

Information Structure in Serer and a Comparative Study with Fula

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Working Title: “A Morphosyntactic Study on Information Structure in Pular (Fula of Fuuta Jaloo, Guinea)¹”

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¹ The dissertation is realized in affiliation to Project B7 “Predicate-centered focus types: A sample-based typological study in African languages” of the SFB 632 ‘Information Structure’ and is funded by the DFG and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. I thank my colleagues for their very helpful comments on earlier versions of (parts) of this presentation.

1 Introduction

Classification and Geographic Distribution

- Serer and Fula are both Niger-Congo > Atlantic > Northern languages
- Segerer (2010) shows that Serer and Fula are closely related languages under what he calls Northern 2 sub-branch of Atlantic

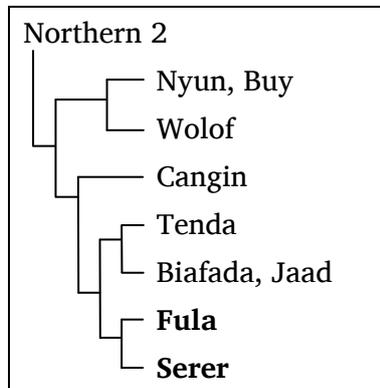
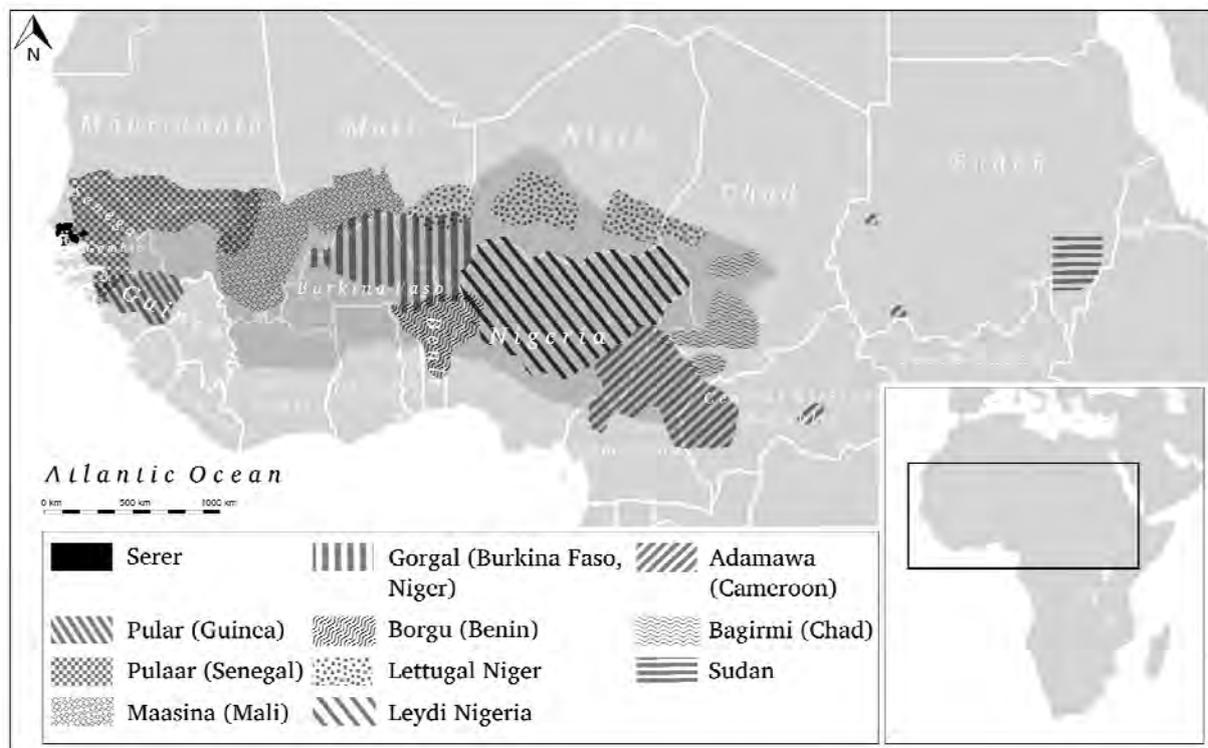


