

# CONTRAST IN CONTEXT: TOPIC, FOCUS AND DEFINITENESS IN GA<sup>1</sup>

M. E. Kropp Dakubu  
Language Centre, University of Ghana

The discourse functions of different syntactic constructions involving the Ga particle *H-le* are discussed, with the aim of finding a relating factor. This factor is found to be the specification of an item as signifying a choice within a system. The choice itself may or may not represent new information, but the system of possible choices with respect to which it is contextualized does not. Comparisons are made between Ga and its closest relative, Dangme, other New Kwa languages, Akan and Ewe, and the more distantly related Dagaare and Guruni (Oti-Volta Gur). All have comparable discourse phenomena and particles that are probably genetically related.

Cette communication traite des fonctions discursives des différentes constructions syntaxiques faisant intervenir la particule *H-le* en Ga; le but est de trouver une fonction qui soit commune aux différents emplois. L'on constate que cette fonction commune consiste à opérer un choix portant sur un élément au sein d'un système. L'élément choisi peut apporter une nouvelle information, alors que le système proposé n'apporte rien de nouveau. L'on procède à des comparaisons entre le Ga et d'autres langues ouest africaines de la famille Niger Congo, y compris le Dangme qui est le plus apparenté et d'autres langues de la famille Kwa, l'Akan, l'Ewe ainsi que le Dagaare et le Guruni (Oti-Volta, Voltaïque) qui sont moins apparentés. Toutes ces langues connaissent des phénomènes discursifs qui pourraient être liés sur le plan génétique.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is essentially an attempt to solve a syntactic problem in Ga, namely the function or functions of the particle *H-le* (which is phonetically a vowel preceded by a floating high tone, see §1.2 below), by appealing to pragmatic relations that arise out of discourse, that is, in the course of linguistic performance. The general approach is derived from Functional Sentence Perspective, and the discussion specifically employs the concepts of DEFINITENESS, FOCUS and TOPIC as defined by Comrie (1989). In addition, however, it is found necessary to consider relations between whole clauses in complex sentences, and between sentences in discourse, as well as between phrasal constituents of the clause or simple sentence. The treatments of topic and focus are therefore developed in ways partly derived from the approach to THEME/RHEME and GIVEN/NEW of Halliday (1985). One result is that the approach to focus in particular is somewhat different from the approaches taken by writers on the only neighboring language in which such features have been discussed, namely Akan (Boadi 1974, Saah 1988), and to varying extents, from other writers' treatments of Focus in various other West African languages, for example Marchese (1983).

### 1.1 THE PROBLEM

The problem arises from the fact that the particle *H-le* occurs in two distinguishable situations. It typically appears in a nominal phrase, where it occurs at the final (right-most) position, excluding any intensifiers (such as *ḥḥé* 'all' or *nóḥḥ* 'indeed'). The nominal phrase in question may be subject or complement of its clause, in the normal, unmarked positions for those functions, as in (1), or it may be syntactically marked by front-shifting, as in the examples in (2) (the comma marks a possible pause).

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- (1) a. mina gbee le I saw the dog.  
 b. gbee le na mi The dog saw me.
- (2) a. bo le, ona gbee As for you, you saw a dog.  
 b. gbee le, ena tso As for the dog, it saw a stick.  
 c. gbee le, minaaa As for the dog, I didn't see (it).

These sentences may be compared with those in (3)–(5), in which H-le is not present.

- (3) a. mina gbee I saw the dog.  
 b. gbee na mi A dog saw me.
- (4) mina gbee ko I saw a certain dog.
- (5) a. ame amebaaa As for them, they didn't come.  
 b. Kojo, mina le Kojo, I saw him.

H-le also occurs, just as typically, at the end of certain kinds of subordinate clause. These may be relative clauses, as in (6), or conditional, temporal and other kinds of adverbial clauses, as in (7)–(10).<sup>2</sup>

- (6) a. misumɔɔ ataade le ní ohe le I like the dress that you bought.  
 b. ataade le ní ohe le ye bie The dress that you bought is here.

Such clauses often begin with the particle ní, with high tone, or bení/béní 'when'. They may follow the verb and its complements, thus occupying the normal position for adverbial expressions, as in (7).

- (7) mite shi beni eba le I got up when he came.

Frequently, however, such clauses precede the principal clause, as in (8).

- (8) beni eba le, mite shi When he came, I got up.

Sometimes no introductory particle accompanies the subordinate clause. In this case, the clause must precede the principal clause, and be accompanied by H-le, for example (9).

- (9) eba le, mibasala bo Since/when/as he came, I came to visit you.

If the subordinate clause is marked by the conditional particle ké, H-le does not follow if the conditional clause follows the principal, but is usually present if the conditional precedes the principal clause, compare (10a) and (10b).

- (10) a. maya ké oba I will go if you come.  
 b. ké oba le, maya If you come, I will go.

