# When long distance dependencies are actually short: The case of Mabia languages

Anke Himmelreich, Katharina Hartmann & Johannes Mursell (Goethe University Frankfurt)
{himmelreich|k.hartmann|j.mursell}@lingua.uni-frankfurt.de

**Summary:** Mabia languages (formerly Gur, Northern Ghana), all SVO, exhibit morpho-syntactic reflexes with short A'-movement. These reflexes are absent in the lower clause(s) of long distance (LD) A'-dependencies. We argue that this follows from the general absence of LD movement in Mabia languages. We propose that the extracted XP is base-generated at the phase edge of the embedded clause and that it moves clause-internally to the main clause periphery.

**Data:** Our claim is supported by evidence from verbal morphology, aspect, islands, and focus marking. (If not indicated otherwise, the data were elicited during fieldwork in Ghana in 2022.)

**1.** Sentence-final perfective verbs in the out-of-focus form need a verbal extension *ya* in Dagbani, (1), and Gurene. With focus movement, the marker is obligatorily absent (2). The marker is not just absent with focus movement but in general with all A'-dependencies, including negation (3). Interestingly, the marker is obligatory in the embedded clause of LD interrogatives, (4) (Issah 2020:96), strongly indicating that there is no A'-movement in the embedded clause.

(1) *Adam tum-ya.*
Adam work.PFV-YA
'Adam worked.'

(2) *Adam n tum.*
Adam FOC work.PFV
'ADAM worked.'

(3) *O bi yili (\*ya).*
3SG NEG sing.PFV YA
'She did not sing.'

(4) *Bù ŋùní kà bíhí máa yèlí [nì bɛ́ sà kú-\*(ya)]?*
goat which FOC children DEF say C 3PL PST kill.PFV-YA
'Which goat do the children say they killed yesterday?'

**2.** Some Mabia languages show reflexes of A'-movement in aspect marking. In Gurene, progressive aspect is marked with a verbal suffix *-(r)i* (5) which changes to *-(r)a* with a trace of A'-movement in its c-command domain (6). In apparent LD cases, the lower verb still shows the *-(r)i* form, indicating that no A'-trace is present (7). Note that if fronting takes place inside the embedded clause, the embedded verb shows the expected change from *-(r)i* to *-(r)a* (8).

(5) *Atiŋa bɔ'ɔ-ri/\*-ra la Ania dukɔ.*
Atiŋa give-PROG LA Ania pot
'Atiŋa is giving Ania a pot.'

(7) *Beni ti Ama soke [ti John kõrege-ri/\*-ra]?*
what FOC Ama ask C John slaughter-PROG
'What did Ama ask that John is slaughtering?'

(6) *Ani ti Atiŋa bo'o-ra/\*-ri dukɔ?*
who FOC Atiŋa give-PROG pot
'Whom was Atiŋa giving a pot?'

(8) *A. n soke [ti beni ti J. kõrege-ra].*
A. FOC ask C what FOC J. slaughter-PROG
'Ama asked what John is slaughtering.'

Similarly, in Sisaali, the standard progressive marker *aa* (9) changes to *ki* in the presence of an A'-trace (10). LD constructions have the standard marker *aa* in all embedded clauses (11) and *ki* in the matrix clause, which indicates movement only in the highest clause, but no movement in the embedded clause. (Exactly the same pattern emerges in Gurene; data omitted.)

(9) *Adama aa kpʊ gyimii rɛ.*
Adama PROG kill fowl FOC
'Adama is slaughtering a fowl.'

(10) *Puŋ bee rɛ galee hu ki kpʊ?*
animal which FOC cat DEF PROG kill
'Which animal is the cat killing?'

(11) *Bekɪŋ nɛ ɪ fa ki liisi [CP nɪ ʊ fa aa liisi [CP dɪ John fa aa kɔrɪkɪ]]?*
what FOC 2SG PST IPFV think C 3SG PST IPFV think C John PST IPFV slaughter
'What were you thinking that she was thinking that John was slaughtering?'

**3.** Mabia languages show island effects for relative clause islands, see (12) from Sisaali. However, when the RelC island is in an embedded clause, no island violation occurs (13). (Exactly the same patterns can be found in Gurene; data omitted.)

