

# Topic in Fulfulde

Viktoria Apel

Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

## 0 PhD Thesis ‘Information structure in Fulfulde’: Contents

- 1 Introduction
- 2 On the theory of INFORMATION STRUCTURE
- 3 The verbal system of Fulfulde
- 4 Thetic and categorical statements in Fulfulde
- 5 **The expression of TOPIC in Fulfulde**
  - 5.1 **Zero anaphora**
  - 5.2 **Unstressed pronouns**
  - 5.3 **Emphatic pronouns**
  - 5.4 **Definite nouns**
  - 5.5 **Left-Dislocation**
  - 5.6 **Summary**
- 6 FOCUS in Fulfulde
- 7 The IS-encoding in different dialects in the closely related languages
- 8 Summary

## 1 Basic information on Fulfulde

- **Classification:** Niger-Congo > Atlantic-Congo > Atlantic > Northern > Senegambian > Fulani-Wolof > Fula > West Central (Lewis 2009)
- **ISO 693-3:** fuf
- Fulfulde is spoken in **18 countries** from Western to Central Africa by around **18 million people** (Gajdos 2004: 9-11).
- There are around **3 million speakers** of the Fuuta Jaloo dialect in Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Senegal, Gambia, Mali, Sierra Leone (Lewis 2009)



Map 1: The Fulfulde dialect of Fuuta Jaloo (Guinea)<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Harrison, Annette (2003): *Fulfulde language family report*, SIL Electronic Survey Reports 2003-009, <http://www.sil.org/silestr/2003/silestr2003-009.htm>.

## 1.1 Basic phonology

- No tones
- The length of vowels and consonants is distinctive (e.g. *amugol* 'to dance', *aamugol* 'to be lazy')
- Consonant mutation (the first consonant of nouns may change in singular and plural, e.g. *fello* 'hill' → *pelle* 'hills')

## 1.2 Basic morphosyntax

- SVO
- Head-initial
- **24 agreement classes:** agreement between the noun and definite articles, demonstratives, adjectives, numerals and pronouns
- **Verbal morphology:**

(1) **stem**–(derivational suffix<sub>n</sub>)–**TAM**–(subject pronoun)–(IO pronoun)–(DO pronoun)

### ➤ Verb paradigms:

- **Three perfective** paradigms vs. **five imperfective** paradigms<sup>2</sup>
- In each paradigm the verbs are classified in three voices: **active, middle, passive**
- As in many Atlantic languages, the TAM-markers merge tense, aspect, voice and focus (cf. Robert 2010)

## 2 Theoretical introduction: TOPIC

### DEFINITION OF DISCOURSE TOPIC:

A discourse topic is **what a part of a discourse is about**. Discourse topics are topics of larger units and they can be more abstract. (cf. van Dijk 1977)

### DEFINITION OF SENTENCE TOPIC:

A sentence topic is **what is predicated about an entity in a sentence**: The speaker announces a topic and then says something about it (topic-comment-structure) (cf. van Dijk 1977)

- (2) a. [Aristoteles Onassis]<sub>Top</sub> [married Jackie Kennedy.]<sub>Comment</sub> [Krifka 2007: 41]  
b. [Jackie Kennedy]<sub>Top</sub> [married Aristoteles Onassis.]<sub>Comment</sub> [Krifka 2007: 41]

---

<sup>2</sup> The asymmetry of 3 vs. 5 paradigms is due to the fact that in the traditional Fulfulde literature, moods as imperative and subjunctive are part of the imperfective paradigm.

It is important to point out that **comment** ≠ **focus**:

(3) *(When did Aristoteles Onassis marry Jackie Kennedy?)*

[He]<sub>Top</sub> [married her [in 1968.]<sub>Foc</sub>]<sub>Comment</sub>

[Krifka 2007: 42]

The sentence topic often - but not always - correlates with the grammatical subject of the sentence (they have different properties and functions). Topics can also be expressed by another syntactic construction, a special topic marker or the sentence initial position.

