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Topicalisation in Tupuri: A Cartographic Approach

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Abstract- This study investigates the syntactic phenomenon of topicalisation in Tupuri. Specifically, it examines the fronting of subjects, objects, and adjuncts to the left periphery of the clause within a cartographic framework, assessing how Tupuri aligns with cross-linguistic patterns of topicalisation. Data were collected through a one-month field visit in the Guidiguis subdivision, involving the recording and transcription of naturally occurring speech. Each sentence was analyzed using Cartographic Syntax (Rizzi, 1997; Cinque & Rizzi, 2010), focusing on the hierarchical organisation of the left periphery, including Spec-TopicP, Spec-FocP, and FinP. It was found that Tupuri systematically uses Spec-TopicP to encode topicalised constituents, with subjects and objects frequently accompanied by resumptive pronouns to preserve argument structure and coreference. Adjuncts, such as temporal, locative, and manner phrases, can also be fronted without resumptive elements. In all cases, topicalisation establishes a clear topic-comment structure, confirming that movement to the left periphery is a productive strategy for marking discourse relevance.

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Abstract—This study investigates the syntactic phenomenon of topicalisation in Tupuri. Specifically, it examines the fronting of subjects, objects, and adjuncts to the left periphery of the clause within a cartographic framework, assessing how Tupuri aligns with cross-linguistic patterns of topicalisation. Data were collected through a one-month field visit in the Guidiguis subdivision, involving the recording and transcription of naturally occurring speech. Each sentence was analyzed using Cartographic Syntax (Rizzi, 1997; Cinque & Rizzi, 2010), focusing on the hierarchical organisation of the left periphery, including Spec-TopicP, Spec-FocP, and FinP. It was found that Tupuri systematically uses Spec-TopicP to encode topicalised constituents, with subjects and objects frequently accompanied by resumptive pronouns to preserve argument structure and coreference. Adjuncts, such as temporal, locative, and manner phrases, can also be fronted without resumptive elements. In all cases, topicalisation establishes a clear topic–comment structure, confirming that movement to the left periphery is a productive strategy for marking discourse relevance.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The study of African languages has increasingly attracted the attention of linguists, not only for purposes of documentation but also for the insights they provide into linguistic diversity and universal grammar. Among these languages is Tupuri (also spelled Toupouri), classified by Boyd (1974) as part of the Niger-Congo phylum, the Adamawa-Ubangi family, and the Mbum group. The present study focuses on the *ɓango* dialect, spoken in Cameroon. Tupuri is of particular interest because of its rich phonological, morphological, and especially syntactic structures, which remain underexplored in linguistic literature.

One syntactic phenomenon that plays a central role in the organisation of discourse is topicalisation. Crystal (2008) defines topicalisation as a syntactic process that places an element, such as a noun phrase or a prepositional phrase, at the beginning of the sentence to mark it as the topic of discourse. Similarly, Jackendoff (1972) views topicalisation as a principle of preposing, which moves sentence constituents from their canonical positions to the left periphery of the clause. In structural terms, topicalisation is

characterised by three core features: (i) movement, where a constituent is displaced from its base position to the front of the sentence; (ii) emphasis, which highlights the topicalised element in discourse; and (iii) the establishment of a topic–comment structure, in which the fronted constituent serves as the topic and the remainder of the sentence functions as the comment.

To illustrate, consider the following examples from English cited by Alnabi and Muhammad (2022):

- 1.a. Does she like tea?
- b. Tea, she doesn't like. (Ross, 1967)
- 2.a. I liked the subject.
- b. The subject, I liked. (Baltin, 1982)

These examples demonstrate how topicalisation restructures the canonical word order to foreground a particular constituent. While such constructions have been widely studied in English and other Indo-European languages, there remains a scarcity of research on topicalisation in Tupuri.

This study therefore investigates the syntactic structure of topicalisation in Tupuri within a cartographic framework. By applying cartographic syntax (Rizzi, 1997; Cinque & Rizzi, 2010), which maps the hierarchical structure of the left periphery, the research seeks to identify how topicalised constituents are represented in Tupuri.

II. THEORETICAL ASSUMPTION

This study is grounded on the Cartographic Approach to syntactic theory, as developed by Rizzi (1997) and further elaborated by Cinque and Rizzi (2010). The cartographic framework assumes that syntactic structures can be represented in a highly articulated hierarchy of functional projections, particularly in the left periphery of the clause, where discourse-related categories such as Topic and Focus are encoded.

