

## **THE CORRELATION BETWEEN ASPECT AND TRANSITIVITY ALTERNATION IN DAGBANI**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper attempts to describe and analyze the relation between aspect and transitivity in Dagbani, a Gur language spoken in the Northern Region of Ghana by the Dagbamba. The author does this by focusing on the fact that there are different (perfective and imperfective) aspectual markers that correlate with the presence or absence of NP objects or adjunct phrases, such as adverbs. I conclude that pronouncing any syntactic element after a Dagbani verbal phrase or otherwise is determined by the aspectual suffixes of that verbal phrase.

In an attempt to find explanations to this transitivity alternations, I make two hypotheses; the incorporated pronouns hypothesis and the focus hypothesis. None of these however, seems to adequately address the problem and I leave the working out of this to future research. It is shown that the correlation between aspect and transitivity in Dagbani sounds (at least superficially), very similar to the so-called “conjunct/disjunct” or “short/long” verb phenomenon that is found in a number of Bantu languages.

**Key Words:** Aspect, sentence structure, perfective, imperfective, transitivity alternation.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Dagbani is a South Western Oti-Volta central Gur language spoken in Northern Ghana, Bendor-Samuel (1989), Naden (1988). It is spoken mainly in the north-eastern part of Ghana especially within the Northern Region of Ghana specifically in Tamale and its surroundings and in Yendi and its surroundings. The speakers of Dagbani call themselves Dagbamba (plural) and the singular is Dagbana. Just like many languages, Dagbani has different dialects. Some other Gur languages which are somewhat close to Dagbani in terms of linguistic features include: Dagaare, Mampruli, Safaleba, Kusaal, Gurune. Hudu (2010:3) also argues that Dagbani is the mother tongue of two

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ethnic groups, which include the Dagomba and Nanumba. By this he means that Nanuni is not a distinct language from Dagbani. He further assumes that Dagbani shares a high level of mutual intelligibility with the Mampruli speakers of Mampruli. Abdul-Rahman (2005) also makes the same argument that Nanuni be seen as a dialect of Dagbani rather than a language on its own. The data in this paper is based on the Tomosili dialect.

Aspect is identified as a very fundamental category of the verb in most languages. According to Bhat (1999:43) “aspect indicates the temporal structure of an event, i.e. the way in which the event occurs in time (on-going or completed, beginning, continuing, or ending, iterative or semelfactive, etc)”. According to Adger (2004:50) “semantic difference between ongoing and completed action is one of aspect”. In most natural languages, two basic forms of aspectual distinctions have been identified: the perfective and imperfective aspects. Traditionally, the imperfective aspect includes the habitual and progressive forms of the verb. The distinction between the perfective and imperfective forms of the verb is very important as they are used to codify different situations in languages.

In the literature, the term ‘aspect’ has been assumed to have a narrow and broad sense. In the narrow sense, it has been argued that the term is used to indicate whether the action that is denoted by the verb is conceived to be punctual, that is whether it marks an action that is in action with an undivided moment of time, or perceived to be in progression. It is assumed that aspect when viewed from this perspective is divided into about two to four types that are, aorist/imperfective, perfective or neutral. Sasse (2003:3) uses the term ASPECT1 to refer to aspect in its narrow form. This pattern of aspect mostly is realized via morphological marking (inflection) as seemingly the case in many languages. As mentioned earlier in this paper, ‘aspect’ has also been viewed from a broad perspective. In the broad sense, it is seen as a situation where a language uses verbal particles and auxiliaries to encode this verbal property. In Sasse (2002:201) the term ASPECT2 is used to refer to this form of aspectual marking. The former type of ‘aspect’ that is the narrow ‘aspect’ is what is discussed in this paper. This is borne out of the observation that the form of aspect discussed is done purely with the use of aspectual markers which are inflectional in nature.