Krifka (2007) distinguishes under the notion topicality **frame setters** from **aboutness topics**:

(4) *(How is John?)*

[As for his health,]<sub>Frame</sub> [he]<sub>AboutTop</sub> [is fine.]<sub>Comment</sub>

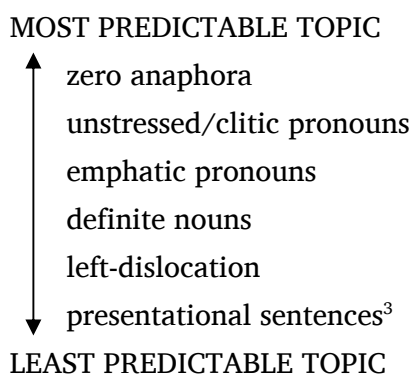
[cf. Krifka 2007: 46]

#### PROPERTIES OF TOPICS:

- Prince (1981) defines **givenness** by **predictability**, **saliency** and **shared knowledge**, whereas one should distinguish between the speaker's and the hearer's perspective
- Reinhart (1982) concentrates on **NPs** and claims the existence of the reference of a topical NP if this NP is predictable, salient/immediate aware or shared knowledge; Further, she proposes **tests for the topichood** of referents
- Givón (1987) examines the **background** status of topics and points out the problems with the binary functional distinction of foreground and background; Also, he gives examples where background is not the same as **presupposed material** or **old information**
- Gundel (1988) posits a correlation between **topic and givenness/familiarity** and **topic and definiteness/identifiability**
- Nikolaeva (2001) concentrates on the **activation status** following Chafe (1987, 1994); Additionally, referents are topical if they truly **exist** and are thus **referential**

In the following section, I will look at how topics which show different degrees of predictability (and other properties) will be encoded on the sentence level in Fulfulde adapting the scale given by Givón (1987):

(5) **THE PREDICTABILITY SCALE:**



(adapted from Givón 1987: 177)

I will concentrate here on nominal topics, not on verbal ones (e.g. ‘*As for swimming, ...*’).

### 3 Topic in Fulfulde

#### 3.1 Zero anaphora

Zero anaphora is used when several verbs refer to the same subject (in the same or a sequence of sentences):

- (6) **Pay-kun** **kun** yah-i ∅ **ndaar-i** ∅ **taw-i** baaba-jo on  
child-21 DEF.21 go-A.PFV2 look-A.PFV2 find-A.PFV2 father-1 DEF.1  
no jangude livre on.  
AUX read-A.IPFV1 book.1 DEF.1  
‘**The child** goes ∅ **looks** ∅ **finds** the father reading the book.’ [OKD-01.01]

- (7) **Baaba-jo** on yeh-i. ∅ **Taw-i** bidd-o on no  
father-1 DEF.1 go-A.PFV2 find-A.PFV2 child-1 DEF.1 AUX  
waal-ii no jang-ude livre on.  
lie.down-M.PFV2 AUX read-A.IPFV1 book.1 DEF.1  
‘**The father** goes. ∅ **finds** the child laying down reading the book.’ [OKD-01.01]

- It is the **least marked strategy** without any linguistic material
- The topic is **most predictable**
- IS-status: **given**

---

<sup>3</sup> Although the fact that presentational sentences arethetic I included them here; Presentational sentences introduce new participants into the discourse and thus these participants are absolutely not predictable, that’s why they appear on the scale.

### 3.2 Unstressed/Clitic pronouns

Unstressed pronouns are used when a topic has already been introduced previously:

(8) Previous sentence: ‘A turtle came and found them dead.’

<b>Ngal</b>	wurn-it-i	kot-oo	makko	taho.
11	let.live-REP-A.PFV2	older.brother-1	3S.POSS	first

‘It (*the turtle*) revived first his older brother.’ [Salvaing 1985: 68]

- It is a **less marked strategy** with few linguistic material (mono-syllabic)
- The topic is **much predictable**, because the pronoun refers to a referent activated immediately before
- Function: **anaphoric reference**
- IS-status: **given**

#### NOTE:

These unstressed pronouns can cliticise to the verb in background clauses (e.g. interrogatives, term focus constructions, relative clauses or temporal clauses):

(9) **A:** Ko honde tuma yah-ot-**on** Labe?  
 TF when go-A.IPFV4-2P Labe  
 ‘WHEN will **you** go to Labe?’

