

Information Structure of Copular Sentences in Wolof

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1. Introduction

This paper investigates the information-structural properties of those copular sentences in the Niger-Congo language Wolof that consist of two DPs, focusing on what their use in context can tell us about the relationship between different types of copular sentences and particular information-structural profiles. A language that encodes information-structural properties of utterances in the morphosyntax, Wolof is an ideal candidate for investigating the relationship between copular sentences and information structure. The main finding of this preliminary research is that, while Wolof copular sentences contain what appears to be obligatory syntactic focus/exhaustivity marking, and some sentences also obligatory topicalization, the interpretation of (exhaustively) focused and topicalized constituents is not uniform across constructions. First, one copular sentence type, even though it has a topic-focus structure, does not require its constituents to be semantically topicalized or focused. Second, pragmatic context and structural restrictions on the types of DPs that can occur in different positions in copular sentences also modulate the interpretation of focus.

The paper is organized as follows. In §2, I discuss the theoretical background on copular sentences. Section 3 provides basic information on the clausal structure of Wolof and the syntax of A'-movement and focus, central to the discussion of the information structure of copular sentences in Wolof. I present the syntactic and information-structural properties of Wolof copular sentences in §4. The discussion of preliminary findings, conclusion, and future research directions are given in §5.

2. Background on copular sentences

2.1. Types of copular sentences

Copular sentences contain two constituents usually connected with a copula. This paper only deals with copular sentences in which the constituents are two DPs, as in (1), here referred to as Double-DP copular sentences.

(1) *Double-DP copular sentences*

- | | | |
|----|---|----------------------------|
| a. | [_{DP1} Carissa] is [_{DP2} a mother] | [Predicational] |
| b. | [_{DP1} The professor] is [_{DP2} Karlos] | [Specificational] |
| c. | [_{DP1} Clark Kent] is [_{DP2} Superman] | [Identity] |

In the first detailed investigation of copular sentences, Higgins (1973, 1979), following Akmajian (1970), identifies different types of copular sentences. The basic distinction that Higgins highlights is between the **predicational** and the **specificational** meaning of copular sentences. Consider the examples in (1a) and (1b). In the former, the pre-copular DP (DP1) denotes an individual, and the post-copular DP (DP2) predicates a property of that individual: there is an individual x (Carissa), and that x has

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the property of being a mother. Specificational sentences seem to perform a different function: the precopular constituent provides a variable (there is an x such that x is a professor), and the postcopular constituent provides a value for that variable ($x = \text{Karlos}$) (Higgins 1973, 1979; Declerck 1988; den Dikken 2001; Mikkelsen 2005). The *value* is new information, or *focus*, and the variable part is old information, *presupposition* (Declerck 1988), or *topic* (Mikkelsen 2005). In that sense, a specificational sentence is akin to question-answer pairs, in that the value provides the answer to the question contained in the variable (Declerck 1988). Predicational sentences, Higgins argues, tell us something about the referent of DP1, whereas specificational sentences tell us who or what the referent of DP1 is. The third type of copular sentence relevant for the present discussion is in (1c). In this example, both DPs seem to be referential, and the referent of DP1, Clark Kent, is equated with the referent of DP2, Superman. Such sentences are usually called **equatives** or **identity statements** (Higgins 1979; Heggie 1988; Declerck 1988).

The difference in meaning and use of copular sentences has been attributed to various factors, from the diversity in the underlying structure of particular copular sentences (Heycock & Kroch 1999; Rothstein 2001), to different derivations usually proposing that specificational sentences are *inverted* predicational sentences (Heggie 1988; Heycock 1994; Moro 1997; Mikkelsen 2005; den Dikken 2006), or to information-structural profiles encoded in the syntax (Heggie 1988; Mikkelsen 2005). While this paper cannot address these various proposals in detail, it can suggest a line of research by exploring the syntactic and information-structural properties of copular sentences in Wolof, a language that encodes information structure in the morpho-syntax and can thus give a straightforward answer to some of the questions posed about the syntax and information structure of copular sentences in general.

2.2. Information structure of copular sentences

Many authors have claimed that specificational sentences have a particular information structure: the variable is always the presupposition, old information, or topic, and the value is the focus of the sentence (Higgins 1979; Declerck 1988; Mikkelsen 2005). Based on question-answer pairs in (2) and (3), which compare the information structure of a predicational and a specificational sentence, Mikkelsen argues that specificational sentences in English have a fixed topic-focus structure:

- | | | |
|-----|-------------------------|-------------------|
| (2) | a. Who is the winner? | |
| | b. The winner is JOHN. | [Specificational] |
| | c. JOHN is the winner. | [Predicational] |
| (3) | a. What is John? | |
| | b. #The WINNER is John. | [Specificational] |
| | c. John is the WINNER. | [Predicational] |

A question about the subject (i.e. a question that focuses the referential DP) can felicitously be answered with either a predicational sentence, or a specificational sentence, as shown in (2). A question which requires the non-referential DP to be focused, however, can only be answered with a predicational sentence, illustrated in (3); a specificational sentence seems to reject focus on the pre-copular DP. Mikkelsen (2005) (see also Heycock 1994) therefore argues that specificational sentences in English have a fixed topic-focus structure: DP1 is obligatorily the topic, and DP2 the focus. No such requirements are placed on predicational sentences.