## 1.2 REMARKS

On the one hand, it is not immediately obvious that H-le as used after a nominal phrase in (1)–(5) and as used after a clause in (6)–(10) is 'the same' morpheme. On the other hand, they are phonologically identical, and unusual in terms of Ga morph shapes. They are also unique in the language as its only clitics, i.e., syntactically determined elements that are phonologically incorporated into whatever element they happen to follow. H-le in both cases is invariably realized in speech as /a/ after /a/, /ɔ/ after /ɔ/ and /ɛ/ after any other phoneme, there is always a (floating) high tone, indicated here by H-

<sup>2</sup> Examples are given in orthographic form except where otherwise indicated. Tone is marked in this article only when it is specifically relevant to the discussion. In the examples in (6), the high tone of ní is marked to distinguish it from ni with low tone, which has related but different functions (and is not discussed here).

on the syllable before it, and the vowel has an unmarked low tone, which means that it has downstepped high tone before another high tone or pause but low tone before another low tone. One consequence of this is that preposed subordinate clauses tend to close in a characteristic intonational coda, high-downstepped high. The initial 'l' of the orthography is archaic, inherited in the orthography that was first developed in the first half of the nineteenth century but never pronounced in the modern language except as a hyper-correct spelling pronunciation. In all of these features it is quite different from the orthographically identical third person singular pronoun *le*, which is always pronounced /lɛ/, with invariable (marked) low tone and no floating high tone before it. It is not unreasonable to expect that the clitic form must in some sense realize 'the same' morpheme in both syntactic uses. The problem therefore is to relate the syntactic constructions in which it appears.

## 2. WORKING CONCEPTS

It is proposed to deal with the problem as outlined above in terms of three concepts, all of which represent essentially pragmatic relations. That is, I attempt to explain the various occurrences of *H-le* as exponents of relations that are determined by the context of the text or discourse. Generally speaking, these relations can only be determined by reference to the discourse beyond the sentence, including reference to the context of the discourse, to the social context and/or shared cultural information, since they are denoted by terms whose use and application varies, I shall define and discuss them first.

### 2.1 DEFINITENESS

Definiteness is a pragmatic property inherent in the nominal phrase to which it belongs (Comrie 1989:65). A nominal phrase is definite if it denotes something that can be identified by the listener because it has been previously specified, either implicitly by the context or explicitly by the speaker. Its definiteness is said to be 'inherent', because it is present in that nominal phrase regardless of what is being said in the particular sentence: its interpretation does not depend on the relationship of the nominal phrase to its verb or anything else. Thus in (1a) and (1b), we know that *gbee le* is definite even without further context. The dog is signalled as identifiable, whether this is the first time it has occurred in the conversation, or not.

*H-le* as a marker of a nominal phrase always indicates definiteness. Thus in (1a) and (1b) it is clear that speaker and hearer can identify *gbee* with a particular dog, but in the (3) they cannot, or at least it is not specified in the nominal phrase structure that they can. The nominal phrase *gbee le* in (1a) is thus definite, but the nominal phrase *gbee* in (3a) is indefinite. To this extent it is correct to say that *H-le* is the Ga 'definite article'.

In Ga, it is useful to distinguish definiteness from specificity. All definite nominal phrases are specific, but the reverse is not the case. In (4), *gbee ko* specifies the dog referred to, even though the dog in question cannot be identified by the hearer.<sup>3</sup> In this sense, definiteness, but not specificity, implies information that is already shared by speaker and listener. However a specific nominal phrase can also be definite with reference to an earlier specification, as in *gbee ko le* 'the particular dog', i.e., the unidentified dog we are speaking of.

Note that all pronouns (except the impersonal *a*, which marks a semantically empty subject) and all proper names are inherently definite, and in 'normal' nominal phrases do not occur with *H-le*. Therefore, the presence of *H-le* after *bo* in (2a), in contrast to its absence after *ame* in (5a), must be related to something other than ordinary definiteness.

<sup>3</sup> Possibly the speaker is signalling that the dog in question is identifiable by him, although not by his hearer. If this is indeed how *ko* is used, then in Ga definiteness means identifiable by both parties, but specificity means identifiable only by the speaker. The matter has yet to be investigated.

## 2.2 FOCUS

The next concept to be deployed is FOCUS. Following Comrie (1989:63) we relate the concept of focus to the introduction of new information into the sentence. The part of a clause or sentence that is in focus, or *is* the focus of the sentence, is the part that introduces something new, while the part or parts that are out of focus do not. When everything in a clause represents new information, it is the focus of its sentence relative to other clauses, and if it is the only clause of its sentence, it is the focus of its portion of the discourse.<sup>4</sup>

It is clear that the clitic definite article **H-le** does *not* mark focus. Ga does not usually give focus a grammatical or syntactic marking, and in the normal or unmarked situation it is associated with the verb. A nominal phrase may present new information, but this cannot be detected without access to more of the discourse. A minimal discourse context can be conveniently supplied by pairing the sentence with a related question, and serves to demonstrate the point. If the sentence (1a) **mina gbee le** is in the discourse because it answers the question **mina ona?** 'What did you see?', then the nominal phrase **gbee le** is in focus, but if it has been uttered because it answers the question **namo na gbee le** 'who saw the dog?' it is not, and the pronoun **mi** is the focus of the sentence. It happens that **mi** is a pronoun and therefore also definite, but the same question could have been answered by **yoo ko na gbee le** 'a certain woman saw the dog', where **yoo ko**, the focus, is not definite.

