-questions and their corresponding answers can be in-situ or ex-situ in Dagbani.
- ▶ Subject wh-questions are always ex-situ.
- ▶ When ex-situ, the elements are fronted and followed by a particle.
- ▶ The particle seems to be sensitive to the subject–non-subject distinction.
- ▶ (8) shows a subject question-answer pair, from Issah (2020):

- (8) Q: ṇùní **ń** dàà dá búá?  
 who FOC PST buy.PFV goat  
 ‘Who bought a goat some time ago?’
- A: Beninya **ń** dàà dá búá.  
 B. FOC PST buy.PFV goat  
 ‘Beninya bought the goat some time ago.’

# Left-peripheral focus – Dagbani

- ▶ (9) shows a non-subject question and answer, from Issah (2020).
- ▶ The particles *ń* and *kà* are obligatory after the fronted foci.

- (9) Q: Bò **kà** páyà máá dá-r-á?  
what FOC woman DEF buy-IPFV-DJ  
‘What is the woman buying?’
- A: Nìmdí **kà** páyà máá dá-r-á.  
meat FOC woman DEF buy-IPFV-DJ  
‘The woman is buying meat.’

## Left-peripheral focus – Dagbani

- ▶ As discussed at length in Issah and Smith (2020), the distinction is actually between local subjects and everything else.
- ▶ Note especially the contrast between (10) and (11):

(10) Dó só **kà** ń wúm nì ò dá lòòrì.  
 man certain FOC I hear.PFV that he buy.PFV car  
 ‘I heard that a CERTAIN MAN bought a car.’

(11) Wumpini yèlí-yá nì Mbangba **ń** dá lòòrì.  
 Wumpini say.PFV-DJ that Mbangba FOC buy.PFV car  
 ‘Wumpini said that MBANGBA bought a car.’

- ▶ In (10) the embedded subject is focussed and fronted to the main clause where it is marked by *kà*.
- ▶ In (11) the subject is locally focussed in the embedded clause and marked by *ń*.

## Left-peripheral focus – Likpakpaanl

- ▶ Object wh-questions and their corresponding answers present a superficially similar picture in Likpakpaanl.
- ▶ They can be in-situ or ex-situ.
- ▶ When ex-situ, they are followed by a particle *lè*.

- (12) Q1: Adam nan kər            ba?  
Adam PST slaughter what  
'What did Adam slaughter?'
- Q2: Ba    *lè*    Adam nan kər?  
what FOC Adam PST slaughter  
'What did Adam slaughter?'
- A1: Adam nan kər            ukɔla *là*.  
Adan PST slaughter fowl FOC  
'Adam slaughtered fowl.'
- A2: Ukɔla *lè*    Adam nan kər.  
fowl FOC Adam PST slaughter  
'Adam slaughtered fowl.'

## Left-peripheral focus – Likpakpaanl

- ▶ Subject wh-questions are different.
- ▶ The subject wh-element is never followed by the particle seen in ex-situ object wh, suggesting subject wh-questions are always in-situ.
- ▶ Answers to subject wh-questions on the other hand must be followed by the particle, revealing an interesting asymmetry.
- ▶ Note that in contrast to Dagbani, the particle is not sensitive to the subject–non-subject distinction.

(13) Q: ŋma (\*lè) tun?  
          who FOC work  
          'Who worked?'

A: Adam \*(lè) fé                    tun (fénnà).  
     Adam FOC HEST.PST work yesterday  
     'Adam worked yesterday.'

## Left-peripheral focus – Likpakpaanl

- ▶ Unsurprisingly, long-distance focalization behaves similar to Dagbani.
- ▶ The extracted wh-element is treated as non-subject focus in the matrix clause, i.e. it is followed by the particle.

(14) Q: ɲmà lè Peter len kè u kər ukɔla  
 who FOC Peter say COMP 3SG slaughter fowl  
 gbaan?

DEF

'Who did Peter say that slaughtered the fowl?'

A1: John lè Peter len kè u kər ukɔla  
 John FOC Peter say COMP 3SG slaughter fowl  
 gbaaan.

DEF

'Peter said that John slaughtered the fowl.'



# Clause Medial

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## Focus in medial position – Dagbani

- ▶ Clause-medially, focus on the verb / the predicate is marked differently than in the left periphery.
- ▶ Again, there is an asymmetry between markers, but this time, it appears to be related to the argument structure (see Issah 2013).
  - ▶ **mí** marks verb/predicate focus in intransitives
  - ▶ **lá** marks verb/predicate focus in transitives

## Focus in medial position – Dagbani

- The particle **mí** is used for verbal focus in intransitive clauses.