This paper, beyond this section, is structured as follows: part one discusses the interaction between the aspectual alternations and syntax in Dagbani, concentrating on both the perfective and imperfective forms of the verb in positive sentences. In part two, we discuss the same verbal paradigm in negative sentences. The same section discusses the various hypotheses that have been propounded to account for these syntactic alternations in the verbal paradigm and briefly compares the phenomenon with what is observed in Bantu languages. Conclusions and summary end the paper in section three.

**IMPERFECTIVE ASPECTUAL ALTERNATIONS**

According to Bhat (1999: 45), “the imperfective provides the situation from the inside, thus the imperfective views the situation as ongoing from the time of speech or habitual” Dagbani has a morphological alternation in the marking of aspect within its verbal paradigm. This morphological alternation is valid for both the perfective and imperfective aspectual forms in Dagbani. These different morphological alternations come with different syntactic requirements in the language. The different syntactic requirements of these different aspectual forms in the language will herein be referred to as “transitive” and “intransitive” alternation. This is shown in the paradigm in (1) below.

**Table 1: Dagbani Transitivity Alternations**

	Transitive	Intransitive
Imperfective	di-ri X They eat, they are eating X	di-ra <sup>1</sup> They eat, they are eating
Perfective	di-Ø X They have eaten X	di-ya They have eaten

My use of the terms “intransitive” and “transitive” are due to the fact that the morphological/aspectual alternation has a correlation with the permissibility or otherwise of an NP complement or adverbial phrase following the VP. The intransitive form of the verbal phrase<sup>2</sup> occurs clause finally whilst the transitive form canonically cannot occur in a clausal final position. In other words when the intransitive form of the verb occurs with an

<sup>1</sup> The aspectual suffixes **-ra/-ri**, have phonologically conditioned variants, which are **-da/-di**. These are used when a verb ends in a consonant in Dagbani. There are other variants: **-ta** and **-ti** which occur with disyllabic verbs whose second syllables have the lateral /r/ in the onset position.

<sup>2</sup> My use of the term verbal phrase refers to the verb without an inclusion of the pre and post modifiers that it may occur with. In this light, my use of this term somewhat differs from what Dakubu (1989) and Atintono (2005) who in their analyses of the Gurunε verb use the term verbal phrase to refer to the verb alone or the verb together with other pre and post modifiers.

NP object, the resulting structure will be ungrammatical, whilst the transitive alternation invariably needs an NP object or adjunct phrase to be complete.<sup>3</sup>

(1) **a. Bi-hi**                      **maa**                      **di-ra**                      “INTRANSITIVE”<sup>4</sup>  
Child-PL              DEF      eat-IMPERF  
*“The children eat/are eating”*

**b. Bi-hi**                      **maa**    **di-ri**    **shinkaafa**              “TRANSITIVE”  
child-PL              DEF      eat-IMPERF      rice  
*“They eat/are eating rice”*

(2) **a.\*Bi-hi**                      **maa**    **di-ra**    **shinkaafa**              “INTRANSITIVE”  
Child-PL              DEF      eat-IMPERF      rice

**b.\*Bi-hi**    **maa**    **di-ri** ----                      “TRANSITIVE”  
Child-PL    DEF      eat-IMPERF

The ungrammaticality of the structures in (3) is due to the fact that the intransitive version has been assigned NP complement **shinkaafa** “rice” as in (3a) whilst the intransitive version has been used without an NP complement and no adverbial phrase too. The distribution of adjunct phrases, such as adverbs is also affected by the imperfective aspectual suffix in the language. This is shown in (4).