## 2.3 TOPIC

The third concept we shall use is TOPIC. The topic of a sentence is taken to be what the sentence (or clause) is about, as opposed to the comment, which is what is said about the topic. (The contrast is sometimes referred to as theme and rheme.<sup>5</sup>) In Ga as in English, the topic very often occurs in the subject of the clause, and that may be taken as the unmarked situation, but as with focus, its coincidence with any syntactic unit or category cannot be assumed.

Again as with focus, it is helpful to construct a dialogue situation to sort out the contrasts, particularly because interrogative words often propose the topic, and also demand new information about it which will probably be the focus of the response. Consider the dialogue in (11).

- |                                    |                                  |
|------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| (11) a. <b>mini ona</b>            | What did you see?                |
| b. <b>mina gbee le</b>             | I saw the dog.                   |
| c. <b>mee gbee (ni ona le)</b>     | What dog (did you see)?          |
| d. <b>(mina) gbee le ni ohe le</b> | (I saw) the dog that you bought. |

In view of (11a), we know that the focus of (11b), its new information, is **gbee le**. Its topic, what it is about, is not so readily determined, but if the choice in (11a) was between **o** 'you' and other people, then **mi**, the subject of the sentence, must be the topic of (11b), and the rest of the sentence is the comment. Although the focus, **gbee le**, is definite, the first speaker cannot in fact identify it and asks for further information about it in (11c), where the topic changes to **gbee**. Nothing in (11c) except the interrogative represents new information, and everything else except the topic can be omitted, as indicated by the brackets. The response (11d) has the same topic. The comment also provides the new information, in the relative clause that follows. Information in the topic

<sup>4</sup> Halliday (1985:274) provides a precedent for taking whole clauses as loci of the contrast between old information and new. Otherwise his treatment of focus is quite different: it is not an element of information structure but the phonological mode in which the climax of the new is marked (1985:278). This is with specific reference to English, where focus is considered to be marked by a suprasegmental phenomenon.

<sup>5</sup> Halliday (1985) regards the topic as but one aspect of the theme. Although that approach is not followed here, we shall avoid using the term theme, because there are a number of different but related phenomena in Ga which will not be dealt with here but for which the distinction is potentially usefully.

that is not central to identifying it with the focus in (11c) can be left out. Thus the topic does not necessarily or even normally coincide with the focus, and old information that is not essential to identify it can be deleted in some circumstances.

As can be seen from these examples, topic need not be grammatically marked in Ga. It is a feature of the relations between a nominal phrase and the rest of its clause, or between clauses in a sentence, that is determined by the relations among clauses and sentences in a discourse. However, it is also possible to mark the topic syntactically. In (12), one of the nominal phrases is front-shifted, and marked by H-*le* followed by an intonation phrase boundary (which is a place of potential pause).

- (12) a. **bo le, ona gbee**                      As for you, you saw a dog.  
 b. **gbee le, ena tso**                      As for the dog, it saw a stick.  
 c. **gbee le, minaaa**                      As for the dog, I didn't see (it).

In (12a) and (12b) the front-shifted element is the subject, and the pronoun occurs where it would normally be in the clause. In (12c) it is the complement. It would be replaced by a pronoun in the normal complement position, but in this case it is not, because non-human singular complements are usually deleted rather than pronominalized after non-ergative verbs. (Chinebuah 1976). In (13a) and (13b) the topic marked by front-shifting is a pronoun or proper name and therefore definite, and H-*le* does not follow as it does in (12a), where the topicalized subject is also a pronoun.

- (13) a. **ame amebaaa**                      As for them, they didn't come.  
 b. **Kojo, mina le**                      Kojo, I saw him.

If the nominal itself is inherently definite, i.e., a pronoun or proper name, then if H-*le* occurs as well, it presumably marks something other than definiteness or simple topicalization, which is marked by preposing (front-shifting). We return to this problem below.

Inspection of texts indicates that a topicalized nominal phrase is not necessarily definite. Consider the clause sequence in (14).<sup>6</sup>

- (14) **gbemei ni ba mibamomɔ ame, yei ke kii. yei ke hii mimomɔ ame**  
People who came I captured them, women and men. Women and men I captured them.

In both sentences there is topicalization of a non-definite complement, which (unlike *gbee le* in (12c)) has plural human reference, and is therefore represented in its normal position by a pronoun. Although they happen to have the same referent, both topicalized nominal phrases mark topic changes: the first brought new information into the text, and the second switches to a particular aspect of that information, not new because just mentioned. It appears that marking such topic changes is in fact the main function of front-shifting. This helps to explain why the subject may be topicalized, even though it is the default topic in any case. In clauses like (12b) or (13a) the subject is being presented as topic in contrast to some previous or alternative topic.

It is essential to note that FOCUS as new information and TOPIC as what is being talked about are distinct concepts, and that both can be involved in what some authors have termed EMPHASIS, which arises from the configuration of choices made among these features and others besides. The differences between the following analysis and those of Boadi (1974) and Saah (1988) for comparable phenomena in Akan arise from these distinctions.