**B:** Ko asewe men yah-ata Labe.  
 TF Saturday 1P.EXCL go-A.IPFV4 Labe  
 ‘We will go to Labe on SATURDAY.’

### 3.3 Emphatic pronouns

The emphatic pronouns are used to mark contrast; They must be resumed by an unmarked pronoun following them:

(10) (*A turtle wants to revive two children. The older child warns him not to revive his younger brother, if not that one will kill it.*)

Keku-wal	ngal	inn-i:	“E	kono	<b>an</b>	a	moyy-aa!
turtle-11	DEF.11	say-A.PFV2	INTJ	but	2S.E	2S	be.good-A.PFV.NEG

A	yi'-i	fii	tagaa-do!	<b>An</b>	a	wuur-i,	oya	kan,
2S	see-A.PFV2	for	human.being-1	2S.E	2S	live-A.PFV2	other	as.to

wota	∅	wuur-u!”
NEG		live-A.PFV3

‘The turtle said: “Eh as for **you**, you are not good! This is how you see people! As for **you**, you live, as to the other, (he) should not live!’ [Salvaing 1985: 70]

- It is a **less marked strategy** with few linguistic material (mono- or bisyllabic)
- The topic is **predictable** because the emphatic pronouns have a **referent in the discourse**
- Function: **contrast**
- IS-status: **given**

### 3.4 *Definite nouns*

Definite nouns have to be given in the discourse. They mark topic shift or contrast:

(11) Neene-jo on land-ii honto biid-o on. Baaba-jo on yeh-i.  
 mother-1 DEF.1 ask-M.PFV2 where child-1 DEF.1 father-1 DEF.1 go-A.PFV2  
 ‘The mother asks where the child is. The father goes.’ [OKD-01.01]

(12) Pay-kun kun hewt-i baabajo on hewt-aali.  
 child-21 DEF.21 arrive-A.PFV2 father-1 DEF.1 arrive-A.PFV.NEG  
 ‘The child arrives, the father doesn’t arrive.’ [OKD-01.01]

- It is a **less marked strategy** with full NPs
- Function: **contrast/topic change**
- IS-status: **given**

### 3.5 *Left-dislocation*

There are two types of syntactic marking: Left-dislocation and topicalization:

**LEFT-DISLOCATION:**

(13) [This movie]<sub>i</sub>, I saw it<sub>i</sub> when I was a kid. [Lambrecht 2001: 1052]

**TOPICALIZATION:**

(14) [This movie]<sub>i</sub>, I saw \_\_ when I was a kid. [Lambrecht 2001: 1052]

In the Fulfulde of Fuuta Jaloo, I only find examples for left-dislocation, where a trace that resumes the dislocated (partial) subject or object must be left in the main clause:

(15) O inn-i: “Min, haaju am alaa e dum.”  
 3S say-A.PFV2 1S.E affair.1 1S.POSS nothing and 24  
 ‘He said: “As for me, this is not my affair.”’ [Salvaing 1985: 70]

(16) **Keku-wal ngal inn-i:** “E kono **an a** moyy’-aa!  
 turtle-11 DEF.11 say-A.PFV2 INTJ but 2S.E 2S be.good-A.PFV.NEG  
 ‘The turtle said: “Eh as for you, you are not good!’ [Salvaing 1985: 70]

(17) **On jiw-o,** alaa suka mo yam-aali **mo (...)**  
 DEM.1 girl-1 none young.person.1 REL.1 ask.for.marriage-A.PFV.NEG 3S  
 ‘This girl, none of the young guys who wanted to marry her, (...)’  
 [Salvaing 1985: 92]

Caron & Mohamadou (1999) and Diallo (2000) point out that the pronoun has the same grammatical relation as the dislocated topic and that there is a change in the accentuation:

(18) **Karamoko-jó on, o** alaa doo.  
 teacher-1 DEF.1 3S NEG here  
 ‘The teacher, he is not here.’ [Diallo 2000: 69]

In contrast to the ‘normal’ accentuation (ex. 18), the word final syllable receives the main stress as left-dislocated topic (Diallo 2000: 67-71).

