

THE SYNTAX OF EMPHASIS IN KPELLE

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Non-Africans acquiring a reasonably high level of competence in an African language, and analysts who have progressed beyond the first stages of their work, have frequently reported having difficulty with a little particle of some sort that seems to be used frequently and with no immediately obvious rationale. In cases representing a number of West African languages from Liberia to eastern Nigeria, I have heard such reports and ventured a guess that the particle is frequently used in questions, and that it has a form something like le or ne . Even without a prior acquaintance with the language, such a guess has frequently proven close enough to warrant further speculation that the particle indicates emphasis of some word or phrase in the sentence. While details of form and usage naturally differ widely, this has often proven to be the key to a satisfactory analysis. Perhaps a fuller discussion of such a problem for one language may be helpful to others who face comparable problems in other languages.

Kpelle, which is spoken in central Liberia and adjacent parts of Guinea by perhaps 400,000 people, is one of the Southwestern Mande group of languages. As such, its relationship to non-Mande languages in the Niger-Congo family is by no means close, and even among the Mande languages there are wide divergences. Yet the type of syntactic distinctions described here for Kpelle appear to be extremely widespread, so that this description is more representative than appears on the surface.

For a discussion of the phonology of Kpelle, with a fuller treatment than is appropriate here of the problems underlying the transcriptions used, see the *Journal of African Languages*, Vol. I, part 1, 1962, pp. 69-93. For purposes of the present treatment, a phonemic transcription is used, with the transcription used in Kpelle orthography for purposes of literature occasionally given in parentheses. The latter is used only where a prior acquaintance with the language and its writing system may make the phonemic transcription confusing.

Material of this sort is by no means easy to present in such a way that it will be readily decipherable and meaningful to the reader who has no acquaintance with the language. There would be no great merit in a treatment of this sort if it could be used only by those who already know Kpelle, or if strangers to the specific language would have to guess at much of the structure outside the particular scope of the subject at hand. At the same time, the problem treated here must of necessity involve, at least incidentally, the use of a variety of forms and constructions. This problem is recognized at the outset, and a careful and conscious effort has been made to avoid presupposing a knowledge of the material used. Section 1 below gives a brief outline of those aspects of Kpelle syntax that are essential to the problems of emphasis described in the remainder of the article. In giving illustrations throughout the article, the component parts of sentences are separately identified until they become self-evident. Thus the large amount of illustrative material should be viewed as intended for clarification, rather than too extensive for comprehension. In addition, the vocabulary employed has been kept relatively small; the point of this article is to illustrate a comparatively simple principle at an admittedly advanced level of analysis, but not to display lexical virtuosity.