Most of in depth work on copular sentences has been done on English (Germanic languages, at best), with Higgins' taxonomy as the starting point. We would like to know, however, if the properties claimed to hold for different types of copular sentences in English hold across languages, i.e. if the taxonomy of copular sentences followed since Higgins (1973, 1979) has universal properties. Investigating Wolof can greatly help in these endeavors. Wolof overtly encodes information-structural properties of utterances by having morpho-syntactically identifiable topicalization and focalization/exhaustive identification. It is therefore a highly suitable language for investigating the relationship between syntax, information structure, and copular sentence types.

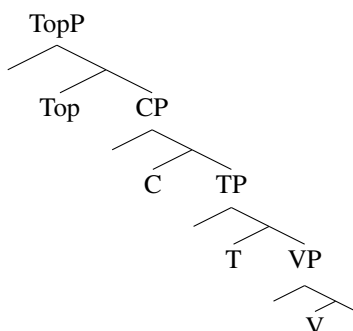
3. Background on Wolof

In this section we review three properties of Wolof clause structure which are essential for understanding the syntax and information structure of copular sentences: obligatory left dislocation of lexical subjects in some clause types in Wolof, the syntax of A'-movement, and finally the expression of focus/exhaustivity. All these properties are found in Double-DP copular sentences.

3.1. Left-dislocated subjects

Wolof belongs to the Atlantic branch of the Niger-Congo language family, most widely spoken in Senegal, but also in the Gambia and Mauritania. It is an SVO language, and for the purposes of the present discussion, I assume that Wolof sentences have the basic structure in (4).

(4) Wolof clausal structure



Example (5) illustrates a neutral, affirmative sentence.¹

- (5) Affirmative sentence²
 Xale yi jox na-ñu Musaa tééré bi.
 child the.PL give C_{AFF}-3PL Moussa book the.SG
 “The children gave Moussa the book.”

This basic word order is changed in A'-movement structures, such as *wh*-questions, in which the extracted element is fronted:

- (6) Object *wh*-question
 L-an l-a xale yi jox Musaa.
 CM-Q l-C child the.PL give Moussa
 “What did the children give to Moussa.”

Aside from word order, (5) and (6) differ in two more ways. First, in both sentences there is another element in the clause, a *sentential particle*, in addition to the subject, the verb, and the object – *na* in the affirmative sentence, and *la* in the object focus sentence. Second, an element which I refer to as the *subject marker* follows the particle *na* in (5) (*ñu*, 3PL), but is absent in (6). Understanding the function and position of these elements is crucial for understanding the syntax of copular sentences. I briefly review them in the remainder of this section.

There are about a dozen different sentence particles in Wolof: subject and complement focus particles, imperative, affirmative, obligative and negative imperative/obligative particles, and four different temporal modality particles. Due to their complementary distribution, Dunigan (1994) assumes that all sentential particles occupy a single position in the clause. For the present purposes, it is sufficient to know that the particles are complementizer-like elements which occupy a projection immediately

¹Unless otherwise noted, all the data in this paper comes from my own fieldwork with native speakers of Wolof.

²Abbreviations: AFF = affirmative; CM = class marker; SM = subject marker; Q = question word.

dominating the TP. I situate them in the C head. The only particle relevant for the present discussion is the *wh*-movement complementizer (*l*)*a* (Martinović 2013).

In (5), a subject marker follows the clausal particle *na*, but it is altogether absent in (6). There are two groups of construction with respect to the occurrence of subject markers. In A'-movement structures, the subject markers are in complementary distribution with lexical subjects. (7) shows an object *wh*-question, in which the *wh*-phrase is fronted to the left of the complementizer, and either the lexical subject or the subject marker are found to the right of the complementizer; they cannot both occur (examples from Dunigan 1994).