Figure 1. Classification of Serer and Fula within the Northern branch of the Atlantic Languages (Segerer 2010)

- Serer (also “Serer-Sine”): < 1.2 million speakers in Senegal and Gambia (Lewis et al. 2014), ISO 639-3: srr
- Fula: ≈ 22 million speakers in 18 countries (Gajdos 2004: 10f.)

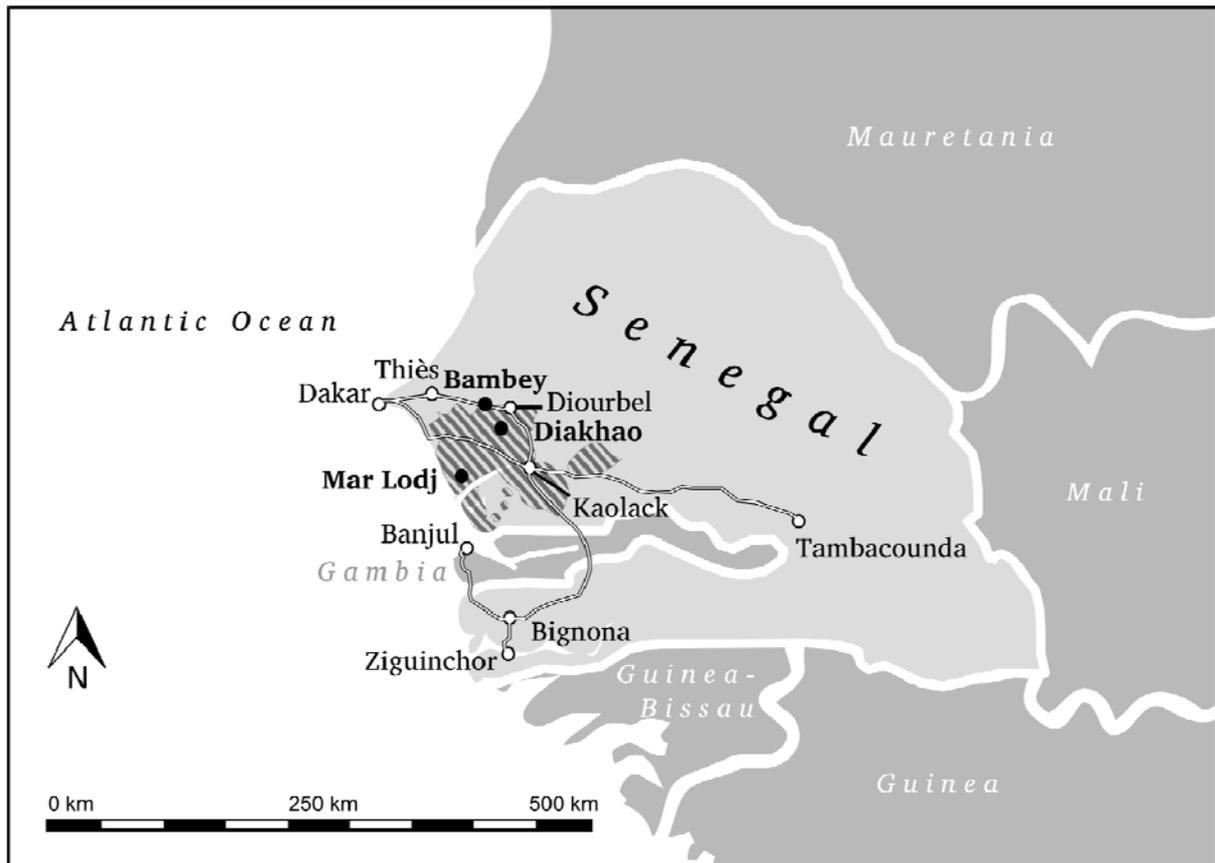


Map 1. Serer and Fula dialects in Africa (map by Simon Argus²)