- (15) Q: Bò kà á níŋ-d-í sáhá ŋɔ? Á  
what FOC you do-IPFV-CJ time DEM you  
kárín-d-í **mí** bée á dí-r-í **mí**?  
read-IPFV-CJ FOC or you eat-IPFV-CJ FOC  
'What are you doing right now? Are you reading or  
are you eating?'
- A: N dí-r-í **mí**.  
I eat-IPFV-CJ FOC  
'I am eating.'

## Focus in medial position – Dagbani

- The particle **lá** is used for verbal focus in transitive clauses.

- (16) Q: Á vɔ-r-í **lá** búɲɔyú máa bée a  
you pull-IPFV-CJ FOC wagon DEF or you  
dáa-r-í **lá** búɲɔyú máa?  
push-IPFV-CJ FOC wagon DEF  
'Are you pulling the wagon or are you pushing the wagon?'  
A: Í vɔ-r-í **lá** búɲɔyú máa.  
I pull-IPFV-DJ FOC wagon DEF  
'I am pulling the wagon.'

## Focus in medial position – Dagbani

- ▶ However, the choice of the particle does not actually depend on the transitivity of the verb, but rather on whether the particle is followed by an overt constituent in the same clause.
- ▶ Weak pronouns precede the low particles, so **mí** can occur even with transitive verbs in such cases.

- (17) Q: Bò kà Abu níŋ bíá máá?  
           what FOC A. do.PFV child DEF  
           ‘What has Abu done to the child?’
- A: Abu bú ò **mí**.  
       A. beat.PFV him FOC  
       ‘Abu has beaten him/her.’

## Focus in medial position – Dagbani

- ▶ In-situ focus of arguments can be marked by the particle **lá** following the verb or it can be unmarked.
- ▶ The semantic difference between the two structures is yet to be investigated.

- (18) Q: Napari dá        bò?  
          Napari buy.PFV what  
          'Napari bought what?'  
      A: Napari dá        búá.  
          Napari buy.PFV goat  
          'Napari bought a goat.'
- (19) Q: Napari dá        **lá**    bò?  
          Napari buy.PFV FOC what  
          'Napari bought what?'  
      A: Napari dá        **lá**    búá.  
          Napari buy.PFV FOC goat  
          'Napari bought a goat.'

## Focus in medial position – Likpakpaanl

- Unlike Dagbani, Likpakpaanl does not use a different set of markers for in-situ focus.

(20) Q: Konja mɛ̀ɛ ŋma ki-gban?

Konja beg who NC-book

‘Who did Konja beg a book from?’

A: Konja mɛ̀ɛ Sam lɛ̀ ki-gban (dɪn).

Konja beg Sam FOC NC-book today

‘Konja begged a booked from Sam.’

(21) Q: Konja mɛ̀ɛ Sam ba?

Konja beg Sam what

‘What did Konja beg from Sam?’

A: Konja mɛ̀ɛ Sam ki-gban lɛ̀ dɪn.

Konja beg Sam NC-book FOC today

‘Konja begged a booked from Sam today.’

## Focus in medial position – Likpakpaanl

- Similar to Dagbani, the choice of the particle depends on whether the focus particle is followed by an overt constituent or not.

- (22) Q: Konja mèè Sam ba?  
Konja beg Sam what  
'What did Konja beg from Sam?'
- A1: Konja mèè Sam ki-gban là.  
Konja beg Sam NC-book FOC  
'Konja begged a booked from Sam.'
- A2: Konja mèè Sam ki-gban lè din.  
Konja beg Sam NC-book FOC today  
'Konja begged a booked from Sam today.'



## Focus in medial position – Likpakpaanl

- ▶ Interestingly, the focus particle has to follow a phrase in the spine of a finite clause (i.e. a VP or an argument DP).
- ▶ It cannot follow the verb, for example (unlike what we have seen in Dagbani).

(23) Q: Adam nán dàà ukɔla aa?

Adam PST buy fowl Q

'Did Adam buy fowl?'

A1: Aayi, Adam nán kɔr ukɔla là.

no Adam PST slaughter fowl FOC

'No, Adam slaughtered fowl.'

A2: \*Aayi, Adam nán kɔr là ukɔla.

no Adam PST slaughter FOC fowl

'No, Adam slaughtered fowl.'

