

Conjoint/Disjoint Marking in Mabia Languages

Katharina Hartmann

Goethe-University Frankfurt

GLOW Lecture, 2026-06-26

Introduction

I will comment on the following topics from Nancy's talk:

- ▶ conjoint/disjoint marking outside Bantu
- ▶ distribution of CJ/DJ marking in Dagbani (Mabia)
- ▶ against a focus related interpretation of CJ/DJ

CJ/DJ outside Bantu

- ▶ The CJ/DJ system has been mainly attested for Bantu languages, cf. the contributions in van der Wal & Hyman (2017).
- ▶ Similar systems have been studied outside of Bantu as well, e.g. in Babanki (Grassfields Bantu, Akumbu 2022), and in some Mabia languages, such as Yom (Fiedler 2017), Dagbani (Issah 2015, 2020), Gurene (Atintono 2006), or Kusaal (Abubakari 2018).
- ▶ In what follows, I will first discuss Dagbani in some detail and then revisit the analysis of Fiedler (2017) on Yom in light of my findings.

Dagbani basic information

- ▶ Dagbani is a Mabia (Gur) language spoken in the Northeast of Ghana.
- ▶ Dagbani is an SVO language and has focus/wh fronting.
- ▶ Imperfective aspect is marked on the verb; perfective aspect is unmarked.
- ▶ Deictic tense particles optionally appear preverbally in T.
- ▶ Dagbani has two tones, H and L, indicated in the following where available (based on speaker intuitions).
- ▶ If not indicated otherwise, the data are from fieldwork in Ghana and Germany.

CJ/DJ marking

- ▶ The Dagbani verb is sensitive to its following linguistic context as reflected by the verbal morphology.
- ▶ If the verb is in final position, the suffix $-(y)á$ is added (=DJ) (perfective and imperfective).
- ▶ If the verb is in non-final position, the suffix $-í$ is added (=CJ) (only imperfective), see Issah (2015).
- ▶ (1) shows the imperfective pattern (Issah 2015: 4ab).

- (1) a. B́í-h́í máá dí-r-í *(sh̀ìnkááfà).
 child.PL DEF eat-IPFV-CJ rice
 ‘The children eat/are eating rice.’
- b. B́í-h́í máá dí-r-á (*sh̀ìnkááfà).
 child.PL DEF eat-IPFV-DJ rice
 ‘The children eat/are eating.’

CJ/DJ in Dagbani

- ▶ In the perfective, CJ is unmarked and given that the perfective is also unmarked, the verb appears in its basic form.
- ▶ DJ-marking appears as introduced above; the glide /y/ is inserted to avoid two consecutive vowels.
- ▶ Glossing: I only gloss overtly expressed morphemes. Basic verbs are inherently interpreted as perfective.

- (2) a. B́íhí máá dí *(sh̀ìnkááfà).
children DEF eat rice
'The children ate rice.'
- b. B́íhí máá dí-**yá** (*sh̀ìnkááfà).
children DEF eat-DJ rice
'The children ate.'

CJ/DJ in Dagbani - phonology

- ▶ I think that CJ/DJ in Dagbani is not phonologically motivated (though Dagbani has not yet been well investigated in this respect).
- ▶ Across all my data, both markers are always associated with H tones, irrespective of the tone of the preceding vowel.
- ▶ The DJ marker does not seem to be sensitive to prosodic phrasing either.
- ▶ In (3), the length of the postverbal adverbial does not trigger DJ-morphology on the verb.
- ▶ Even postverbal sentential adverbs keep CJ-morphology on the main verb and do not trigger DJ.

CJ/DJ in Dagbani - prosody

- (3) a. Ò túm-d-í (lá) [kpè].
3SG work-IPFV-CJ FOC here
'She is working here.'
- b. Ò túm-d-í (lá) [dúdúhígú máa ní].
3SG work-IPFV-CJ FOC kitchen DEF LOC
'She is working in the kitchen.'
- c. Ò túm-d-í [ò bíhí ní kpé gbíhí-bú
3SG work-IPFV-CJ 3SG children COMP enter sleep-VN
zúyú].
because
'She is working because her children have gone to bed.'

Surface orientation of the CJ/DJ system

- ▶ The DJ form does not mark hidden transitivity.
- ▶ CJ/DJ morphology is sensitive also to postverbal adverbials (4) (a: imperfective; b: perfective) and focus particles (5).

