

Dogon existential proclitic *yá*

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“existential” proclitic

Dogon languages have a proclitic particle that is here called “existential.” Like English existential (impersonal) *there*, it probably originated as a deictic adverb meaning (discourse-definite) ‘there’, and it preserves some traces of such a sense. It is strongly associated with stative verbs and quasi-verbs, and in some constructions it is obligatory. However, it is confined to positive main clauses and cannot co-occur with negation, subordination (relative clauses), or a focalized non-verb constituent.

forms

The forms of the proclitic are in (1). In some languages the vowel assimilates to that of the following verb, especially in the high-frequency combinations with ‘be’ and ‘have’ quasi-verbs.

(1)	eastern		
	Toro Tegu	<i>á</i>	imperfective and with ‘be’ but not ‘have’
	Ben Tey	<i>yá</i>	
	Bankan Tey	<i>yá</i>	
	Nanga	<i>yá</i>	
	Jamsay	<i>yé, yó</i>	<i>yó wà</i> and <i>yó kà</i> ‘be’, <i>yó kùn</i> ‘be in’, otherwise <i>yé</i>
	Togo Kan	<i>yé, yó</i>	<i>yó</i> in <i>yó wà</i> and <i>yó kà</i> ‘be’
	Tommo So	<i>yé, kó</i>	not used with ‘be’; <i>kó</i> indicates proximity
	Donno So	<i>yé, yí, yó, yó</i>	<i>yó = ò</i> ‘be’, <i>yó tò</i> ‘be in’, <i>yí sè</i> ‘have’, otherwise <i>yé</i>
	Yorno So	<i>yá</i>	
	Tomo Kan	<i>yè, yè, yò, yò</i>	assimilates to following <i>ɛ, o, ɔ</i> , otherwise <i>yè</i>
	northwestern		
	Najamba	[none]	
	Tiranige	<i>è ~ é, yà ~ yá</i>	<i>ya</i> indicates displacement
	Dogul Dom	<i>yè, yò</i>	free variation (?)
	Tebul Ure	<i>yé</i>	
	Yanda Dom	<i>yà</i>	also “realis” with perfective verbs

southwestern		
Bunoge	<i>bò</i>	from a reduced ‘there’ adverb
Mombo	<i>ò</i>	
Ampari	<i>ǎⁿ</i>	
Penange	<i>èⁿ, èⁿ</i>	<i>èⁿ bó</i> ‘be’, otherwise <i>èⁿ</i>

There is abundant evidence in eastern and northwestern language for a reconstruction **ye/ye*, with a tendency to assimilate vowel qualities especially in ‘be’ and ‘have’ constructions. This cognate set can be referred to as Y-existentials. Bunoge *bò* is clearly distinct etymologically; it probably derives from a ‘there’ adverb (cf. Bunoge *bò-nâ*: ‘there’, *bó-lò* ‘to/from there’), not from the phonologically similar ‘be’ quasi-verb. The existential variants consisting of just a vowel might be reduced versions of **ye/ye* or, in the case of Mombo *ò*, from **bò*. For example, Toro Tegu *á* might be a reduction of *yá* seen in some nearby eastern languages. However, the fact that Tiranige distinguishes unmarked *è ~ é* from spatially displaced *yà ~ yá* suggests that (some) vowel-only variants may constitute their own cognate set, distinct from Y-existentials.

Like *bò*, the Y-existentials likely derive from discourse-definite ‘there’ adverbs, which are often related to or derived from near-distant deictic demonstratives. In Togo Kan, existential *yé ~ yó* is phonologically similar to discourse-definite *yê* ‘there’, but the two differ tonally and they can co-occur in the same clause. Nanga has *yá* ‘there’ as well as existential *yá*. Jamsay has near-distant demonstrative stem *yí ~ yé ~ yé* in addition to existential *yé ~ yó*. Of course one has to look no farther than English to find parallels to the evolution from (discourse-definite) ‘there’ to existential particle.

grammatical function

In most Dogon languages, the existential particle is required with the locational ‘be’ quasi-verb in unfocalized positive main clauses unless an overt locational expression is present. That is, it occurs in ‘X is (present)’ but usually not in ‘X is [in the house]’. This means that the existential proclitic betrays its origin as a semantically light locative adverb ‘there’, and still functions as a default locational with ‘be’. However, the proclitic is obligatory with ‘have’ in unfocalized main clauses, whether or not an overt locational expression is present; it occurs both in ‘X has Y’ and in ‘X has Y [in the house]’. Therefore the (weakened) locational status of the existential in the ‘be’ construction does not apply to ‘have’ constructions.

The existential particle, though very common with ‘be’ in positive main clauses and obligatory with ‘have’ in such clauses, is generally not allowed in combination with negation, subordination (relative clauses), or when some non-verb constituent is focalized (as in ‘who is there?’ or ‘what do you have?’).

Toro Tegu imperfective á ~ â:

It is possible that Toro Tegu imperfective proclitic á ~ â: is cognate to á, which functions like an existential particle in the ‘be’ construction á dâ but does not occur in the ‘have’ construction.

á ~ â: occurs in positive clauses with future and imperfective verbs. It has some but not all distributional peculiarities of the existential clitic in other Dogon languages. On the plus side, it is incompatible with negation. On the negative side, it is compatible with a focalized constituent, and it may occur in relative clauses.

Whether or not cognate to or synchronically identifiable with the imperfective proclitic, existential proclitic á is required before (stative) locational ‘be’ quasi-verb dâ in the absence of an overt locational phrase. It is optional before dâ if such a locational is present. Unlike imperfective á ~ â:, existential á is disallowed in the presence of a focalized non-verb constituent. So one possibility is that existential á is etymologically a Y-existential reduced from *yá and is etymologically unrelated to the partially homophonous imperfective proclitic. Another possibility, given that no obvious cognate for the imperfective proclitic á ~ â: can be found, is that it represents a grammatical extension of the existential clitic.

Yanda Dom realis yà

A somewhat similar situation is presented by Yanda Dom. In addition to existential yà with statives including ‘be’ and ‘have’, the same (or a homophonous) proclitic is very common before active verbs in realis perfective positive clauses.