Topic and focus fields in Naki

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Abstract

Naki, a mostly undescribed Bantoid language of Northwest Cameroon with SVO as its canonical word order, makes use of an interesting information-structure encoding construction wherein a non-object focused element is shifted into immediately postverbal position. In this respect, Naki is similar to Aghem and Noni, two other languages of the area. However, unlike these languages, this word order shift is associated with special tone marking on the verb, and, in transitive sentences, it typically triggers fronting of objects to a preverbal position. This paper presents an analysis of this construction, situating it both with respect to general properties of Naki information-structure encoding and with respect to current theoretical approaches to information-structure sensitive word-order shifts. An important conclusion of the study is that Naki surface syntax seems better characterized in terms of linear fields than in terms of constituency trees.

<div align="center">**Topic and focus fields in Naki**[1]</div>

1 Introduction

Naki is a Bantoid language of Northwest Cameroon, belonging to the Eastern Beboid subgroup, with, perhaps, 3000–4000 speakers.[2] While proper comparative work has yet to be done, impressionistically, Naki has many affinities with Noni (Hyman 1981), the only Beboid language for which there is a grammar. Previous work on the language includes: Hombert (1980), a survey of noun classes in all of Beboid; survey work done by SIL (Hamm et al. (2002), Hamm (2002), Brye and Brye (2002)); Kum (2002), a description of Naki phonology; and a word list in Chilver and Kaberry (1974:37–40). To the best of my knowledge, there is no published work on Naki syntax, semantics, or pragmatics.[3]

The primary purpose of this paper is to describe and analyze an information-structure encoding construction in Naki in which a non-object focused constituent appears in immediately postverbal position—the canonical position for objects—and the verb shows special tone marking. This construction will be given the label *postverbal focalization*. Since comparable constructions are reported in the neighboring Grassfields Bantu language Aghem and in Noni, data from these languages will discussed as well.

The structure of this paper is as follows. In section 2, I will give a brief overview of pertinent aspects of Naki syntax. Section 3 will then give a summary of what is presently known about the general encoding of information structure in Naki. In section 4, a detailed description of postverbal focalization will be given, and, in section 5, an analysis of this construction will be presented, wherein the Naki sentence is conceptualized as containing a preverbal topic field and a postverbal focus field. This type of analysis will be contrasted with a currently popular type of analysis of information-structure sensitive word alternations which makes use of dedicated topic and focus positions in an abstract syntactic constituency structure. Section 6 will offer a brief conclusion.

There is no standardized (or even non-standardized) orthography for Naki. The examples are transcribed using my own evolving system.[4] The tone transcriptions should be reasonably accurate in terms of indicating surface tonal realization, though they have been standardized in some places. A full tonemic analysis has not yet been completed.

2 Brief overview of Naki sentential syntax

Basic sentential word order in Naki is Subject-Verb-Object (SVO). Accordingly, I will refer to SV(O) sentences as exhibiting *canonical* word order. Verbs do not agree with their subject or object. (There is a fairly robust noun class system in the language, but it does not play a role in verbal morphology.) Verbal segmental morphology is limited to some segmental Tense-Mood-

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[2] Naki has Ethnologue 15 code [mff]. It is also known as Mekaf, which is the name of the largest Naki-speaking village. The Nigerian language listed in Ethnologue 15 as Mashi with code [jms] is probably a variety of Naki.

[3] The Naki data in this paper was collected during field work conducted in Bamenda, Wum, and Mekaf, Cameroon during 2004 and 2005. The primary consultant was Kum George Ngong, born in Mekaf and living in Bamenda. The primary contact language was English and, secondarily, Cameroonian Pidgin. Sentences marked with a "@" (for "attested") are drawn from unpublished texts produced by various speakers.

[4] The following transcription and glossing conventions will be maintained. For tones: à low, ā mid, á high, ǎ low-high, â high-low, à̱ low-mid, ā̱ mid-low, ā̄ high-mid. Segmental transcriptions have been standardized and (where clear) phonemicized, following the recommendations in Tadadjeu and Sadembouo (1984).

Aspect (TMA) marking. Verbal tonal morphology also plays a role in TMA marking (and, as will be made clear in section 4, focus marking). An example of a simple transitive sentence is given in (1).

(1) *Kúm ákpə̄lə̄ fyɛ̄p yɔ̀.*
    Kum kill.PST 9.rat 9.the
    "Kum killed the rat."

For the verb *give*, two objects can follow the verb in the order recipient-theme without either being marked by an adposition. The reverse order requires the recipient to be marked with the circumposition *ī...lī*. Relevant examples are given in (2).

(2) a. *Kúm ádɛ̂   Sī fyō.*
       Kum give.PST Si 19.thing
       "Kum gave Si something."

    b. *Kúm ádɛ̂   āŋpóŋá kɔ́   ī   Sī lī.*
       Kum give.PST 7.table 7.the for$_1$ Si for$_2$
       "Kum gave the table to Si."

As we will see, OV word order is attested in a special focus construction, which will be termed *postverbal focalization*. Otherwise, it has (so far) only been encountered as a syntactically optional variant word order in sentences containing negative auxiliary verbs, as exemplified in (3). Example (3b) shows one object appearing before the verb, and example (3c) shows two objects appearing before the verb. As can be seen, these instances of preverbal objects appear between the auxiliary and the main verb, producing an SAuxOV pattern. (See Gensler (1994), Gensler (1997) and Güldemann (forthcoming) for discussion of this word order variant frequently attested in Niger-Congo.)

(3) a. *Kúm ábə̄m   ādɛ̀   kə̄ **lù** ūnə̄ wɔ́.*
       Kum NEG.PST give.PST NEG 3s 5.fufu 5.the
       "Kum didn't give her the fufu."

    b. *Kúm ábə̄m   ūnə̄ wɔ́ ādɛ̀   kə̄ **lû**.*
       Kum NEG.PST 5.fufu 5.the give.PST NEG 3s.EMPH
       "Kum didn't give her the fufu."

    c. *Kúm ábə̄m   **lù** ūnə̄ wɔ́ ādɛ̀   kə̄.*
       Kum NEG.PST 3s 5.fufu 5.the give.PST NEG
       "Kum didn't give her the fufu."

Presumably, the variant word orders in (3) encode different information structure relations among the object arguments. However, as they were produced in an elicitation context, this cannot easily be determined. Nevertheless, some indication that this may be the case comes from the fact that, as seen in (3b), the final third-person pronoun *lû*, glossed here as being "emphatic", has a much more articulated tone contour when it is the sole postverbal argument than it does elsewhere, making it impressionistically quite prominent. As we will see in sections 3 and 4, the position after the main verb of a sentence is clearly associated with focus in other contexts. This suggests that objects appearing after the verb in structures like those seen in

(3) may be more focal and, correspondingly, the preverbal objects may be more topical.[5] Such a conclusion makes sense from a comparative perspective, as negation-sensitive word-order alternations found elsewhere in Benue-Congo have been argued to have similar information-structure properties (Güldemann forthcoming).

VS order is also attested in Naki, both under postverbal focalization, as will be discussed in section 4, and in at least one other case, given in (4), which appears to be an instance of locative inversion.

(4) *ɛ̄*   *kód*   *ādə̄ng*   *Kúm.*
    LOC down sit.PST Kum
    "Down sat Kum."

With respect to the order of elements in the noun phrase, possessive constructions exhibit Noun-Genitive order, as seen in example (5), and articles follow the noun (as seen in, for example, (1) above).

(5) *ŋkūŋ*   *wì*   *nyə̀m*
    1.chief 1.ASS 10.animal
    "chief of (the) animals"

Before moving on, it is important to point out that, while I will use terms like "subject" and "object" throughout the paper as convenient descriptive labels, the existence of well-defined grammatical roles like subject and object in Naki is not completely obvious, and terms like "actor" for subject and "undergoer" for object might, in fact, be more accurate. It would be dangerous, therefore, to infer from the use of these labels here that such notions play a fundamental role in Naki grammar.

In the next section, I will discuss general aspects of the encoding of information structure in Naki.