<sup>6</sup> Extract from text given in Dakubu (1981:417).

## 3. DISCUSSION

## 3.1 THE PROBLEM RESTATED

As mentioned already, the definite marker **H-le** does not mark focus. **gbee le** is the focus or new information of (11b), but it is old information in (11d). Although definiteness may be related to focus, it is clearly not the same thing. We might expect it to be more closely related to old information than new, and it will be shown that this is indeed the case.

In §2, only occurrences of **H-le** at the end of nominal phrases were discussed. In some instances, **H-le** after a clause may be regarded as a definite marker. In the relative clauses of (15a,b) for example (which we saw earlier in (6)), the occurrence of **H-le** is governed by the occurrence of the particle as definite marker after the head noun: it must be present in or absent from both. Compare (15a) and (16).

- (15) a. **misumɔɔ ataade le ní ohe le**                    I like the dress that you bought.  
 b. **ataade le ní ohe le ye bie**                    The dress that you bought is here.

- (16) **misumɔɔ ataade ní ohe**                    I like a/the dress that you bought.

We may say that its occurrence represents agreement in definiteness between the nominal head and its relative clause.

We are thus left with two questions: 1) why does a definite marker **H-le** sometimes follow topicalized nominal phrases that are inherently definite anyway, and 2) why is **H-le** required with certain non-relative subordinate clauses, independently of their marking as topic by front-shifting? I propose that both may be usefully approached through a concept of contrastive contextualization, which can be regarded as an extension of the function of **H-le** from a marker of information treated as an inherent feature of a nominal phrase, namely identifiability, to include marking somewhat similar information arising from relations to the rest of the text.

## 3.2 CONTRASTIVELY TOPICALIZED NOMINAL PHRASES

With respect to the first question, it appears that if an inherently definite nominal phrase is topicalized and also marked by **H-le**, its information content cannot be new. Thus in (17), although 'you' is a new topic, it is 'didn't come', probably more specifically 'didn't', that must be the new information. By contrast, while in (18) **ame** 'they' is equally a new topic, there is no indication of its status as new or old information.

- (17) **bo le, obaaa**                    As for you, you didn't come.  
 (18) **ame amebaaa**                    Them, they didn't come.

However, since in Ga the verb is the default focus, it is again likely to be old. Evidently, information status is not the operative factor. The difference rather seems to lie in the organization of the shared knowledge that underlies the topic in each case, which is not quite the same thing as shared knowledge of the topic itself. In (17), the topic is contrastive: it is presented as a term in a system the content of which is a given in the situation, 'you of all the set of relevant people, which we know'. In (18) there is no such assumption of a singling out from the underlying set. A topicalized element with **H-le**, as in (17), is contextualized relative to the situation in a way that a topicalized element without it, as in (18), is not.

## 3.3 CONTRASTIVELY CONTEXTUALIZING CLAUSES

In a sentence like (19) (repeated from (8)) we may suppose that in terms of the text, the subordinate clause usually represents old information, and the principal clause represents the new. This is demonstrably so when such clauses occur in texts in the

formal oratorical style marked by clause chaining, where a sentence-initial subordinate clause marked by **H-*le*** is lexically a repetition of the principal clause of the sentence that immediately precedes it, as in (20).

(19) ***beni eba le, mite shi***

When he came, I got up.

(20) ***wotee le, wotee Nii Gbese je le. wotee le, woyanina le. beni woyanina le le, efee bizi . . .***

When we went, we went to the Gbese Chief's place. When we went, we met him. When we met him, he was busy . . .

On the other hand, (21) occurred in a text in which only the antecedents of the pronouns had occurred previously.<sup>7</sup>

(21) ***ke nuu ji le le, ebanina mi ye bie***

[*ké nùù jí !lé !lé, . . .*]

If he is a man, he should come and meet me here.

(In this sentence and in the third sentence of (20) the first *le* is the third person singular pronoun, while the second is **H-*le***.)

In these sentences too, the question is not one of new versus old information, but of contextualization. That is, these clauses are topicalized. The particle **H-*le*** marks the subordinate clauses as given, not inherently, nor with respect to recognition of their information whether earlier in the discourse or logically prior to it, but in relation to the principal clauses.

The first clause of the first sentence in (20) (*wotee le*) was old information within the social context, although nothing in it had previously been mentioned. It is marked as the context or point of departure of the sentence and indeed of the entire narrative, which was all about what happened 'when we went'. Although it recurs lexically any surface constituent of it and so does not constitute topicalization of any expressed part of it, in contrast to (17), for example, where the preposed element **bo** is a topicalization of the expressed subject **o**. In the conditional sentence (21), the question of front-shifting of any expressed constituent of principal clause does not arise. Nevertheless, the clause marked by **H-*le*** contextualizes it. Put another way, the principal clause makes a comment on the condition or situation stated in the subordinate clause, and the same can be said of (19), (23), and (24b). In contrast, the subordinate clauses of (22) and (24a), which follow the principal clause, are in the unmarked position for adverbials and do not constitute a point of departure for the rest of the sentence.

