

Alagwa functional sentence perspective and “incorporation”

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Abstract

The outstanding syntactic feature of Alagwa and the other Southern Cushitic languages is that they have a distributed predicative syntax which provides three alternative positions for non-subject constituents: preverbal, postverbal or intraverbal. This paper examines the factors that govern this kind of word order variation in Alagwa, especially the semanto-pragmatic profile of the intraverbal position or “incorporation”. Incorporation within the verbal complex reduces the number of verbal complements by one to form a more compact type of utterance, depriving the incorporated constituent of its syntactic accessibility and its pragmatic prominence. Although there is a preference for generics, indefinites and inanimates to occur in incorporation, specific and definite NPs and deictics are also affected, and incorporation is even used for the function of complementary focus (Dik 1989). With respect to Sasse’s Eastern Cushitic based model (1984) of a progressive dissociation of semantic and pragmatic functions in syntactic structures, leading to a differentiation of language types between the extremes of a largely semantically based syntax and one where pragmatics takes the precedence, Alagwa (as representative of Southern Cushitic) takes a position further to the pole of a pragmatic orientation, since major syntactic devices, especially “noun incorporation”, are determined to a large extent by purely pragmatic factors.

1. Introduction

The outstanding syntactic feature of Alagwa and the other Southern Cushitic languages is that they have a distributed predicative syntax, i.e. “verbal functions are divided over the verb and an obligatory sentence building word that has been variously termed indicator particle, selector ...” (Mous 2001: 125), preverbal clitic cluster, or most general, predicative marker (PM). The Alagwa clause in (1) presents the PM *ningi* which displays subject agreement for person (not number) and a TAM marking element which indicates sequential action, directly followed by the finite verb, *bu’iyee’*, which is marked for person and number of the subject (agreement), between the clause-initial subject, *dende’ewós*, and the clause-final direct object, *yaawáa*.

- (1) Alagwa clause structure S PM V O (postverbal position of direct object)¹

dende'ee-w-ós	ningi	bu'-i-yee'	yaawáa ²
folks-N-3SG.POSS	SEQ:S3	pay-3-PF.PL	dowry
S	PM	V	O

'His folks paid the dowry.'

Both words, the inflected verb on the one hand and the predicative marker on the other, make up the verbal complex as a syntactic unit. This kind of split basic verbal structure provides three possible syntactic positions for non-subject constituents such as the direct object: before the verbal complex (preverbal), after it (postverbal) or inside (intraverbal):

- (2) Syntactic options for the direct object
 S O [PM V] (preverbal position)
 S [PM V] O (postverbal position)
 S [PM O V] (intraverbal position or incorporation)

All three possibilities are realised in Alagwa. The object is in postverbal position in (1), in (3) it comes before the verbal complex, and in (4) it is inside.

- (3) Alagwa clause structure S O PM V (preverbal position of direct object)

dende'ee-w-ós	yaawáa	ningi	bu'-i-yee'
folks-N-3SG.POSS	dowry	SEQ:O3PL	pay-3-PF.PL
S	O	PM	V

'His folks paid the dowry.'

- (4) Alagwa clause structure S PM O V (intraverbal position of direct object)³

dende'ee-w-ós	ningi	<u>yaawáa</u>	bu'-i-yee'
folks-N-3SG.POSS	SEQ:S3	dowry	pay-3-PF.PL
S	PM	O	V

'His folks paid the dowry.'

Agreement in the PM is governed by the principle of leftward adjacency, i.e. in (1) and (4) the PM agrees with the subject which is immediately preceding, whereas in (3) it agrees with the object immediately to its left.⁴ This il-

¹ Abbreviations: ABL ablative, ADV adverb, ALL allative, AN anaphorical base, BEN benefactive, BGND background marker, CAUS causative, CON construct case, COP copula, D determiner, DEP dependent marker, EMPH emphatic, F feminine marker, FOC focus, INDEF indefinite, IPF imperfective, LOC locative marker / locative adjunct, M masculine marker, MED Mediopassiv, O object, N neuter marker, OB oblique, OPT optative, PCP participle, PERF perfect, PF perfective, PL plural, PM predicative marker, PN predicational noun, POSS possessive, PROH prohibitive, PST past, REC reciprocal, REL relative, S subject, SEQ sequential, SG singular, SID subject-indefinite, SJN subjunctive, V verb, VEN ventive, VN verbal noun. The Iraqw glossing in (28-30) has slightly been adapted for the sake of compatibility with the conventions of the Alagwa glossing.