3   The encoding of information structure in Naki

While no detailed study of the full range of known types of information structure configurations has been done for Naki, it is still possible to come to some broad generalizations about how information structure is coded in the language. In this section, I will focus only on the information structure of clauses not making use of postverbal focalization, which will be the topic of section 4. In my use of the terms *topic* and *focus*, I follow authors like Lambrecht (1994) in considering a topic to be a referent that a given proposition is construed as being about and treating focus as that part of a proposition which is distinct from what is already presupposed in the discourse (which will often mean that focus is correlated with new information). From a methodological standpoint, the most important device which will be used in this paper to establish what the focus of a sentence is will be question-answer pairs wherein a question word, and the element taking the place of the question word in an answer, will be assumed to be in focus, following standard practice. I further assume that referents that are not established as in focus by such a test can be taken as part of the presupposition of the discourse and that they are, therefore, in some sense, *topical*—even if they are not the primary topic of a given proposition.[6]

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[5] An open question is why the third singular pronoun did not show such an articulated tone contour in (3a). A likely possibility is that the presence of a second postverbal object caused this pronominal object to be interpreted as less pragmatically salient than when it appeared alone after the verb.

[6] See Lambrecht (1994:147) for discussion of the possibility of multiple sentential topics, including distinct primary and secondary topics.

In addition to being focused by means of postverbal focalization, subjects can be focused by the use of an apparent cleft construction, illustrated in the examples in (6).[7] While I lack, at present, extensive naturalistic data on subject content questions, the elicitation of question/answer pairs in such cases has always resulted in the use of either postverbal focalization or this cleft construction both for the questions and for their associated answers. It would thus appear to be reasonable to assume that subjects appearing in canonical preverbal position cannot be interpreted as being in focus.[8] (In the examples in (6), as well as in other examples below, the class 19 diminutive noun *fyō* '19.thing' is used in a similar fashion to the English word *something*.)

(6) a. *Dàŋ yē l' ādɛ̄   Sī fyō   fyɔ́?*
       it.is who 3s give.PST Si 19.thing 19.the
       "*Who* gave Si something?"

   b. *Dàŋ bú b' ādɛ̄   Sī fyō   fyɔ́?*
      it.is 3p 3p give.PST Si 19.thing 19.the
      "*They* gave Si something."

Object arguments can be interpreted as focused in their canonical postverbal position, as indicated by the question-answer pair in (7).

(7) a. *Mù   wə̀ āmé   yē?*
       1.man 1.the see.PST who
       "*Who* did the man see?"

   b. *L' āmé   mùkpàng wə̀.*
      3s see.PST 1.woman 1.the
      "He saw *the woman*."

As we will see, postverbal focalization indicates that immediate postverbal position plays an important role in focus marking in Naki, and there was also some indication of this with respect to the word order alternations seen above in (3). Another area of the grammar evincing such a pattern are content questions on the objects of ditransitive verbs. If the questioned constituent is the recipient, the sentence takes on a form analogous to the alternant given in (2a), with the recipient appearing immediately after the verb. If the questioned constituent is the theme, the sentence takes on a form analogous to the alternant given in (2b), where the theme is immediately postverbal. Examples are given in (8).[9]

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[7] Outside of subject content questions, clefts have not been studied in detail in Naki. The label *cleft* is used here for these constructions since they begin with an element *dɔ́ŋ* which is segmentally identical to a verb stem *dɔ́ŋ* 'sit, be' that appears in certain copular constructions. The extent to which Naki subject content question "clefts" have similar properties to constructions given the label *cleft* in other languages is not presently known. In particular, since verbal tonology has not been fully examined, it cannot be determined at this point whether verbal tones in the construction in (6) either resemble—or are the same as—verbal tones in relative constructions.

[8] As can be seen in the examples in (6), the content verb of the sentences where the cleft construction is found is preceded by an apparent resumptive subject pronoun. In main clauses with nominal subjects, such pronouns, while not obligatory, are also possible—an example will be seen in (16b). The fact that these pronouns are not generally obligatory makes them poor candidates for treatment as subject agreement markers.

[9] The verb *ádê* 'give.PST' surfaces with a high-mid tone contour in this context. This is presumably the result of tone sandhi with a following mid-tone question word with which it forms a tight phonological phrase, at least in an impressionistic sense.

(8) a. *Kúm ádɛ̂*   ***yē***   *fyō?*
   Kum give.PST who 19.thing
   "*Who* did Kum give something?"

   b. *Kúm ádɛ̂*   ***lɛ̄***   *ī   Sī lī?*
   Kum give.PST what for₁ Si for₂
   "*What* did Kum give to Si?"

There appears to be no formal distinction between verb phrase focus and object focus in Naki. The example in (9), drawn from a text, includes two verb phrases which, based on the context introduced by the first clause (whose information structure is left unanalyzed here since it is not directly relevant), are likely to be interpreted as in focus. The first such verb phrase is bolded, and the second is underlined.[10]

(9)[@]*Ācú yí*   *ēbɔ́*   *ńlâbtɔ̀   lī,   Fìmɔ́kwɔ̄mɔ́*
   soon 10.PRON come.DPST race.INF FOC 19.chameleon

   ékù   ***Fìkō   ī   wɔ̄nī bī,***   *áyánɔ̂*   *gòb   yì*   *ī   Fīkō   lī.*
   catch.DPST 19.hare for₁ 5.tail LOC change.CNS 9.body 9.3sPOSS for₁ 19.hare for₂

   "As soon as they began to race, Chameleon caught Hare by the tail and transformed his body into the hare's."

Verb focus has not been extensively examined in Naki.[11] However, the example taken from a text given in (10), indicates that the verb may be in focus when in its canonical position without any special marking. The sentence in (10) contains a sequence of verbs all acting on the same object. The pronominal coding of the object found in the non-initial verb phrases indicates it is topical in those phrases, meaning that, perhaps, only the verbs themselves in those phrases are interpreted as being in focus.[12] (The sentence in (10) is the very beginning of a recipe. Thus, the focus in the first verb phrase is most plausibly interpreted as being the content of the whole verb phrase itself or, perhaps, just that of the nominal object.)

(10)[@]*W' àdzì*   *dzɔ́ng,*   ***áyū***   *nú,*   ***áyúshɛ̂***   *nú,*   ***ányínâ***   *nú.*
   2s take.PRS 6.maize peel.CNS 6.PRON crush.CNS 6.PRON soak.CNS 6.PRON
   "You take maize, peel it, crush it, and soak it."

Thetic statements—i.e., statements where a whole proposition is in focus—do not appear to have significantly different form from canonical clauses. The sentence in (11a) introduces the

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[10] See the discussion around the examples in (13) for comments on the use of the focus particle *lī* seen in the first clause in (9). Its presence there appears to be at least partially conditioned by the fact that the infinitival verb form preceding it is not followed by an object.

[11] I leave out discussion of so-called operator focus here (see Dik (1997:330–331)) since it has not been examined extensively enough to come to any concrete generalizations. However, as we will see below, there are some indications that this type of focus is grammatically relevant under the guise of "auxiliary focus" (Hyman and Watters 1984).

[12] I include the sentence in (10), in order to give as complete a discussion of Naki information structure encoding as possible given presently available data. It should be noted, however, that such a sentence using conjoined verb phrases is not ideal for establishing the coding of narrow verb focus since it is difficult to rule out that, in fact, it is not simply the propositional content of the verb itself that is in focus in such structures but, rather, the broader fact that the particular action encoded by the verb is applied to some presupposed referent—in which case the entire verb phrase would be in focus. Reaching definitive conclusions as to the coding of verb focus in Naki will, therefore, have to await future research.

character of the tiger in a story and is, therefore, a good candidate for being a thetic statement. It has the form of a canonical intransitive SV sentence. A similar example, of an elicited sentence can be seen in (11b), which gives the Naki equivalent of "It's raining". The sentence in (11c) opens a narrative and, therefore, is a possible candidate for a thetic statement. As can be seen, it has the form of a canonical SVO sentence. However, the fact that the subject of the sentence *Àcōm kâm* 'my story' refers to a presumably available concept in the discourse means it is open to an analysis where only the verb phrase is in focus, making this a less than ideal example. Since I have not yet encountered a clear example of a thetic sentence containing a transitive verb, it is not possible to come to any firm conclusions about their expression at present.

(11) a.@*Dzə̀m yə̀   éfwāshà.*
  9.tiger 9.the arrive.DPST
  "The tiger arrived."

 b. *Dzə̄ng yə̀   bānyə̀.*
  9.rain 9.the come.ITER
  "The rain is falling."

 c.@*Àcōm kâm dzɛ̀   ágé-kū   Kǎnsī   bú Ādzō.*
  7.story 7.my stand.PRS go.CNS-catch Bushbaby with Rooster
  "My story is about Bushbaby and Rooster."