² Based on Harrison (2003) and University of Texas Libraries,

Sources for Serer

- 1) The grammar by Waly Faye (1979): “Étude morphosyntaxique du sereer singandum (région de Jaxaaw - Ñaaxar)” (= Diakhao)
- 2) The description by Marie Renaudier (2012): “Dérivation et valence en sereer: Variété de Mar Lodj (Sénégal)”
- 3) Supplementary data from Papa Saliou Sarr, a native speaker from Bambey, Senegal



Map 2. Serer in Senegal (map by Simon Argus)

Some Typological Features of Fula and Serer

- **Word order:** SVO
- **Morphology**
 - Agreement class systems range from 13 classes (Serer) to 21-24 classes (Fula)
 - Serer has agreement class *prefixes* on the nouns while Fula has *suffixes*
- **Phonology**
 - Distinctive vowel length (<a> vs. <aa>, <e> vs. <ee>, etc.)
 - Implosives: both languages use the labial implosive [ɓ] and the palatal implosive [ɗ], Fula in addition the alveolar implosive [ɗ]

- Consonant mutation for singular/plural stems in nouns and verbs (also some qualifiers and quantifiers)
- **Verb System**
 - **verb stem** – (DER) – **conjugation** – (PRO)
 - Derivational suffixes are inserted between the verb stem and the conjugation suffix in order to express benefactive, causative, manner, etc.
 - Conjugation is marked by suffixes on the verb
 - Subject pronouns (only in some constructions) and object pronouns occur as enclitics
 - Locative periphrasis: expresses a progressive in both languages (e.g. “I *am at working*”) (in Fula the locative periphrasis is also used for stative and habitual)
 - **Aspect:**
 - Perfective vs. Imperfective (Fula: 3 perfective vs. 4 imperfective affirmative paradigms, Serer: 3 perfective vs. 3 imperfective affirmative paradigms)
 - For both languages I adopt here a (random) numbering of the paradigms instead of labelling them. For Fula I follow Sylla (1982) and Diallo (2000). Numbering is uncommon in Serer
 - **Voice:**
 - Fula verb paradigms distinguish between *active*, *middle* and *passive* voice (for each voice, the conjugation suffix differs within the paradigms)
 - In Serer, middle and passive voice are less grammaticalised: they are expressed by derivational suffixes (which cannot be combined with all paradigms), or by different construction types
- ⇒ these derivational suffixes are grammaticalised in Fula and form the basis for the middle and passive paradigms

- **Perfective Paradigms in Fula**

	Voice	PFV1	PFV2	PFV3
Unmarked	Active	-u/-∅	-i [-u/-∅]	-ii
	Middle	-i	-ii [-i]	-ike
	Passive	-a	-aa [-a]	-aama
Preterite	Active		-u-no/-∅-no	-ii-no
	Middle		-i-no	-i-noo-ke
	Passive		-a-no	-aa-noo-ma

Table 1. The perfective paradigms in Fula

- Unmarked (or default) perfective vs. past (marked by the past suffix *-no(o)*; main function: to situate an action in the past with respect to the time of the story told)
- Perfective 1 Active Unmarked and Perfective 2 Active Preterite: the conjugation suffix is either *-u* or zero for phonological reasons

- Perfective 2 Unmarked: the first morphemes (-i/-ii/-aa) occur if no past marker or enclitic pronoun follows the conjugated verb
- Perfective 2: the second morphemes (-u/-∅/-i/-a) are those which occur if the past suffix or enclitic pronoun follow them: the suffix changes from -i to -u or zero in active voice, in middle and passive voice the length of the conjugation suffix is reduced
- Perfective 3 Middle and Passive: -i/-ke and -aa/-ma are historically two morphemes, which explains why the past marker occurs between them (their order was probably more flexible in the past)