The Following Assumptions Guide the Present Analysis:

- Hierarchical structure of the left periphery
The left periphery is not a single undifferentiated position but a sequence of functional projections. According to Rizzi (1997), the structure includes ForceP, TopicP, FocusP, and FinP, among others. Topicalisation in Tupuri is therefore assumed to target the TopicP projection within this hierarchy.

– Movement Operations

Topicalisation is assumed to involve syntactic movement from an argument or adjunct position to the specifier of TopicP. This displacement accounts for the sentence-initial position of the topicalised constituent.

– Topic–comment articulation

The sentence is divided into a topic (what the sentence is about) and a comment (what is said about the topic). Topicalisation structures in Tupuri are assumed to follow this articulation, consistent with cross-linguistic evidence (Lambrecht, 1994).

– Multiplicity of Topic Positions

Following cartographic studies (Frascarelli & Hinterhölzl, 2007), it is assumed that a language may allow multiple Topic projections (e.g., aboutness topics, contrastive topics). This study explores whether Tupuri permits such distinctions or restricts topicalisation to a single position.

III. METHODOLOGY

a) Data Collection

To collect the data, a field visit was conducted for one month in the Guidiguu subdivision, an area inhabited by a large Tupuri community. This fieldwork enabled the recording and transcription of texts. It should be noted that the topic-building examples analyzed in this study were drawn exclusively from these field recordings. Consequently, the research is limited, as it does not capture all possible instances of topicalization.

b) Measures

The collected data were systematically organized according to the type of topicalisation. For each sentence, the dataset includes: the original tupuri sentence, a literal English gloss of the Tupuri sentence and the English translation.

Each example was then analyzed following the Cartographic Syntax approach, with a focus on the left periphery of the clause (Spec-TopP, Spec-FocP, and FinP projections), to reveal the syntactic positions of topicalised constituents and the operations that motivate their displacement.

IV. RESULTS

a) Subject Topicalisation

Subject topicalisation occurs when the subject of a clause is moved from its canonical position to the left periphery, specifically to the specifier of TopicP. This fronting highlights the subject as the discourse topic, while the remainder of the clause functions as the comment, expressing what is said about that topic. In Tupuri, the topicalised subject is often marked with a definite article or discourse marker, which signals its prominence in the sentence. Syntactically, this process

involves movement from Spec-TP to Spec-TopicP, leaving the predicate, verb, and any complements in their original positions within the TP/FinP domain. Examples

(1) *Maiba, á de reege*

Maiba 3SG. PRO eat

Maiba, she is eating

‘

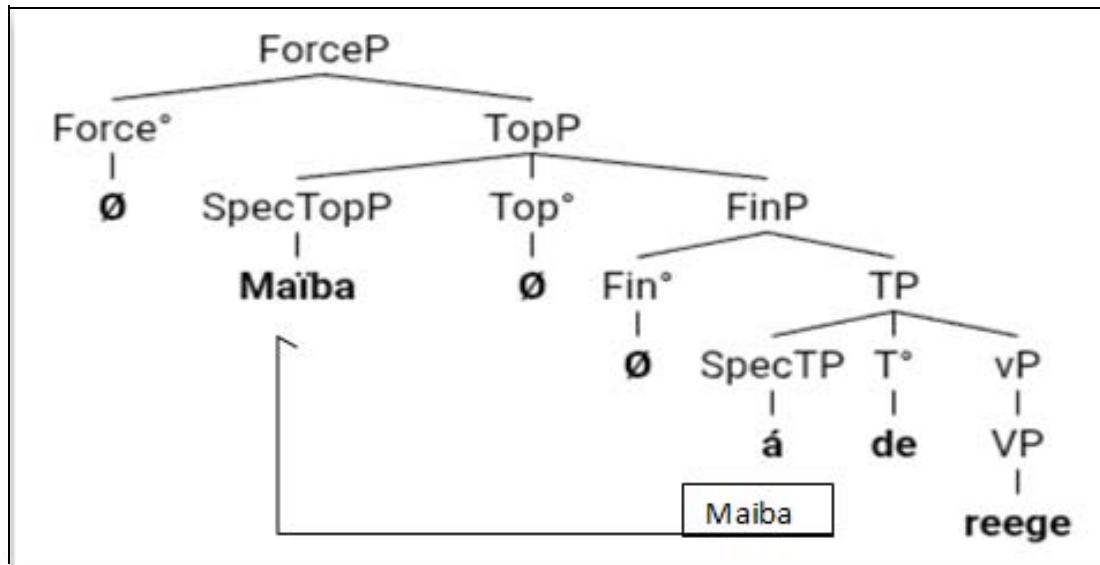
(2) *Way no, a nii paadu no*

Dog DEF 3SG. chased cat DEF ‘

The dog, it chased the cat.’