(3) a. **\*Mikashini**                      **di-ra**    **yiriŋ**                      “INTRANSITIVE”  
Mikashini      eat-IMPERF carelessly

**b. Chentiwuni**                      **di-ri**    **pam**                      “TRANSITIVE”  
Chentiwuni eat-IMPERF alot  
*‘Chentiwuni eats/is eating a lot’*

We see from the sentences in (4) that whilst (4a) is ungrammatical, (4b) is grammatical. The ungrammaticality of (4a) is borne out of the fact that the intransitive version of the imperfective aspect is made to occur with an adjunct phrase, in this case the adverb **yiriŋ** which means “carelessly”. This

<sup>3</sup> Abbreviations used in this paper include: TDP= time depth particles, PERF=perfective, IMPERF=imperfective, PLU=plural, DEF=definite, SG=singular, INTEN=intensifier 1st, 2nd, 3rd for first, second, and third person respectively, FOC=focus, ADJUN=adjunct, NEG=negative, A=answer, Q=question.

<sup>4</sup>Dakubu (1989) and Saanchi (2003) use the terminologies Perfective A, Perfective B and Imperfective A and Imperfective B to describe the same morphological alternation in Dagaare.

could possibly be explained with the fact that the imperfective aspectual marker occurs with neither an NP complement, nor adverbial phrases. If this were not the case, then we would not have had the sentence in (4a) being ungrammatical.

## PERFECTIVE ASPECTUAL ALTERNATION

The transitivity alternation is present in the perfective aspectual forms in Dagbani. As mentioned, the perfective aspect is used to indicate situational perfection, completeness. It is used to indicate that a given situation talked of has been perfected or completed. Just like what has been observed of the imperfective aspectual form of the verb, I hypothesise that there are two different morphological forms available for the perfective aspect in Dagbani. One form which I call the perfective transitive usually has the same morphological shape as the neutral form of the verb and has the morpheme  $-\emptyset$  whilst the other which I call the perfective intransitive is invariably marked with the morpheme  $-ya$ . This paradigm is shown in (5) and (6).

- (5) a. **O**            **di-ya**            **pumpɔŋɔ**            “INTRANSITIVE”  
           3SG    eat-PERF            now  
           ‘S/he has eaten now’.
- b. **Ti**            **ku-ya**            **pam**                “INTRANSITIVE”  
           2pl kill-PERF a lot  
           ‘We have killed a lot’.
- c. \***Mandeeya**            **da-ya buku**            “INTRANSITIVE”  
           Mandeeya            buy-PERF            book
- d. \***Mandeeya**            **bu-ya o**                “INTRANSITIVE”  
           Mandeeya            beat-PERF 3sg.

We observe from the data above that the intransitive perfective cannot occur with NP objects. However, it does not have to necessarily occur clause-finally like the imperfective intransitive since it is possible for it to occur with adjunct phrases such as adverbials as in (5a) and (5b). Adjuncts are themselves not obligatory arguments of the sentence structure. It is therefore no surprise that the perfective intransitive can occur with adjuncts. The ungrammaticality of (5c) is due to the fact that the perfective intransitive has occurred with an NP complement, which in this case is **buku**, which is “a book”. We see also that the sentence in (5d) is also ungrammatical and that

could presuppose that the perfective is just incompatible with NP complements be they object pronouns or full NPs.

In the data that follow in (6) we will observe that the perfective transitive obligatorily requires an NP object and can also co-occur with adjuncts. Without the NP object or adjunct, the sentence would be considered as ungrammatical or at best incomplete.

- (6) a. **Abu da-Ø yili** “TRANSITIVE”  
 Abu buy-PERF house  
 ‘*Abu has bought a house*’.
- b. **Mikashi di- Ø vienyela** “TRANSITIVE”  
 Mikashini eat-PERF well  
 ‘*Mikashini has eaten well*’.
- c. \***Fati di- Ø pumpəŋə** “TRANSITIVE”  
 Fati eat-PERF now
- d. \* **Mikashini di- Ø -----** “TRANSITIVE”  
 Mikashini eat-PERF

From this data, we observe that the transitive perfective does occur with NP complements. It can also occur with manner adverbs as in (6b). However, the ungrammaticality of (6c) probably gives a clue that it is not possible for the perfective transitive to occur with time adverbials. Though the manner adverbial **vienyela** meaning “well” does not affect the grammaticality of the sentence in (6b), the grammaticality of sentence (6c) is affected by the time adverbial **pumpəŋə** meaning “now”.