No special markers for contrastive topic or contrastive focus have been found. The bracketed elements in (12) contrast two different groups of Naki speakers with respect to which locations they migrated to. No readily identifiable formal marking appears on the contrasted elements.

(12)@*Jē   ù   bā éshāmfî.   [Bùdōbɔ́ Nsê], [bùdōbɔ́ Kpâng], [bùdōbɔ́ Nsàd].*
 5.voice 5.ASS 1p scatter.PST some   Nser some   Mashi some   Isu
 "The speakers of our language scattered. Some to Nser, some to Mashi, some to Isu."

A final feature of Naki grammar worth mentioning with respect to focus marking are two verb-phrase final particles whose appearance is sensitive to the presence/absence of an object in the verb phrase and to the tense/aspect/polarity of the verb (though they are not strictly conditioned by either of these things). The first such particle has the form *lī* and has only been found in affirmative clauses. It appears at the end of the subordinate clause in (9) and was also frequently elicited following progressive verb forms not accompanied by a verbal object. Relevant elicited examples are given in (13). The sentence in (13a) contains a non-progressive past tense verb which was not followed by *lī*. The sentence in (13b) contains a past progressive verb form which was followed by *lī*. The presence of *lī* in a sentence like the one in (13b) appeared to be obligatory in elicitation contexts.

(13) a. *Kúm ájè.*
  Kum eat.PST
  "Kum ate."

 b. *Kúm ājén   lī.*
  Kum eat.PST.PROG FOC
  "Kum was eating."

The second verb-phrase final particle of this type that has been encountered has the form *cə̄* and is found in certain negated clauses. In elicitation contexts, it seems to be optional, but it appears that its presence is more natural when the negated verb is not followed by an object than when it is followed by an object. Relevant examples are given in (14a) and (14b). Sentence (14a) represents the first variant elicited when the verb was not followed by an object, and sentence (14b) represents the first variant elicited when the verb was followed by an object. However, a variant of (14a) without the particle as well as a variant of (14b) with the particle (appearing at the very end of the sentence) were both judged grammatical when constructed.

(14) a. *Mī sá ājē kə̄ cə̄.*
    1s will.NEG eat.NEG NEG NFOC
    "I will not eat."

   b. *Mī sá ājē kə̄ ūnə̄.*
    1s will.NEG eat.NEG NEG 5.fufu
    "I will not eat fufu."

These particles are at least superficially similar to particles of the form *lɔ̀* and *kɛ* that Hyman (1981:56–64) describes for Noni, a close relative of Naki, and he attributes their appearance, at least partially, to a distinction between focused and non-focused verb forms in the language, with the particles appearing only after non-focused forms. Furthermore, the sensitivity of these Naki particles to categories like tense, aspect, and negation, suggests that their appearance may be tied in some way to so-called auxiliary focus (see Hyman and Watters (1984)), a phenomenon well attested in other African languages. Therefore, while too few examples have been collected to come to any firm conclusions about the use of these particles at present, it seems likely that they are playing some role in the coding of information structure in the language, probably in the realm of verb or verb-phrase focus.

With regard to the expression of topic in Naki, not surprisingly, subjects in their canonical preverbal position can be topics, and this, in fact, appears to be the overwhelmingly most common way topics are expressed on the basis of an impressionistic examination of several texts. The pair of sentences in (15), for example, illustrates how the two characters of Hare and Chameleon are introduced in the opening sentence of a story, and then in the following sentence serving as topics, appear in preverbal subject position.

(15) a.[@]*Àcōm kâm dzɛ̀ ágé-kū nyaṁ fyɔ́, Fìmɔ́kwə̄mɔ́ bú Fìkō.*
    7.story 7.my stand.PRS go.CNS-catch 10.animal 10.two Chameleon and Hare
    "My story is about two animals, Chameleon and Hare."

   b.[@]*Nyə̀m yɛ̄nì ēdə̀ng sū.*
    10.animal 10.this sit.DPST 1.friendship
    "These animals were friends."

There is also evidence for the presence of a type of topicalization construction in Naki which can target, at least, subjects and objects. This construction involves a noun phrase at the left edge of the sentence associated with a resumptive pronoun closer to the verb. The examples in (16) contrast a sentence not making use of this construction, in (16a), with one making use of it, in (16b). These sentences were in free variation in an elicitation context.

(16) a. ***Kúm** áfād mù wɔ̀ lù yɔ́mnə̄ bīsē byə̄.*
    Kum make.PST 1.man 1.the 3s dry 8.cloth 8.the
    "Kum made the man dry the clothes."

b. ***Kúm*** *l' áfād   mù   wɔ̀ lù yɔ́mnɔ̄ bīsē   byɔ̄.*
Kum 3s make.PST 1.man 1.the 3s dry   8.cloth 8.the
"Kum, he made the man dry the clothes."

Structures like this have been encountered in texts, as well. An example involving subject topicalization is given in (17). It is drawn from the opening sentence of a brief oral history of the Naki people.[13]

(17)@***Būnákì***, *bú fɔ̀   ē   Jɔ̀s, Nâjīryā.*
2.Naki   3p come LOC Jos Nigeria
"The Naki people, they come from Jos, Nigeria."

Another instance of the construction, in this case involving object topicalization, is given in (18). This sentence makes use of the postverbal focalization construction, which will be discussed in detail in section 4. A typical feature of this construction is the appearance of objects preverbally, as in (18). However, in this sentence, there are, in fact, two elements referring to the verbal object in (18), the sentence-initial noun phrase *bùflā bùnɔ́ngbɛ́* 'nice flowers' and a resumptive pronoun *bú* '3p' appearing immediately before the verbal complex. This latter element indicates that this sentence is employing the topicalization construction.

(18)@***Bùflā   bùnɔ́ngbɛ́***, *kì bú sí   tsád ɔ́nē̄   là?*
1.flower 1.good   1p 3p will meet where PART
"Nice flowers, where can we find them?"

The function of this construction appears to be to explicitly mark a noun phrase as a topic, including the possibility of overriding a reading where the subject of the sentence might otherwise be construed as the primary topic of a given proposition, hence the use of the label *topicalization* for the construction here.

In the next section, I will focus on the description of one particular information-structure sensitive construction found in Naki: postverbal focalization.

4 Postverbal focalization

A curious feature of Naki grammar is a special focus construction with two primary distinguishing characteristics: (i) the verb appears with a tone pattern which can be distinct from its tone pattern when outside of the construction and (ii) the appearance, in immediately postverbal position, of constituents which do not appear there canonically and which are interpreted as focused. A core use of this construction is for subject content questions—and corresponding answers for those questions. Examples can be seen in (19b) and (19c). These sentences also exemplify a typical word order for transitive sentences making use of this construction where objects appear preverbally. We will see below, however, that this is not obligatory. Sentences (19b) and (19c) contrast with the sentence in (19a) which does not instantiate the construction, exhibits canonical SVO word order, and has different tone marking than the verbs in (19b) and (19c). I will refer to this construction as *postverbal focalization* and to the verb form in this construction as *disfluentive*—i.e., "against the flow"—as a mnemonic for the fact that this form is used in cases where the canonical information structure relations in the sentences are, in some sense, "disrupted". Verbs appearing outside of this construction will be given the label *confluentive*——i.e., "with the flow"—to indicate that they are used when canonical information structure relations are maintained. Only disfluentive verb forms will be explicitly indicated in the glossing.

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[13] A possible origin for Naki-speaking peoples from the Jos Plateau area has not been verified.

(19) a. *Kúm ákpɔ̄lɔ̄ fyɛ̀p yɔ̀.*
Kum kill.PST 9.rat 9.the
"Kum killed the rat."

   b. *Fyɛ̀p yɔ̀ ākpɔ́lɔ̄ **yē?***
9.rat 9.the kill.PST.DSF who
"*Who* killed the rat?"

   c. *Fyɛ̀p yɔ̀ ākpɔ́lɔ̄ **Kúm**.*
9.rat 9.the kill.PST.DSF Kum
"*Kum* killed the rat." (answer to question in (19b))

A minimal pair consisting of a sentence not making use of the postverbal focalization and a sentence making use of it is given in (20). Sentence (20b) is an instance of postverbal focalization. Sentences (20a) and (20b) differ formally solely by virtue of the tone marking on the verb. The sentence in (20b) was offered as a translation for "The lion was killed by the hunter." No true passive construction has been found in Naki, and this sentence was presumably offered because, among other things, it shows Patient-Verb-Agent word order in a way that is analogous to an English passive.