From the example above, we realize that in the sentences (1), the subject *Maiba* is topicalised to the clause-initial position. Similarly, in (2), the subject *Way no* is fronted to serve as the topic. Both sentences exhibit the characteristic Topic–Comment articulation: the fronted subject is the topic, and the following clause provides the comment. It should be noted that the topicalised subjects are followed directly by the resumptive pronouns as “á” both in sentence (1) and (2).

The diagram representation of one these sentences, showing the hierarchical organisation of the topicalised subject within the left periphery, is as follows:



From this diagram, we realize that, in Tupuri, topicalisation involves moving a constituent from its canonical position in the clause to the left periphery to mark it as the topic, or what the sentence is about. In the sentence “Maiba, á de reege”, the DP *Maiba* is originally generated in the SpecTP position but is moved to SpecTopP to signal its discourse prominence. To maintain grammatical and referential integrity, a resumptive pronoun ‘*á*’ is inserted in the original subject position, co-referential with the topicalised DP. This pronoun ensures that the syntactic relation between the subject and the predicate remains intact while allowing the topic to appear at the front of the clause. Meanwhile, the verbal predicate ‘*de reege*’ stays in its base position within TP/vP, preserving the canonical event structure and maintaining the core argument–predicate relations

b) Object Topicalisation

Object topicalisation is a syntactic phenomenon whereby the object of a clause is fronted to the left periphery, specifically to Spec-TopicP, to serve as the discourse topic. This displacement highlights the object while the remainder of the clause forms the comment, expressing what is said about the object. In many cases, Tupuri uses a resumptive pronoun in the canonical object position within the VP to maintain grammatical and semantic coherence. The process involves movement from the base VP position of the object to Spec-TopicP, leaving the verb and any other complements in their original positions within FinP/TP. For instance:

(3) *Kefder no, ndi go de keege be*

book DEF 1SG already read 3SG/Resumptive

The book, I have already read it.’

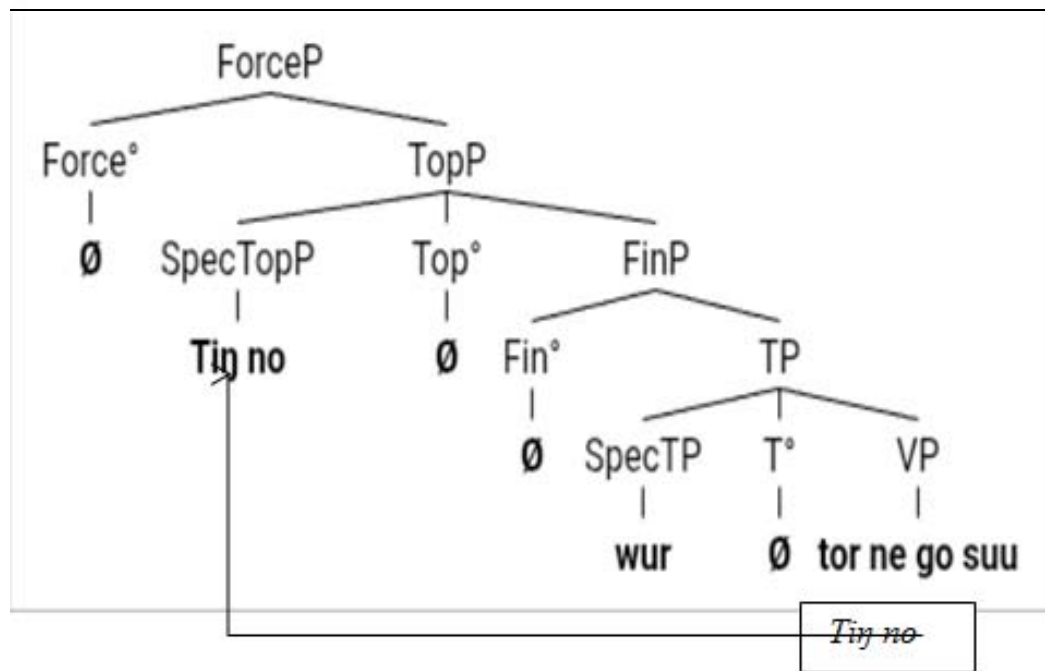
(4) *Tij no, wur tor ne go suu*

House DEF 1PL clean 3SG yesterday ‘

The house, we cleaned it yesterday.’