(19) **káramokoo-jo on**  
 teacher-1 DEF.1  
 ‘the teacher’ [Diallo 2000: 63]

**A SIDE NOTE TO THE SENEGALESE DIALECT:**

In the Senegalese dialect, left-dislocated objects can also have a neuter pronoun as a trace (Sylla 1993: 134):

(20) **Rawaa-ndu ndu,** Aali jagg-ii **ndu/ɗum.**  
 dog-7 DEF.7 Aali catch-A.PFV1 7/24  
 ‘The dog, Aali caught him/it.’ [Senegal; Sylla 1993: 134]

Several topical objects plus a subject can be left-dislocated in one sentence:

(21) **Sukka-be be<sub>i</sub>, njaw-di ndi<sub>j</sub>, maw-ɗo o<sub>k</sub>, be<sub>i</sub>**  
 young.person-2 DEF.2 sheep-6 DEF.6 old.person-1 DEF.1 3P  
 mbar-an-ii-**mo<sub>k</sub>-ndi<sub>j</sub>.**  
 sacrifice-BEN-A.PFV1-3S-6  
 ‘The children<sub>i</sub>, the sheep<sub>j</sub>, the old man<sub>k</sub>, they<sub>i</sub> sacrificed it<sub>k</sub> for him<sub>j</sub>.’  
 [Senegal; Sylla 1993: 137]

- It is a **marked strategy**
- Function: **contrastive**
- IS-status: **given**

### 3.6 *Presentational sentences*

There exist different strategies for presentational sentences which introduce the new participants into the discourse or into a paragraph:

a) use of indefinite nouns:

(22) **Maw-do** no jood-ii ka julle-re.  
 old.man-1 AUX sit-M.PFV2 PREP chair-5  
 ‘**An old man** sits on a chair.’ [OKD-03.01]

b) use of indefinite nouns + the presentational marker *ko (fi)*:

(23) **Ko debb-o e gork-o** no ka taab-al, [...].  
 PRES woman-1 and man-1 AUX PREP table-11  
 ‘**There are a woman and a man** (sitting) at the table, [...].’ [OKD-01.01]

(24) **Ko fii pay-kun** kanasee-hun!  
 PRES for child-21 terrible-21  
 ‘**This is about a terrible child!**’ [Salvaing 1985: 66]

- *Ko (fi)* **marked strategy** with many linguistic material
- The topic is **not predictable**
- Function: **introducing new referents into the discourse**
- IS-status: **new**

### 3.7 *Text sample: “A terrible child”*

The story begins with a presentational sentence introducing the indefinite ‘a child’ with the presentational marker *ko fi*:

(25) **Ko fii pay-kun** kanasee-hun!  
 PRES about child-21 terrible-21.  
 ‘**This is about a terrible child.**’ [Salvaing 1985: 66]



In the next sentence, the definite topic ‘*the child*’ is taken up:

- (26) **Kun** pay-kun nyan-nde go’o (...)  
 DEM.21 child-21 day-5 one  
 ‘**This child**, one day (...)’ [Salvaing 1985: 66]

In the following, the topic ‘*the (younger) child*’ is referred to by anaphoric reference:

- (27) **O** acc-i haa kot-oo **makko** daan-ii  
 3S let-A.PFV2 until older.brother-1 3S.POSS sleep-M.PFV2  
 o yah-i o war-oy-i futuu-be ben fow.  
 3S go-A.PFV2 3S kill-DIST-A.PFV2 relatives-2 DEF.2 all  
 ‘**He** let it until **his** older brother slept, **he** went out and **he** killed all the relatives.’  
 [Salvaing 1985: 66]