(7) Lexical subjects and subject markers in A'-movement constructions

- a. K-an l-a **góor ñi** gis?
CM-Q l-C man the.PL see
“Who did the men see.”
- b. K-an l-a-**ñu** gis?
CM-Q l-C-3PL see
“Who did they see?”
- c. *K-an l-a-**ñu** **góor ñi** gis?
CM-Q l-C-3PL man the.PL see

In A'-movement constructions, the lexical subject and the subject marker can both be present only if the lexical subject precedes the extracted element. In fact, the subject marker is obligatory in that case, suggesting that it is a pronoun resuming a topicalized lexical subject. This is illustrated in the object focus constructions in (8):

(8) Topicalized lexical subjects and subject markers

- a. **Góor ñi** Musaa l-a-**ñu** gis.
man the.PL Moussa l-C-3.PL see
“The men, they saw MOUSSA.”
- b. ***Góor ñi** Musaa l-a gis.
men the.PL Moussa l-C see

From the preceding examples it can be concluded that in A'-movement constructions, the lexical subjects and the subject markers occupy the same position in the clause immediately to the right of the A'-complementizer (*l*)*a* in C. Since nothing can ever interfere between the complementizer and the subject marker, I assume that this position is Spec,TP.

The second type of construction with respect to the distribution of lexical subjects and subject markers are structures in which only the subject marker can follow the sentence particle, and the lexical subject is obligatorily at the left edge of the clause. Consider the examples of neutral affirmative sentences in (9):

(9) Clauses with obligatorily left-dislocated lexical subjects

- a. Lekk na-**ñu** ceeb.
eat C_{AF}F-3.PL rice
“They ate rice.”
- b. **Xale yi** lekk na-**ñu** ceeb.
child the.PL eat C_{AF}F-3.PL rice
“The children ate rice.”
- c. *Lekk na **xale yi** ceeb.
eat C_{AF}F child the.PL rice
- d. ***Xale yi** lekk na ceeb.
child the.PL eat C_{AF}F rice

As these examples show, the lexical subject, if present, can only be at the left edge of the clause, and never follow the sentence particle *na* (i.e. it can never occupy Spec,TP). Furthermore, the subject marker is obligatorily present at the right of the sentence particle. Dunigan (1994) and Russell (2006) consider lexical subjects in such constructions to be topicalized and resumed by a pronoun in Spec,TP. Russell (2006) presents evidence to that effect, illustrating that left-dislocated lexical subjects in many ways behave like other topics in Wolof. I follow this analysis and assume that there are constructions in Wolof in which lexical subjects are obligatorily topicalized.³ We shall see that one type of copular sentences falls into this category.

3.2. *A'-movement and the subject/non-subject asymmetry*

The examples of *A'*-movement constructions in (6)-(8) all contain the sentence particle (*l*)*a*. Most instances of *A'*-movement (focus constructions, one type of *wh*-questions, comparatives, and any long-distance extraction) require its presence. Building on previous work (Martinović 2013), I analyze (*l*)*a* as an *A'*-movement complementizer, which requires a phrase with a Wh-feature to move into its specifier position. An important property of this complementizer is that it exhibits a subject/non-subject asymmetry: it surfaces as *a* in cases of subject extraction, as in (10), and as *la* in cases of non-subject extraction, in (11) (for different analyses of the asymmetry, see Torrence 2005, 2012a, 2013a,b; Martinović 2013).

(10) Subject question
 K-an **a** gis Musaa?
 CM-Q C see Moussa
 “Who saw Moussa?”

(11) Object question
 K-an **l-a** Musaa gis?
 CM-Q l-C Moussa see
 “Who did Moussa see?”

The subject/non-subject asymmetry therefore tells us unambiguously if the element in its specifier position is the structural subject of the sentence (i.e. if it moved there from Spec,TP), or if it is another constituent. This is a helpful diagnostic in case of copular clauses which consist of two DPs.

3.3. *Focus*

In many constructions, (*l*)*a* in the matrix clause coincides with some type of focus. Robert (1993) identifies this focus in Wolof as contrastive, with explicit or implicit reference to excluded alternatives (also known as identificational focus in É. Kiss 1998 and exhaustive identification in Horvath 2007). However, according to my research, this usually only encompasses examples such those in (12).⁴

(12) Contrastive subject and object focus
 a. Aali a (>Aalee) gis Musaa.
 Ali C see Moussa
 “ALI saw Moussa.” (“It’s Ali who saw Moussa.”)
 b. Musaa l-a Aali gis
 Moussa l-C ali see
 “Ali saw MOUSSA.” (“It’s Moussa who Ali saw.”)

³For a discussion on possible reason for this dislocation, see Dunigan 1994.

⁴The meaning of such structures is closest to the meaning expressed by the English cleft sentence. Wolof focus structures are, however, not bi-clausal clefts. I will therefore continue translating them as monoclausal sentences with a focused constituent, and when appropriate, offer the English cleft equivalent in parentheses.

In addition to focus constructions, the complementizer (*l*)*a* occurs in a number of structures, one of them being *wh*-questions, as in (10) and (11). The parallel between focus constructions and questions is not surprising. Horvath (1986) observes that languages which have a designated structural focus position tend to move their *wh*-phrases to that position as well. Another structure which obligatorily contains (*l*)*a* are comparatives, as in (13).