In the sentence (3), the object *Kefder no* is fronted to clause-initial position as the topic, while *be* functions as a resumptive pronoun in VP. Similarly, in (4), the object *Tij no* is topicalised, with the resumptive pronoun *ne* maintaining the link to its original position.

The diagram representation of one of the sentences, showing the hierarchical organisation of the topicalised object within the left periphery, are as follows:



The above diagram shows that in Tupuri, object topicalisation occurs when a constituent that is normally the object of the verb is moved to the left periphery of the clause to mark it as the topic, or the entity the sentence is about. In the sentence “*Tiη no, wur tor ne go suu*” (“The house, we cleaned it yesterday”), the DP *Tiη no* (“the house”) is topicalised and occupies SpecTopP in the left periphery, signaling its discourse prominence. To maintain grammatical and referential relations, a resumptive pronoun ‘*ne*’ is inserted within the VP, co-referential with the topicalised object, ensuring that the verb can still assign its argument properly. The VP itself remains intact, containing the verb complex ‘*tor go*’ (“cleaned”), the resumptive pronoun ‘*ne*’, and the temporal adjunct ‘*suu*’ (“yesterday”), while the subject pronoun ‘*wur*’ (“we”) occupies SpecTP. This structure demonstrates that Tupuri uses left-dislocation plus resumptive pronouns as a strategy for object topicalisation, preserving both syntax and discourse coherence.

c) Adjunct Topicalisation

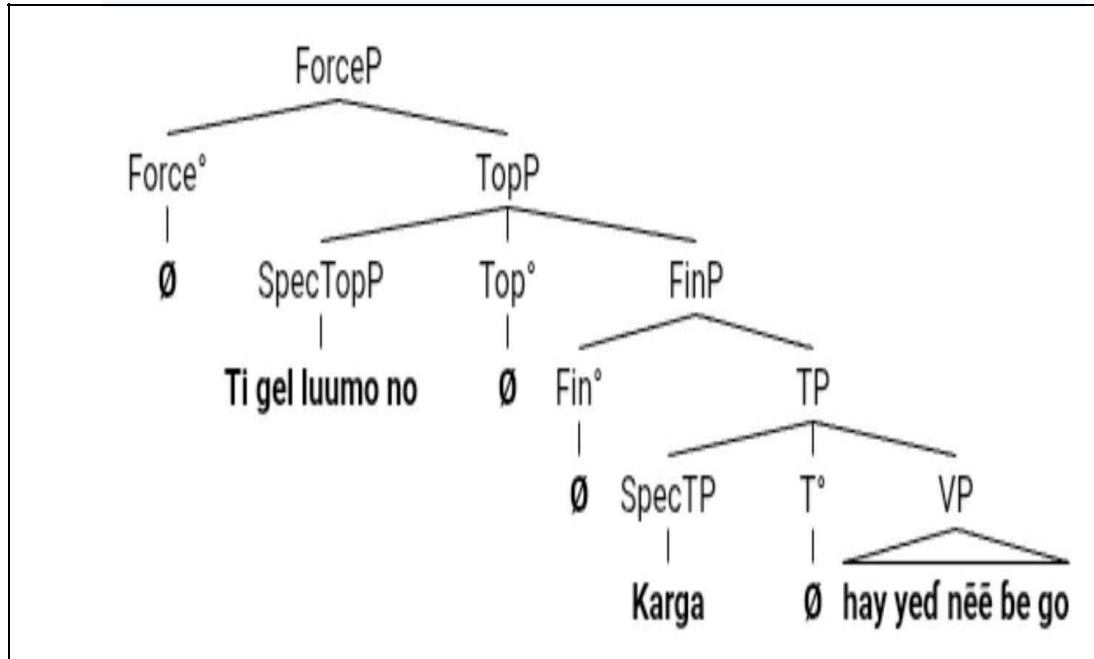
In Tupuri, adjunct topicalisation occurs when temporal, locative, or manner adjuncts are fronted to the left periphery, specifically to Spec-TopicP, to function as the discourse topic. This fronting highlights the adjunct and situates the comment, the remainder of the clause, in relation to it. Unlike argument topicalisation, adjunct topicalisation typically does not require a resumptive pronoun, as the adjunct is external to the VP and does not affect core argument structure.