(22) ***mite shi beni eba le*** I got up when he came.

(23) ***eba le, mibasala bo*** Since/when/as he came, I came to visit you.

(24) a. ***maya ké oba*** I will go if you come.

b. ***ké oba le, maya*** If you come, I will go.

As with contextualized nominal phrases, topicalization by front-shifting and the use of **H-*le*** must be distinguished, even though the two devices frequently occur together. In all cases in (20) and (21), the preposed subordinate clause can be regarded as a front-shifted adverbial. In (22), however, the adverbial occurs sentence-finally, and yet is marked by **H-*le*** (compare (19) and the three sentences in (20)). Sentence (25) provides

<sup>7</sup> (18) and (19) are from the texts reproduced on pages 195 and 417 of Dakubu 1981, respectively.

an instance of a front-shifted, inherently definite nominal phrase topic marked by **H-le**, followed by a front-shifted, contextualizing conditional clause which is not thus marked (compare (24a) and (24b)).<sup>8</sup>

- (25) **Kòfí** **!lé, ké òkè** **lè shwéì nǒŋŋ pɛ́, èmlì é!fú**  
 Kofi c-c if you-take him play indeed just his-inside has-swelled.  
 As for Kofi, if you play around with him, he gets angry.

The occurrence or not of **H-le** at the end of a contextualizing clause depends, as for nominal phrases, on whether the clause marks a contrasting term in a system. In (20), the subordinate clauses that begin each sentence form a kind of paradigm: they fill the same slot in a series of structurally parallel sentences. Substitution patterns of this kind are typical of Ga formal styles. However, the occurrence of **H-le** is not governed by syntactically defined paradigms, but by systemic ones. Quite apart from their relations to other sentences, within the structure of each individual sentence in (20) the clause marked by **H-le** is presented as posing a contrast to a set of other possible clauses. In the case of a conditional, like (21) or b), the system consists of the condition and its negation (If he is not a man . . .). In (19), (20), (22), and (23), the clause specifies a member of a given set of possible events. Depending on the situation, this set might consist of this member and its negation (this seems the best explanation of the highly stylized sequence in (20)), or of some other, situationally limited, set of possible events. In (24a), on the other hand, the set of possible events of which **oba** is a member is treated as open, not as a given in the discourse.

Sentence (25) displays contrastive and non-contrastive contextualization in operation together. Kofi is topicalized as both complement of the first, subordinate clause and subject of the principal clause, and so contextualizes the whole of the sentence very strongly, but it is also defined as a member of a system, consisting apparently of a known group of children (or the set of their names). The conditional clause, as a preposed adverbial, provides additional context for the principal clause, but it is not marked as a contrastive term. Indeed, it is presented as unique, its singularity emphasized by the intensifiers **nǒŋŋ** and **pɛ́** (which might therefore be said to contrast with **H-le**). This non-systemic singularity is presumably related to the presentation, through perfect aspect, of the principal clause as a general statement of a rule of consequence, not a particular instance of a result.

#### 3.4 DEFINITENESS AND THE CONTRASTIVE CONTEXT

In our restatement of the problem it was suggested that it should be possible to find a connection between the function of **H-le** as a constituent of the nominal phrase, the definite article, and its other functions. The connection has been found: it lies in the membership of the item marked by this particle in a system, which is one of the givens of the situation of the text. The fact that a new item belongs to a known set means that it is identifiable, to the extent that it is recognizable as a term in an identifiable system. Or, whether or not the individual item is identifiable, it is in any case more definite than a member of an unbounded open set.

When an inherently definite nominal is topicalized, as in (26) and (27), **H-le** indicates that it is not only definite, but represents a systemic choice.

- (26) **bo le, ona gbee** As for you, you saw a dog.

There are situations where we can expect **H-le** to occur twice in succession, for example when a nominal phrase or a relative clause marked as definite by **H-le** is also contrastively contextualized. Such a sequence is almost impossible to elicit, because

<sup>8</sup> I owe this example to my colleague Alec A. Mante.

speakers generally seem to regard it as redundant, perhaps due to an unwillingness to assign so much significance to what is phonetically only a slightly prolonged down-glide. However, a few instances have been recorded, in relatively formal speech styles. The first clause in (27) represents a topicalization of the subject of the second.

- (27) **ejaakε no ni bu ebe le le, ele ebe shishi**  
 [èbé! é! é!]

Because the one who cites his proverb, he understands his proverb.<sup>9</sup>

**H-le** immediately after **ebe** 'his proverb' marks the nominal phrase as definite. The second **H-le** marks the relative clause as definite, in agreement with the definite pronoun **nò**. The two **H-le** thus mark different structural elements, and the fact that they occur one after the other is thus of no syntactic significance. It is phonologically significant, however, because it demonstrates that such a sequence is not always simplified by deleting one occurrence, as speakers under elicitation conditions tend to do.

In (28), on the other hand, two adjacent occurrences of **H-le** mark the same nominal phrase. **H-le** following the first, contextualized clause is a definite relative marker, like the second **H-le** in (27). The second marks **owe** 'your house' as definite, but the third marks the definite nominal phrase **owe le** as contrastively contextualized (the house belonging to you, contrasting with the rest of the set of houses belonging to people of this village).