(20) a. *Nyɛ̀ŋkɔ̀ wɔ̀ ákpɔ̄lɔ̄ mù wɔ̀ bwê wɔ̀.*
1.lion 1.the kill.PST 1.man 1.the hunt 1.the
"The lion killed the hunter."

   b. *Nyɛ̀ŋkɔ̀ wɔ̀ ākpɔ́lɔ̄ **mù wɔ̀ bwê wɔ̀**.*
1.lion 1.the kill.PST.DSF 1.man 1.the hunt 1.the
"*The hunter* killed the lion."

Examples contrasting a subject content question with an object content question, both of which, in this case, employ a postverbal *yē* 'who', are given in (21). (Recall from section 3 that objects in canonical position can be focused.) Sentence (21a) is repeated from (8a). As can be seen, the sentences are essentially identical formally except that the second syllable of the verb in example (21b), which exhibits postverbal focalization, has a higher tone than the verb in (21a). (In elicitation contexts, the presence of an article after the diminutive noun *fyō* '19.thing' was not clearly associated with any distinct pragmatic function.)

(21) a. *Kúm ādɛ̄ **yē** fyō?*
Kum give.PST who 19.thing
"*Who* did Kum give something?"

   b. *Sī ādɛ̄ **yē** fyō fyɔ́?*
Si give.PST.DSF who 19.thing 19.the
"*Who* gave Si something?"

A further example of the construction can be seen in (22), where the confluentive and disfluentive forms of the verb *jé* 'eat' contrast. The confluentive variant can be seen in (22a) and the disfluentive variant in (22b).

(22) a. ***Kúm** ájē ūnā wɔ́.*
Kum eat.PST 5.fufu 5.the
"Kum ate the fufu."

b. *Ūnā wɔ́ ājé* **Kúm.**
   5.fufu 5.the eat.PST.DSF Kum
   "*Kum* ate the fufu."

Constructions comparable to Naki postverbal focalization are found in other languages of the area. Watters (1979:144–148), for example, describes similar phenomena in Aghem, as does Hyman (1981:104–105) in Noni. While the existence of this construction in Naki and Noni may be the result of genetic inheritance, neither of these languages are especially closely related to Aghem (from the perspective of Bantoid), and it, therefore, seems likely that areal factors may be playing a role in this common feature among the languages. Naki is the only language of the area I am aware of that makes use of special verbal tonal marking in a postverbal focalization construction. In Aghem and Noni, the most salient formal feature of the construction is simply a shift in word order.

A further distinction between Naki, on the one hand, and Aghem and Noni, on the other, is that, when this construction is employed in Naki, the word order of the sentence shows a strong tendency to shift to OVS in transitive sentences. Noni does allow OVS as a variant word order in its version of the construction, as seen in (23b), which can be contrasted with the more typical word order in (23a), and Aghem seems to allow this as a variant as well (John Watters, personal communication).[14] So, in this respect, the difference between Naki versus Aghem and Noni would seem to involve tendencies rather than hard and fast rules of their respective grammars.

(23) a. *ɛ̀ dɛ̀ɛ̀lě* *njì* **kèngɔ̀m**   NONI
     DS cook.PRS.PROG Nji 7.plantain
     "*Nji* is cooking plantains."

    b. **kèngɔ̀m** *dɛ̀ɛ̀lě* *njì*
     7.plantain cook.PRS.PROG Nji
     "*Nji* is cooking plantains."   (Hyman 1981:107)

As indicated, postverbal focalization is only associated with special tone marking in some tenses/aspects in Naki. For example, in (24) the tone pattern for the disfluentive form of the verb is the same as for the confluentive form. These sentences employ a strategy of future tense marking wherein a future auxiliary *sí* appears before a stem form of the main verb.

(24) a. **Kúm** *sí kpɔ́lɔ́ fyɛ̀p yɔ̀* *ī* *Sī lī.*
     Kum will kill   9.rat 9.the for$_1$ Si for$_2$
     "Kum will kill the rat for Si."

    b. *Fyɛ̀p yɛ̀* *sí kpɔ́lɔ́* **Kúm** *ī* *Sī lī.*
     9.rat 9.the will kill   Kum for$_1$ Si for$_2$
     "*Kum* will kill the rat for Si."

Not enough data on verbal tone patterns has been analyzed to come to useful generalizations about the morphophonological conditions under which the tones of the disfluentive verb forms differ from those of confluentive forms. Presumably, in at least some cases, the lack of special tonal marking on the disfluentive form can be attributed to lexical and phonological factors not directly related to information-structure coding. For example, the lexical specifications of the monosyllabic high-toned auxiliary verb *sí*, seen in (24), may not allow any other tone melody to

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[14] The glossing in (23) is my own.

appear on that form. Similarly, the form of the main verb selected by that auxiliary (apparently a bare stem) may not be of the right morphosyntactic class to be marked with the disfluentive tone melody. Confirmation of such hypotheses will have to await a fuller analysis of the verbal tonal paradigms. As discussed briefly in section 2, the functions of verbal tone marking are not limited solely to marking information structure configurations. Tone also plays a role in TMA marking.[15]

Possible postverbal elements in sentences showing postverbal focalization are not limited to subjects but can be any argument or adjunct which would not canonically appear immediately after the verb. In the sentence in (25a) the phrase *ì Sí lī* 'for Si' is postverbal and in focus. In (25b), repeated from (18), the question word *ɔ́nɛ̄* 'where' appears in the postverbal focus position.

(25) a. *Bú fyɛ̀p yɔ̀   ākpɔ́lɔ̄   ī   Sí lī.*
       3p 9.rat 9.the kill.PST.DSF for₁ Si for₂
       "They killed the rat *for Si*."

   b.[@] *Bùflā̰   bùnɔ́ngbɛ̄, kì bú sí   tsád ɔ́nɛ̄   là?*
       1.flower 1.good   1p 3p will meet where PART
       "Nice flowers, where can we find them?"

As discussed above, in clauses containing transitive verbs, the default word order for this construction in Naki when the subject is in focus appears to be OVS. In addition, as seen in sentence (25b), for example, when an element other than the subject is in focus, the subject and object can both appear preverbally, giving SOVX word order. However, this does not exhaust the possibilities for word order in the construction which, in general, appears to be fairly flexible. The sentence with OSV word order in (26a) and the sentence with VSO order in (26b), for example, were both judged to be acceptable when constructed.

(26) a. *Fyɛ̀p yɔ̀   b' ākpɔ́lɔ̄   ī   Sí lī.*
       9.rat 9.the 3p kill.PST.DSF for₁ Si for₂
       "They killed the rat *for Si*."

   b. *Ākpɔ́lɔ̄   yē fyɛ̀p yɔ̀   ī   Sí lī?*
       kill.PST.DSF who 9.rat 9.the for₁ Si for₂
       "*Who* killed the rat for Si?"

Word order is not completely free in this construction, however. The sentences in (27), for example, were rejected. Sentence (27a) is a case where the immediately postverbal element is the direct object of the verb—i.e., the canonical postverbal argument. Sentence (27b) is a case where the subject appears following a focused circumpositional phrase. And, sentence (27c) is a case where a focused circumpositional phrase is followed by the verbal object.

(27) a.*Ī   Sí lī   ākpɔ́lɔ̄   *fyɛ̀p yɔ̀*   yē?*
       for₁ Si for₂ kill.PST.DSF 9.rat 9.the who
       Intended: "Who killed *the rat* for Si?"

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[15] In addition, tone can be partially lexically conditioned in verbs in a way that appears to be largely comparable to what is found in other languages of the area, e.g., Noni (Hyman 1981:51), where stems can be divided into a high-tone class and a low-tone class.

b.*_Fyềp yề_ _ākpɔ́lɔ̄_ _ī_ **_Sí lī_** _Kúm._
9.rat 9.the kill.PST.DSF for₁ Si for₂ Kum
Intended: "Kum killed the rat *for Si*."

c.*_Kúm ākpɔ́lɔ̄_ _ī_ **_Sí lī_** _fyềp yề._
Kum kill.PST.FOC for₁ Si for₂ 9.rat 9.the
Intended: "Kum killed the rat *for Si*. "

The rejection of (27a) is not particularly surprising in light of the fact that the primary function of postverbal focalization appears to be to allow a non-object to be focused. As discussed in section 3, objects appearing in postverbal position can be focused without use of this construction, rendering it redundant in a sentence like the one in (27a).