- (13) *Comparative construction*
 Tëy l-a-a gënë gaaw bind ci démb.
 today l-C-1SG more fast write LOC yesterday
 “I write faster today than yesterday.”

Comparatives are also often claimed to involve some sort of focusing (Reglero 2006; Merchant 2009).⁵ However, it is hard to say whether focus in comparatives could be claimed to be exhaustive.

Finally, (*l*)*a* obligatorily occurs in all intermediate C positions in long-distance extraction, as in (14):

- (14) *Long-distance extraction*
 L-an l-a Musaa xam ni l-a Faatu gis?
 CM-Q l-C Moussa know that l-C Fatou see
 “What does Moussa know that Fatou saw?”

This behavior of (*l*)*a* is reminiscent of the Irish *A'*-extraction complementizer *aL* (McCloskey 2001, 2002) and speaks strongly in favor of treating it as an *A'*-complementizer, and not a focus marker.

It can be seen from this brief discussion that the relationship between the presence of the *A'*-movement complementizer (*l*)*a* and focusing/exhaustivity marking is in need of further study. In certain constructions (*l*)*a* requires the element in its specifier to have an obligatory exhaustive reading, while in others its information-structural properties are unclear. While a number of those constructions can be argued to involve some type of focusing, its defining characteristics have not been researched in detail.

Double-DP copular sentences in Wolof contain the three aforementioned syntactic and information-structural characteristics. They obligatorily contain the complementizer (*l*)*a*, which indicates that they are *A'*-movement constructions. We shall see that in some types of copular sentences this also means that there is obligatory exhaustivity marking, though this is not a property of all copular sentences. Finally, some Double-DP copular sentences have obligatorily left-dislocated/topicalized subjects. This makes Wolof copular sentences a good candidate for investigating the syntax of information-structure of copular sentences.

4. Wolof copular sentences

In this section, we discuss Double-DP copular sentences in Wolof. We first review two syntactic constructions in which copular sentences appear and how they relate to the three types of copular sentences established in Higgins' taxonomy: predicational and specificational copular sentences and identity statements. We then explore the contexts of their use, which reveals the pragmatic function of information-structural characteristics which are in Wolof syntactically encoded. We finally discuss some structural restrictions placed on one type of Wolof copular sentences, and the influence these restrictions have on their use.

4.1. Types of copular sentences in Wolof

Double-DP copular sentences in Wolof most commonly contain the *A'*-movement complementizer (*l*)*a*.⁶ They come in two forms, DP DP *la*-SM (SM = subject marker) (*la*-sentence), or DP-*a* DP (*a*-sentence), illustrated in (15) and (16), respectively.

⁵See Baglini to appear for an analysis of Wolof comparatives.

⁶In specific and very restricted information-structural contexts, Double-DP sentences can also appear with other sentence particles. They however most commonly contain (*l*)*a*.

- (15) la-sentence
 Xale yi sàcc l-a-ñu.
 child the.PL thief l-C-3PL
 “The children are thieves.”
- (16) a-sentence
 Samba a di (>Sambaay) sàcc.
 Samba C IMPF thief
 “SAMB A is a thief.”
 (“It’s Samba who is a thief.”)

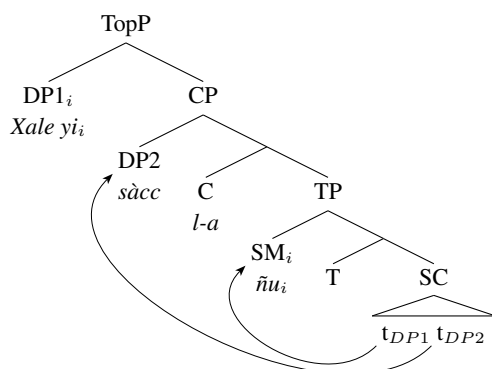
The presence of (*l*)*a* always involves A’-movement of a constituent to its specifier position. Some authors consider (*l*)*a* to be a copula (Kihm 1999; Torrence 2005, 2012a,b), due to its occurrence in copular sentences. However, it is not uncommon for elements other than the copula, especially for focus markers in African languages, to appear in copular sentences (for example, in Hausa, described in Green 2007). More importantly, (*l*)*a* in no way behaves like a verbal element in Wolof: it does not occupy a position inside the VP, but occurs in a projection above the TP, and it is in complementary distribution with all other sentence particles (i.e. complementizer-like elements). Furthermore, other sentence particles can occur in Double-DP sentences in particular information-structural contexts, in which case (*l*)*a* does not appear. For a detailed discussion and justification of the analysis advocated here, see Martinović 2013.