(5) *Ti gel luumo no, Karga hay yed' nēē be go*
At market DEF, Karga sold vegetables DEF-POSS
At the market, Karga sold his vegetables.'

(6) *Suu, wur hay ti luumo*
Yesterday 1PL COP at market'
Yesterday, we were at the market.'

For example, in the sentence (5), the locative adjunct *Ti gel luumo no* is topicalised to clause-initial position. Similarly, in (6), the temporal adjunct *Suu* is fronted.

The diagram representation, showing the hierarchical organisation of the topicalised adjunct, is as follows:



From the diagram above, we realize that adjunct topicalisation occurs when an adjunct, such as a locative phrase, is moved to the left periphery of the clause, specifically to SpecTopP within TopP, to signal discourse prominence. For example, in the sentence “*Ti gel luumo no, Karga hay yed nēē be go*” (“At the market, Karga sold his vegetables”), the locative phrase *Ti gel luumo no* is topicalised and occupies SpecTopP, while the subject *Karga* remains in SpecTP and the VP *hay yed nēē be go* remains intact, preserving the canonical argument structure. Unlike topicalised objects, adjuncts do not require a resumptive pronoun, as seen in this example where no pronoun links *Ti gel luumo no* to the VP. This structure illustrates that Tupuri uses the ForceP–TopP–FinP–TP hierarchy to allow left-peripheral movement of adjuncts for discourse emphasis while maintaining grammatical relations and the integrity of the VP.

d) Resumptive Pronouns

In Tupuri, resumptive pronouns are used when a topicalised constituent, whether a subject or an object, is displaced to the left periphery. These pronouns appear in the canonical argument position within the VP, maintaining syntactic and semantic coherence by linking the fronted topic to its original position. This ensures that the sentence remains well-formed and that the Topic–Comment structure is preserved, allowing the fronted element to retain its discourse prominence while the comment conveys the predicate information.

(7) *May geemanbin no, á hay raw wo mban were*
SisterDEF 3SG. Went to village
My sister, she went to the village.’

(8) *Je tāābe no, á hay sii ree maga hres go jag pāāre ge deban*

Old man DEF 3SG told story long about past ‘
The old man, he told a long story about the past.’

(9) *Kamliiri wo, á hay joŋ wo hrag bil fēele no*
child PL 3PL play yard DEF ‘
The children, they played in the yard.’

In the sentence (7), the topicalised subject *May geemanbin no* is fronted to Spec-TopicP, while the resumptive pronoun *á* appears in the VP. Similarly, in (8), the pronoun *á* resumes the topicalised subject, maintaining grammatical integrity. In (9), the plural resumptive pronoun *á* links back to the fronted topic *Kamliiri wo*.

The linear bracketed representations of these sentences are as follows:

[ForceP [TopicP May geemanbin no] [Top’ [FocusP [FinP á hay raw [VP wo mban were]]]]]

[ForceP [TopicP Je tāābe no] [Top’ [FocusP [FinP á hay sii ree maga [VP hres go jag pāāre ge debane]]]]]

[ForceP [TopicP Kamliiri wo] [Top’ [FocusP [FinP á hay joŋ [VP wo hrag bil fēele no]]]]]

In these structures, the topicalised constituents occupy Spec-TopicP, while the resumptive pronouns in VP preserve argument structure and coreference. This pattern illustrates how Tupuri utilises resumptive pronouns to maintain both syntactic well-formedness and clear Topic–Comment articulation within the Cartographic framework.

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the analysis of topicalisation in Tupuri demonstrates that the language systematically employs the left periphery to encode discourse prominence. Subjects, objects, and adjuncts can be fronted to Spec-TopicP, marking them as topics while the remainder of the clause constitutes the comment. Resumptive pronouns are used when necessary to maintain grammatical integrity and preserve coreference. The tree diagrams and the linear bracketed representations show that Tupuri aligns with the Cartographic framework, where movement to the left periphery serves as a key mechanism for highlighting discourse-relevant elements. Overall, this study highlights the intricate interplay between syntax and discourse in Tupuri, confirming that topicalisation is a productive strategy for managing information structure and ensuring clear Topic–Comment articulation in the language.

ABBREVIATION LEGEND

TOP = Topic marker

DEF = Definite marker

PST = Past tense

1SG/1PL = First person singular/plural

3SG.M/3SG.F = Third person singular masculine/feminine

3PL = Third person plural

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