### 1.2. Possible Separate Transitivity Morpheme Segmentation

Further, a reader immediately notes that there seems to be something “funny” about these aspect markers. With a critical observation, we notice that the imperfective intransitive has the morphemes **-ra/da** whilst the imperfective transitive has the morphemes **-ri/di**. With the perfective intransitive too, we could have **-y-a**.

Comparing across forms, it seems possible for one to hypothesize that the **r/d-** is probably the imperfective marker whilst the **-a** is the marker of intransitivity and the **-i** could then be assumed to be a marker of transitivity. This claim of possible separate morpheme segmentation is shown in a more picturesque manner below.

r/d-i	r/d-a
PROG-TRANS	PROG-INTRANS

y-a  
 PERF-INTRANS

The morpheme separation analysis would seem to be unattractive given the fact that in the perfective aspect, the same transitivity alternation exists, yet it is hard to segmentalize the transitivity morpheme. Therefore, the author will rather deal with distinct aspectual markers than a separate transitivity morpheme, which may tempt one to see them as different verbal paradigms.

**NEGATION AND THE VERBAL PARADIGM**

We observe that the data that we have so far examined are drawn from positive sentences. This section of the paper is aimed at examining how the interaction between transitivity alternation and aspectual suffixes behave in negative clauses. Dagbani marks negation by the use of particles which take the pre verbal slots. These particles are **ku** and **bi** which are used for the encoding of future and non-future negation respectively. I will investigate how this morphological alternation is realised with both the perfective and imperfective verbal paradigm. In the data that follow (7-8), we illustrate the imperfective verbal pattern.

- (7) a. \***bi-hi**            **maa**   **ku**    **di-ri**            “TRANSITIVE”  
           Child-PLU DEF NEG eat-IMPERF
  
- b. **bi-hi**            **maa**   **ku**    **di-ra**            “INTRANSITIVE”  
           Child-PLU DEF NEG eat-IMPERF  
           *“The children will not be eating”*
  
- c. \***bi-hi**    **maa**   **ku**    **di-ra**   **shinkaafa**    “INTRANSITIVE”  
           Child-PLU DEF    NEG    eat-IMPERF    rice
  
- d. **bi-hi**    **maa**   **ku**    **bo-ri**   **shinkaafa**    “TRANSITIVE”  
           Child-PLU DEF NEG eat-IMPERF rice  
           *“The children will not want rice”*

In the sentences in (7) we observe that (7a) and (7c) are ungrammatical whilst (7b) is grammatical. I assume that the ungrammaticality of the (7a) is borne out of the fact that the transitive version of the imperfective aspect has been used intransitively. Assigning the intransitive version of the imperfective aspect, an NP complement is what is responsible for the ungrammaticality of (7c). The sentence in (7d) is also grammatical because the transitive imperfective aspectual suffix has been assigned an NP object as required of its syntax. Based on this, I make the hypothesis that the future negation particle can occur with the imperfective aspect in Dagbani and that transitivity alternation does not neutralize in negative clauses. In (8), I further explore the

co-occurrence permissibility between these suffixes and adjunct clauses in negative clauses.

- (8) a. \* **bi-hi** **maa** **ku** **di-ra** **viɛnyɛla** “INTRANSITIVE”  
 Child-PLU DEF NEG eat-IMPERF well
- b. **bi-hi** **maa** **ku** **di-ri** **viɛnyɛla** “TRANSITIVE”  
 Child-PLU DEF NEG eat-IMPERF well  
*“The children will not be eating well”.*
- c. \* **bi-hi** **maa** **ku** **di-ra** **pumpɔŋɔ** “INTRASITIVE”  
 Child-PLU DEF NEG eat-IMPERF now

We observe from the data in (8a) and (8c) that even in the negative clauses, the **-ra** suffix cannot occur with adjuncts, whether adverbials of manner or of time. The **-ri** suffix however also demonstrates the same pattern observed already in that it can occur with adjuncts. This makes me assume that the **-ra** suffix needs canonical intransitive sentence, whilst the **-ri** suffix occurs only in a canonical transitive sentence.