• Imperfective Paradigms in Fula

	Voice	IPFV1	IPFV2	IPFV3	IPFV4
Unmarked	Active	-u/-∅ [-e]	-a [-∅/-e]	-ay	-(a)ta [-at/-et/-ot/-ay]
	Middle	-o	-oo [-o]	-oto	-otoo [-oto]
	Passive	-e	-ee [-e]	-ete	-etee [-ete]
Preterite	Active			-ay-no	-ay-noo
	Middle			-oto-no	-oto-noo
	Passive			-ete-no	-ete-noo

Table 2. The imperfective paradigms

- Imperfective 1 Active: the conjugation suffix is either -u or zero for phonological reasons; -e as a result of the fusion with the enclitic object pronoun of the second person singular = *maa*
- Imperfective 2 Active: -a is regularly zero in front of an enclitic subject pronoun
- Imperfective 2 and 4 Middle and Passive: the final vowel of the conjugation suffix is shortened in front of an enclitic pronoun
- Imperfective 4 Active: the initial -a may be dropped in fast speech; vowel assimilation in front of enclitic subject pronoun; -ay in front of the enclitic object pronoun of the second person singular = *maa*

• Perfective Paradigms in Serer

	PFV1	PFV2	PFV3
Unmarked	-u	-∅	-a
Preterite	-ʔ-u	-ʔ-u	-ʔ-a

Table 3. The perfective paradigms in Serer

- Unmarked vs. past: their function is not clear in the language descriptions. Faye (1979) calls it “actuel” vs. “inactuel”, Renaudier calls it “présent” vs. “passé”
- But: the unmarked form is mostly translated by the French “passé composé” and the past by the French “plus-que-parfait”

- The preterite suffix is the glottal stop [ʔ]
- In the preterite the PFV1 and PFV2 are identical

- Imperfective Paradigms in Serer

	IPFV1	IPFV2
Unmarked	-aa	-aa
Preterite	-og-u	-og-a

Table 4. The imperfective paradigms in Serer

- The unmarked form is in the affirmative always *-aa*
- The preterite suffix is *-og*

2 The Behaviour of Topics

Definition of Topic: “A referent is interpreted as the topic of a proposition if in a given situation the proposition is construed as being about this referent, i.e. as expressing information which is relevant to and which increases the addressee’s knowledge of this referent.” (Lambrecht 1994: 131)

Question: Are topics sentence-initial in both Serer and Fula?

In the canonical sentence (SVO), the unmarked subject is the topic. It agrees with the finite verb.

(1) [Topic] [Comment]
 Njugur a-ar-a xaalis xane
 1.PN 1-bring-PFV3 6.money today
 ‘Njugur brought the money today.’ (Sarr p.c.)

Lexical subjects and objects can be extracted from the background clause of clefts.

(2) [Topic] [Focus] [Background]
 Sang Ndakaru a-ret-u
 1.PN ?.PN 1-leave-PFV1
 ‘Jean, c’est à Dakar qu’il est parti.’ [Jean, (it is to) Dakar (he) went.]
 (Renaudier 2012: 111)

- (3) [Topic] [Focus] [Background]
 ndiaw neeke, caaci-es a-diaw-u
 5.food 5.DEF:PROX 6.grandmother-1S.POSS 6-cook-PFV1
 ‘{And the sauce?} This food, (it is) my grandmother (who) cooked (it).’ (Sarr p.c.)

Framesetters precede the topic of the main clause.

- (4) [Framesetter] [Topic] [Comment]
 kam o-ntaant ole mi, baa-ess *panthère* a-ref-u
 inside 10-dream 10.DEF 1S.POSS 6.father-1S.POSS 6.panther 6-be-PFV1
 ‘In my dream, my father was a panther.’ (Sarr p.c.)