Since the complementizer (*l*)*a* exhibits a subject/non-subject asymmetry, its form in (15) tells us that the DP in its specifier, *sàcc* ‘thief’, did not move there from Spec,TP, meaning that the other DP, *xale yi* ‘the children’, is the structural subject of the sentence. Furthermore, in the *la-sentence*, the particle is obligatorily followed by a subject marker (*ñu*). We saw that there are structures in Wolof in which the lexical subject is obligatorily left-dislocated and resumed by a subject marker. I consider *la-sentences* to be another such case.

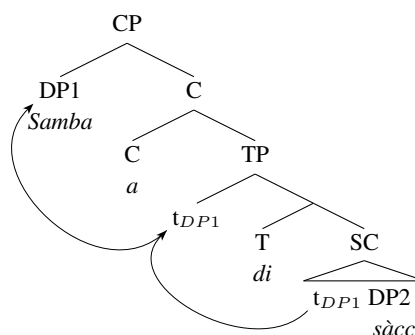
In the *a-sentence* in (16), the complementizer surfaces as *a*, indicating that the DP in its specifier, *Samba*, is the structural subject. The predicate DP *sàcc* ‘thief’ remains below the particle, and there is no resumption.

A tentative structure of the *la-sentence* and the *a-sentence* from (15) and (16) is presented in (17) and (18), respectively. For present purposes, I assume that the two DPs start out in a small clause (SC). In (17), DP1 raises to Spec,TP, and either moves to Spec,TopP and is resumed in Spec,TP, or stays in Spec,TP and is co-indexed with a lexical subject base-generated in Spec,TopP.⁷ DP2 moves to Spec,CP. In (18), DP1 moves to Spec,TP and then to Spec,CP. DP2 stays in situ.⁸

(17) The structure of *la-sentences*



(18) The structure of *a-sentences*



⁷Either is a possible derivation, and I do not take a stand on this here.

⁸Another difference between *a-sentences* and *la-sentences* is in the obligatory presence of the imperfective aspect morpheme *di* in the former, and its obligatory absence in the latter construction. The existential verb *nekk* can occur in place of *di*. In the absence of overt tense morphology, active verbs in Wolof are associated with a past tense reading, and stative verbs with a present tense reading (Dunigan 1994). Copular sentences express a state, and as such are not expected to have obligatory overt aspect marking in present tense. The obligatory presence of *di/nekk* therefore probably encodes something else; possibly, they function as a type of a copula. For now I set this problem aside.

The structure of *la-sentences* is compatible with the predicational meaning: the examples in (19) are felicitous in a context in which there is an individual picked out by the referential DP (in this case either *Samba* or *jàngalekat bi* ‘the teacher’, in a situation in which there is a particular, contextually familiar teacher), and some property is predicated of that individual (here being a thief). This restriction will become important in the discussion of the use of different copular sentences.

- (19) Predicational *la-sentences*
- a. Samba sàcc l-a-∅.
Samba thief l-C-3SG.
“*Samba is a thief.*”
- b. Jàngalëkat bi sàcc l-a-∅.
teacher the.SG thief l-C-∅
“*The teacher is a thief.*”

In Wolof, a definite DP is usually not felicitous as DP2 of a *la-sentence* if it is meant to denote a property. A question such as *What is Samba?* in a context in which Samba is the only thief in a room full of people (so that being a thief is considered Samba’s occupation, and is not referring to him as a perpetrator of a specific theft), cannot be answered with the sentence in (20).

- (20) Predicational *la-sentence* with a definite DP2
- *Samba sàcc bi l-a-∅.
Samba thief the.SG l-C-3SG
“*Samba is the thief.*”

La-sentences can also convey the specificational meaning, as in (21). These sentences are felicitous in a context in which a theft has occurred, but the perpetrator is not known (in other words, DP1 introduces a variable – there is an *x* such that *x* is a thief – and does not refer to a contextually salient individual). DP2 is then referential and picks out the individual who committed the crime.

- (21) Specificational *la-sentences*
- a. Sàcc bi Samba l-a-∅.
thief the.SG Samba l-C-3SG
“*The thief is Samba.*”
- b. Sàcc bi jàngalekat bi l-a-∅.
thief the.SG teacher the.SG l-C-3SG
“*The thief is the teacher.*”

We see in (21b) that DP2 in a *la-sentence* can be a definite description, so is it possible that (20) is not felicitous in a predicational meaning, but is grammatical if both DPs are interpreted referentially? The answer is no; identity statements are not possible as *la-sentences*. The sentence in (22) is not felicitous in a context in which there is an individual who is known as both Samba and Oussman, and the identity statement equates the referents of the two DPs.

- (22) Identity statement as *la-sentence*
- *Usmaan Samba l-a-∅.
Oussman Samba l-C-3SG
intended: “Oussman is Samba.”

