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THE TOP OF THE FOLK TAXONOMY – Abstract

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This study lies at the interface of two areas of investigation which have hitherto been conducted largely independently in separate sub-fields of research. One of these is the linguistic/theoretic examination of syntactic and pragmatic controls of reference in text.

The other area of research which we are addressing here is conducted more within the discipline of anthropology and anthropological linguistics. Here a lot of work has gone into the study of what is often called the folk taxonomy, tracing “kind-of” relations in word-families up each branch of the hierarchy to a ‘unique beginner’.

This study has its focus in the very highest levels where pragmatic considerations of vagueness – whether from deliberate pragmatic strategy of the speaker or carelessness and mental aberration – and the widest possible generality of reference are to the fore.

Thus we consider terms like “thing” (and the Ghana English ‘dis ting’), “whatsisname” “so and so” and the system which I have called ‘hesitation’ which determines the features of fluency and non-fluency in discourse.

## THE TOP OF THE FOLK TAXONOMY

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**1. INTRODUCTION**

## 1.1

This study lies at the interface of two areas of investigation which have hitherto been conducted largely independently in separate sub-fields of research. One of these is the linguistic/theoretic examination of syntactic and pragmatic controls of reference in text. This has been focussed on Chomsky's Binding Conditions, with the aims variously of exemplifying, refining, simplifying or abolishing them. A discussion with copious references to the progress of this debate is found in Ariel, 1994. Particularly interesting is the perspective which this article gives to the pragmatic question – that of how a speaker manages anaphora (in the widest sense of the term) with regard for the accessibility, to the hearer, of potential antecedents or referents. This makes sense in the consideration of real-world language use, as well as in broadening the theoretical syntactic/pragmatic discussion, and this is so whether or not we are convinced by Ariel's particular 'Accessibility Theory' solution to the whole range of problems.

## 1.2

## 1.2.1

The other area of research which we are addressing here is conducted more within the discipline of anthropology and anthropological linguistics. Here a lot of work has gone into the study of what is often called the folk taxonomy. Particularly noteworthy are the work of Brent Berlin and his collaborators (Berlin *et al.* 1973), and a series of studies detailed in Whatsisface, 1979.b, 1984, 1986.a,b,c. and related publications. The basic contention is that the hierarchical organisation of concepts and their lexicalisations is not just a characteristic of specialised scientific discourse but is also part of natural language. Different levels of specificity and generality are posited and illustrated from the nomenclatures of a wide range of languages. It should be apparent that this research is also concerned with reference relations between language and the 'real world' which language usually assumes to exist, whatever subjective or solipsistic metaphysic individual thinkers may choose to espouse (Lakoff, 1987). The scale of specificity discussed here may be considered in this way from a paradigmatic perspective, or alternatively can be treated syntagmatically in the pragmatic interpretation of specific utterances in context. The latter viewpoint, as exemplified in Cruse 1977, for instance, takes us back into relation with accessibility, relevance, and interpretation of anaphoric (in the general, rather than the Chomskyan, sense) reference.

## 1.2.2

In the anthropological studies referred to above, each domain is characteristically carried up to a level called 'unique beginner' such as Plant, Animal and so on. The implication is that these parallel categories are the heads of their respective hierarchies, and not subordinate to anything more inclusive. This seems to equate in non-technical terms to a claim that natural language contains utterances like "The oak is a sort of tree.", or "Rats, parrots and sharks are all animals.", but not statements like "Plants are a type of material

object.” or “This animal and that mountain make two *realia*.”. As I have just produced the two latter statements and it would not be appropriate to asterisk them; the claim is presumably that they belong to an artificial language of logic or science which builds on, but is not, natural language. It may be true that many languages of the world are spoken by communities which have not yet found a need to develop this type of specialised sub-language for direct analytic statements. However I have encountered in my studies in West African languages higher levels of generality which yet fall short of syntactic pronominalisation.

### 1.2.3

These data are of two types, one being the application of conventions of quantity (Grice 1975) which set levels of appropriate generality (Cruse 1977) very high when the reference is sufficiently determined in the context, and other the type of form for which I suggest the name ‘general substitute’ which is used when one temporarily forgets the particular word which is presupposed in ones planning of an utterance. The former type is found to operate in Mampruli and other Western Oti/Volta languages (Manessy 1975; Naden 1988, 1989) which I am currently studying, in a way quite similar to the corresponding items in Bisa, a language of the virtually-unrelated Mande family (unrelated: Mukarovsky 1977 ; cf./ct. Bendor-Samuel [ed.] 1989, 12-20, 47ff.), which is covered in my doctoral research (Naden 1970, 1973). General substitutes are specifically lexicalised in Bisa and, in a stylistically-marked way, in English. In Mampruli and its congeners they share lexical forms with the former type of item of high generality. In addition to these major types, there are some minor high-generality or, if you will, low-specificity forms which are also worthy of discussion in this context, while it also needs to be noted that important grammatical devices like pronominalisation and deixis have functions in this semantic–pragmatic area which are not usually given much attention when their other significances are discussed.