(4) a. Páyí-bá dèm-d-í / *dèm-d-á kpè.
 woman-PL play-IPFV-CJ play-IPFV-DJ here
 ‘The women play here.’

b. Páyí-bá dèm / *dèm-yá kpè.
 woman-PL play play-DJ here
 ‘The women played here.’

(5) Q: Tisia dá-r-í lá nóonìmdí máa?
 Tisia buy-IPFV-CJ FOC chicken DEF
 ‘Is Tisia buying the chicken?’

A: Ò dá-r-í mí. / Ò dá-r-á (*mí).
 3SG buy-IPFV-CJ FOC 3SG buy-IPFV-DJ FOC
 ‘He IS buying (them).’

The surface orientation of the CJ/DJ marker

- ▶ The following example is even more surprising.
- ▶ CJ can be triggered by a postverbal element outside of the VP.

(6) [DP [TopP *Bù sò* [TP *bíhí nì yú-r-í*]] *máá*] *kpí-yá*.
 goat INDF children COMP like-IPFV-CJ DEF die-DJ
 ‘The goat that the children like, died.’

- ▶ (6) illustrates a (head internal) ex situ relative clause with *máá* being the head of the high DP (Mursell & Hartmann 2025).
- ▶ This high determiner nevertheless triggers CJ-marking on the verb within the relative clause.

Syntactic interactions

- ▶ Despite being sensitive to rather linear licensing conditions, the DJ-marker also interacts with syntactic constraints.
- ▶ In the perfective aspect, DJ-morphology is blocked in sentences with A'-dependencies (Himmelreich et al. 2025).
- ▶ Since neither perfective aspect nor CJ are overtly expressed, the final perfective verb appears in its bare form.
- ▶ (7) illustrates this for wh-questions and answer focus.

(7) Q: Bo ka Adam kɔrigi-(*ya)?
what FOC Adam slaughter-DJ
'What did Adam slaughter?'

A: Noo ka Adam kɔrigi-(*ya).
fowl FOC Adam slaughter-DJ
'Adam slaughtered fowl.'

Syntactic interactions

- ▶ The DJ-marker is also blocked in relative and negative clauses.
- ▶ Blocking under negation shows that it is the A'-dependency rather than A'-movement that causes this effect.

- (8) a. tiŋa shɛli n ni yu-(*ya)
land DET 1SG COMP love-DJ
'a country I loved'
- b. bi-puyim-bila so ŋun duyi-(*ya)
child-F-DIM DET 3SG cook-DJ
'a girl that cooked'
- (9) a. Bɛneeti di-*(ya).
Bɛneeti eat-DJ
'Beneeti ate.'
- b. Bɛneeti bi di-(*ya).
Bɛneeti NEG eat-DJ
'Beneeti did not eat.'

Interim Summary

- ▶ Similarly to the Bantu languages, Mabia languages also distinguish CJ from DJ verb forms.
- ▶ Similarly to the Bantu languages, the distribution is determined by the finality of the verb.
- ▶ CJ/DJ in Dagbani is surface oriented in that any element following the verb triggers CJ.
- ▶ At the same time, DJ-morphology interacts, at least in the perfective aspect, with A'-dependencies.

CJ/DJ and focus

- ▶ In many Bantu languages, the CJ/DJ distinction is often related to focus, cf. the contributions in van der Wal & Hyman (2017) / Nancy's talk.
- ▶ CJ-morphology is assumed to mark focus on post-verbal constituents.
- ▶ DJ is taken to indicate predicate-centered focus, thus focus on the lexical verb, or on some verbal operator.
- ▶ In Dagbani, however, CJ/DJ does not seem to be related to focus.

Ex situ term focus

- ▶ Ex situ wh/focus constituents appear in sentence-initial position where they precede a focus particle (Issah 2020).
- ▶ In the imperfective, CJ/DJ morphology is independent of focus fronting.
- ▶ Dagbani allows for object drop of inanimate objects, which allows for minimal pairs.

- (10) Q: D̀̀ń k̀̀ b́́ t́́-ŕ́ ĺ́ / t́́-ŕ́-á?
 who FOC 3PL give-IPFV-CJ it give-IPFV-DJ
 ‘Who are they giving (it)?’
- A: Ḿ́ń k̀̀ b́́ t́́-ŕ́ ĺ́ / t́́-ŕ́-á.
 1SG FOC 3PL give-IPFV-CJ it give-IPFV-DJ
 ‘They are giving (it) to [me]_{FOC}.’