## Focus in medial position – Likpakpaanl

- In (24), you see that a DP inside a DP (e.g. a possessor) cannot be followed by *lè*. Rather the entire possessive DP is marked.

- (24) Q: Mary kɔr            ŋma aa-kɔla?  
           Mary slaughter who POSS-fowl  
           ‘Whose fowl did Mary slaughter?’
- A1: Mary kɔr            [Peter aa-kɔla] *lè*?  
           Mary slaughter Peter POSS-fowl FOC  
           ‘Mary slaughtered Peter’s fowl?’
- A2: \*Mary kɔr            [Peter *lè* aa-kɔla].  
           Mary slaughter Peter FOC POSS-fowl  
           ‘Mary slaughtered Peter’s fowl?’

# Implications for the theory of focus

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# Overview of Markers

	Left periphery	Clause medially
<b>Dagbani</b>	<b>ká</b> $\neg$ local subject <b>ń</b> local subject	<b>lá</b> $\neg$ clause final <b>mí</b> clause final
<b>Likpakpaanl</b>	<b>lè</b>	<b>là</b> clause final <b>lè</b> $\neg$ clause final

Table 1: Focus markers in Dagbani and Likpakpaanl

# Generalizations

- 1 In both Dagbani and Likpakpaanl a focused constituent in the left periphery is followed by a focus particle.

(25) [ XP<sub>F</sub> **loc** ... ]

- 2 In Dagbani, focus on the predicate and in-situ argument focus can be marked by a focus particle that immediately follows the verb (*modulo* weak pronouns)

- (26) a. **Verbal focus:**  
 [... [VP V<sub>(F)</sub> ... ]<sub>(F)</sub> \***loc** ...]  
 [... [VP V<sub>F</sub> **loc** ... ] ...]
- b. **Argument focus:**  
 [... [VP V ... XP<sub>(F)</sub> \***loc** ... ]  
 [... [VP V **loc** ... XP<sub>F</sub> ... ]

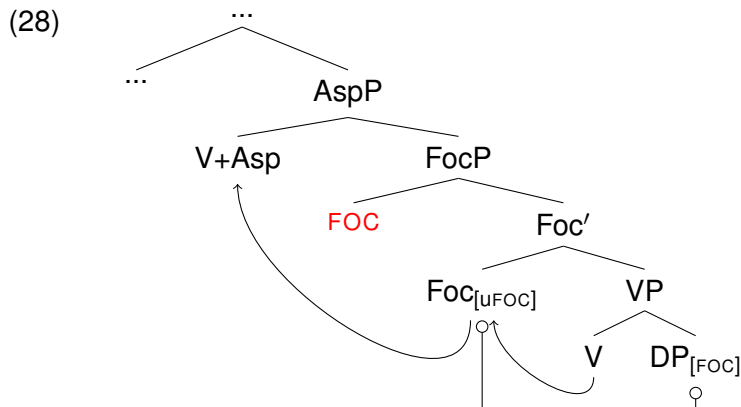
# Generalizations

- ③ In Likpakpaanl, a clause medial focused element appears in-situ with the focus particle following the highest XP in the clausal spine that the element belongs to.

- (27) a. **Verbal focus:**  
[... [VP V<sub>(F)</sub> ... ]<sub>(F)</sub> **fo**c ...]  
[... [VP V<sub>F</sub> \***fo**c ... ] ...]
- b. **Argument focus:**  
[... [DP ... X<sub>(F)</sub> ... ]<sub>(F)</sub> **fo**c ...]  
[... [DP ... X<sub>F</sub> \***fo**c ... ] ...]