## 2. ‘DIS TING’

In the English speech of uneducated Ghanaians, a high proportion of the nominals appear as **dis-ting** (SE “this thing”)<sup>1</sup>:-

1. My father asks you to lend him your dis-ting.
2. I have forgotten my dis-ting.
3. We can’t do that and finish unless we get dis-ting.  
(actual examples)

This usage is ‘catching’ – many educated Ghanaians and native English-speaking expatriates pick up the locution, partly for humorous effect, partly from its usefulness. This usage relates to the vernacular languages in that these usually have a noun which is at the top of the nominal lexicon’s taxonomic hierarchy – a real ‘unique beginner’ – and is usually translated “thing”. However the conditions of use of this item are rather different from those of the English word. This “thing” term (in Bisa it is **fo**, in Mampruli **bunni**<sup>2</sup>) is usable for

<sup>1</sup> Interview with worker of Ashanti Goldfields company, BBC World Service March 1995: (Ghanaian worker) “No, since privatization there hasn’t been any dis-ting.”

<sup>2</sup> The standard two-letter code abbreviations will often be used for these languages, respectively BI and MP. Orthographic transcriptions are used (in the case of BI my own orthographic-style transcription as the language has no official one in Ghana), except that a hyphen may be used to indicate word-internal morpheme boundaries.

any concrete object, or even any syntactic nominal, especially where its identity is clear from the linguistic or situational context, and/or if the speaker cannot think of the specific name or does not want to specify :

4. (BI) **Ni'n<sup>3</sup> fɔ̃ gu ma.** They took off the thing. (lid/cover/door...)  
*they'+<sup>3</sup> thing remove from*
5. (BI) A: **Bɔ̃ a kan mɔ̃w'i?** What will he give me?  
*what he give.will me'to?*
- B: **A fɔ̃ kale ibii'w; ...** – He will give you something; ...  
*he thing give.will you'to ...* (goes on to suggest possibilities)
6. (MP) **Bunni n<sup>4</sup> tukki n nimbiri ni.** Something got in my eye.  
*thing !<sup>t</sup> enter my eye in*
7. (MP) **Bunni wa naai ni<sup>4</sup>.** This (one) is finished.  
*thing this finish !<sup>t</sup>*

In Mampruli, as in example 7 above, “thing” is used with demonstratives, which require nominal support; it is used similarly, though optionally, with interrogatives :-

8. (MP) **I butti la bum-bɔ̃a?** What are you sowing?  
*you sowing !<sup>t</sup> thing-what?*
9. (MP) **Bum-bɔ̃ n-ɲɔ̃a?** What's that?  
or Bɔ̃ n-ɲɔ̃a?

In Bisa, particularly, the vagueness or openness of ‘dis-ting’ lends itself to all sorts of contextually-imposed senses :-

10. (BI) **Ibii fɔ̃ m bi.** You win!  
*your thing is it*
11. (BI) **gwaa faam fɔ̃** public property  
*people all thing*
12. (BI) **Ibii fɔ̃ yi leda.** Your opinion/argument is best.  
*your thing is excelling*

In both languages (as in English) the word can mean “belongings, furniture, riches” :-

<sup>3</sup> The Bisa sequential marker **n** following the subject, glossed ‘+’, indicates continuation of discourse theme.

<sup>4</sup> Mampruli has a system of focus markers in complementary distribution :-

<b>n/m</b> following the subject	::	Subject focus
<b>ni</b> following the verb	::	Verb focus (no constituent follows verb)
<b>la</b> following the verb	::	Rheme focus (some constituent follows – irrespective of its syntactic status)

These are represented in the gloss line of interlinear examples with “!”