In situ term focus

- ▶ With in situ term focus of non-subjects, the verb never appears in final position, hence CJ-morphology is expected in the imperfective.

- (11) Q: Dóo máa tí-r-í Abu bò?
man DEF give-IPFV-CJ Abu what
'What does the man give to Abu?'
- A: Dóo máa tí-r-í Abu lòrì.
man DEF give-IPFV-CJ Abu car
'The man gives Abu a car.'

In situ focus marking

- ▶ Apart from the ex situ focus marker, Dagbani also has an in situ focus marker (optional in in situ wh), (Issah 2015; Mursell et al. 2025).
- ▶ The focus marker is *lá* and is assumed to head a low FocP (Belletti 2004).

- (12) Q: Adam kɔrigi **la** bɔ?
Adam slaughter FOC what
'What did Adam slaughter?'
- A: Adam kɔrigi **la** noo.
Adam slaughter FOC goat
'Adam slaughtered a goat.'

In situ term focus

- ▶ Low focus in Dagbani does not move, hence the focus and the focus marker do not have to be adjacent.
- ▶ In double object constructions, the object adjacent to the verb may be contextually given and only the distant object be focused.

- (13) Q: Ziema ti **la** Napaya bo?
Ziema give FOC Napaya what
‘What did Ziema give to Napaya?’
- A: Ziema ti **la** Napaya [lakɔrigu]_{FOC}.
Ziema give FOC Napaya pot
‘Ziema gave Napaya a pot.’

In situ term focus

- ▶ The high and the low focus marker may not co-occur, (14).
- ▶ Given that the low focus marker can co-occur with the CJ-marker, this is again evidence against CJ as a focus marker.

- (14) Q: Bo ka Ziema ti ηuni?
 what FOC Ziema give who
 ‘What did Ziema give to whom?’
- A: *Dugu ka Ziema ti la Napog.
 pot FOC Ziema give FOC Napog
 ‘Ziema gave Napog a pot.’
- (15) Q: Bo ka Adam kɔrigi-r-a?
 what FOC Adam slaughter-IPFV-DJ
 ‘What is Adam slaughtering?’
- A: Adam kɔrigi-r-i la noo.
 Adam slaughter-IPFV-CJ FOC goat
 ‘Adam is slaughtering a goat.’

Predicate-centered focus: V(P)-focus

- ▶ Turning to the second hypothesis that DJ is related to verb focus, this also does not hold in Dagbani.
- ▶ If the focused verb is followed, by, e.g. a focus particle, CJ-morphology appears, and DJ is excluded.

- (16) a. Á kárin-d-í mí bée á dí-r-í mí?
2SG read-IPFV-CJ FOC or 2SG eat-IPFV-CJ FOC
'Are you reading or are you eating?'
- b. N dí-r-í mí.
1SG eat-IPFV-CJ FOC
'I am eating.'

Polarity focus

- ▶ Polarity focus in Dagbani follows the same pattern.
- ▶ DJ is only licensed with final verbs. With postverbal focus particles or given elements, CJ-morphology is obligatory.

- (17) Q: Pete dá-r-í lá nóonìmdí máa bée ó bì
 Pete buy-IPFV-CJ FOC chicken DEF or 3SG NEG
 dá-r-í lí?
 buy-IPFV-CJ 3SG
 ‘Is Pete buying the chicken or is he not buying them?’
- A1: Ò dá-r-í lí (mí).
 3SG buy-IPFV-CJ it FOC
 ‘He IS buying them.’
- A2: Ò dá-r-á.
 3SG buy-IPFV-DJ
 ‘He IS buying (them).’

Interim Summary

- ▶ CJ/DJ-morphology in Dagbani is not related to focus.
- ▶ With all kinds of focus (in situ / ex situ term focus, verb focus, polarity focus) CJ appears whenever anything follows the verb.
- ▶ DJ appears when the verb is in final position, irrespective of the focus condition.

Fiedler (2017) on Yom

- ▶ Fiedler (2017) reports on a CJ/DJ system in Yom, another Mabia language spoken in Benin.
- ▶ She argues that the system follows the Bantu focus distinction, CJ for postverbal focus; DJ for verbal focus types.
- ▶ However, her data do not really support this hypothesis.
- ▶ I first briefly introduce the basic data and then raise my doubts against a focus dependency of the CJ/DJ-system.