To the extent that any generalizations govern the ungrammaticality of (27b) and (27c), it might be that elements following the postverbal focused element are restricted to those which (i) can be postverbal in canonical sentences (accounting for (27b)) and (ii) have the same relative order as they would in a canonical sentence (accounting for (27c)). Whether or not these generalizations turn out to be correct, a more basic generalization can be made more firmly: the order of elements before the verb in this construction is freer than the order of elements after.

Finally, while all of the examples of postverbal focalization given to this point have involved prototypically transitive verbs, the construction can also be used with prototypically intransitive verbs as seen in (28b), which can be opposed to example (28a) showing canonical word order.[16]

(28) a. _Kúm ādɘ̄ng kód._
Kum sit.PST down
"Kum sat down."

b. _Àdɔ́ng_ **_yē_** _kód?_
sit.PST.DSF who down
"*Who* sat down?"

Having given a descriptive overview of postverbal focalization, we can summarize its behavior as in (29).

(29) a. A non-object constituent appears in postverbal position and is put into focus.

b. There is a shift in tone marking on the verb in some tenses/aspects.

c. The construction is available for prototypically transitive and prototypically intransitive verbs.

The fact that this focusing strategy can be associated with verbal tonal marking distinct from when it is not used indicates that it does not involve merely a shift in word order but is, in fact, a dedicated syntactic construction.

In the next section, I will give an analysis of postverbal focalization employing linearly defined sentential "fields", contrasting such an analysis with so-called cartographic approaches to information-structure sensitive word-order shifts, which have gained widespread currency in recent years.

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[16] The locative element _kód_ 'down' can also be used with the verb _nềm_ 'lie' to indicate change of position. I have recorded numerous examples of the verb _nềm_ appearing without _kód_, and, while I have not encountered examples of _dɔ́ng_ when used to mean 'sit' without _kód_, I believe this is simply due to an accident of elicitation. There is no evidence that _kód_ serves as an object of the verb in sentences like those in (28), though as will be discussed in section 6, I am not aware of any strong strong evidence for grammatical subjects or objects in general in Naki.

5   Analyzing postverbal focalization

5.1   Cartographic approaches

A popular way of analyzing information-structure sensitive word-order shifts in recent work involves positing dedicated topic and focus positions within a universal syntactic tree (see, e.g., Rizzi (1997), Aboh (2003:235–239), and Belletti (2004), among others). Adapting proposals of Belletti (2004), two such focus positions could be represented as in the tree in (30). The phrasal category *FiniteP* is being used as a cover term for a possible set of tense/aspect positions in an articulated clause structure. The label *Focused XP* is used to indicate positions where a focused phrase might appear in this kind of analysis. The category *Focus^o* refers to a so-called Focus head—a possibly null element taken to be the head of a focus phrase (*FocusP* in the tree). Overt focus markers, in languages where they are attested, would appear in this position. The abbreviation *VP* in the tree refers to some phrasal category consisting of a verb and its arguments—including a subject.[17]

(30)

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                        FocusP
                       /      \
            Focused XP         Focus′
                              /      \
                        Focusᵒ        FiniteP
                                         ⋮
                                      FocusP
                                     /      \
                          Focused XP         Focus′
                                            /      \
                                      Focusᵒ        VP
                                                    /\
                                                   ...
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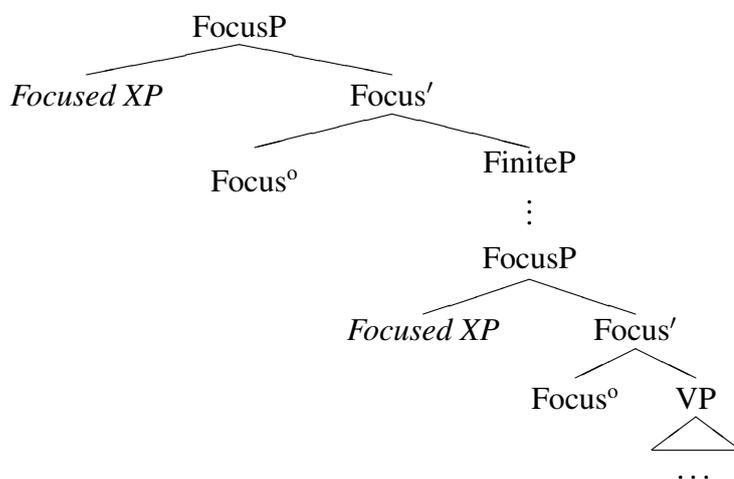
I will assume here that, in a cartographic approach to the analysis of focus positions, it is a low focus position, like the one under FiniteP in (30), that becomes occupied by postverbal focused elements. The reason for this is that the existence of this low position was argued for by Belletti (2004) specifically to account for postverbal focused subjects in Italian, whereas the existence of the higher focus position was motivated by data involving focused elements "dislocated" to the *left* periphery of the sentence in languages like English and (also) Italian (Rizzi 1997).[18]

The sort of structure schematized in (30) can be applied straightforwardly to cases where a focused postverbal subject follows an intransitive verb, though it requires one to make various assumptions. Adapting suggestions made by Enoch Aboh (see footnote 18), we can treat a focused subject as moving from its canonical position to the low focus position with the sentence's verb subsequently moving to some higher tense/aspect position. This kind of analysis is schematized in (31) and is based on the Aghem sentence in (32c), abstracting away from the

[17] Readers familiar with generative literature on topic and focus will see that I have taken some liberties in my presentation of the various theoretical devices used in this kind of approach. The changes have been made to increase the accessibility of these analyses to a non-generative audience.

[18] I am grateful to Enoch Aboh for pointing out to me the work of Belletti (2004) on this topic. The discussion here is heavily influenced by his presentation entitled, "If we see *Focus*, you go left and I go right," which was given at the *International Conference on Bantu Grammar: Description and Theory* held at SOAS on 20–22 April 2006. This presentation (among other things) applied aspects of Belletti's (2004) approach to data from Aghem like that seen in (32) .

presence of the dummy subject marker in that sentence (but see section 5.3) as well as the tense auxiliary.

(31)
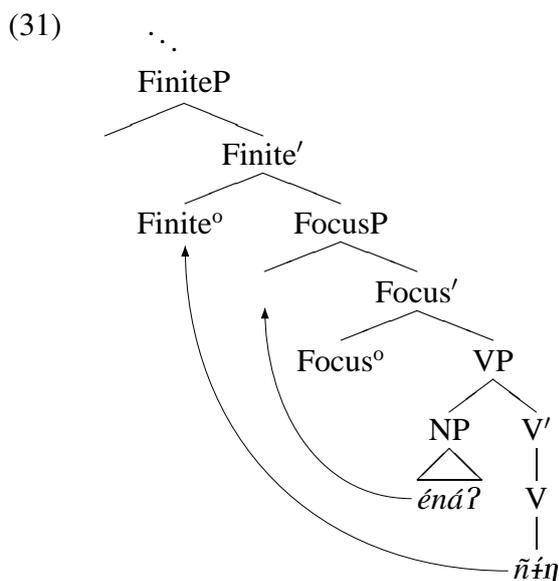
As discussed above, and seen in (32), Aghem shows postverbal focalization similar to what is found in Naki. For example, in order to form content questions on the subject of a sentence, the question word appears immediately postverbally, instead of in canonical preverbal position, as seen in (32b). Example (32c) shows that the answer to such a question can maintain the postverbal subject order. Example (32a) gives a canonical SV sentence, where the subject is not in focus.

(32) a. **énáʔ** mɔ̀ ñɨ́ŋ nô   AGHEM
      Inah DPST run FOC
      "Inah ran."

   b. *á* mɔ̀ ñɨ́ŋ **ndúghɔ̀**
      DS DPST run who
      "*Who* ran?"

   c. *á* mɔ̀ ñɨ́ŋ **énáʔ**
      DS DPST run Inah
      "*Inah* ran."   (Watters 1979:144)

A positive aspect of an analysis like the one schematized in (31) is that it can readily account for cases of VSO order in transitive sentences when the subject is focused—which, as we saw in section 4, is a possible order in Naki and the preferred order in Aghem and Noni. The sentences in (33) exemplify the typical behavior of transitive sentences in Aghem under both subject and object focus. In sentences (33a) and (33b), a question-answer pair, the element in focus is the object, and the word order is canonical SVO. In sentences (33c) and (33d), another question-answer pair is given, where the element in focus is the subject. As can be seen, these sentences both show VSO order. The analysis schematized in (31) straightforwardly extends to data like that in (33c) and (33d). While the subject and the verb both move to higher positions towards the left edge of the clause, the object is assumed to remain low, accounting for its appearance in sentence-final position at the clause's right edge.

