Topic, focus and reference tracking in Taqbaylit Berber discourse

Our paper investigates correlations between word order, discourse functions and reference tracking in Taqbaylit Berber (Afro-Asiatic, Algeria). TB is discourse-configurational and displays both head-marking and dependent-marking tendencies as well as zero-anaphora (Mettouchi 2008, Mettouchi & Fleisch 2010, Mettouchi 2018). Canonically, information structure and reference tracking follow these patterns: (i) **Inactivated** arguments which are not in focus or topicalised occur in post-V position in the order V S / A P G OBL[1]. S/A are obligatorily cross-referenced on V by agreement affixes (e.g. 1); (ii) **Activated** arguments tend to be omitted and simply cross-referenced on V or a TAMNeg particle preceding V; (iii) **Topics and Narrow Foci** occur in pre-verbal positions. Topics are obligatorily cross-referenced and occur in the unmarked form regardless of their grammatical role (e.g. 2). S and A foci trigger default agreement on V (e.g. 3).

(1) **y-ssarsə=d**   **w-mɣar=iw**   **taqcict**
    3SGM.S-put.PFV=VENT   CS-old.man=1SG.POSS   girl.FS
    '*My father-in-law laid the girl down.*'

(2) **tanuṭ=iw**   **t-ṭṭəf=iji**   **sja**
    sister.in.law.FS=POSS.1SG   3SGF.S-touch.PVF=DAT.1SG here
    '*My sister-in-law, she touched me here.*'

(3) **(d)**   **nəṭṭat**   **i**   **g-uɣ-n**   **snat** **n tktaßin**.
    COP   she   REL   3SGM-buy.PFV-PTCP   two   of books.CS
    '*It is SHE who bought two books.*'

In discourse, alternations to the canonical order of arguments may be found, particularly inside the core parts of clauses – i.e. excluding peripheries (e.g. 4 & 5).

(4) **i-ɣli=as**   **i**   **we-qcic**   **u-capu=s**
    3SGM.fall.PFV=3SGM.DAT   DAT   CS-boy   CS-hat=POSS.3SG
    '*His hat fell from the boy.*'

(5) **t-xdəm**   **di tƏmgart=is**   **azrar**
    3SGF-work.PFV   in neck.CS=POSS.3SG   FS.necklace
    '*She put a necklace on her neck.*'

These can occur where all post-V arguments are inactivated or with a non-topic activated argument. Given the zero-anaphora and discourse configurational profile of TB, these internal clause alternations are very rare. However, they are clearly marked and appear to be constrained to a certain extent.

Our talk investigates what functions these alternative orders serve in the information structure packaging of the language. Based on original data, collected between 2018 and 2021, we describe the frequency and possible discourse properties of these alternate word orders in natural discourse. Specifically, we look at the extent to which these alternations correlate with degree of activation and agentivity – referents that are alternatively ordered are often agentive, activated or linked to another activated referent, such as a clause topic or continuous discourse topic. At the stage when (4) is uttered, 'the boy' is one of several continuous discourse topics, while 'the hat' is a new referent. In (5), 'the neck' relates to the subject/topic of the entire clause. Our study largely confirms earlier cross-linguistic findings linking referents' agentivity and information status to clause alternations (Mithun 1986; Givón 1983; Belleti 2004, Erteschik-Shir 2007, Poletto 2014, Nordlinger et al. 2020, Schutlze-Bernt 2020). But it also shows that in the task of maintaining cohesion and coherence in narratives, instead of simply looking for topic chains it is useful to also survey reference.

References

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[1]A: most agent-like argument of a transitive verb; ACC: Accusative; COP: Copula; DAT: Dative; F: Feminine; G: the most goal-like argument of a transitive verb; M: Masculine; NOM: Nominative; OBL: oblique; P: the most patient-like argument of a transitive verb; PFV: Perfective; POSS: Possessive;-S: Subject; SG: Singular; S: sole argument of an intransitive verb; VENT: Ventive.