² The transcription uses the following conventions: ' [ʔ], / [ʕ], hh [h], sl [ʃ], tl [tʃ], ts [tsʰ].

³ Underlining indicates the incorporated constituent(s).

⁴ The effect could not be seen here, since the marker for third person subject *i* and

illustrates the different syntactic status of the incorporated direct object vis-à-vis the preverbal direct object: it is inaccessible for agreement in the PM.

The rest of this paper explores the semantics and pragmatics of this kind of syntactic variation, especially with respect to the last option which might be called “incorporation”.

2. General organisation of information in the clause

Basically, the linear organisation of information in an Alagwa clause obeys iconicity principles in that new information is presented in postverbal position, whereas given information precedes in preverbal position:

- (5) Alagwa: correlation of syntactic position and information value
 Final (postverbal) position = NEW information
 Initial (preverbal) position = GIVEN information

How this linearisation of information works in narratives is shown by Mous (2001: 129): “In a story new entities are usually introduced in the post-verbal position as is the case in the first sentence of (11) [cited here as (6), R.K.]; in the next sentence in (11) [i.e. (6), R.K.] this previously introduced entity, troughs, now appears sentence-initially and with a referential demonstrative, while the new entity, milk, appears in the post-verbal position; in the next sentence this information i[s] repeated and the sentence is marked as being background information. Such sequences and repetitions for cohesion are typical of narrative style.”

- (6) i-n háts-is mlambebee; mlambabee-wá-d i-yaa hats-ir
 S3-PF full-CAUS:3M troughs troughs-N-D S3-PST full-3PL
 ilibaa. ilibaa k-i hats-ir-íí ...
 milk milk DEP-S3 full-3PL-BGND
 ‘He filled troughs. Milk filled those troughs. The troughs being filled with milk ...’

In such a string of sentences, there is a progressive development of new information introduced in postverbal position becoming given information and taken up in preverbal position again. The change of information status does not necessarily coincide with a switch in syntactic role as in (6), where the new constituent comes in first as an object and is taken up again as subject of the next sentence. Once introduced in object position, it may also be taken up again still as an object. In this case, an alternation in syntactic position indicates its changed information status: the object representing new information comes in postverbal position; and if it is taken up again as given, it will be in preverbal position. This is the case in (3) which is taken from a narrative with a sentence like (1) preceding it, presented in (7) as (7d) and (7e) in the context.

- (7) Alagwa switch in syntactic position reflecting the changed information status of the direct object

third person plural object *i* are homophones.

- (a) makimoo-wookôo ning-áa xay kweera dahha
 guy-M:INDEF SEQ:S3-ABL come:3SGM bush coming.from
 S PM V LOC V
 ‘A guy came from the bush.’
- (b) daawa’i-r-ós diraawee
 relatives-F-3sg.POSS lions
 S PN
 ‘his relatives being lions.’
- (c) ning-aa xaboo kay [...]
 SEQ:S3-ABL marriage go.to:3SGM
 S VN V
 ‘He came to find a wife.’ [...]
- (d) makimoo-w-ód, ning-aa xay-ee’ ningi bu’-i-yee’ yaawáa
 guy-M-D SEQ:S3-ABL come:3-PF.PL SEQ:S3 pay-3-PF.PL dowry
 S PM V PM V O
 ‘As for that guy, they [i.e. the lions] came and paid the dowry.’
- (e) maa dende’ee-w-ós yaawáa ningi bu’-i-yee’
 so folks-N-3SG.POSS dowry SEQ:O3PL pay-3-PF.PL
 ADV S O PM V
 ‘His folks paid the dowry.’

In (7d), *yaawá* ‘dowry’ is introduced, therefore it comes in postverbal position, and in (7e) it is taken up again, therefore preverbal position.