I further investigate the same phenomenon with the non-future negation marker. This is to help us come up with diversified data which will add weight to conclusions that will be made.

- (9) a. \* **Abu** **bi** **ku-ra** **baa** “INTRANSITIVE”  
 Abu NEG kill-IMPERF dog
- b. **Abu** **bi** **di-ri** **banchi** “TRANSITIVE”  
 Abu NEG eat-IMPERF cassava  
*“Abu does not eat cassava”.*
- c. **Abu** **bi** **di-ra** “INTRANSITIVE”  
 Abu NEG eat-IMPERF  
*“Abu does not eat”.*
- d. \* **Abu** **bi** **ku-ri** “TRANSITIVE”  
 Abu NEG kill-IMPERF

We observe in the data in (9) that there is no difference between the conclusions made of the future negation marker and the non-future negation marker.

In the data in (10), I take a look at the perfective aspect of the Dagbani verbal phrase and how it interacts with negation and the observed transitivity alternation.

- (10) a. **Abu bi di- Ø shinkaafa** “TRANSITIVE”  
 Abu NEG eat-PERF rice  
*“Abu has not eaten rice”.*
- b. **Abu ku di shikaafa** “TRANSITIVE”  
 Abu NEG eat rice  
*“Abu will not eat rice”*
- c. **Abu ku di** “TRANSITIVE”  
 Abu NEG eat.  
*“Abu will not eat”.*
- d. **Abu ku di pumpɔŋɔ** “TRANSITIVE”  
 Abu NEG eat now  
*“Abu will not eat now”.*

We see in the data in (10) that the transitive perfective displays a pattern in the negative clauses that is slightly different from what is observed earlier. The grammaticality of the sentences in (10) however means that the perfective transitive is not excluded from negative sentences. It is observed in (10c) that the perfective transitive has been used intransitively in that the verb **di** that is “eat” has occurred clause finally. In the non-negative structures, we observed that it is not possible for the perfective transitive to occur without an NP complement or adjunct, but the negative clause displays a different pattern where we have it occurring in clause final position. The author currently does not have a reason for this different syntactic feature of this aspectual form. However, one fact that is observed is that the morphological alternation is neutralized here. In the data that follow in (11), I investigate what the extent of the phenomenon is in the interaction between negation and the perfective intransitive aspectual marker.

- (11) a. **\*Bia maa bi deeri-ya** “INTRANSITIVE”  
 child DEF NEG collect-PERF
- b. **\*Bia maa bi gbihya pumpɔŋɔ**  
 “INTRANSITIVE”  
 Child DEF NEG sleep-PERF now

The data in (11) also gives us an interesting pattern. The perfective intransitive which I have argued needs a canonical intransitive sentence does not seem to be compatible with negative clauses. This contention of mine is obvious in the ungrammaticality of (11a) and (11b). The presence of the negative phrase which takes the preverbal syntactic slot is therefore assumed

to be incompatible with the perfective intransitive marker. This observation makes the author to assume that the perfective intransitive is totally excluded from negative sentences.

**(12) Summary of the Aspectual Suffixes and their Morphological Alternations.**

	Suffix	permissibility in negative clauses	adjunct/ NP object
Perfective transitive	-Ø	-compatible with negative clauses	-needs obligatory NP object. -can take an adjunct
Perfective intransitive	-ya	- incompatible with negative sentences.	-cannot co-occur with NP object. -can occur with an adjunct.
Imperfective transitive	-ri/ di/ti	-compatible with negative sentences.	-needs an obligatory NP object -can occur with an adjunct
Imperfective intransitive	-ra/da/ta	-compatible with negative clauses	-cannot occur with NP object -cannot occur with adjuncts