(33) a. *fíl   á   mɔ̀   zí   **kwɔ̀**   AGHEM
        friends SM DPST eat what
        "*What* did the friends eat?"

   b. *fíl   á   mɔ̀   zí   **kíbɛ́***
        friends SM DPST eat fufu.A
        "The friends ate *fufu*."

   c. *á   mɔ̀   zí   **ndúghɔ̀** bɛ́-ꞌkɔ́*
        DS DPST eat who   fufu.B
        "*Who* ate the fufu?"

   d. *á   mɔ̀   zí   **á-fín** bɛ́-ꞌkɔ́*
        DS DPST eat friends fufu.B
        "*The friends* ate fufu."   (Watters 1979:146)

However, the application of this type of analysis to a wider range of data from Naki, Aghem, and Noni runs into a number of problems. They revolve around two issues: (i) the possibility of orders like OVS under postverbal focalization and (ii) the ability for non-subject arguments to be focused in the construction. The first problem is more immediately encountered in Naki than Aghem or Noni because of its apparent preference for OVS word order over VSO order in transitive sentences where the subject is focused. But, as discussed in section 4, all three languages appear to permit OVS order—they simply differ in the extent to which it is preferred over VSO order. A sentence like the one in (25b) from Naki is an example of the second class of problematic data. Comparable data is also reported in Aghem by Watters (1979:147–148) and in Noni by Hyman (1981:105).

I will explore the nature of these problems in more detail in the next section and, in section 5.3, will propose an alternative analysis employing linearly-defined preverbal and postverbal fields.

5.2   OVS word order and focused non-subjects in a cartographic analysis

It was discussed above, in reference to data like that in (33c) and (33d), how an analysis along the lines of the one schematized in (31) is able to account for VSO word order in sentences where the subject is in focus. However, as we have seen other word orders are possible under postverbal focalization—for example, OVS order (see (20b), among others, for Naki and (23b) for Noni) and SOVX (see, for example, (25a)).

The analysis of such word orders would require additional assumptions under a cartographic analysis. OVS word order, for example, would presumably be accounted for via an additional movement of the object to some position above the verb, with a good candidate being a dedicated topic position. Such an analysis is not necessarily particularly problematic except for the fact that it leaves as somewhat of a mystery why the object can appear preverbally just in case another element has moved to the low focus position.

As for cases where non-subject material is focused under postverbal focalization, these run into a similar problem insofar as, without additional assumptions, they predict that non-focused subjects and objects could remain low in the syntactic structure since they would have no reason to move into higher positions—unlike the verb or the focused element. This would seem to entail, for example, that a sentence with the semantics and pragmatics of (25b) should have a default order along the lines of VXSO, instead of the attested order where both the subject and object are preverbal. Moreover, the ungrammaticality of sentences like (27b) and (27c)

indicates that it is not simply dispreferred for subjects and objects to remain "low" in the clause in sentences like these in Naki but that they cannot remain there at all. This kind of data is especially problematic for a cartographic analysis since it seemingly requires an explanation as to not only why subjects or objects *can* appear high in the clause when some other element is in focus, but why they *must* appear there.[19]

None of this is to say that cartographic analyses could not be devised to handle the observed data. I have no doubt that they could. However, clearly such analyses would require a somewhat complex set of assumptions which would go well beyond simply positing a low focus position. Even more problematic for cartographic approaches, in my view, is the fact that they treat as accidental the most straightforward generalization one can make about word order in Naki, Aghem, and Noni: Topical material tends to be appear preverbally and focal material postverbally, regardless of what kind of role this material might play in the argument structure of the clause. An analysis based on this generalization will be pursued in the next section.[20]

5.3 A field-based analysis of postverbal focalization

5.3.1 The basic analysis

The basic claim of cartographic approaches to information structure is that non-canonical word orders correlating with topic and focus marking are the result of topic or focus elements being moved into reserved topic and focus positions in a syntactic tree. For a language like English, which can exploit the so-called "left periphery" (Rizzi 1997) to explicitly mark constituents as topical or focal, such an approach is quite reasonable. However, for a language like Naki (or Aghem or Noni), this type of approach suffers from a basic problem: It must treat as accidental a striking correlation between the information structure relationships in "canonical" clause types (i.e., SV(O) sentences for the languages of interest here) and the non-canonical clause types. Consider, for example, the prototypical shape of a transitive Naki sentence expressed in terms of grammatical relations, as in (34a), and expressed in term of information structure relations, as in (34b).

(34) a. [[   ]Subject [   ]Verb [   ]Object]

    b. [[   ]Topic [   ]Predicate [   ]Focus]

As discussed in section 3, preverbal subjects quite typically serve as topics in Naki. We also saw in that section that postverbal objects can be in focus.[21] This is, of course, the expected pattern for an SVO language. However, a crucial difference between Naki and, say, a language like English with more rigid word order, is that when this expected correlation does not hold, a focused subject can move into postverbal position and a non-focused—and, therefore, more

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[19] Aghem and Noni appear to be less problematic in this regard, since there is no indication that objects must appear preverbally in cases comparable to the Naki sentence in (25b) (see, for example, Watters (1979:147–8)). However, in both these languages subjects do appear preverbally in such sentences (Watters (1979:147–8), Hyman (1981:105)). As in Naki, why these subjects do not remain "low" in their clauses would need to be explained.

[20] I have focused on "cartographic" analyses here since this seems to be a popular way to analyze information-structure sensitive word-order shifts at present. However, it is worth pointing that Horvath's (1995) approach to focus, also in a generative framework, would seem to run into similar problems in accounting for the full range of word orders attested under postverbal focalization in these languages. However, in general, I believe her approach is closer to the one to be adopted in section 5.3 than cartographic approaches since it treats the focus position as truly postverbal and not as "accidentally" postverbal due to verb movement to a position above a moved object.

[21] I will discuss the issue of the ambiguity of verb-object structures for object focus versus verb-phrase focus below and limit the discussion, at this point, to argument focus.

topical—object can move into preverbal position, resulting in an OVS pattern like that seen in (20b).

It seems, therefore, that an information-structure model like the one in (34b) characterizes a wider range of Naki sentential patterns than the one in (34a), since it can not only account for the presence of canonical SVO order but also for important features of non-canonical orders. Specifically, it would directly account for why non-object arguments appear in "object" position when focused and why object arguments can appear in "subject" position when out of focus. Postverbal position, in a model like the one in (34b), would not, in fact, be considered an object position at all. Rather, it is a focus position, and an independent tendency for objects to be in focus means that, in the majority of tokens, objects will appear there for information structure reasons. Similarly, preverbal position would not be considered a subject position but, rather, a topic position, with subjects frequently appearing there also for information structure reasons.

There are several complications for such an analysis, however, which need to be addressed. These are: (i) how to account for sentences making use of postverbal focalization not showing (O)VS order, (ii) how the special tone marking on the verb found in the construction relates to the overall analysis, and (iii) how this analysis relates to structures involving non-argument focus. I take up each of these in turn.

5.3.2 Variant word orders in the postverbal focalization construction

As seen in section 4, postverbal focalization in Naki allows for variant word orders, some of which do not fit nicely into a pattern like the one in (34b). For example, the sentences in (25), where a non-subject element is focused in postverbal focalization, have both the subject and the object before the verb—i.e., multiple elements in topic position. And, the sentence in (26a) shows something similar, but with OSVX order instead of SOVX order. Finally, the sentence in (26b) shows verb-initial order followed by multiple postverbal elements, leaving the preverbal topic position unfilled despite the presence of elements in the clause which could grammatically appear there.

The most straightforward way to deal with such sentences would be to modify the schematization in (34b) along the lines of what is given below in (35). Specifically, rather than treating the sentence as consisting of a single preverbal topic "slot" and a postverbal focus "slot", it should be modeled instead as consisting of a preverbal topic *field* and postverbal focus field, each of which could contain multiple elements.[22] This type of field-based analysis is directly inspired by the traditional analysis of German sentential syntax wherein sentences in the language are similarly analyzed as consisting of various positional fields (see Kathol (2000) for a recent formal reworking of this traditional analysis).

(35) [[   ]Topic Field [   ]Predicate [   ]Focus Field]

If the Naki sentence is conceived of as making use of topic and focus fields, along the lines of what is schematized in (35), then sentences with multiple preverbal arguments, like those in (25), can simply be understood as having multiple arguments marked as topical, and sentences with multiple postverbal arguments, like those in (26), as having multiple arguments marked as focal.