CJ/DJ in Yom

- ▶ CJ/DJ-morphology appears in the perfective and imperfective aspects.
- ▶ These two aspects are differentiated by tonal distinctions on the verb stem and by a verbal suffix *-r* in the perfective.
- ▶ Verbs in non-final position follow the conjoint construal, CJ being morphologically unmarked.
- ▶ DJ appears overtly with verbs in final position.
- ▶ (18) illustrates for the perfective.
- ▶ All Yom data are taken from Fiedler (2017).

- (18) a. À nyù-r nyâm.
1SG drink-PFV water
'He drank water.'
- b. À nyù-r-wá.
1SG drink-PFV-DJ
'He drank.'

Focus and CJ/DJ in Yom

- ▶ Similarly to Dagbani, in situ focus is always postverbal in Yom.
- ▶ In situ focus may be unmarked and given that CJ is not overtly marked either, see (18-a), it is, in my opinion, daring to take the CJ construal as being responsible for postverbal focus.
- ▶ (18-a) is argued to answer a wh-object question (apart from being a default SVO clause in Yom).
- ▶ However, this is not enough reason to claim that in situ focus is related to CJ.
- ▶ In addition, Yom has a focus marker *rà*, which optionally marks focus (distribution unclear), (19).

(19) Q: How did the woman eat?

A: À jì-r yáyù-yáyù-ù-**rà**.

1SG eat-PFV RED-GREEDILY-LNK-FOC

‘She ate greedily.’

Focus and CJ/DJ in Yom

- ▶ Turning to DJ, Fiedler (2017) contradicts herself.
- ▶ The claim that DJ marks verbal focus is false since focused verbs lack DJ-morphology if not in final position, just as in Dagbani.

(20) Póyá wá jí-r jéném, àmá à nyù-r jéném.
woman NEG eat-PFV well but 1SG drink-PFV well
'The woman did not eat well, but she drank well.'

- ▶ My conclusion is that (i) more research needs to be done on Yom, and (ii) findings from one language (group) should not be carelessly generalized without thorough investigation to another language.

Conclusions

- ▶ I showed that the CJ/DJ system also exists outside Bantu. It has been also described for some of the Mabia languages.
- ▶ In the Mabia languages, however, it does not appear to be phonologically or prosodically motivated.
- ▶ I argued that CJ/DJ in Dagbani is not related to focus, in distinction to claims on many Bantu languages.
- ▶ Finally, I argued that the focus claim potentially needs to be revisited at least in the language Yom.

References I

- Abubakari, Hasiyatu. 2018. *Aspects of Kusaal grammar: The syntax-information structure interface*. Wien: Universität Wien dissertation. doi:10.25365/thesis.52565.
- Akumbu, Pius W. 2022. The conjoint/disjoint alternation in Babanki. *Language in Africa* 3(3). 16–39.
- Atintono, Samuel Awinkene. 2006. Gurene verbal suffixes: Their nature and function. *Cahiers du Cerleshs* 25. 63–83.
- Belletti, Adriana. 2004. Aspects of the low IP area. In Luigi Rizzi (ed.), *The structure of cp and ip*, 16–51. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fiedler, Ines. 2017. Conjoint/disjoint verb forms in Gur? Evidence from Yom. In Jenneke van der Wal & Larry M. Hyman (eds.), *The conjoint/disjoint alternation in Bantu*, 175–199. Berlin: de Gruyter.
- Himmelreich, Anke, Johannes Mursell & Katharina Hartmann. 2025. When long distance dependencies are actually short: The case of Mabia languages. Ms., Goethe University Frankfurt/Bielefeld University.

References II

- Issah, Samuel Alhassan. 2015. Conjoint and disjoint verb alternations in Dagbani. *Ghana Journal of Linguistics* 4(2). 29–63.
- Issah, Samuel Alhassan. 2020. *On the structure of A-bar construction in Dagbani*. Berlin: Peter Lang. doi:10.3726/b17097.
- Mursell, Johannes & Katharina Hartmann. 2025. Subject relative clauses in Dagbani. *Glossa: a journal of general linguistics* 10(1). doi:10.16995/glossa.10572.
- Mursell, Johannes, Anke Himmelreich & Katharina Hartmann. 2025. Two types of in-situ focus marking in the Mabia languages. Ms., Goethe University Frankfurt.
- van der Wal, Jenneke & Larry M. Hyman (eds.). 2017. *The conjoint/disjoint alternation in Bantu*. Berlin: de Gruyter.