A new referent in the story is introduced as an indefinite NP; The second verb lacks a pronoun:

- (28) **Keku-wal** ar-i, ∅ taw-i be ka be maay-i.  
 turtle-11 come-A.PFV1 find-A.PFV2 3P when 3P die-A.PFV2  
 ‘**A turtle** came ∅ found them dead.’ [Salvaing 1985: 68]

The new topic is further referred to by an anaphoric pronoun:

- (29) **Ngal** wurn-it-i kot-oo makko taho.  
 11 let.live-REP-A.PFV2 older.brother-1 3S.POSS first  
 ‘**It** revived first his older brother.’ [Salvaing 1985: 68]

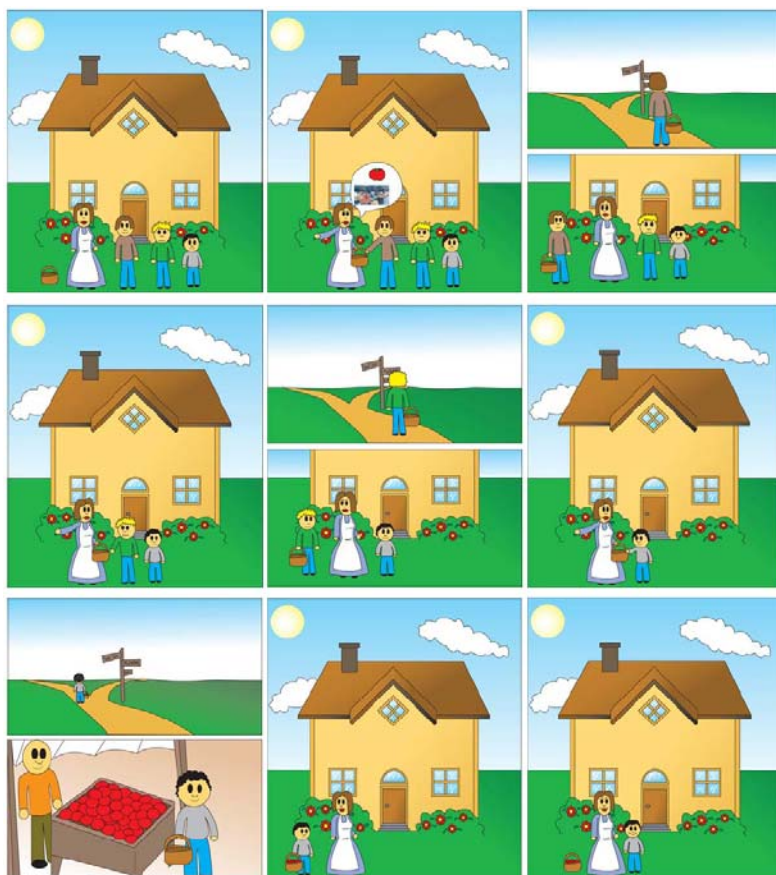
When the topic changes, a definite noun is used to refer to the aforementioned topic to indicate contrast; The emphatic pronouns are used to mark contrast and are taken up by unstressed pronouns; The zero anaphora in the last sentence is used because it’s referent is mentioned just before:

- (30) **Keku-wal ngal** inn-i: “E kono **an** **a** moyy-aa!  
 turtle-11 DEF.11 say-A.PFV2 INTJ but 2S.E 2S be.good-A.PFV.NEG  
 A yi’-i fii tagaa-∅! **An** **a** wuur-i, oya kan,  
 2S see-A.PFV2 for human.being-1 2S.E 2S live-A.PFV2 other as.to  
 wota ∅ wuur-u!”  
 NEG live-A.PFV3

‘The turtle said: “Eh as for you, you are not good! This is how you see people! As for you, you live, as to the other, ∅ should not live!” [Salvaing 1985: 70]

## 4 Further research

During the field work, topic can be elicited by using some experiment of QUIS, e.g. the tomato story which should be described:



Once upon a time, a mother had three children. One market day, she sent her eldest child to the market to buy tomatoes, because she wanted to cook tomato soup. The child took a basket and set off to the market. But it couldn't find the right road and came back without the tomatoes. Then the mother sent the second child. This child, too, set off, lost its way and came back without tomatoes. So the mother sent her youngest child to the market. This child found the right way. It arrived at the market stall, bought tomatoes and came back to its mother. They were very happy and the mother cooked the tomato soup.