Both lexical subjects and objects can be left-dislocated with or without topic marker; (prosodic break between *xaalis* and *Njugur*).

- (5) [Topic 1_i] [Topic 2] [Comment_i]
 xaalis, Njugur a-ar-a = ni xane
 6.money 1.PN 1-bring-PFV3 = 6.PRO today
 ‘{And the money?} The money, Njugur brought it today.’ (Sarr, p.c.)

- (6) [Topic_i TOP] [Comment[-Topic_i]]
 mi kat and-iim ta tig
 1S.EMPH TOP know-PFV.NEG:1S of.it ?.thing
 ‘Pour ma part, je n’en sais rien.’ [As for me, I don’t know anything about it.]
 (Faye 1979: 82)

Serer	Fula
kat, o mat, o(?)	kam, boo, duu, le, nii, non, dey, (...)

Table 5. Topic markers in Serer and Fula

#	Construction				Serer	Fula
1	Topic	Comment			✓	✓
2	Topic	Focus-Background			✓	✓
3	Framesetter	Topic	Comment		✓	✓
4	Topic 1 _i	Topic 2 _i	Comment		✓	✓
5	Topic 1 _i	Topic 2	Comment _i		✓	✓
6	Topic 1	Framesetter	Topic 2	Comment		✓
7		Topic	Background-Focus			✓
8		Framesetter	Focus-Background			✓

Table 6. Summary of Construction types in Serer and Fula

3.1 Ex-Situ Term Focus

Serer uses a cleft construction for ex-situ term focus.

(8) Focus clause Background clause
 [X (FOC)] [(S) V (O)]

- Focussed terms (incl. question words) are in sentence-initial position, optionally followed by a focus marker
- Dependent/Deranked/Background verb form in the background clause (PFV1 and IPFV1) which allows for suffixation of the subject pronouns for 1S and 2S in case of non-subject focus

(9) Object focus: SVO→OSV

[Focus _____] [Background _____]

mbaal ndew ne Jeen o-qooxoox oxe a-jik-u
 5.sheep female 5.DEF 1.PN 1-farmer 1.DEF 1-buy-PFV1

‘C’est la brebis de Jeen que le paysan a achetée.’ [The farmer bought JEEN’S SHEEP.]

(Faye 1979: 59)

For subject focus, the subject focus marker³ is optional only in the perfective. In the imperfective it is obligatory.

	PFV1	IPFV1
Subject focus	∅ / o	o / naa
Non-subject focus	∅	∅

Table 7. Distribution of subject focus markers in Serer

The verb never agrees with the subject which is clause-external.

In the perfective, the subject focus marker is either zero or o.

(10) [Focus] [Background _____]

Jeen ñaam-u saac ke
 1.PN eat-PFV1 4.couscous 4.DEF

‘C’est Jeen qui a mangé le couscous.’ [JEEN ate couscous.]

(Faye 1979: 59)

³ The subject focus marker o is also used as equational copula and an identificational marker, similar to ko in Pular. The subject focus marker naa is not polyfunctional (Sarr, p.c.).

- (11) [Focus] [Background]
in **o** mbode-**u** *entente* Sine Meridional (...)
 1P.EMPH SBJ.FOC found-PFV1 6.entente ?.PN ?.PN
 ‘C’est nous qui avons fondé l’entente sine méridionale (pour faire vivre les traditions de notre village).’ [WE founded the Sine Meridional entente (in order to promote the traditions of our village)] (Renaudier 2012: 75)

In the imperfective, the subject focus marker is either *naa* or *o*.

- (12) [Focus] [Background]
o-koor naa komande-**aa**
 1-man SBJ.FOC command-IPFV1
 ‘C’est l’homme qui commande.’ [It is the MAN (who) commands.] (Renaudier 2012: 70)

- (13) [Focus] [Background]
den **o** fad-**an**
 2.EMPH SBJ.FOC beat-IPFV1:1.PRO
 ‘It is THEM (who) beats him.’ (Sarr p.c.)