- (28) **bo mɔ ni obaa le, owe le le, maŋ we**  
 [bò mɔ ní òbáá !á # ó!wé !é !é # màŋ wè]

You who don't come, as for your house, town's house (i.e., your house may be destroyed).<sup>10</sup>

#### 4. IMPLICATIONS FOR COMPARATIVE STUDIES

The functions expressed in Ga by **H-le** and discussed above are of both synchronic typological and genetic comparative interest. Virtually all the languages of the area (Kwa languages) have particles that are syntactically and phonologically similar, and at the same time subtly but significantly different, so that to explore the matter fully would be a fairly monumental task. This section only attempts to outline a few of the most striking relationships between Ga and its best-known relatives, and suggest some possibilities. I shall deal with synchronic comparisons first.

##### 4.1 AREA TYPOLOGY

In the immediate neighborhood of Ga, particles with comparable functions have been noted in the literature for Akan and Ewe. Ga has only one really close relative, Dangme, immediately to the east. In that language, definite nominal phrases are marked by the particle **ɔ** (or **a** after **a**), which unlike Ga **H-le** is followed by the plural suffix in any phrase in which it occurs, as in (29).

- (29) Dangme    **bí ɔ**                      Ga    **bí !lé**                      'the child'  
                   **bí ɔ-mē**                             **bí-í !lé**                      'the children'

It is probably this fact that led Zimmermann (1858:454) to consider it a kind of pronominal. Topicalized nominal phrases are also marked by this particle, but topicalized and relativized clauses are marked by a particle that is segmentally identical

<sup>9</sup> Extracted from a prayer text. See Dakubu 1981:167.

<sup>10</sup> Conclusion of an announcement by a gong-gong beater or town herald. See Dakubu 1981:170.

but has low tone, not mid, and cannot be pluralized.<sup>11</sup> The equation of phrase and clause structures that characterizes the Ga situation is thus not complete in Dangme, and the meaning distinctions being made are probably slightly different.

Akan and Ewe are more distant relatives, particularly Ewe, which in the present classification belongs to a different major sub-division of New Kwa (Stewart 1989:221). However in this instance it is Ewe that more closely resembles Ga-Dangme, particularly Ga. In Akan, the definite marker is *nó*.

- (30) Akan (Christaller, *Dictionary*)  
**abofra no** 'the boy'

The *no* does not occur after clauses. The particle *na* has been described as a focus marker by both Boadi (1974) and Saah (1988), but in fact their data indicate that it functions most often as a topic marker.<sup>12</sup> It seems furthermore that what Boadi calls exclusive focus (1974:7) is very similar to what I have called contrastive contextualization. *na* occurs after front-shifted nominal phrases and contextualized clauses, but they are semantically different, and the comparable function is not performed in Ga and Dangme by *H-le* and *ɔ* but by quite different particles, respectively Ga *nì* and Dangme *ne*. The Akan particle *dee*, which Boadi also calls a non-exclusive focus marker (Boadi 1974:11), makes a better syntactic comparison as in (31).<sup>13</sup> However *dee* does not occur after clauses.

- (31) Akan (Boadi 1974)  
**me dee mee baa ha nera** 'I came here yesterday.'

In Ewe, on the other hand, the particle *lá*, alternatively pronounced *á*, *ɔ* or *é*, depending on the dialect (Pazzi 1975:30, 34), and always with high tone, occurs in the same phonological form at the end of both nominal phrases and relative clauses, very much like Ga *H-le* (Dzameshie 1987).<sup>14</sup> It appears from Westermann's examples that phonologically the same particle also occurs after a topicalized nominal phrase, including topicalized pronouns, and after non-relative subordinate clauses preceding the principal clause (Westermann 1930:143ff.).

- (32) Ewe (Dzameshie 1987)  
**atiku la mie**  
 'The seed has germinated (definite article)'  
**nutsu si avu ɖu la dze dava**  
 'The man who was bitten by the dog is mad (relative clause)'  
 (Westermann 1930)  
**nye lá mekpôè**  
 I top I-saw-it  
 'I myself saw it (contrastive topic)'  
**háfi wòáɖo afé lá, fofóa kú xóxo**  
 'before he reached home, his father was already dead (contextualized temporal clause).'

<sup>11</sup> On the differences between the tone systems of Ga and Dangme, see Dakubu 1986.

<sup>12</sup> Viz, Boadi (1974:6): "a focus 'which reflects the speaker's decision as to where the main burden of the message should lie,'" apparently quoting Halliday (1967).

<sup>13</sup> All examples are in the transcriptions of the various sources. If no source is indicated, the transcription is my own.

<sup>14</sup> The three-vowel variation is found in Aja, but in that dialect the conditioning is different from what obtains in Dangme, the tonal behavior of the particle is rather different, and it is more often pronounced *lɔ* (Pazzi 1975:34).

The relatedness of these functions was recognized by Schlegel, who called *la* a "sentence article" (Satzartikel) (1857:24).

