FROM INTERROGATION TO TOPICALIZATION:
PROTO-TIBETO-BURMAN *la IN KATHMANDU NEWAR*

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INTRODUCTION

This paper outlines the synchronic variation found in the discourse functions of the particle *la* in Kathmandu Newar and argues that from this synchronic variation we can reconstruct a pathway of reanalysis from an original clause-final interrogative function to a clause-initial topicalization function. In adjacency pairs such as those found in examples (1) and (2) below, the Kathmandu Newar clause-final speech act particle *la* marks a yes/no interrogative speech act. In the second pair part, the affirmative response repeats the verb phrase; the negative response repeats the negated verb phrase. As described by Kansakar (1977), interrogative utterances with the final particle *la* are marked with a fall in pitch.

(1) A: ja *nɔ-e dhun-ɔ la*
   rice eat-INF finish-PRF.DJ PRT
   ‘Have you eaten yet?’

   B: *nɔ-e dhun-ɔ*
   eat-INF finish-PRF.DJ
   ‘(I’ve) already eaten.’

(2) A: ja *nɔ-e dhun-ɔ la*
   rice eat-INF finish-PRF.DJ PRT
   ‘Have you eaten yet?’

   B: *mɔ-nɔy-a-ni*
   NEG-eat-PST.CJ-yet
   ‘(I’ve) not eaten yet.’

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There is good evidence that this interrogative yes/no particle *la is a reflex of a Proto-Tibeto-Burman (PTB) interrogative particle *la. Matisoff (1988:1347) sets up a Proto-Lolo-Burmese yes/no interrogative form *la on the basis of Lahu là, and Written Burmese là, and extends this to PTB on the basis of Meithei la. The phonological correspondence for Newar initial l- and PTB initial *l- is well attested, as is the vowel correspondence with PTB *a: Newar la ‘moon, month’ < PTB *s-la/*g-la (STC¹ #144), Modern Newar lha < laha ‘hand’ < PTB *lak/*g-lak (STC #86). Thus, the Newar form shows that the distribution of the PTB particle extends at least to the Kathmandu Valley.

In addition to yes/no la, there is another Newar sentence final particle le, which occurs in questions, often, but not exclusively, in content (wh-) questions (cf. Kölver and Shresthacarya 1994:195).

(3) wô gôc wèn-o le
3.ABS where go-PREF.DJ PRT
‘Where did he go?’ (Malla 1985:65)

(4) wô cae le?
3.ABS why PRT
‘Why is that?’

It may also co-occur with the yes/no particle la.

(5) jhi-pi: thôw chê: cwô wô-e dhun-o la le
1.PL.INCL here house stay come-INF finish-PREF.DJ PRT PRT
‘Had we already come (back) to stay here at our house?’

Finally, there is another form le (variant re), which occurs in polite requests,

(6) thôw wa re
here come.IMPR PRT
‘Come here/Will you come here?’ (Malla 1985:65)

(7) thô-the yan-a biu le
this-like do-CM give.IMPR PRT
‘Please do it like this.’ (cf. Manandhar 1986:233).

(8) chô: bhô-te co le
2.ERG paper.LOC write.IMPR PRT
‘Write this down on the paper!’

Thus, Malla (1985:65) cites three different utterance final forms: *la ‘simple question marker’, *le ‘content questions’, and re(le) ‘persuasive particle’. Given the fact that initial r- is not a phonemic category for Kathmandu Newar, occurring only with Indic loan words, attributing the full three way contrast to Proto-Newar is problematic and needs further investigation. Nevertheless, the *la/le/le(re) opposition in Newar shows interesting parallels with a lâ/lê/lê opposition in Lahu cited by Matisoff (1988): lâ ‘marker of yes/no questions’ (p.1347), le ‘marker of substance-questions’ (p.1373), and lê ‘particle that requests the assent or consent of the listener’ (p.1374). If the Newar and Lahu particles turn out to be cognate, then we can reasonably assume that the particle system is of PTB origin (cf. DeLancey 1978).

**THE TOPIC/FOCUS PARTICLE *la**

In addition to the Newar interrogative particle *la, there is another discourse particle *la that appears to have a distinct function. This particle is ubiquitous in colloquial conversations and is established enough to be present in dialogs and reported speech from late Classical to modern literary texts. The first example (9) comes from a conversational text. The particle *la follows a headless possessive relative clause NP, indicated via the relative marker -pī (for plural animate):

(9) ọle chê-chā phukkā dū:pī la
> then house-RDP all collapse-REL PRT
‘And so, as for all those whose houses had collapsed,

tinikhya chō-gu-lī: cwō-cwō:-gu du ka
Tundikhel one-CL-LOC stay-stay.IMP.DJ-NOM be-IMP.DJ EMPH
they were staying throughout the Tundikhel area.’

The intonation contour on the first clause does not show the falling contour characteristic of interrogation, and the subsequent clause is not the second pair part of an interrogation adjacency pair. There is no turn transition indicated at the end of the first clause and the second clause is a follow-up to the first clause which maintains the same speaker’s turn. Thus, the particle highlights the preceding NP.

In looking at examples such as (9) above, the question arises as to whether the topic/focus form is related to the interrogative form, which we have seen as being of clear PTB origin. An alternative, of course, is that the interrogative *la

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2 Examples from oral texts are written in phonemic transcription; examples from written texts are given in devanāgarī transliteration.
and the topic/focus *la* are merely coincidentally homophonous and have no historical relationship to one another. In this paper I argue that assuming a PTB interrogative function, the topicalizing function can be shown to be emergent from the interrogation function via specific stages in the reinterpretation of local discourse relations marked by the particle, all of which are evident in contemporary discourse. In other words, I will argue that a synchronic poly-functionality for the form *la* is evidence of a progressive extension of the PTB interrogative function towards a topic/focus function. We begin with yes/no interrogation.

**EXTENDED FUNCTIONS OF YES/NO QUESTIONS**

As illustrated in the opening examples above, in the canonical yes/no adjacency pair the cohesion of the first and second pair part is constructed via the repetition of the verb phrase in its affirmative or negative form. However, in many cases, the first pair part of a yes/no interrogative is not followed directly by the second pair part. Instead, the conversational dynamics may include material which intervenes between the question and its response. This less canonical interrogative function is well attested for Newar *la* in spoken discourse, as in example (10) below.

Example (10) comes from a three party conversation in which G is asking K and L about their childhood memories of the devastating earthquake of 1934. G initiates the sequence with a yes/no question addressed to K and L. However, instead of a yes/no response, G’s question is immediately followed by another yes/no question by K. The question demonstrates a tentativeness in making a direct factual claim (understandably since the events happened more than 60 years ago) and attempts to clarify the scope of G’s previous question as to whether there was electricity upstairs and downstairs, downstairs only, or not at all. In the overlapping discussion, K’s tentativeness (as evidenced by the use of the particle *thē* ‘like/seem/appear’) contrasts with L’s certainty. What is less canonical in conversation analytic terms is the fact that the first yes/no question is followed by a second question which addresses the scope of the previous question resulting in a dual-party discussion with overlapping turns. When K’s question follows G’s previous question, it functions simultaneously as interrogation, request for clarification, and delimitation of scope of assertion.3

(10)

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G: x bóle bizuli mo-du-ni la
> that-time electricity NEG-be.IMP.DO-yet PRT
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‘At that time, wasn’t there any electricity yet?’

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3 Brackets on succeeding lines mark overlapping talk at turn boundaries.