For now, however, this can only be treated as a prediction of the analysis since I lack enough examples of the relevant types to verify such claims—though nothing in the data I have examined would seem to contradict them. Looking outside of Naki, some verification that multiple

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[22] There is extensive evidence that something like a preverbal topic field is or was active in a large number of Benue-Congo languages as discussed by Güldemann (forthcoming).

postverbal arguments can all be interpreted as focal, comes from Aghem where, as discussed by Watters (1979:147), sentences which clearly have focus on multiple arguments (for example questions and answers involving multiple questioned arguments) place all of those arguments postverbally.

It seems worth further pointing out that an analysis along the lines just proposed immediately allows us to understand why a range of variant word orders like those seen in section 4 were judged acceptable when elicited: Without any particular discourse context, sentential variants appropriate to any number of different discourse contexts were simply judged as available structures in the grammar, even if their discourse use is subject to restrictions not easily determined in the artificial elicitation environment.

While the data cannot, at present, point the way to any general explanation for the principles that may govern the ordering of multiple elements within the proposed topic or focus fields, it would seem to be the case that immediately postverbal position is reserved for elements with the highest degree of focus, as indicated by the fact that this is where question words appear. It is also clear that, at least in Naki, there seem to be fewer restrictions on the order of elements in the topic field than the focus field. Perhaps this is the reflex of the fact that the presence of multiple topical elements in a clause appears to be pragmatically more typical than the presence of multiple focal elements.[23]

5.3.3 Disfluentive verbal tone marking

A second issue raised by an analysis along the lines of the one schematized in (34b)—as well as in the modified version in (35)—is how to analyze the special tone marking found on disfluentive verbs in Naki. I would like to suggest that this marking is analogous to phenomena like passive marking in languages where grammatical relations like subject and object play an important role in syntactic constructions.[24] If passive marking is understood as an overt (morphological or syntactic) signal that the prototypical relationship between subject and actor and object and undergoer is not found in a particular clause, this tonal marking found in Naki could be similarly conceived of as an overt signal that the prototypical relationship between subject and topic and/or object and focus is also not found.

It seems worth noting here that the existence of special verbal morphology to encode information structure relationships is not particularly striking when examined from the wider Bantoid context. Whatever formal analysis one might give, on a descriptive level, the opposition between confluentive and disfluentive verb forms in Naki is clearly reminiscent of the opposition between conjoint and disjoint verb forms found in many (Narrow) Bantu languages which play a role in marking predicate and non-predicate focus (see Güldemann (2003:325–331) for an overview).

5.3.4 Non-argument focus

A final issue which needs to be addressed here is how non-argument focus fits into the analysis—since a schema like that in (35) only directly accounts for argument focus structures. As was seen in section 3, verb-phrase focus, and, on the basis of presently available data, possibly verb focus and thetic sentences have all been observed to make use of canonical sentence structures—that is, sentences of shape SV or SVO.

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[23] For overview discussion on the issue of multiple foci see Polinsky (1999:575) who suggests that "the majority of natural language utterances seem to favor a single focus".

[24] As discussed in section 4, Naki appears to lack a passive.

The most straightforward way to deal with these facts, under the present approach, is simply to treat the canonical SVO sentence type as not simply encoding topic-predicate-focus structure but as being vague and/or homophonous for different information structure readings, in the sense developed by Lambrecht (1994:296–322). Under such an analysis, SVO sentences could be understood as the "unmarked" type insofar as they would allow a wider range of information structure readings than other sentence types. We can schematize five types of information-structure configurations for Naki as in (36)—as seen, four involve SV(O) word order, while one, the postverbal focus construction does not. (The schematizations are not intended to represent field-based analyses but are simply an informal means of describing the relevant patterns. They assume that verb focus is coded as SV(O) and transitive thetic sentences are coded as SVO. As discussed in section 3, the available data is not completely clear on these points.)

(36) $[\text{ S V (O) }]_{\text{Focus}}$ *Thetic*
      $[\text{ S }]_{\text{Topic}} [\text{ V (O) }]_{\text{Focus}}$ *Verb phrase*
      $[\text{ S }]_{\text{Topic}} [\text{ V }]_{\text{Focus}} [\text{ O }]_{\text{Topic}}$ *Verb*
      $[\text{ S }]_{\text{Topic}} [\text{ V }]_{\text{Predicate}} [\text{ O }]_{\text{Focus}}$ *Object argument*
      $[\dots]_{\text{Topic}} [\text{ V }]_{\text{Predicate}} [\text{ X }]_{\text{Focus}}$ *Non-object argument*

Postverbal focalization, as we have seen, is an argument-focusing construction. So, it would, therefore, be viewed here as being in opposition to the object-focusing use of SVO order—that is, the use of SVO order that also involves argument focusing. The schema in (35) could, thus, be understood as the primary information-structure configuration for argument focus in Naki, applying to both object and non-object argument focus. The other information structure classes would make use of the same surface pattern as object argument focus but would involve different information-structure configurations than the argument-focus one schematized in (35) and would, therefore, require a separate account.

Such an analysis, of course, leaves open an intriguing question as to why the coding of information structure in Naki conflates verb-phrase focus and, possibly, verb focus and thetic statements into the same surface pattern as object focus. Aspects of this pattern of conflation hardly seem restricted to Naki. Aghem (Watters 1979:146) and Noni (Hyman 1981:106) show a similar pattern, at least with respect to verb-phrase and thetic sentences, and English, too, (though involving not word order but accent placement) shows something comparable (Lambrecht 1994:321). It would seem to be the case, therefore, that a proper account of this aspect of Naki information structure coding may require an appeal to broader, cross-linguistic principles governing patterns of formal conflation in information structure encoding. Unfortunately, the prerequisite crosslinguistic studies needed to ascertain such principles do not yet seem to have been undertaken.[25]

5.4 Slot-fillers in Aghem and Noni?

Field-based analyses of sentential syntax, like the one developed here for Naki (and, by extension, Aghem and Noni) have not been widely employed in recent work, to the best of my knowledge. An important question, then, is whether a notion like "topic field" is merely a descriptive convenience or if it can be considered to represent a truly distinct possibility for the exploitation of linear order in syntactic coding from more standard tree-based models—either

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[25] Lambrecht (1994:321) writes, "Partial or total homophony of sentence-focus [=thetic statements] and narrow-focus [=argument focus] is a common occurrence across languages." However, it is unclear how many languages this statement is based on.

universalist-oriented trees typical of many current generative approaches or more language-specific ones.

In principle, the crucial distinction between a field-based approach and a tree-based one is that syntactic positions are not defined in terms of how they fit into some abstract structure which can be mapped onto a linearization pattern but, rather, are defined directly in terms of their linear ordering, in a way which is roughly analogous to the slots proposed for position-class morphological systems. In the present context, therefore, it would be interesting to see if there was any evidence for such linearly-defined positions in a language like Naki, apart from evidence relating to how surface word order codes different information structure configurations.

In fact, I am unaware of any clear evidence in Naki for such positions. However, there are some intriguing syntactic phenomena found in Aghem and Noni which, in principle, could constitute evidence for linearly-defined positions—the presence of "dummy" filler elements in what is analyzed here as the topic and focus fields. This is a sort of phenomenon one would expect to encounter in a field-based syntax since it is easily explainable in terms of a linearly-defined syntactic structure: The grammar might specify that a given field must be filled with some overt material, even when the syntax/semantics of the sentence would not provide a "natural" element to fill it, in order to ensure that surfacing sentences are all conformant with the basic principles of linear organization governing the language's syntax.

Relevant data, from Aghem, is given in (37). (These examples are repeated from (32).) Aghem makes use of two such dummy elements, one to the left of the verb and one to the right of the verb. One of these is the "focus marker" *nô*, which is seen in (37a) and appears postverbally. In (37b) a sentence with the same semantics, but different word order and information structure is given in which a dummy subject *á* appears before the verb. These markers are obligatory in these sentences, and they have no obvious function other than to serve as preverbal and postverbal "slot"-fillers in sentences where material would not otherwise be found in those positions.