I return to the discussion of the possible DP types in copular sentences in 4.3.

All permutations of the different types of DP (with respect to their definiteness) are possible in *a-sentences*, however, when DP2 is definite, the preferred reading seems to be that of an identity statement.⁹

⁹The general contexts for different *a-sentences* are equivalent to the ones described for *la-sentences*, and information-structural distinctions are discussed in the following section.

(23) Predicational a-sentences

- a. Samba-a di (>Sambaay) sàcc.
Samba-C IMPF. thief.
“*SAMBA is a thief.*” (“*It’s Samba who is a thief.*”)
- b. Jangalëkat bi-a di (>beey) sàcc.
teacher the.SG-C IMPF thief.
“*THE TEACHER is a thief.*” (“*It’s the teacher who is a thief.*”)
- c. Samba a di (> Sambaay) sàcc bi.
Samba C IMPF thief the.SG
“*SAMBA is the thief.*” (“*It’s Samba who is the thief.*”) OR
“*Samba is the thief.*” [Identity]

(24) Specificational a-sentences¹⁰

- a. Sàcc bi-a di (>beey) Samba
thief DEF.SG-C IMPF Samba
“*The thief is Samba.*”
- b. Sàcc bi-a di (>beey) jàngalekat bi
thief DEF.SG-C IMPF teacher the.SG
“*The thief is the teacher.*”

(25) Identity statement as a-sentence

- Usmaan a di (> Usmaanay) Samba.
Oussman C IMPF Samba
“*Oussman is Samba.*”

In the following section, we explore the differences in use between *la-sentences* and *a-sentences* and the consequences of the unavailability of certain copular constructions in the *la-sentence* structure.

4.2. *Contexts of use*

The most important difference between *a-sentences* and *la-sentences* is in their use. The *la-sentence* seems to be neutral; it is felicitous in an out-of-the-blue context, or as an answer to a question that requires broad sentence focus, such as the one in (26a). It is also used when the context requires predicate focus, as in (26b). An *a-sentence* is not felicitous in these situations.

NEUTRAL/BROAD SENTENCE FOCUS/PREDICATE FOCUS(26) Questions

- a. Lu xew?
what happen
“*What is happening?*”
- b. Lu-tax bëgg-ul-óó Samba?
why like-NEG-2SG Samba
“*Why don’t you like Samba?*”

(27) Answer

- a. Samba sàcc l-a-∅.
Samba thief l-C-3SG
“*Samba is a thief.*”

¹⁰It is not entirely clear to me if these are really specificational sentences. Speakers usually accepted them in contexts in which a specificational sentence would be felicitous, but it is possible that they are simply identity statements and that the context was not appropriate to distinguish between them. More investigation is needed to address this question.

- b. #Samba-a di (>Sambaay) sàcc.
 Samba-C IMPF thief
 intended: “*Samba is a thief.*”

A question to which the response is the predicate DP, as the one in (28a), or a question that puts contrastive focus on the predicate DP, as in (28b), can also felicitously be answered only with the *la-sentence*:

PREDICATE FOCUS/CONTRASTIVE PREDICATE FOCUS

(28) Questions

- a. Samba l-an l-a-∅?
 Samba CM-Q l-C-3SG
 “*What is Samba?*”
- b. Ndax Samba raikat l-a-∅?
 Q. Samba killer l-C-3SG
 “*Is Samba a killer?*”

(29) Answer

- a. Samba sàcc l-a-∅.
 Samba thief l-C-3SG
 “*Samba is a THIEF.*”
- b. #Samba-a di (>Sambaay) sàcc.
 Samba-C IMPF thief
 intended: “*Samba is a THIEF.*”

We have seen that the presence of the complementizer (*l*)*a* often coincides with some type of focusing, though the exact properties of this focus are not always clear. We would therefore expect DP2 in copular sentences, which is located in the specifier of (*l*)*a*, to be focused. This is certainly a possible interpretation; however, *la-sentences* are also compatible with a neutral or an out-of-the-blue context. This indicates that the interpretation of focus in Wolof copular sentences (and, judging by other examples, in the language in general) is not purely a morpho-syntactic fact – in other words, it is probably not tied to a focus projection, or encoded in the syntax via a feature.

The *a-sentence* is a felicitous response to a question asking about the subject DP, as in (30a), or a question which requires the answer to contrastively focus the subject DP, as in (30b).¹¹

SUBJECT FOCUS/CONTRASTIVE SUBJECT FOCUS

(30) Questions

- a. K-an a di (>ay) sàcc?
 CM-Q C PRES thief
 “*Who is a thief?*”
- b. Ndax Musaa sàcc l-a-∅?
 Q. Musa thief l-C-3SG
 “*Is Musa a thief?*”

¹¹Interestingly, for one speaker the *la-sentence* in (i) is also a possible response to the questions in (30a) and (30b) though the *a-sentence* is preferred.