13. (BI) **Fə ta wəə par'ə guta.** There is plenty at our house.  
*thing exist our house'in much*
14. (MP) **M bunni maa tariga nla.** That's the end of my wealth.  
*my thing the terminus is.that*
15. (MP) **bun-daana** ('thing-owner') a rich person

### 3. GENERAL SUBSTITUTE

A related but rather different sort of case is that of the pure 'thingummy': the speaker forgets a word and has to have place-filler – a pro-noun or 'general substitute' – to keep the sentence going. In one of the few published mentions of these items Wentworth and Flexner's dictionary defines

“ Thingamajig, thingumabob, thingummy, etc. *n.* Used to indicate any item of which the speaker does not know or has momentarily forgotten the name, especially used to ref. to any, usu. a small, new or unfamiliar device, mechanical part, gadget, tool or ornament; a thing.”

though the “especially ...” group of restrictions is rather outmoded, more modern parlance using terms like *widget*, *gizmo*: there are also modern (? already passé) general substitutes like *an' stuff*, *and them* (Pawley/Syder 1983): see also Zwicky 1974. Often the specific term is immediately added in apposition or in a repeat of the whole sentence; sometimes it may be left to the context to supply it, as with some of the 'dis-ting' examples above. Bisa has an extremely useful quasi-lexical item of this type, the general substitute noun **hina** :-

16. (BI) **Bəə hina bi gasu.** The one who went into the whatsit.  
*the.one whatsit the enter*  
 (hearer supplies 'water' from the folktale which is under discussion)
17. (BI) **Hina bi. Mooy n.** It's thingummy. It's rice.

**Hina** can substitute for a whole discourse :-

18. (BI) **Hmm...weell...hina.**  
 (speaker holds his place in the interaction while he thinks of an answer)

The general substitute is a regular noun with its own plural form, and it thus enters into NP constructions with modifiers and postpositions :-

19. (BI) **A n yi a hinarə binbale.** He keeps doing his thingummies.  
*he + be his thingies do.doing<sup>5</sup>*  
 “He keeps acting that way” (i.e., from context, barking)

<sup>5</sup> A number of BI verbs have reduplicated derivatives with plural meaning: plural subject (**ga** “die” / **ginga** “all die off”), object (**ze** “kill” / **zinze** “massacre”) or action (**ba** “do” / **binba** “do repeatedly”) – Naden 1973, 219ff..

20. (BI) **A n tri ta hina ' w.** He used to go to oojah.  
*he + HABIT go thingummy'to*  
 (context supplies 'the location of the preceding and following events')
21. (BI) **A n a la hina bi la.** He did not chase it from  
*he NEG it chase thingy the from* the thingummy.  
 (tale in question supplies 'the bowl of milk')

In Mampruli the function of the general substitute is filled by a further extension of the range of "thing": the 'broken English' "dis-ting" has a similar use :-

22. (MP) **M bunn i la lee?** Where is my dis-ting?<sup>6</sup>
23. (MP) **U kyaŋŋi la bunn i...daa.** He went to dis-ting...market.  
*he go ! thing...market*

#### 4. DESCRIBED

##### 4.1

The items under discussion here are also used when the thing described is in focus, particularly in Mampruli. In this and other Central Gur languages the 'adjective' is not a free form but is a nominal root which always appears as the final element in a compound (Naden MS 1997.b). To predicate a description one has either to use a descriptive state verb, or to put the adjective in the predicate with some dummy carrier which is usually a noun which is immediately or ultimately a hyperonym of the topic noun :-

24. (MP) **Seydu wə'a.** ('Seydu is.tall.') Seydu is tall.
25. (MP) **Seydu nyɛ la dɔ-wa'alli.** Seydu is tall.  
*Seydu is ! man-tall*
26. (MP) **Seydu nyɛ la bun-wa'alli.** Seydu is tall.  
*Seydu is ! thing-tall*

4.2 Bisa, on the other hand, has free adjectives which can be predicative :-

27. (BI) **gwaa miŋa** a good man
28. (BI) **Gwaa naaduu miŋa n.** This man is good.  
*man this-here good is*

4.3 As in any language "thing" can be used anaphorically because of its high generality, and can then be modified by an adjective :-

<sup>6</sup> Contrast "Where is mine?" - e.g. 51.

29. (BI) **I fɔ gweli ba moo ma'y?** Did you do (this) nice thing for me?  
*you thing nice do me for?*<sup>7</sup>

Bisa also has the construction for rendering the adjective as head of a nominal phrase :-

30. (BI) **A gweli ba 'w 'i.** There are no nice ones.  
*its nice not.exist'in'NEG*<sup>7</sup>
31. (BI) **a poori bi** ('*its small the*') the little one

4.4 In Mampruli, this latter type uses the dummy 'dis-ting', as does the isolated mention of the adjective :-

32. (MP) **M bu boori bun-zeesi la.** I don't want the red ones  
*I not want thing-reds the*
33. (MP) Researcher: "What is the Mampruli for 'big'?"  
Assistant: "It's '**bun-titaari**'."