Serer	Fula
[Focus] [Background]	
Focus clause: N SUBJ.FOC	Focus clause: T.FOC N
∅; <i>o, naa</i> (only subjects)	∅, <i>ko, dūn/dūm, yo, wo, âum</i> (all terms)
Background clause: dependent verb forms	Background clause: dependent verb forms
PFV1, IPFV1	PFV2, IPFV4

Table 8. The ex-situ term focus construction in Serer and Fula

In Serer, *o* is a class prefix of three agreement classes. In Fula, *ko* and *dūn/dūm* are agreement class pronouns.

⇒ The ex-situ term focus structure is quite similar, the only difference being the position of the term/subject focus marker

Further research:

Is subject focus also used forthetic utterances and object focus also for VP focus?

3.2 State-of-Affairs Focus

In Serer, the sentence-initial state-of-affairs focus marker *kaa* is combined with the PFV2 and IPFV1.

- (14) **kaa** i-ñaaam-∅ maalo
 SOA.FOC 1P-eat-PFV2 6.rice
 ‘Nous avons mangé du riz.’ [We ATE rice.] (Renaudier 2012: 77)

- (15) **kaa** i-ñaaam-aa maalo
 SOA.FOC 1P-eat-IPFV2 6.rice
 ‘Nous mangeons du riz.’ [We EAT rice.] (Renaudier 2012: 77)

According to Sarr (p.c.), *kaa* only has one function, namely SoA marker.

In Fula, the verb paradigm PFV1 in the perfective and a periphrastic construction in the imperfective (only described for Pular in Guinea) are used for SoA focus.

- (16) (...) o nodd-**u** = mo.
 1.PRO call-PFV1 = 1.PRO
 ‘{The woman said that she saw Osman.} (She did not see him) she CALLED him.’
 (Apel, f.n.)

- (17) be sood-**ay** won-**i**.
 2.PRO buy-IPFV3 be-PFV2
 ‘{Will the boys buy or sell bananas?} They will buy/They buy.’ (Apel, f.n.)

	Serer	Fula
Perfective	<i>kaa</i> + PFV2	PFV1
Imperfective	<i>kaa</i> + IPFV2	IPFV3 + <i>woni</i>

Table 9. SoA focus in Serer and Fula

Further research:

Is the SoA focus structure in Serer also used inthetic utterances or for VP focus?

3.3 Section Summary

Ex-situ term focus is expressed similarly in both languages, SoA focus not.

	Serer	Fula
Term focus	Cleft with dependent verb forms	
SoA focus	<i>kaa</i> + PFV2/IPFV1	PFV1; IPFV3 + <i>woni</i>

Table 10. Term and SoA focus in Serer and Fula

4 A New View on the Verb Systems of Serer and Fula

Serer

Perfective 1 and 2 are dependent verb paradigms.

- PFV1: background clause in the ex-situ term focus construction (syntactic dependence)
- PFV2: relative clauses, SoA focus (syntactic dependence) and narratives (pragmatic dependence)⁴

Perfective 3 is an independent paradigm used for expressing the completeness of an action (French *passé composé*), e.g. I have eaten. It is also used in the locative construction.

	PFV1	PFV2	PFV3
	dependent		independent
Unmarked	-u	-∅	-a
Preterite	-ʔ-u	-ʔ-u	-ʔ-a

Table 11. The perfective paradigms in Serer

In the imperfective, syntactic dependency is expressed by only form, namely Imperfective 1.

- IPFV1: background clause in the ex-situ term focus construction, SoA focus (syntactic dependence), narrative? (French *présent*, *imparfait*)

Imperfective 2, in contrast, seems to be an independent paradigm.

- IPFV2: French *présent* and *imparfait*; locative construction

	IPFV1	IPFV2
	dependent?	independent?
Unmarked	-aa	-aa
Preterite	-og-u	-og-a

Table 12. The imperfective paradigms in Serer

⁴ That one and the same verb form (here: Perfective 2) is used for both focus and narration is also attested for other West African Niger-Congo and Chadic (< Afro-Asiatic) languages (Beard 1993, Frajzyngier 2004).