3. Syntactic aspects of incorporation

Apart from the direct object, there are other syntactic constituents which might be incorporated between verb and PM, e.g. indirect objects (8) and adverbials such as locatives (9), temporals (11), modals (12) and subject continuity markers (13). Thus, the goal NP of speech act verbs is frequently placed between the PM and the verb, since the postverbal position is occupied by the new information which is a stretch of direct speech.

- (8) Addressee of speech act verbs in incorporation
 ... diraw-uw-ód ningi daaqay-w-ád maahas ...
 ... lion-M-D SEQ:S3 children-N-D ask
 ‘... and the lion asked the children ...’

Spatial adverbs, such as *diisi* ‘there to’ (referential), *diisáa* ‘from there’ (referential), *hadí* ‘over there’, *haqí* ‘there’, *taysí* ‘there to’ (distal), *taysáa* ‘from there’ (distal), and entire locative phrases such as *ka’afu-lí taatlimoo-lí* (10) are also found in incorporation:

- (9) Spatial adverb in incorporation
 ningi haq-í haa’ut-iyee’ maa l-ii diis-í
 SEQ:S3 there-ALL go.away-3:PF:PL then OPT-S3 there-ALL
 raa’amamin-aa’
 sing:3-IPF:PL
 ‘And they went there and would be singing there.’

- (10) Locative phrase in incorporation
 k-a dah-at-i l-aa ka'afu-lí taatlimoo-lí
 OB:REL-S1/2 arrive-2SG-PF OPT-S1/2 entrance-LOC upper.pole-LOC
 'ee'ibit
 settle:2SG
 ‘When you arrive at the entrance of the cattle fold, settle down on
 the upper pole above the entrance!’

Temporal adverbials such as *hiinkóo* ‘now’, *leesá* ‘at first’, *’asó* ‘right then’ also occur in incorporation:

- (11) Temporal adverbial in incorporation
 l-aa leesá tsaahh-at raa'amu-w-ós k-od
 OPT-S1/2 at.first understand-2SG song-M-3SG.POSS AN.M-D
 ‘You first have to understand his song.’

Frequently, modal adverbials based on the dummy noun *doo* ‘kind, manner’ are used for creating cohesion in a text. They also often occur in incorporation:

- (12) Modal adverbial in incorporation
 gurutu-w-ód ko dootí 'óoh-i ningi 'iliidahh
 he-goat-M-D OB.REL-O3SGM so grab-SJN.3SGM SEQ:S3 escape
 ‘Grabbing the he-goat, he made off.’

As regards reference tracking, a nominal based on the feminine anaphor *ta* modified by a possessive suffix that refers back to the subject is used for indicating topic continuity. This constituent occurs in incorporation only:

- (13) Topic continuity marker *ta* plus possessive suffix in incorporation
 ningi haa'ut 'ini níngí t-ós kon
 SEQ:S3 leave 3SG SEQ:S3 AN.F-3SG.POSS have:3SGM
 ‘He left and had – for his part – his share.’

The verb *kaw* ‘go to’ is on the brink of being grammaticalised to an inchoative marker ‘go to do something, be about to do’. Its verbal noun complement is always found in incorporation (14) and may also drag along with it an adverbial (15).

- (14) Inchoative *kaw* construction with incorporated verbal noun complement
 ningi qaasa káy 'ilibáa-w-as
 SEQ:S3 storing go.to:3SGM milk-N-3SG.POSS
 ‘And he went to store his milk.’
- (15) Inchoative *kaw* construction with incorporated verbal noun complement plus locative adverbial
 nungunu tsée/aa-w-ád-i slaslaymu kayee' sloomee
 SEQ:REC steppe-N-D-ALL meeting go.to:3:PF:PL all
 ‘And they all went to meet in the steppe.’

There is also a special discontinuous “secondary object” construction (Mous 2001: 130) which is characterised by a primary object in intraverbal position and the secondary object in preverbal position. Usually there is a semantic

tie between both objects, e.g. a part-of-a-whole-relationship as with the body-part found in (16).

- (16) Primary body part object in incorporation
 maa karaama-r-ód nanga hhaysoo 'óoh
 then castrated.bull-F-D SEQ:O3SGF tail grasp
 'He grabbed the castrated bull by its tail.'