Compounds with "thing" also acquire institutionalised lexical meanings: these are the main source of such generic terminology as the taxonomies possess (Tables 1 and 2).

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<sup>7</sup> The particle realized 'y ~ 'i is a clause-final marker of interrogative or negative clauses (in addition to the markers in the clause core where appropriate). Similarly 'w ~ 'o is a general locative postposition (Naden 1974.b) "in, at, to ...". Both have their semivocalic realization when following a vowel and their vocalic form when following a consonant.

# <sup>8</sup>	FREE FORM	MEANING	WITH ƒ	MEANING/COMMENTS
1.	<b>bi</b>	to eat	i) <b>ƒobile</b>	food (thing eaten)
			ii) <b>ƒombil</b>	weevil (thing that eats)
2.	<b>bise</b>	to breathe	<b>ƒobise</b>	animal, living thing (anything with a recognisable nose)
2.a	<b>ga</b>	to die	<b>ƒogale</b>	corpse, dead thing (not 'inanimate')
3.	<b>lee</b>	a leaf	<b>ƒolee</b>	vegetables, greens
3.a	<b>yaa</b>	a seed	<b>ƒoyaa</b> (also <b>ƒiyaa</b> )	cereals <u>esp.</u> millet
4.	<b>par</b>	a house (cf.	<b>par ƒ</b>	domestic animal)
4.a	<b>kye</b>	room, hut (cf.	<b>kye ƒ</b>	household pest)
5.	<b>-sa</b>	male-	<b>ƒosa</b>	a male
5.a	<b>-da</b>	female-	<b>ƒoda</b>	a female
5.b	<b>-lur</b>	young female-'heifer'	<b>ƒolur</b>	a young female

*Table 1 - Bisa 'Thing'-compounds*

<sup>8</sup> The numbering is designed to show up comparable parallel items in the two languages  
 – see Table 2

# <sup>9</sup>	FREE FORM	MEANING	WITH <i>BUNNI</i>	MEANING/COMMENTS
1.	<b>n-di</b>	to eat	<b>bundirigu</b>	food (thing eaten)
2.	<b>n-vu</b>	to breathe	<b>bunvuuri</b> (esp.pl. <b>bunvuya</b> )	livestock, esp. poultry
3.	<b>n-wali</b>	to fruit	<b>buwanni</b>	a fruit tree
3.a	<b>n-nye</b>	to form tubers	<b>bun-nyeera</b> (pl.)	root-crops
4.	<b>n-yigi</b>	to fly	<b>bun-yigra</b> (pl.)	flying creatures
4.a	<b>kɔbgu</b>	fur, feather, body-hair	<b>bunkɔbgu</b> / (pl.) <b>bunkɔbri</b>	animal <sup>10</sup> (esp. sheep & goats)
5. <sup>11</sup>	<b>-do ~ -daa</b>	male-	<b>bun-doo</b>	a male
5.a	<b>-nyaanŋa</b>	female-	<b>bun-nyaanŋa</b>	a female
5.b	<b>-saa</b>	young female- 'heifer'	<b>bun-saa</b>	a young female

*Table 2 - Mampruli 'Thing'-compounds*

<sup>9</sup> The numbering is designed to show up comparable parallel items in the two languages – see Table 1

<sup>10</sup> Other related languages (e.g. Talni, Frafra, Dagaari) have a word \*DUN-GA for “animal” which is missing in MP (and its closest relatives Dagbani, Agole Kusaal, Hanga, and Kantoonsi).

<sup>11</sup> These ‘male/female/heifer’ (young female not yet having produced young) terms in both languages are only found in composition, if not with ‘thing’ then with the name of some species – in MP this makes them technically adjectives.

## 5. ANIMACY

## 5.1

One point of contrast with English is that the BI and MP “thing” is not used to express inanimateness in a contrast with humanity or animateness:–

34. “Hamlet : The King is a thing ...  
Guildestern : A *thing*, my Lord?” (Hamlet, Act IV, Sc.2, 29ff.)

It has already appeared from Tables 1 and 2 that terms for genera of living creatures may be compounds with ‘thing’. The MP for “adult” is **bunkurigu** ‘old-thing’ which is really only an institutionalised usage of the general function of ‘thing’ to act as carrier for an adjective regardless of the class of the referent, as described above (esp. *ee.g.* 24-26).