*2.1. Transitivity Alternation; Plausible Accounts*

It remains as a puzzle in the analysis as to what could be responsible for the transitivity alternation in the encoding of aspect in the Dagbani verbal paradigm. The forms of the verb which have been labelled “intransitive perfective” and “intransitive imperfective” do not permit combination with NP objects. When those forms of the verb co-occur with NP objects, it results in ungrammaticality. The conclusion then is that they are used intransitively. Thus the possibility of getting any element coming after the verb in Dagbani is a matter of the type of the aspectual suffix that is attached to that verb. In this paper, I attempt hypothesizing two plausible explanations for this morphological alternation: the incorporated pronouns hypothesis and the focus hypothesis though both seem to inadequately address the issue.

### 2.1.1. The Incorporated Pronoun Hypothesis.

One assumption that has been made in this paper has been that the morpheme **-ya** or **-ra** or its variant **-da** and **-ta** are incorporated pronouns. Any verb that is used in this verbal form is therefore assumed to have an incorporated pronoun and so the prohibition on its co-occurrence with NP objects and sometimes adjunct phrases, whilst the transitive form of the verb does lack an incorporated pronoun. By virtue of the claim that the intransitive verbal forms have incorporated pronouns, it becomes unacceptable for them to take NP objects or pronominals.

However, this assumption is threatened by the observation that this form of the verb can be used in passive structures as shown in (13).

- (13) a. **Puu maa ko-ya** "INTRANSITIVE"  
Farm DEF weed-PERF  
*"The farm is weeded"*
- b. **Dam maa bi-ya** "INTRANSITIVE"  
Pito DEF cook-PERF  
*"The pito is cooked".*

The fact that there is the possibility of using these forms in passive structures then suggests that the morpheme could have an alternative analysis as a passive morpheme. However, it does seem that this hypothesis does not unravel the puzzle of this morphological alternation in Dagbani, since only inanimate nominals can assign these forms of the verb passivity reading. When the NPs used are animate ones, the resulting sentences would still have active readings and not passive readings as shown below.

- (14) a. **Tiyumba ko-ya** "INTRANSITIVE"  
Tiyumba farm-PERF  
*"Tiyumba has weeded"*
- b. **Mbangba di-ya** "INTRANSITIVE"  
Mbangba eat-PERF  
*"Mbangba has eaten"*

Thus the selective nature of NP requirement threatens the analysis of this morpheme as a passive morpheme. The second hypothesis is then formulated to see how it will help address the puzzle of morphological alternation.

### 2.1.2. The Focus Hypothesis.

The next hypothesis that the author formulates in an attempt to explain the puzzle of the transitivity alternation manifested by the Dagbani verbal paradigm is the focus hypothesis. This hypothesis assumes that morphological alternation of transitivity probably has focal interpretation in the language. I thus postulate that when the verbal word is used intransitively, it means that the verb is focused whilst the transitive use of the verb implies that whatever follows the verb, whether an adjunct or NP complement, is also focused. The alternation is therefore assumed to have focus properties: one in which the focus is on the verb itself and the other in which the focus is on the NP or adjunct that follows the verb. It also turns out that there is evidence that threatens an argument for an analysis in which focus is encoded directly with the verbal alternation. The two arguments that I see as a threat to this focal interpretations on the morphological alternation of the verb are: the distribution of certain post verbal particles: **la** and **mi** that encode focus on NPs/adjuncts and verbs respectively and answers to content-questions in which the verb will be expected to be in focus. I view focus in line with the speculations of (Dik 1997: 326) who assumes that:

“The focal information in a linguistic expression is that information which is relatively the most important or salient in the given communicative setting, and considered by S[peaker, A.S.] to be most essential for A[ddressee, A.S.] to integrate into his pragmatic information”.