- (i) ?Samba sàcc l-a-∅.
 Samba thief l-C-3SG
 “*Samba is a thief.*”

- (31) Answer
 Samba-a di (>Sambaay) sàcc.
 Samba-C IMPF thief
 “SAMBA is a thief.” (“It’s Samba who is a thief.”)

A-sentences are therefore felicitous if the subject is in some way focused. In all other contexts, if a *la-sentence* is grammatical, it is preferred to the *a-sentence*. We have, however, seen that in some situations *la-sentences* are ungrammatical. In those cases, *a-sentences* must be used, regardless of the information-structural requirements imposed by the context. I review these cases in the following section.

4.3. Structural restrictions on *la-sentences*

We saw that two structures are not available as *la-sentences*: a predicational sentence in which DP2 is definite, and an identity statement. The relevant examples are repeated in (32) and (33).

- (32) Predicational *la-sentence* with a definite DP2
 *Samba sàcc bi l-a-∅.
 Samba thief the.SG l-C-3SG
 intended: “Samba is the thief.”

- (33) Identity statement as a *la-sentence*
 *Usmaan Samba l-a-∅.
 Oussman Samba l-C-3SG
 intended: “Oussman is Samba.”

In our discussion of the syntax of *a-sentences* and *la-sentences*, we have pointed out a crucial difference between them with respect to their syntactic structure, illustrated in examples (17) and (18): *la-sentences* have obligatorily topicalized subjects. In Martinović (forthcoming(a)) I propose that this structural difference leads to an important informational-structural distinction between the two sentence types: *la-sentences* have a topic-comment structure, which has the purpose of attributing some property (comment) of an already established discourse referent (topic) (Lambrecht 1994). I argue that this syntactic configuration forces the two DPs in copular sentences to be asymmetric in a broader sense: DP2 must in some way contribute information about DP1. Specifically, I argue that in *la-sentences* DP1 must be higher on the familiarity/givenness hierarchy (Gundel et al. 1993; Mulkern 1996) compared to DP2.

Consider the example in (32), in which DP2 cannot be definite. I argue that this is due to the fact that definite descriptions contain a familiarity presupposition (i.e. they pick out familiar referents; Heim 1982). As such, they cannot be in DP2 position in *la-sentences*, when DP1 is obligatorily referential (for example, when it is a name), because there is no asymmetry in terms of familiarity between DP1 and DP2.¹² In this situation, when a *la-sentence* is ungrammatical, the parallel *a-sentence* is used, regardless of information-structural requirements imposed by the context, as in the question-answer pairs in (34)-(35).

- (34) Questions
 Ndax Samba-a di (>Saambay) raikat bi?
 Q. Samba-C IMPF killer the.SG
 “Is Samba the killer?”

- (35) Answer
 a. Samba a di (>Sambaay) sàcc bi.
 Samba C IMPF thief the.SG
 “Samba is the thief.”
 # “SAMBA is a thief” (“It’s Samba who is a thief.”)

¹²For a detailed analysis, see Martinović forthcoming(a).

- b. *Samba sàcc bi 1-a-∅.
 Samba thief the.SG I-C-3SG
 “Samba is the thief.”

Another copular structure which cannot be expressed with a *la-sentence* is an identity statement, as in (33). An analysis which requires an asymmetry between DP1 and DP2 in familiarity/givenness predicts the ungrammaticality of identity statements in *la-constructions*: since names presuppose familiar referents, neither DP1 nor DP2 can be higher than the other on the familiarity scale. Again, an identity statement can only be expressed with an *a-sentence*, without the need to semantically focus DP1.

- (36) Question
 K-an a di (>ay) Usmaan?
 who C IMPF Oussman
 “Who is Oussman?”

- (37) Answer
 Usmaan a di (>Usmaanay) Samba.
 Oussman C IMPF Samba
 “Oussman is Samba.”
 # “OUSSMAN is Samba” (# “It’s Oussman who is Samba.”)

In the following section I discuss the implications of these preliminary findings and the areas of future research.

5. Discussion and conclusions

Double-DP copular sentences can be expressed with two syntactic structures in Wolof. Both constructions contain the complementizer (*la*), which in some other *A'*-movement clauses indicates some type of focusing. The only construction in which the interpretation of focus is clear, however, are focus constructions, where the focus is exhaustive. In other *A'*-movement structures which contain (*la*) (*wh*-questions, comparatives) the exact information-structural properties of the *A'*-moved constituents is at this moment not well understood.