There is also a closed word class of special adverbs that might be called “in-traverbials”, defined on the basis of their property that they occur in incorporation predominantly.⁵ Typically they give a modal or aspectual shading to the action or event, e.g. *kara* ‘again’, *qoro* ‘definitely’, *hara* ‘simultaneously’, *tsigaa* ‘quickly, early’.

- (17) “Intraverbials” (= adverbs that occur in incorporation predominantly)
 dakaa'imoo-w-ód i-yaa qoro nakats
 baobab-M-D S3-PST definitely be.slippery
 'The baobab was definitely slippery.'

In general, every type of syntactic constituent could be incorporated, except for the subject which is restricted to preverbal position. Incorporation does not involve a syntactic decategorization of the items affected, e.g. nouns in incorporation do not lose their “nouniness”, they still retain most of their inflectional options, except for two things: they become inaccessible for agreement in the PM and they could not be modified by relative clauses.

4. Semantic aspects of incorporation

Apart from the various syntactic roles of the incorporated constituents, there is also a great variety as regards their semantic properties. Direct objects tend to be generic, unspecific or indefinite when they are incorporated (18), but incorporation also affects definite nominals, such as possessives (19), personal pronouns (20) and even names (21).

- (18) Generic, inspecific and indefinite objects in incorporation

- (a) maarée 'aslaa 'ohis-it hara tays-í
 PROH fire light-2SG at there-ALL
 'Don't light a fire over there!'

- (b) ningi ma'áy firin
 SEQ:S3 water ask.for:3SGM
 'He asked for water.'

⁵ In closely related Burunge this is even clearer still, since the adverbs of this class, called “preverbs” there (Kießling 1994: 187), have to undergo a morphological operation, as soon as they are extracted from incorporation. This may serve as an indicator of the degree of functional entrenchment of this syntactic position.

- (19) Definite object modified by possessive in incorporation
 gaa sa-k-a hhayt-óg geemáw-t-i
 thing BEN-OB.REL-S1/2 husband-2SG.POSS let-2SG-PF
 lo-k-o /ag na diraw
 OPT-SID-O3SGM eat by lion
 ‘Why did you leave your husband to be eaten by a lion?’
- (20) Personal pronoun in incorporation
 hiinkóo makaa i-yaa 'ana /iis-it
 now animal S3-PST 1SG rescue-3SGF
 ‘Now this animal has actually rescued me!’
- (21) Personal name in incorporation
 ha'ut-aree' na Neetii tsuunkutim-an
 leave-VEN.PL SEQ-S1/2 Neti pinch-1PL
 ‘Come here and let's pinch Neti!’

From this it becomes clear that incorporation is not constrained by semantic properties such as indefiniteness or genericity, but determined by pragmatic considerations. It is a syntactic device for tying up information which is composed of at least two conceptual entities into a single compact bundle which is to be analysed without internal informational substructure any more. So the incorporated constituent loses syntactic and conceptual independence, merging with the verbal complex to form a monolithic conceptual block.

5. Riddles as a testing ground for information structure

Riddles could serve as a perfect testing-ground for this hypothesis. They have been characterised as verbal puzzles “in which a statement is posed in challenge and another statement is offered in response either to the hidden meaning or the form of the challenge” (Okpewho 1992: 239). Because of this strict limitation to only one statement, they are forced to condense an aesthetic message in a minimum of only one proposition. Typically they construct a situation as a complex whole with no given information to draw upon, everything is presented as new information. Many of the Alagwa riddles (22) which have complex initial propositions come up with a syntactic structure that employs incorporation of an adverbial and / or a direct object.

- (22) Incorporation in propositions of riddles
- (a) 'ufoodo'o-w-íí' i-yaa rawáa xu'
 door-M-1SG.POSS S3-ABL up face
 ‘My door faces upwards.’
- (b) 'Aali-w-óor i-ni sihheeri /isin
 Ali-M-1PL.POSS S3-PERF teeth make:3SGM
 ‘Our Ali has grown teeth.’

This observation supports the point that incorporation is in fact used as a strategy to build a pragmatic unit and to conceptualise something as a thematic block which would otherwise have to be presented resorting to a structure of figure vs. ground.