Each language has a high-level term for humans which is used where a person is introduced or referred to with minimal specification, either because already known or because as yet unknown. BI **gwaa/gwaarɔ** is used for both “(male) man” and “Man(kind)”, “person/people in general” :–

35. (BI) **Bi gwaa.** This chap (should answer).
36. **Gwaarɔ nyinta kaaku ...** There were once three men ...  
*men sat three*
37. **Gwaa ba 'w 'i a n a dama ...** There is no one who can ...  
*man not.exist'in'NEG he + it can ...*

Mampruli, in fact, has several: **nira/niriba** person/people, is most frequently used in the plural, and is normally head of a NP ; **ninvug-** (some dialects **nirvug-**) is only used in composition with an adjective or numeral, and in compounds simply **nin-** ; **(nin)saala** is human being , while **doo(wa)/dɔppa~dappa** is “man, male”<sup>12</sup> :–

38. (MP) **U yeli niriba.** He/She told (the) people.
39. **U nye la ninvugsunɔ.** He is a good man. or  
She is a good woman.
40. **Ninsaala diri m-mari alaafca.** Mankind must eat to live.  
*human eating to-have health*
41. **A: U dɔ'ai biiya.** She has had a baby.  
*she bear child*  
**B: Doowa bee (pɔ'a)?** A boy or (a girl)?

Mampruli also has a related but by no means identical phenomenon in the proper noun substitute, the ‘Mr. So-and-So’ construction. This is exemplified by English “Mr. So-and-So” or French Monsieur un tel. The general substitute in § 3 above is used when one temporarily forgets the specific lexeme, or when it is no problem for the hearer to recover it,

<sup>12</sup> As the Bisa examples show, the unmarked interpretation for **gwaa** is “man (vir)”, though it can mean “person”. To emphasise maleness **yar** or **gwaayar** is used.

but in either case there is a specific lexeme in mind which will be accepted if an interlocutor or commentator supplies it. In contrast the proper noun substitute indicates a range of cases where any member of a particular class of referents is appropriate. Thus in “When I arrive and ask for Mr. So-and-So, the receptionist always ...”, I am not referring to my asking for a particular man on a particular occasion but the name has slipped my mind or is obvious to you (as in “I arrived and asked for Whatsisname, and the receptionist said...”), but to various occasions when I ask for a male person by title and last name, a different person in each case. This further contrasts with “I ask(ed) to see somebody...” which might report my saying “I want to see somebody.”, and “... I ask(ed) to see somebody-or-other ...” which could include asking for a person of either sex, and maybe referring to them by a title or definite description – “the Vice-President”, “someone from marketing”, “the officer who came to my house yesterday”. I did not encounter this type in Bisa, but it is common in Mampruli and its sister languages. The persons substitute in MP is **za'ala** :-

42. (MP) **N zaŋŋi n-ti za'ala.** I hand it over to a certain person (whose  
*I take to-give So'n'So* name I forget or don't need to mention).

This may be qualified, as in :-

43. (MP) **Ni, di daa nye la Na-za'ala saha.** (He/She said/says) that it was in the  
*that it [past] be !Chief-So'n'So time* time of Chief So and So.  
 (i.e. any particular Paramount Chief, e.g. **Na-Waafu** Chief Waafu ('Serpent'))

There is also a descriptive substitute, used like an adjective, and meaning “some particular sort of ...”, and this is very often used for places, **tin-yaakaza** (\*tin- as in **tinŋa** “town, village, named place”):-

44. (MP) **N daa tumni tun-yaakaza.** I was doing a particular job.  
*I was working job - certain*
45. **Oh! N daa zaŋŋi ti-yaakaza n-fa m manŋa.**  
*Oh! I [past] take medicine-so'so to-snatch I self*  
Oh!, I took a certain medicine and saved myself.
46. **Ba nin kyangŋi tin-yaakaza.** They will go to So-and-So-Ville.  
*they will go town - certain*

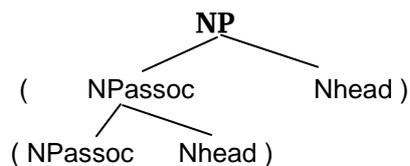
None of these high-level person terms in BI and MP enter into strictly taxonomic contrasts of the “Is it a person or a thing?” type.