(37) a. *énáʔ mɔ̀   ñɨ́ŋ **nô***   AGHEM
         Inah DPST run FOC
         "Inah ran."

      b. ***á*** *mɔ̀   ñɨ́ŋ énáʔ*
         DS DPST run Inah
         "*Inah* ran."   (Watters 1979:144)

Comparable data from Noni is seen in (38), where a dummy postverbal focus marker has the form *lɔ̀* and a dummy subject marker has form *ɛ̀*.[26]

(38) a. *me nyemté   **lɔ̀***   NONI
         1s 1s.fall.PST FOC
         "I am singing."

      b. ***ɛ̀*** *nyemté me*
         DS fall.PST FOC
         "*I* am singing."   (Hyman 1981:107)

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[26] The analysis of these Aghem and Noni preverbal elements as "dummy" subjects is not my own but is how they are referred to by Watters (1979:146) and Hyman (1981:104), respectively. Neither explicitly refers to the postverbal elements as "dummy" forms, but they do both report them as being grammatically obligatory in certain contexts when no material would otherwise follow the verb (Watters (1979:166), Hyman (1981:56)). The explicit interpretation of these elements as dummy forms is my own.

The Naki marker *lī*, exemplified in (13), appears to be comparable to Aghem *nô* and Noni *lɔ̀*, though it is not yet fully known if it is completely obligatory in any context. However, as discussed in section 3, there are some indications that this may be the case.

While the dummy subject marker in Noni does not seem to also be associated with a contentful use in other contexts, the other observed dummy elements do have such uses. The Aghem dummy subject marker, *á*, for example, also serves as a third plural subject agreement marker (Hyman 1979:48). And, as indicated by the glosses, the two postverbal dummy elements can serve as contentful focus markers elsewhere. Specifically, the Aghem element *nô* also has something like a contrastive use (Watters 1979:166–168), and the Noni element *lɔ̀* can have a meaning comparable to English *just* (Hyman 1981:56). While the existence of contentful uses of such dummy elements may point the way to their ultimate origins, it need not impact a synchronic analysis of them as "meaningless". As evidenced by English expletive *it*, for example, a comparable dummy element (though with quite different conditioning), it is not at all atypical for a single element to have clearly distinguishable dummy and contentful uses.

It is worth noting that the postverbal dummy elements found in Aghem and Noni are not required in all contexts where the verb would not otherwise be followed by some other material. Roughly speaking, we can say that they are not found when certain kinds of auxiliary focus (in the sense of Hyman and Watters (1984)) are present in the clause. Note, however, that this does not mean we can simply suggest that the function of these postverbal particles is to "focus" the preceding verb, since sentences like those in (37a) and (38a) appear to be ambiguous for their information structure reading, allowing for thetic interpretation in addition to verb/verb-phrase focus. This point is made fairly explicitly for Aghem (Watters 1979:145) and seems likely to be the case for Noni (Hyman 1981:106–108), but this is less clear from the description.

I have no doubt that it would be possible to fashion analyses of these elements which could account for their distribution without making use of preverbal and postverbal fields.[27] The point here is that a field-based analysis would predict that, at least in some languages having a field-based syntax, one should be able to find elements whose function is to fill a field position when, otherwise, the position would remain unfilled and that good candidates for such elements are found in Noni and Aghem.

One final point needs to be made in this regard, however. As just mentioned, a sentence like the one in (37a) can have a thetic or verb-phrase focus reading. Following the schemas offered in (36), this could be taken to mean that such a sentence would not have a postverbal focus field and, therefore, this type of account would not explain the presence of the postverbal dummy element. However, if we conceptualize a schema like the one in (35) primarily as a representation of the form of a sentence as it can relate to particular (discourse-)functional categories, there is no reason to believe that such a form might not, in some contexts, be divorced from its core function, much as, for example, in certain languages "focus"-marking can become grammatically controlled in such a way that is no longer directly influenced by the discourse context.[28]

Taking such an approach, the canonical *form* of any Naki, Noni, or Aghem sentence can be said to be that given in (35). This form is consonant with functions where a postverbal argument (object or non-object) is focused. In other information-structure configurations, we can say that

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[27] One reason for this is the sheer difficulty of proving the negative claim some linguistic element has no "meaning" and only appears to fulfill formal restriction. Consider, for example, the Athabaskan "peg" element, as discussed and analyzed by Hargus and Tuttle (1997).

[28] This type of situation is described for the morphological form of objects of imperative verbs in Aghem (Hyman 1979:61), for example, which exploits nominal morphology, in addition to word order, to code information structure.

this form may also be used but there would be a form/function mismatch. While the existence of such a mismatch may appear counterintuitive, it would seem to be related to the more general issue of formal conflations of information structure encoding described in section 5.3.4. The general existence of such patterns of conflation is, of course, quite interesting, but it is a problem that goes well beyond the languages (and data) focused on here. Perhaps of relevance for future studies of such conflation patterns is the fact that this analysis implies that the argument-focus constructions of Naki, Aghem, and Noni are, in some sense, "basic", while the other focus types would seem to be "parasitic" on these structures.

6   Conclusion

This paper has given an overview of information-structure encoding in Naki and has discussed, in more detail, a particular construction employed by the language to focus non-object arguments. In addition, it examined relevant comparative data from Aghem and Noni. All of these languages use a surface postverbal position to mark arguments as in focus, which can trigger, in some cases, the appearance of non-canonical word orders.

It was argued that an effective way to analyze the use of word order to encode information structure in these languages was not through the use of reserved information-structure positions in an abstract syntactic tree—a popular analytical strategy at present—but, rather, to conceptualize clauses in these languages as having a form consisting of a preverbal field, a verb, and a postverbal field. In argument-focus constructions, the preverbal field would be reserved for topical arguments and the postverbal field for focal arguments. In addition, it was seen that the surface pattern of Naki (and, it seems, Aghem and Noni) sentences with the "expected" information structure configuration where the topic coincides with subject and focus with object—i.e., SVO—is also used for verb-phrase focus structures and, possibly, verb focus and thetic sentences. Thus, one can say there is a pattern of surface conflation in these languages where the form of a sentence associated with an object argument being in focus can be exploited for other purposes.[29]

By way of conclusion, it is worth noting that the field-based analysis developed here raises a set of important questions relating to the basic grammatical "type" of Naki, Aghem, and Noni. While I have used terminology like subject and object in this paper as a descriptive convenience, the interpretation of the word order facts indicated that such grammatical roles play relatively little role in these languages' surface syntax. The only apparent crucial reference to such notions was, perhaps, in understanding the conditions under which special postverbal focus tone marking is found on Naki verbs—but, even in that case, I know of no evidence to suggest that one could not replace "subject" with a semantic macrorole like actor and "object" with undergoer and still achieve the same analytical coverage.

The surface syntax of these languages could, then, be said to be discourse centered, rather than grammatical-role centered. However, the well-known label *discourse-configurational* (see, for example, Kiss (1995) for discussion of the term) would not seem to be appropriate for them. Such classification would imply that their syntax is characterized by arguments surfacing in topic and focus positions in an abstract syntactic structure with the interpretation of these arguments as topical or focal being dependent on how they configurationally fit into this structure. The analysis here, however, made use only of linearly-defined fields without assuming that

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[29] Assuming that such a conflation pattern is indicative of a particular language "type", in the classic typological sense, one could perhaps label such languages as exhibiting *object salience* to highlight the fact that a clause in which an object is in a pragmatically salient position is relatively unspecified for its information structure interpretation. However, at least with respect to Naki, whose information structure has not yet been fully explored, such a label may be premature.

there was any associated syntactic tree, or similar device, underlying those fields—i.e., the interpretation of the fields was not taken to be dependent on how they fit into a broader syntactic configuration. Thus, we might, instead, label these languages *discourse serializing* to reflect the idea that their surface syntax exploits linearly-defined positions (i.e., *before* or *after* the verb) to code discourse structure. The extent to which such a descriptive label might represent a truly distinct syntactic type from the better-known types like "configurational" must, at this point, be treated as an open question.

Glossing abbreviations

1...19 (without "p" or "s")	noun class prefixes
1,2,3 (with "s" or "p")	person
A	"in focus" noun form (Aghem)
ASS	associative
B	"out of focus" noun form (Aghem)
CNS	consecutive verb form
DPST	distant past
DS	"dummy" subject marker (Aghem, Noni)
DSF	disfluentive verb form
EMPH	emphatic form
FOC	focus particle
FUT	future
ITER	iterative
LOC	locative
NEG	negative marker/negative form
NFOC	negative focus particle
p	plural
PART	particle
PROG	progressive
PRS	present
PST	past
s	singular
SM	subject marker (Aghem)
@	example drawn from text

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