## 5 Abbreviations

A	active voice	EXCL	exclusive
AboutTop	aboutness topic	Foc	focus
AUX	auxiliary	i	index
BEN	benefactive	INTJ	interjection
DEF	definite	IO	indirect object
DEM	demonstrative	IPFV	imperfective
DIST	distantial suffix	M	middle voice
DO	direct object	n	number of elements
E	emphatic pronoun	NEG	negation

P	plural	REP	repetitive
P	passive (followed by a PFV or IPFV)	REL	relative pronoun
PFV	perfective	S	singular
POSS	possessive pronoun	TAM	tense/aspect/mood
PREP	preposition	TF	term focus marker
PRES	presentational marker	Top	topic

## 6 References

- Caron, Bernard & Aliou Mohamadou. 1999. La spécification du terme topique en haoussa et en peul: Vers une caractérisation contrastive de la thématisation et de la focalisation. In Claude Guimier (ed.), *La thématisation dans les langues*, 65-79. Bern [et al.]: Lang.
- Diallo, Abdourahmane. 2000. *Grammaire descriptive du pular du Fuuta Jaloo (Guinée)*. Frankfurt Main: Lang.
- Gajdos, Martina. 2004. *Fulfulde: Lehrbuch einer westafrikanischen Sprache*. Wien: Edition Praesens.
- Givón, Talmy. 1987. Beyond foreground and background. In Russel S. Tomlin, *Coherence and grounding in discourse*, 175-188. Amsterdam [et al.]: Benjamins.
- Gundel, Jeanette K. 1988. Universals of topic-comment structure. In Michael Hammond, Edith A. Moravcsik and Jessica R. Wirth (eds.), *Studies in syntactic typology*, 209-239. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Krifka, Manfred. 2007. Basic Notions of Information Structure. In C. Féry, G. Fanselow and M. Krifka, *Interdisciplinary Studies on Information Structure* 6. 13-55.
- Lambrecht, Knud. 2001. Dislocation. In Martin Haspelmath et al. (eds.), *Language Typology and Language Universals: An International Handbook*, 1050–1078. Berlin [et al.]: Walter de Gruyter.
- Lewis, M. Paul (ed.). 2009. *Ethnologue: Languages of the world*, 16<sup>th</sup> edition. Dallas, Texas: SIL International. <http://www.ethnologue.com/>. (June 3, 2012.)
- Nikolaeva, Irina. 2001. Secondary topic as a relation in information structure. *Linguistics* 39(1). 1-49.
- Prince, Ellen F. 1981. Toward a taxonomy of given-new information. In P. Cole (ed.), *Radical pragmatics*, 223-256. New York: Academic Press.
- Reinhart, Tanya. 1982. *Pragmatics and linguistics: An analysis of sentence topics*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Linguistics Club (IULC).
- Robert, Stéphane. 2010. Focus in Atlantic languages. In Ines Fiedler and Anne Schwarz (eds.), *The Expression of Information Structure*, 233-260. Amsterdam: Benjamins.

- Salvaing, Bernard. 1985. *Contes et récits peuls du Fouta Djallon*. Paris: Conseil international de la langue française.
- Sylla, Yèro. 1993. *Syntaxe peule: contribution à la recherche sur les universaux du langage*. Dakar: Les Nouvelles Éditions Africaines du Sénégal.
- van Dijk, Teun A. 1977. Sentence topic and discourse topic. *Papers in Slavic Philology* 1. 49-61.