Question:

How deep should I go into the pronouns that are used in the different constructions/ contexts?

Fula

In Fula, the picture is less clear. Perfective 1 and 3 are independent paradigms, Perfective 2 is dependent.

- PFV1: SoA focus
- PFV2: relative clauses, background clause in the ex-situ term focus construction (syntactic dependency), narrative (pragmatic dependency), locative construction (stative)
- PFV3: completeness of an action

	Voice	PFV1	PFV2	PFV3
		independent	dependent	independent
Unmarked	Active	-u/-∅	-i [-u/-∅]	-ii
	Middle	-i	-ii [-i]	-ike
	Passive	-a	-aa [-a]	-aama
Preterite	Active		-u-no/-∅-no	-ii-no
	Middle		-i-no	-i-noo-ke
	Passive		-a-no	-aa-noo-ma

Table 13. The perfective paradigms in Fula

Assumption that PFV1 developed out of PFV2: the predicate in a narrative (Perfective 2) encodes the pragmatic focal information (=comment) in a canonical narrative sentence. This unmarked VP-focus is then interpreted as marked VP-focus and eventually to SoA focus.

(18) dependent				independent
narrative	/	narrative	⇒ VP focus	⇒ SoA focus
mi yi'-i		mi yi'-u = mo	mi yi'-u = mo	mi yi'-u
1S see-PFV2		1S see-PFV2 = 3S	1S see-PFV1 = 3S	1S see-PFV1
'I saw'		'I saw him'	'I SAW HIM'	'I SAW'
[Topic] [Comment]		[Topic] [Comment]	[BG] [Focus]	[BG] [Focus]

In the imperfective, the Imperfective 2 and 4 are dependent paradigms.

- IPFV2: subjunctive (syntactic dependency), sequential (syntactic/pragmatic dependency), locative construction (habitual)
- IPFV4: relative clauses, background clause in the ex-situ term focus construction (syntactic dependency)

Imperfective 3 is related morphologically to the dependent Imperfective 4, but it is an independent paradigm.

- IPFV3: mainly expresses a future

Imperfective 1 is used for imperative and optative. Morphologically, it is related to the dependent Imperfective 2.

Questions:

Should I adopt a new numbering for Fula? If yes, should Imperfective 1 (imperative/optative) be part of it? Or is it not really an imperfective?

As I do not have diachronic data, how far should I treat a historical analysis of Serer and Fula in my dissertation?

	Voice	IPFV1	IPFV2	IPFV3	IPFV4
		?	dependent	independent	dependent
Unmarked	Active	-u/-∅ [-e]	-a [-∅/-e]	-ay	-(a)ta [-at/-et/-ot/-ay]
	Middle	-o	-oo [-o]	-oto	-otoo [-oto]
	Passive	-e	-ee [-e]	-ete	-etee [-ete]
Preterite	Active			-ay-no	-ay-noo
	Middle			-oto-no	-oto-noo
	Passive			-ete-no	-ete-noo

Table 14. The imperfective paradigms

5 Summary

- Topics are sentence-initial in Serer and Fula
- Both languages use a cleft construction for ex-situ term focus with only slight differences
- SoA focus is expressed by different means: in Serer with a SoA focus marker plus the dependent verb form, in Fula by a verb paradigm on its own (perfective), and a periphrastic construction (imperfective)
- Both languages have dependent and independent paradigms: this differentiation is clearer in Serer than in Fula

6 Abbreviations

DEF	definite article	PFV	perfective	S	singular
EMPH	emphatic pronoun	PN	proper name	SBJ	subject
FOC	focus	POSS	possessive pronoun	SOA	state-of-affairs
IPFV	imperfective	PRO	pronoun	TOP	topic marker
P	plural	PROX	proximate		

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