## 6. POSSESSED

### 6.1

Top of the taxonomy terms also enter into constructions indicating the thing possessed. In both Bisa and Mampruli possession and related notions (partitive, relation &c., see Naden 1997.a, Crouch/Naden 1998) are expressed by an associative NP placed before the noun which is the head of the matrix NP, while all other modifiers follow the head<sup>13</sup> :-

<sup>13</sup> In view of some of the typological implications proposed in the literature, we should note that these orders are the same for both languages, though basic clause word-order is SOV(X) for Bisa and SVO(X) for Mampruli.



- 47.a (BI) **mɔɔ par lannɔ**  
*PN.1.sg house women*

the women of my house

- 47.b (MP) **n yiri pɔ'aba**

6.2 Where the head is not specified, as for example in the deletion-under-coreference situations where English uses “mine” &c., Bisa resorts to our old friend the ‘disting’ :-

48. (BI) A: **Mɔɔ miyaa n busule.** My eye hurts.  
*I eye-seed + hurting*
- B: **Mɔɔ fɔ busun sɔ.** So does mine.  
*I thing hurting also*

This construction is used with all items which are syntactically associative constructions, not just those that are semantically possessive, or involve concrete inanimates :-

49. (BI) A: **Kan i ta ki.** Welcome!  
*with your go too*<sup>14</sup>
- B: **Kan i fɔ ki.** You, too!  
*with your thing too* (‘and with yours’)
50. (BI) **Fir fɔ naa n a dan’o bwelesii.** Today’s one will make it 14.  
*today thing this + it add’to 10+4*  
 (see also example 14)

6.3 Mampruli, however, has a noun which is specialized as a substitute for a possessed head :-

51. (MP) **Man dinni lee?** Where is mine? (cf. example 22)
52. **Man dina n nyɛ a.** They are mine. (my ones)

<sup>14</sup> While most BI relators are postpositions, “with” is an ‘ambiposition’ **kan ... ki** (Naden 1974.b).



7.2 In Bisa and Mampruli participants may be introduced as : –

1. Proper Name : if known to both speaker and hearer
2. Definite description : somewhat rare in normal speech
3. Indefinite NP : indicating a participant as yet only known by category membership<sup>16</sup>  
: “a young goat”, “three men”
4. Contrastive NP : participant identified by being a distinct member of the same class or group as the previous participant : “another ...”, “the other ...”, “one of the ...s”
5. Minimal reference : general substitute or indefinite nominal “thingummybob”, “whats’isname”, “someone/something”

Further reference to a participant who has been already introduced will be by : –

6. Definite NP : repeat of the specific mention : “the (young) goat”, “the (three) men”, hyperonym, or top-of-taxonomy term, with definite article<sup>12</sup> or demonstrative.
7. Deictic anaphora : NP with demonstrative head, or deictic modifying a top-of-taxonomy term : “this one”, “that woman”
8. General anaphora : a pronoun
9. Zero anaphora : in MP only.

7.3 Under these headings we can consider some of the uses of taxonomy-toppers in the languages we are considering. In Bisa we find : –

3. Indefinite NP :           **Gwaa yi nyinta kaaku.**           Once there were 3 men.  
  *man is sat three*

BI marks indefinite by absence of deictics

4. Contrastive :           **fɔ diin ...**   the other one<sup>17</sup>  
  *thing one*

also with adjective **niŋa other** :

**Fɔ niŋa ta’w.**   There is another one.  
*thing other exist’in*

5. Minimal (indefinite) :           **Fɔ ta’w.**   There is something.

(this use does *not* include persons : –

**Gwaa ta’w.**   There is somebody. )

6. Definite :           **A n bi la hina bi la.**   He didn’t chase away  
  *he + not chase thingy the off*   the thingummy.

7. Deictic Anaphora :           **fɔ naaduu**   this thing

<sup>16</sup> For questions of ‘definite’ and ‘indefinite’ in Mampruli, see Naden 2003

<sup>17</sup> The way in which context determines the content of these terms (“the actual meaning .. being determined by specific usage” Coulmas 1980, p.522) is seen in the fact that another example has **fɔ diim** as meaning the same : –

**Fɔ diin gu!**   Open the other one!  
*thing one open*

**N fɔ diim.**   They are the same.  
*they thing one*

The pronoun case is not really within our sphere of interest here, although it could be argued that the third person pronoun in BI which makes no distinctions except singular and plural is a nominal at the absolute apex of the taxonomy – note that Bresnan (1971: 271), making the analogy in the opposite direction, speaks of “semi-pronouns like people, things”. Unusually for languages in the area, BI does not delete under co-reference in subject (‘serial construction’) or object positions; co-reference is signalled by pronouns in these positions. There may be zero anaphora in the case of the relational phrase where the postposition alone may represent a third person singular referent (Naden 1974.b) : –