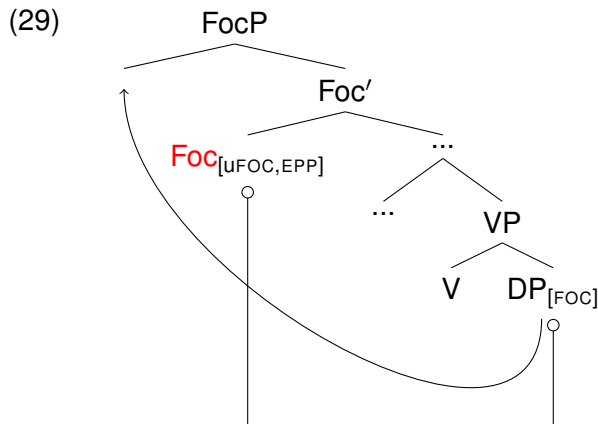
# Focus in Dagbani

## Assumptions for in-situ focus:



# Focus in Dagbani

## Assumptions for ex-situ focus:

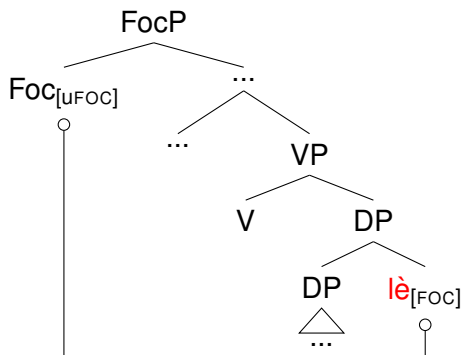




# Focus in Likpakpaani

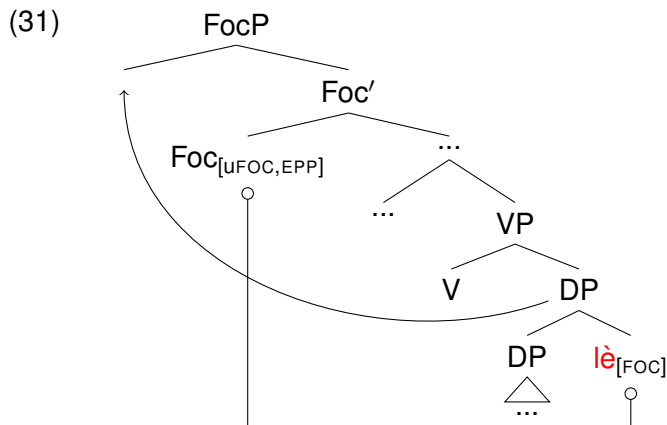
## Assumptions for in-situ focus:

(30)



# Focus in Likpakpaani

## Assumptions for ex-situ focus:



# V and focus

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## CJ - DJ not related to focus – Dagbani

- ▶ In the literature on Bantu languages, it is often assumed that CJ/DJ marking is related to focus (see van der Wal and Hyman 2017).
- ▶ CJ expresses focus on post-verbal constituents.
- ▶ DJ expresses focus on the verb / predicate.
- ▶ this will be shown with examples from Kirundi (Nshemezimana and Bostoen 2017)
- ▶ We argue that CJ/DJ are not related to focus in Dagbani.
- ▶ For Likpakpaanl, we show that the completion marker does not mark focus on the verb.

## CJ - DJ not related to focus – Dagbani

- In (32), object focus triggers the (covert) CJ marker:

(32) Aríko a-á-∅-vyáar-a [a-ba-koóbwa  
 but 1SM-REM.PST-CJ-give.birth-IPFV AUG-2-girl  
 gusa]<sub>FOC</sub>  
 only  
 ‘But she gave birth to GIRLS ONLY.’

- In (33), verb focus triggers the (overt) DJ marker *-ra*:

(33) ehe ntaa ki-ó tu-rí-ye<sup>H</sup>  
 so NEG.COP 7-REF 1PL.SM-eat-PFV.REL  
 tu-∅-ra-nyó-ye gusa  
 1PL.SM-PRS-DJ-drink-PFV only  
 ‘So, there is nothing that we eat, we DRINK ONLY.’

## CJ - DJ not related to focus – Dagbani

- ▶ In Dagbani, verbal morphology depends exclusively on the linguistic context of the verb and is independent of the focus status of the verbal arguments (cf. Buell 2006 for Zulu).
- ▶ ex-situ term focus: CJ/DJ determined by verbal context

- (34) Q: ɲùní kà bɛ́ tí-r-í lí / tí-r-á?  
who FOC 3PL give-IPFV-CJ it / give-IPFV-DJ  
'Who are they giving (it)?'
- A: Mání kà bɛ́ tí-r-í lí / tí-r-á.  
1SG FOC 3PL give-IPFV-CJ it / give-IPFV-DJ  
'They are giving (it) to ME.'

## CJ - DJ not related to focus – Dagbani

- in-situ term focus: [VO] always CJ irrespective of focus

- (35) Q: Fati kpé-r-í yà?  
Fati enter-IPFV-CJ where  
'Where is Fati entering?'  
A: Fati kpé-r-í [Chéechí máa ní]FOC  
Fati enter-IPFV-CJ church DEF LOC  
'Fati is entering the church.'
- (36) Q: ɲùní ń kpé-r-í Chéechí máa ní?  
who FOC enter-IPFV-CJ church DEF LOC  
'Who is entering the church?'  
A: Fati ń kpé-r-í [Chéechí máa  
Fati FOC enter-IPFV-CJ church DEF  
ní]BACKGROUND  
LOC  
'Fati is entering the church.'