#### 4.2 DIACHRONIC RELATIONS

While there is a degree of phonological resemblance among all the particles mentioned, they are also morphemes that might be expected to be phonologically unstable. They may also have undergone functional shift in each language, so that functionally different items may turn out to be genetically related, while functionally similar items may have developed from different roots. The latter is probably the case with Ga *H-le* and Dangme *ɔ*. There is an important syntactic difference, because the Dangme particle takes a plural suffix but the Ga does not. /ɔ/ as a realization of Ga *H-le* occurs only after another /ɔ/, but Dangme *ɔ* has that shape everywhere except after /a/, where (as in Ga) it is /a/. The most significant phonological difference however is tonal. Dangme, unlike Ga, has not two tones but three, and as already mentioned, in its function as a definite article Dangme *ɔ* has mid tone, but as a clause marker, including following a relative clause that qualifies a definite noun, it has low tone, so that two particles can be distinguished (Dakubu 1987:34). In neither case does it raise the tone of the preceding syllable, as *H-le* does. There is therefore no particular reason to think that the Ga and Dangme particles are cognate. It is not at present possible to say whether Proto-Ga-Dangme had one function, which split into two in Dangme and was replaced in both new functions with new, different but similar morphs, or whether the proto-language had two functions, which were collapsed in Ga when the two original morphs were replaced with just one. The latter seems the simpler explanation, but there is as yet no actual evidence for it.

Although the Dangme particle or particles involve no high tone, the Dangme determiner *nɔ* is preceded by a floating high tone in much the same manner as Ga *H-le* (Dakubu 1987:25). The orthography treats *H-nɔ* as two words, *nɛ ɔ*, presumably on the hypothesis that *H-nɔ* historically represents a contraction of these two syllables, of which the first has high tone and the second mid. (Ga also has a determiner *nɛ*, which followed by *H-le* gives *nɛ!ɛ*.) This etymology is not implausible, but neither has it ever been demonstrated. Zimmermann's nineteenth-century Dangme texts give no indication that such a pronunciation once existed, even though he mentions *nɔ*, as a demonstrative pronoun 'that', and one, which is unknown today, as the "full form" of the definite article and "sentence definer" (Zimmermann 1858:451, 454).

Another possibility is that Ga *H-le* and *nɛ* are doublet forms, in which the high tone of *nɛ* represents the original situation and the high-low tone pattern connected with *H-le* represents an old contraction similar to that suggested for Dangme *H-nɔ*. There is precedent for the *l/n* alternation in the Dangme coordinate conjunction 'and', which is usually pronounced *nɛ* in Krobo and other dialects but *lɛ* in Ada.

It is very possible then that, whether or not Ga *H-le* represents a collapse of two syntactic markers, it represents a contraction of two monosyllabic morphemes, the first high, the second non-high. It is even possible that both elements once had the shape /*lɛ*/. In modern Ga there is yet another particle with the shape *lɛ* and low tone, quite distinct from *H-le* that sometimes occurs with topicalized nominal phrases as a kind of emphatic demonstrative, as in (33). In this expression, the first *lɛ* marks contrastive topicalization, and the third behaves in the same way phonologically and is probably there for the same reason, but the second, which (like the third singular pronoun) keeps its /*l*/, is different, and since it does not make much sense to interpret it as the third singular pronoun, it must be a demonstrative. Perhaps it is cognate with the Dangme particle *lɛɛ* with low-high tone that commonly follows topicalized (front-shifted) nominals (Dakubu 1987:38).

- (33) **bo lɛ lɛ lɛ, ...** 'As for you, ...'  
 [bó! é lé! é]  
 T DEM T

Ga **H-lɛ** as a definite marker is clearly comparable to Ewe **lá**, and it seems quite likely that they are cognate. That is, if the proto-Ga form may be reconstructed as \***lé-le**, the Ewe form may be cognate with its first syllable. However, this sheds no light on the second syllable, or on the difference between Ga **H-lɛ** and Dangme **ɔ**. In Ewe the alternation of **la** and **a** already existed in the mid-nineteenth century, when it was noted by Schlegel (1857:23) and also Zimmermann (1858:26, 454), but Zimmermann always spells Ga **H-lɛ** as **le**, and identifies it with the third person singular pronoun **le**. The loss of the consonant in Ga is therefore relatively recent. It is interesting that Protten (1764) invariably spelled definite marker and pronoun the same, **læ**, but consistently attached the former to whatever word preceded it, while writing the pronoun as a separate word. He evidently felt the particle as a clitic, which suggests that at that time the article was already tonally tied to the preceding syllable.

I suggest that Akan **dée** (or **dé**), and not **nó** or **na**, is the most likely cognate of one of the syllables of Ga \***lé-le** and of Ewe **lá**. There are numerous instances of correspondence between Akan /d/ and Ga-Dangme /l/. The validity of the vowel correspondence remains to be determined, but we may note that in all three languages the vowel is retracted, and that Ga-Dangme and Ewe do not have the close spread retracted vowel represented by Akan **e**. The Akan morpheme may also have been borrowed later by Ga, as an element of **díɛntse** 'self', as in **mi díɛntse** 'I myself', compare the eighteenth century **didæ** 'self, own', **nokiæ** 'self' (Protten 1764:C4).