(12) *\*Bekɪŋ_i nɛ Maria naa [RelC baal hʊ aa kɔrɪkɔ _i]?*
what FOC Maria see man DET PST slaughter.PST
Intended: 'What did Maria see the man that slaughtered?'

(13) *Bekɪŋ_i nɛ ɪ fa liisi [CP nɪ Maria naa [RelC baal hʊ aa kɔrɪkɔ _i]]?*
what FOC 2SG PST think C Maria see.PST man DET PST slaughter.PST
Intended: 'What did you think that Maria saw the man that slaughtered?'

**4.** In Dagbani, a subject in ex-situ focus is marked by a special subject focus marker *n*, cf. (2) above & (14). With LD focus, however, *n* is not licensed in the embedded clause, cf. (15). Instead, the subject cooccurs with the non-subject focus marker *ka* in the matrix clause. A resumptive appears in the subject's base position. Although these data are compatible with succ.-cyclic LD movement, the data fit well to the absence of movement in the embedded clause.

(14) *Abdul yɛli-ya    [ni Dede n    kɔrigi        noo maa].*
     Abdul say.PFV-YA C   Dede FOC slaughter.PFV fowl DET
     'Abdul said that DEDE slaughtered a fowl.'

(15) *Dede ka    Abdul yɛli    [ni o    kɔrigi        noo maa].*
     Dede FOC Abdul say.PFV C   3SG slaughter.PFV fowl DET
     'DEDE, Abdul said slaughtered the fowl.'

**Analysis:** In all LD cases discussed above, effects of A'-movement cannot be detected in the embedded clause. The matrix clause, on the other hand, clearly shows morpho-syntactic properties of A'-movement. In Dagbani and Gurene, the absence of the verb-final extension *-ya* in matrix clauses, but its presence in embedded clauses suggest that movement happens only in the matrix clause, and that there are no intermediate movement steps in embedded clauses. The distribution of island effects, A'-progressive-marking and focus marking show exactly the same. We take this observation at face value and assume that all cases of apparent LD movement discussed above do not involve movement in the embedded clauses at all, but only movement in the matrix clause. Concretely, we assume that the wh/focal elements are merged in the edge of the embedded CP and move from there into the left periphery of the matrix clause.

This assumption has various consequences. By being merged in the phase edge of the embedded CP, the respective elements belong to the embedded clause while at the same time already being in the domain of the matrix clause. For the matrix clause, this directly explains the observed A'-movement effects. In addition, the grammatical role of theses elements is indistinguishable in the matrix clause so that it is actually expected that when fronted, they trigger the more general non-subject focus marker, independent of their grammatical role in the embedded clause.

Turning to the embedded clause, no movement effects can be detected as no movement has taken place. To ensure the correct interpretation, we assume that the $\theta$-position corresponding to the element base-generated at the left periphery of the highest embedded clause is filled by a pronoun. This pronoun is overt for subjects (cf. (15)), but covert for objects. Such a distribution of resumption can be found in various A'-dependencies in the languages, for example also in relative clauses. In addition, the languages also show object pro-drop, cf. (16) from Dagbani.

(16) *A: M    bí    nyá-rí    símá    máa. - B: Beneeti dí-rá!*
     1SG NEG see-PROG cookies DEF      Beneeti eat-PROG
     'A: I cannot find the cookies. B: Beneeti is eating (them)!'

**Discussion:** This paper raises three questions concerning the theory of displacement. **1.** Despite first appearance, Mabia lacks LD extraction, suggesting the necessity of a deeper investigation as to whether Mabia languages have proper clausal embedding at all. This would not be surprising given the lack of embedding in other African languages, e.g. concealed relative questions in Hausa and Akan (Zimmermann 2018). **2.** If the analysis is on the right track, the question emerges as to what the nature of A and A' is: Equating A' with fixed positions (i.e. Spec,CP) cannot be correct, as the data (particularly the distribution of *-ya*) suggests the absence of A'-deps in the embedded clause. An approach to A vs. A' in terms of targeted features (van Urk 2015) seems more compatible with the data. **3.** Our analysis points to a redundancy in the theory of displacement in that both, base-generation AND movement seem to be needed to account for the observed patterns. This might appear as an unusual overload of the theory; however, we argue that the Mabia data present a unique case where a bipartite concept of displacement is warranted.