(15) Q: **a. Bo ka Abu niŋda?**

What foc Abu do-IMPERF

*“What is Abu doing?”*

**A: b.≠ O di-ra**

He eat-IMPERF

*“He eats/is eating”*

“INTRANSITIVE”

**c. O di-ri mi**

He eat-IMPERF foc

*“He is eating”.*

“TRANSITIVE”

The question in (15a) has the information structure stated as Verb=New, Subject=Old. Accordingly, going by the definition that the focal information in any linguistic information is the most salient, we will expect that the salient information here is the verb since it is not known and is what is being requested. It will therefore be expected to be focused. However, the answer with the **-ra** suffix which is hypothesized to be the focus marker on the verb is not the felicitous answer to the question. However, we observe that, (15c) is the felicitous answer. This thus serves as counter-evidence to any claim that the intransitive alternation encodes focus on the verb. I thus submit that it will not be a promising analysis. Focus on the verb is therefore likely to be a

syntactic phenomenon, encoded with the presence of a post verbal particle **mi**. If it were really the case that, the intransitive alternation of the Dagbani verb phrase encodes focal interpretation on the verb, then the answer in (15b) should have been felicitous as an answer to the content-question in (15a) which demands a focused verb. The same observation is made of the transitive alternation which is assumed to be marking focus on the NP complements and adjuncts that follow the verb phrase. This is shown in (16).

**(16) Q: a. Bo ka Abu di-ra?**

What FOC Abu eat-IMPERF  
*“What is Abu eating/does Abu eat?”*

**A: b. ≠O di-ri nimdi** “TRANSITIVE”  
 3SG eat-IMPERF meat  
*“He eats/ is eating meat”.*

**c. O da-ri la nimdi** “TRANSITIVE”  
 3SG buy-IMPERF FOC meat  
*“He buys/is buying meat”.*

**d. Nimdi ka o da-ra** “INTRANSITIVE”  
 Meat FOC 3SG eat-IMPERF  
*“It is meat that he buys/is buying”*

Just as was observed in (15), we see something “funny” about the data in (16). The question in (16) has the information structure: subject=old, verb=old, object=new. By virtue of this, we expect to get an answer that will focus the NP object complement. However, the structure in (16b) which has the suffix we assume encodes focal properties on NP complements and adjuncts that follow it is not appropriate as an answer. We have two answers and both of these could be considered as appropriate depending on the intention of the speaker. If the speaker wants to submit the NP object complement **nimdi** meaning “meat” as the only entity that holds in the context of (16), then (16d) is the more appropriate than (16c). In this case, the speaker encodes exhaustive/contrastive focus. However, if the speaker intends submitting **nimdi** “meat” as just new information that is requested, then (16c) is more appropriate than (16d). The data in (15) and (16) therefore serve as evidences to counteract any claim that may associate the verbal alternation in Dagbani with focus marking. This puzzle on what triggers the verbal alternation in Dagbani is therefore left for future research to shed more light on.

*2.2. Sharing some Parallelism with the Bantu Conjoint and Disjoint Verb Forms?*

Though the reason(s) that explain(s) the different syntactic requirement of the various verbal alternation continues to be a puzzle for this current paper, I make the submission that the correlation between aspect and transitivity in Dagbani is somewhat (at least superficially), similar to what has been called “conjoint/disjoint” or “short/long” verb phenomenon of some Bantu languages. This conjoint/disjoint verb phenomenon is a very prominent morphological feature and what triggers this continues to be an issue of debate among researchers of Bantu languages: (Buell 2005, 2006) and Van der Wal (2009). According to Buell (2006:10), this phenomenon is just like that of the Dagbani language where the possibility or otherwise of getting a verb occur in clause final position or otherwise is a matter of the verbal suffix that is attached to a particular verb. Researchers of Bantu languages have used the terminologies “conjoint” (CJ) or “disjoint” (DJ) to refer to this verbal phenomenon. They are also called “short/long” verb phenomenon. “the conjoint form cannot appear clause finally while the disjoint form canonically does appear in clause final position”. Another Bantu syntactician, Van der Wal (2009: 217) also submits that:

*“a very salient and easily detectable difference between the verb forms is their sentence-final distribution: the CJ forms need to be followed by some other element, while the DJ form can occur sentence finally, although it does not need to”.*

The data below taken from Buell (2006:10) illustrates the phenomenon of conjoint/disjoint verbal alternations in Zulu, a Bantu language of the Nguni cluster spoken primarily in South Africa.