In Double-DP copular sentences, either the structural subject (the DP in Spec,TP) or the non-subject can move to Spec,CP, which is indicated by the form of the complementizer (*la*): it surfaces as *a* in subject extraction, and as *la* in non-subject extraction. I therefore term the two types of copular sentences *a-sentences* and *la-sentences*, respectively.

The two sentence types differ in terms of their use. *La-sentences* are felicitous in an out-of-the-blue context, and a context requiring a broad sentence focus. They are also used in case of predicate focus, which is consistent with the fact that the non-subject DP moves to Spec,CP in *la-sentences*, which is in some constructions the focused position. *A-sentences*, on the other hand, are used in cases in which the subject DP is in some way focused, and are not felicitous otherwise. There are, however, cases in which a *la-sentence* is not felicitous: when DP1 is referential and DP2 a definite description, or when both DPs are strongly referential. In those cases, corresponding *a-sentences* are used, regardless of the information-structural requirements imposed by the context.

One important question that arises from the Wolof data is the precise relationship between focusing and copular sentences. It is not unusual for copular sentences to contain particles that otherwise act as focus markers. In fact, the grammaticalization of a copula into a focus marker is widely attested in the grammaticalization literature (Heine & Reh 1984; Heine & Kuteva 2002; Drubig 2003), and is especially common in African languages. Grammaticalization in the opposite direction, from focus marker to copula, has also been argued for, in some Chadic languages (Frajzyngier 1986), and Swahili (McWorther 1994). Therefore, there seems to be an inherent connection between Double-DP sentences in general and focusing. A case very similar to Wolof is that of Hausa, presented in Green 2007. Hausa

is, as Wolof, an SVO language, shown in (38). The language has a focus marker and a focus projection, that induces fronting of the focused constituent, as in (39) (examples from Green 2007).

(38) Neutral affirmative sentence in Hausa

Yârā sun sàyi àbinci
children 3PL.PF buy food
“The children bought food.”

(39) Object focus in Hausa

Abinci_i (nè) yârā sukà sàyā t_i
food FM.M children 3PL.FOC.PF buy
“The children bought FOOD.”

Interestingly, copular sentences in Hausa have the same form as they do in Wolof: both DPs are at the beginning of the sentence, followed by the focus marker.¹³ The following examples seem to correspond to a predicational and a specificational copular sentence.

(40) Predicational copular sentence in Hausa

Audù dālibī nè
Audu student.M FM.M
“Audu is a student.”

(41) Specificational copular sentence in Hausa

Bàrāwòn Audù nè
thief.DD Audu FM.M
“The thief is AUDU.”

As in Wolof, the other word order is also possible, in which the focused constituent is in the initial position, followed by the focus marker, followed by the second DP. In that case, according to Green’s notation, DP1 is focused.

(42) Predicational copular sentence with a focused DP1

Audù nè dālibī
Audu FM.M student.M
“AUDU is a student.”

Green (2007) argues that *nè* in Hausa is not a verbal element, but a head of the focus projection, both in contrastive focus sentences, and in copular sentences. However, as it can be seen from the Hausa examples, the focusing property of *nè* depends on the syntactic configuration which the copular sentence takes, and on other elements, such as context. We find the same situation in Wolof. All this warrants a detailed cross-linguistic investigation of copular sentences in languages such as Wolof and Hausa, which mark information structure in the morpho-syntax, and in which the interaction of information-structural properties such as topic and focus and syntactic structures can be directly observed.

A second question which can greatly benefit from the investigation of Wolof and similar languages is the exact relationship between particular information-structural profiles and various types of copular sentences. Recall that, according to Mikkelsen (2005), only specificational sentences in English have an obligatorily focused DP2 and a presuppositional DP1, resulting in a topic-comment structure.

(43) Topic-comment structure in English specificational sentence

[The thief]_{TOP} is [SAMBA]_{FOC}.

The data presented here shows that this is not the case in Wolof: both predicational and specificational sentences are felicitous as *la-sentences*, which, as we have seen, have a topic-comment structure. Furthermore, the information-structural properties of that structure (focusing, in particular) seems to be

¹³Green also analyses these structures as involving topicalization of DP1.

mediated by pragmatic context, and the grammaticality of a particular construction: when a *la-sentence* is not available, the parallel *a-sentence* must be used, regardless of the information structure required by the context. If a *la-sentence* is available, an *a-sentence* can only be used if the subject is focused. All this suggests that the meaning of copular sentences is not universally tied to particular information-structural profiles, as has been claimed for English and related languages, and that a reexamination of Higgins' taxonomy, which has been the starting point of all work on copular sentences, is in order.

The preliminary findings reported here are for the most part descriptive in nature. They, however, shed light on some important questions regarding the relationship between information structure and syntax in general, and, when it comes to copular sentences, give strong evidence for the need for detailed cross-linguistic research of the topic, with input from languages like Wolof.

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