Another Akan particle that might be considered in this connection is **â**, demonstrated in (34).

(34) Akan

a. (Christaller 1875)

obí    â        ókò        asú    ni  
 person PART    he-goes-to    water    there-is  
 There is one that goes for water.

b. (Boadi 1974)

eyi    ne        asem    a        etoo        me  
 this FOCUS-is    matter which    it-befall    me  
 This the incident that happened to me.

This particle was treated by Christaller (1875:44) as a relative pronoun, and later authors have followed suit (e.g., Boadi 1974:16ff). It is true that it always occurs in a construction that requires English 'who' or 'which' in its translation. On the other hand, a nominal head followed by **â** is always repeated by a pronoun in a following clause, which suggests a kind of topicalization. Furthermore, **â** belongs phonologically with the element that precedes it, whether nominal phrase or clause, and not the relative clause that follows. That is, its high-low tone is heard as a downglide with length on the last syllable of a tone phrase (compare Dolphyne 1988:44(28)). Since they both represent a downglide from high tone on a vowel which can be /a/ (in Ga) or must be (in Akan), it is possible that Ga **H-lɛ** is phonologically (diachronically) related to this particle, although their present functions are considerably different, since the Ga particle occurs at the end of temporal clauses and Akan **â** does not. If this is correct, and the

identification of post-nominal phrase Akan *deɛ* with *H-lɛ* is also correct, it means that the original Akan particle split into two, and in one function but not the other the initial \*/d/ disappeared and a vowel assimilation or neutralization took place.

The particle is not necessarily limited to Kwa. Two North-West Oti-Volta<sup>15</sup> languages have definite and contextualizing particle that strikingly resemble Ga *H-lɛ* and Ewe *lá*. Both Dagaare (Central dialects) and its close relative Guruni have a VP-final particle *lá*. In Dagaare it follows both perfective and imperfective verbs, unless an adverbial expression follows. An object pronoun is incorporated. In short utterances, such as (35), *lá* is required.

(35) Dagaare

n	da	zoe	la		'I ran.'
I	PAST	ran	PART		
n	nyuuri	la	kũɔ̃		'I am drinking water.'
I	drinking	PART	water		
o	koma	la	a	gane	'He gave me the book.'
he	gave	me	PART	the-book	
but					
deɛ	nyuuri	a	kũɔ̃	wĩũ	'Der drank the water quickly.'

In Bolgatanga dialects of Guruni (popularly called Frafra) the particle follows imperfective verbs, and is followed by downstepping of any following high tone that may be treated as a floating low tone, i.e., *lá-L*. This language also has a post-nominal phrase definite article or determiner *lá*.

(36) Guruni

kòʔòm	lá				'the water'
à	dìtì	lá!	ságbóé		'he is eating porridge'
à	ɲmèʔèrè	lá!	bóó!lé	lá	'he is hitting the ball'
he	hitting	PART	ball	the	

In the Zuarungu dialect of Guruni, the situation seems to be a little different, but the examples in (37) present a comparable distribution for the cognate particle *lé*.

(37) Guruni (Zuarungu, Schaefer 1980)

nyá	díkí	zihù	lé		
the	took	fish	the		
'... then took the (previously mentioned) fish'					
bàn	bùgù	báʔáhí	!	lé	
they-TOP	get-wet	finish	PART		
'... when they were wet ...'					

These particle all seem to be definite or contextualizing or both. Schaefer (1980:37) refers to *lé* in both examples of (37) as a textual determiner, and states that a comparable particle has been reported in Hanga, another Oti-Volta language. Even though the Oti-Volta particles seem to contextualize and/or make definite nominal phrases and verb phrases, rather than nominal phrases and clauses, the syntactic and

<sup>15</sup> A sub-group of Central Gur. Both Dagaare and Guruni are spoken in northern Ghana.

phonological parallel with Ga **H-ɛ** seems obvious, to the point that diachronic relationship may be suspected. In Bolgatanga Guruni, as in Ga, the definite/contextualizing particle is to be distinguished from a segmentally homophonous third person singular pronoun, *lã*.

#### 4.3 CONCLUDING REMARKS

I suggest that contrastive topic marking that involves distinctions among contextualized information, information as recognition of a new system (unmarked in Ga), and information as a (new) choice within a given, contextualized system (marked in Ga by **H-ɛ**) is a common feature in Kwa languages, and that a morphological relationship between the expression of the latter and the expression of definiteness is also widespread. Further, there seems to be a high degree of cognacy in the marks involved. Whether or not this feature of information structure is marked in Oti-Volta (and possibly other Gur) languages remains to be determined, but clearly those languages do have particle marking definiteness and topic that may very well be cognate. The marking of phenomena related to definiteness and context by particle involving high tone and beginning in *l* or *d*, which in Kwa tend to disappear, is remarkably widespread, and should repay a more detailed investigation. On the other hand, the nature of the diachronic conclusions that can be drawn will vary considerably, depending on the scope and rigor of the comparison. After all, 'the' is also *lé* in Ngambay, which is not even a Niger-Congo language, not to mention French.

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