- (17) a. A- bafana [ ba- ya- cul- a. ] (disjoint)  
DET- 2.boys 2.SBJ- ya- sing- FV
- b. \* A- bafana [ ba- cul- a. ] (conjoint)  
DET- 2.boys 2.SBJ- sing- FV  
“The boys are singing.”
- (18) a. A- bafana [ ba- cul- a i- ngoma. ] (conjoint)  
DET- 2.boys 2.SBJ- sing- FV DET- 9.song
- b. \* A- bafana [ ba- ya- cul- a ] i- ngoma. (disjoint)  
DET- 2.boys 2.SBJ- ya- sing- FV DET- 9.song  
“The boys are singing a song.”

From these, it seems the observation that what is termed as “disjoint”/“short” verbal form parallels what I call “intransitive” in Dagbani,

whilst the conjoint verbal alternation parallels with the so-called “transitive” in Dagbani. I however do not lose sight of the fact that one may have to do a detailed study of the phenomenon in the two languages before a concrete conclusion can be drawn on the degree of parallelism between the two languages. At least superficially however, one could make the submission that the “intransitive” and “transitive” alternation in Dagbani is somewhat similar to the so-called “conjoint/disjoint” or “short/long” verb phenomenon displayed by a number of Bantu languages.

### 3. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS ON FINDINGS

This paper has attempted to describe and analyse the interaction between aspectual suffixes and transitivity in Dagbani. It is concluded from the foregoing that in Dagbani, there is a tight relationship between the encoding of aspect and verbal transitivity in Dagbani. I coined the terms perfective transitive versus perfective intransitive and imperfective transitive versus imperfective intransitive for the fact that the selection of a particular aspectual suffixes allowed or disallowed the possibility of pronouncing any syntactic element after that verbal element. I showed that the perfective transitive has a null suffix  $-\emptyset$  whose representation is the same as the neutral form of the verb, whilst the perfective intransitive has a **-ya** morpheme suffixed to the verb. The imperfective transitive also has **-di/-ti** or its variant **-ri** which occurs intervocally. The imperfective intransitive has **-da/-ta** which occurs after words that end in nasals or its allomorph **-ra** which also occurs in intervocalic positions. An attempt to do possible separate transitivity morpheme segmentation was also found not to be good enough for the language. I therefore considered dealing with distinct aspectual markers rather than a separate transitivity morpheme, which may tempt one to see them as different verbal paradigms. The imperfective transitive can but needs not occur with an adjunct phrase.

It was also hypothesized that the “intransitive” aspectual suffix canonically occurs in an intransitive sentence, whilst the “transitive” aspectual suffix canonically needs a transitive sentence. The perfective transitive aspectual alternation was however observed not to be totally excluded from negative sentences.

The hypotheses I propounded in an attempt to account for this morphological alternation: the incorporated pronoun hypothesis and the focus hypothesis were found to be inadequate in accounting for the transitivity alternation. I have therefore not been able to readily account for the transitivity alternation and leave out this for future research to investigate. I conclude that although there may be need to further probe into the nature of the conjoint vs disjoint or long vs short verb phenomenon in the Bantu and phenomenon discussed in Dagbani, before a solid conclusion could be drawn on how related the two are, one could at least assume superficially, that this

phenomenon interaction between the verbal morphology and transitivity alternation in Dagbani seems somewhat very related to what has been called the “conjoint/disjoint” or “short/long” verb phenomenon that is found in a number of Bantu languages.

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