6. The puzzle of question words

Taking incorporation as a strategy of shifting syntactic constituents into the pragmatic background and depriving them of their conceptual independence, it may come as a surprise to find that question words like *mii* ‘what’, *malee* ‘how’ and *kaa[li]* ‘where’ occur in incorporation. This seems to be at odds with the fact that they are very salient information-wise and typically associated with inherent focus. So why should they be incorporated to form a bigger chunk of information (23) in which the question word itself is not singled out as specifically salient?

(23) Incorporation of question words

- (a) i-yaa malee tleehhit-ir
S3-PST how turn.into-3PL.PF
‘What did they turn into?’
- (b) mukolookoli-r-oo’in y-aa kaa dahh-at
clan-F-3PL.POSS S3-ABL where come.from-3SGF
‘Where does their clan come from?’
- (c) 'ini i-naa mii 'etaa kaw-t he-t?
3SG S3-PERF what give.bad.sign go.to-3SGF AN.D-F
‘So what kind of bad sign does this (bird) give?’

In a number of cases (24), these question words do not constitute real information questions, but rather form rhetoric questions that signal incredulity, perplexity, helplessness, surprise, indignation or reproach.

(24) Incorporation of question words in rhetoric questions

- (a) s-ii mii 'awaanah-at
BEN-O1SG what cheat-2SG
‘So why do you cheat me?’
- (b) garimoo-w-ód ningi slaqw fayuw-ós ko-d,
elder-M-D SEQ:S3 shoot arrow-M-3SG.POSS AN.M-D

'asó Laa'áy 'oo káalí slay?
but Laa'ay O3SGM where get:3SGM
‘The old man shot his arrow, but could he ever get Laa'ay?’
- (c) hiinkóo 'iyóo-r-oor he-t s-aa míi hhâab
now mother-F-1PL.POSS AN.D-F BEN-S1/2 what tell
‘What shall I say mother now?’
- (d) kii 'aa malée Laa'áy /atlisit
2SGF S1/2:PST how Laa'ay seize-2SG
‘How could you ever dare to seize Laa'ay?’⁶

⁶ The interrogative pronoun and the direct object are placed between the PM and the verb to form an informational unit here. The utterance is an outburst in which Laa'ay reproaches his mother for having repeatedly tried to surrender him to the lion, in an appeal to the auditory for justifying his own counter-trick by which he had managed that, instead of himself, his father had been caught as the victim of the

For the majority of cases the explanation is a different one. In both instances, rhetoric questions (24) and information questions (23), the incorporated question words are used for the function of completive focus in the sense of Dik (1989: 282) and Dik (1991: 269), in that the item fills in a gap in knowledge, adds a missing bit of information in a presupposed scene, in order to form a concise whole, to complete the picture. There is no competing information, as would be the case with contrastive focus. Using the term “focus” in this context might be misleading, since it is rather the idea of completion that is central here. With this in mind, it seems to be perfectly reasonable to reserve the intraverbal position (of incorporation) for this kind of function.

Contrastive focus in Alagwa questions is formed quite differently: either by a cleft construction of the model *X na kaloo* ‘X is which?’ (25), where X could be a noun or a relative clause, *na* being a focalising copula and *kaloo* the focalised question word ‘which’ in right dislocation, or by a different cleft construction *X mii Y* ‘what kind of X is it that Y’ (26), where X is the fronted focalised constituent modified by the attributive question word *mii* ‘which, what kind of’ and Y is a relative clause.

(25) Alagwa: Contrastive focus questions with predicative *kaloo* ‘which’

(a) Laa’áy ná káloo?
 Laa’ay COP.FOC which
 ‘Which one is Laa’ay?’

(b) hiinkóo hati wée na káloo?
 now daughter EMPH COP.FOC which
 ‘Which daughter is it then?’

(26) Alagwa: Contrastive focus questions with attributive *mii* ‘what kind of’

hiru mí he-k kw-aa xots-u tays-áa
 person what AN.D-M REL.M-ABL walk-PCP.M there-ABL
 ‘What kind of person is this that comes walking from over there?’

Subject focus questions in Alagwa are formed by a construction *X na miya* or *miya na X*, in which the focalising copula *na* of (25) takes over subject focus function as PM.

(27) Alagwa: Subject focus question
 miya na ’arin Laa’áy hhak!
 who S.FOC see:3SGM Laa’ay lacking
 ‘Who would see Laa’ay? No one!’