## CJ - DJ not related to focus – Dagbani

- predicate centred focus: CJ/DJ determined by verbal context, not by focus

- (37) Q: Pete dá-r-í lá nóonìmdí máa bée ó  
 Pete buy-IPFV-CJ FOC chicken DEF or 3SG  
 bì dá-r-í lí?  
 NEG buy-IPFV-CJ it  
 'Is Pete buying the chicken or is he not buying it?'
- A1: Ò dá-r-í lí (mí).  
 3SG buy-IPFV-CJ it FOC
- A2: Ò dá-r-í mí.  
 3SG buy-IPFV-CJ FOC
- A3: Ò dá-r-á.  
 3SG buy-IPFV-DJ  
 'He IS buying (it).'



## DJ blocking with focus – Dagbani

- the DJ-suffix is blocked with ex-situ focus in the perfective

- (38) Q: Bò ká bíá máa dá / \*dá-**yá**?  
 what FOC child DEF buy.PFV buy.PFV-DJ  
 ‘What did the child buy?’  
 A: Yílí ká bíá máa dá / \*dá-**yá**.  
 house FOC child DEF buy.PFV buy.PFV-DJ  
 ‘The child bought a HOUSE.’
- (39) Q: ɲùní n kú / \*kú-**yá**?  
 who FOC kill.PFV \*kill.PFV-DJ  
 ‘Who killed?’  
 A: Kayaba n kú / \*kú-**yá**.  
 K. FOC kill.PFV \*kill.PFV-DJ  
 ‘KAyaba killed.’

## COMPL and focus – Likpakpaanl

- ▶ Likpakpaanl does not mark what we called "conjoint" in Dagbani, but has a verbal suffix homophonous to the Dagbani DJ-marker *-á* with identical distribution.
- ▶ Likpakpaanl *-á* has semantic content and marks completion of an action denoted by an intransitive verb.

- (40) a. N jín / jín-**a**.  
1SG eat / eat-COMPL  
'I ate / have eaten.'
- b. N jín(\*-**a**) sakɔla.  
1SG eat(-COMPL) fufu  
'I ate / \*have eaten fufu.'

## COMPL and focus – Likpakpaanl

- ▶ verbal focus is marked by the postverbal particle *là*
- ▶ focus marking is incompatible with the marking of completion

- (41)
- a. N    jín   *là*.  
1SG eat FOC  
'I ATE.'
- b. N    bī    jì   *là*.  
1SG IPFV eat FOC  
'I AM EATING.'
- c. \*N    jín-a            *là*.  
1SG eat-COMPL FOC

- ▶ verbal focus marking is also possible with imperfective verbs where completion marking is excluded
- ▶ this shows that the focus marker *là* is not compositional

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# Summary

- ▶ Dagbani and Likpakpaanl use focus marking particles in the left periphery of the sentence as well as in medial position.
- ▶ Results for Dagbani:
  - ▶ The particles in the left periphery are sensitive for grammatical roles and distinguish subject from non-subject focus.
  - ▶ The particles in medial position are more complex to describe:
    - they mark V/VP-focus and in-situ non-subject focus (the latter only after ex-situ questions)
    - they interact with the conjoint / disjoint system of the language (*mí* appears clause-finally; *lá* appears in non-final environments)
  - ▶ The verbal CJ / DJ markers are insensitive for focus in Dagbani.

# Summary

- ▶ Results for Likpakpaanl:
  - ▶ The left peripheral particle is always *lè*, irrespective of grammatical roles.
  - ▶ Wh-subjects are not marked by *lè*.
  - ▶ The medial particles are obligatory and are realized as *lè* and *là*, depending on the postverbal linguistic context.
  - ▶ Completion marking is not compatible with focus marking.
- ▶ Theoretical claims:
  - ▶ Dagbani has a high and a low focus projection; the focus particles are realized as high / low focus heads.
  - ▶ Dagbani ex-situ focus moves due to an EPP-feature in high Foc; in-situ focus stays in-situ.
  - ▶ In Likpakpaanl, the focus particle is attached to the focus constituent, which is either realized in-situ or ex-situ, depending on the presence of of an EPP-feature in Foc.
  - ▶ Likpakpaanl does not have a low FocP.

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