9. **A a tunto ’ w.** He put it<sub>1</sub> on top of it<sub>2</sub>.  
*he it<sub>1</sub> put.on’ Ø<sub>2</sub> {loc.}*

7.4 Mampruli has a set of indefinites (Naden 2003, § 2.2, Vocabs. 2.n) **sɔ** / **seeba** for persons, which may be substantive or adjective, and **seaa** / **seesi**, **seelli** / **seela** for things, which are normally adjective and substantive respectively, but may exchange these functions :–

3. Indefinite : **Dɔ-sɔ ...** A certain man ...  
**Tin-seaa ...** A certain village ...
4. Contrastive : **Ninvug-sɔ m bɛ ni.** There is/was another person.  
*person-some ! exist in*

**N yi la tin-seaa na.** I come from another village.  
*I go.out ! town-some hither* (sc. ... and do not know your customs)

5. Minimal : Examples of ‘dis ting’ have already been given (*ee.g.* 6, 22); the indefinites can also be used thus absolutely :–

**Sɔ bɛ ni.** There is somebody.

6. Definite : **Bunni maa lee?** Where’s the dis ting?

7. Deictic anaphora **bunni wa** (*cf. e.g.* 7) this thing

- 8/9 Pronoun/Zero : **Ka lu m-basi.** It fell away.  
*it fall to-go.away*  
 PN(S)-V<sub>1</sub>-Ø-V<sub>2</sub>(INF.)

There is a special use for indefinites in negative and interrogative clauses, where English has the forms “anybody / -thing”, “nobody / -thing”. BI often uses a particular suffix in just these cases :–

54. (BI) **Fɔ-si ba ’ w ’ i.** There is nothing.  
*thing-any not.exist’in’neg.*

55. **Fɔ ta’w ge? or Fɔ-si ta’w ge?** Is there anything?

Mampruli uses its indefinites in these contexts without any special mark, the particular nuances of “anything” / “nothing” being conveyed by the marked negation or interrogation of the context :–

- 56.a/b (MP) **Sɔ / Seelli bɛ ni?** Is there anybody / anything?  
 57.a/b **Sɔ / Seelli ka ni?** There is nobody / nothing.

In the negative case there is virtually no difference in using the plural of the inanimate, but the use of the plural animate would suggest that there was an expectation that a group of people or animals would be involved :-

58. (MP) **Seela ka ni.** (= 57.b)
- 59.a **Sɔ ka ni m mi.** There is nobody who knows.  
*someone not.exist in ! know* (knowledge is individual)
- 59.b **Seeba ka ni m mɛ duu la.** There is nobody to build the room.  
*somebodies not.exist in ! build room the* (building is a group activity)

## 8. VERB GENERALITIES

There remains the case of verb generalities to be considered. taxonomic structures in nominal domains are more easily studied and have been the topic of most of the discussion of lexical relationships<sup>18</sup>. However there are generic/specific relations in action, process and state vocabulary as well : MOVE / run, walk, crawl ... ; ALTER / widen, shorten, trim ... ; BIG<sup>19</sup> / tall, fat, wide ... Most languages have a verb at the top of the action taxonomy with a very general sense comparable to the English ‘do’. English, however, distinguishes this action-substitute from a pseudo-passive or eventive ‘happen’ and a factitive or resultative ‘make’. British English also distinguishes ‘make’ and ‘mend’ which fall together in the American ‘fix’ (“fix breakfast” / “fix a flat (tire)” – cf. French *faire* and cognates). In Bisa ‘do’, ‘make’ and ‘mend’, and ‘happen’ all fall together in the verb **ba** : –

60. (BI) **A bi ɸ ban ge.** He wasn't doing anything.  
*3s not thing doing [neg]*
61. **A koosi ba.** She made beancakes.  
*3s beancakes 'do'*
62. **A fuu ba.** He/She made/mended a shirt.  
*3s shirt 'do'*
63. **Bɔ n yi bale mbɔɔni n ge?** What is happening to them?  
*what? + is 'doing' them to eh?*

This language makes extensive use of this ‘do’ with nominal complements to distinguish different actions; it is a particularly handy way to borrow a verb from another language : –

64. (BI) **karenda ba** ‘reading do’ to read ( Mōōré **karenda**, verbal noun  
 from **karem** to read )
65. **sipana ba** ‘spanner do’ to adjust with a spanner

<sup>18</sup> *pace* Henry Burger’s (1984) *tour de force* ‘transitive cladistic’ analysing each verb notion into a binary combination of other verbs, as FASTEN = HOLD + STAY, STAY = UNCHANGE + SPATIALIZE ...