It is remarkable that Iraqw and Gorwaa deviate typologically in this respect. Just like the other West Rift languages, it also has the option to incorporate direct objects (and adjuncts) freely into the verbal phrase, i.e. Whiteley’s (1958: 31) “encapsulation” and Nordbustad’s (1988: 305f.) “clause type 2”. Mous (1993: 251ff.) clearly shows that the difference between “external” and “internal”, i.e. incorporated, objects is in information structure. External objects are always singled out as pragmatically prominent and conceptually

independent from the action or event encoded in the verb, whereas internal objects merge with the verbal phrase to form a solid block of information. Thus the construction with internal, i.e. incorporated, direct object in (28a) would be an appropriate answer to questions like “What are you doing?” or “Are you eating porridge?”, whereas the “external” direct object construction in (28b) serves as an appropriate answer to questions like “What are you eating?” or “Are you eating porridge?”.

(28) Iraqw: Internal vs. external direct object constructions (Mous 1993: 254)

(a) a fa/á-r /áay
S1/2 porridge:CON-F eat:1SG
'I am eating porridge.'

(b) fa/a a /áay
porridge O3SGF eat:1SG
'I am eating porridge.'

In contrast to Alagwa, however, Iraqw does not incorporate question words. Instead it has a fairly elaborate system of interrogative PMs or “selectors” based on the interrogative clitic *ma ~ m* (Whiteley 1958: 41ff., Nordbustad 1988: 224ff., Mous 1993: 287f.).

(29) Iraqw: Interrogative PM (Mous 1993: 287)

laarí ma /ay-áan
today what-O3SGF eat-1PL
'What are we eating today?'

There is the alternative strategy to form a cleft construction with the question word in right dislocation (Mous 1993: 283).⁷

(30) Iraqw: Cleft question with the question word in right dislocation (Mous 1993: 284)

láa gá-r ta /ay-aan a milá
today thing:CON-F DEP.S1/2 eat-1PL:SJN COP what
'What do we eat today?'

Although Mous (1993: 287) concedes that the semantic difference between (29) and (30) is not clear, a comparison to the Alagwa opposition of contrastive vs. completive focus suggests that – while both languages concur in employing cleft constructions for contrastive focus function – the interrogative PM (29) in Iraqw takes over the completive focus function which is encoded in Alagwa by the incorporation of question words.

7. Conclusion

In discussing the pragmatics of noun incorporation in Eastern Cushitic, Sasse 1984 observes a historical drift which is characterised by a progressive dis-

⁷ Left dislocation is also possible for *xaylá* ‘when’ and *daqmá* ‘at what time’ (Mous 1993: 286f.). There is an overall tendency towards ellipsis of the question word in right dislocation (Mous 1993: 284) with concomitant reanalysis of the dummy head noun as a question word.

sociation of semantic and pragmatic functions in syntactic structures. This development leads to a differentiation of types which spans out between the extremes of languages with a largely semantically based syntax and those where pragmatics takes the precedence. Within this framework, the findings show that Alagwa (as representative of Southern Cushitic) takes a position further to the pole of pragmatical orientation, since major syntactic devices, especially ‘noun incorporation’, are determined to a large extent by pragmatic factors.

In a number of interrogatives, Alagwa question words, such as *mii* ‘what’, *miyaa* ‘who’, *malee* ‘how’, *kaa ~ kaali* ‘where’, occupy the position of incorporation between PM and finite verb which is typically used for backgrounding information and building a monolithic block of information in which no single bit of information receives salience. This finding seems to violate the general assumption that question words, being focalised inherently, should be incompatible with backgrounding, i.e. a syntactic constituent cannot at the same time be in focus and part of a thetic information block. The reason of this apparent contradiction is that these questions are never used for the purpose of contrastive focus (which is done by clefts of the kind ‘the place that ... is where?’), but instead for what would be “complementary focus” in Dik’s (1989) terminology. The perspective in these questions is not on the prominence of the missing bit of information that is needed to round up the picture, but on the unity of this picture as a whole. This is why the structure of these “complementary questions” goes together with the syntactic structure used for building larger unitary blocks of information. The alleged contradiction is resolved by a similarity in perspective on an informational unit, not on the salience of one of its parts.

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