<sup>19</sup> Here, as elsewhere, adjectives are intermediate between noun and verb as both adnominal and often formally adjective (*vs.* substantive) nominal on the one hand, and descriptive predicate on the other – see Naden 1997.b and references there.

Mampruli, in contrast, does not normally use such constructions : –

- 66 (MP) **n-karim** to read (loan from (same source as) Mōōré)
- 67.a **n-luusi** to loosen (nut/screw)
- 67.b **n-taati** to tighten - - - - -

Mampruli groups “do” and “happen” under **n-niŋi**, but has another verb **m-maali** for “fix” (make/mend) : –

68. (MP) **U bu niŋi seela.** He didn’t do anything.
69. **Bɔ n-niŋi?** What happened?
70. **U maanni la u kyekye.** He is mending his bike.  
*he fixing ! his bicycle*
71. **U maanni la kparigu.** He/She is making/mending a shirt.

In the make/mend example a definite object – ... his/the/this shirt would tend to imply a “mend” interpretation, as non-contrastive definiteness normally applies to pre-existent objects rather than those which are coming into being (past tense would cancel this presumption).

I have not been able to find a language which has an interrogative verb, though I can see no logical reason why such a thing should not exist (“He was whatting?” is possible jocularly in English as an echo-question). In most languages the general substitute verb is used with an interrogative object nominal: – “What was he doing?”. Both BI and MP follow this pattern : –

72. (BI) **Bɔ ka i bale’y?** What are you doing?
73. (MP) **Bɔ ka i niŋna?**  
*what? that you doing*

Equally languages seem not to have an indefinite verb “he was performing some sort of action or other, but use an indefinite nominal as object of ‘do’ : –

74. I was doing something.

Bisa does have a pro-verb, which enables the content verb to be left-shifted for emphasis leaving the pro-verb as placeholder in the rump of the clause : –

75. (BI) **Ta mɔɔ n aa naa’w.** I’m off now.  
*go I + am this’at*
76. **A pi a n aale.** He was saying it.  
*3s say he was-ing.*

and the common farewell greeting : –

77. **Doo mɔɔ n aam bi.** Well, I'm off home.  
*go.home I + be-will the*

The pro-verb {AA} picks up, respectively, frontshifted **ta** “go”, **pi** “say” and **doo** “go home” and may be inflected with the suffixes for imperfective {-LE} and non-past {-M}, but it cannot stand alone as a main verb ‘do’ or ‘be’<sup>20</sup>.

Bisa can use its general substitute in the same way to form a general substitute verb : –

78. (BI) **A n a hina ba ...** And he thingummied...  
*he + his thingy do*

I have not encountered \***U niŋi (u) bunni.**, the parallel construction in Mampruli, though I imagine it could occur. The normal way of filling in while searching for a verb would be to use non-wordlike hesitation noises : –

79. (MP) **U daa ... deerr ... za’asi ka.** He ... eerr ... refused it.  
*he (past) uh refuse it*

## 9. CONCLUSION

The main conclusion of this study is that there is indeed something to study. In the area between clear-cut grammatical pronoun systems (Naden 1986) and definite lexical taxonomies there are *whatsits*, *oojahs*, and *dis tings* which form a by no means negligible part of everyday language-use and which may need information from pragmatics, discourse, syntax and lexis in order to account for their functions and interpretation. Further data would need to be added from the analysis of the performance-error or hesitational aspects of language-use: I originally treated **hina** as one of the marks of the NON-FLUENT choice in a (Hallidayan) discourse system of FLUENCY, along with hesitations, false starts and stutters (Naden 1970, pp. 172 ff.) . To avoid all these questions in favour of a study of a regularized and edited fluent prose may make it easier to get results which suit an algorithmic formalism, but in the process much of the real stuff of actual language-in-context may need to be swept under the carpet of ‘performance-error’ or some such pejorative term.

<sup>20</sup> The verb **wu** is used in a similar way – **A zu i wu.** You steal it. – but can also be used independently, being almost synonymous with **ba** – **A dam wule.** He is working a farm. : **Ibii kyisa wu.** You sneezed.

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