Information Structure in Neo-Aramaic

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The Neo-Aramaic dialect of Telkepe was until last year spoken by Chaldaeans/Assyrians living in the small town of Telkepe near Mosul in Iraq. Since the conquest and ethnic cleansing of this and other Christian villages by ISIS, the endangerment of the dialect has increased.

The following study of information structure forms part of a larger documentation of this dialect. Information structure is expressed via the position of the nuclear stress in the intonation phrase in conjunction with word order: the former is more decisive than the latter. In addition, topical objects are marked as such by the presence of an object index on the verb and in many cases a dative preposition flagging the object NP. Other than this differential object marker, there is no case marking in this or any other Neo-Aramaic dialect. There are also no (in)definite articles, except for the numeral 'one', which is sparingly used for indefinite specific nouns playing a significant role in the discourse (English 'a certain').

Pronominal subjects and objects are normally expressed by argument indexing on the verb alone, but independent pronouns may additionally be used, in particular to bear stress for focus or for contrastive topics. When nominal arguments appear, these may be indexed on the verb: for subjects this is obligatory, for objects dependent on topic-status.

Topics are most often expressed purely by indexes on the verb. A primary topic NP typically occurs (clause-initially) when there are several activated participants (of the same gender and number), and thus a pronoun index would be ambiguous. The following sentence occurs in a discourse in which a house is mentioned; thus 'floors' are activated (definite) as part of the situation (Lyons 1999: 2–4). There are however many other things that are similarly activated (doors, windows etc.), so the full noun is used.:

(1)   *ṭawābəq*_{TOP} *kull-ay*   NP*ƏL-LA,|*
      floors   all-POSS.3PL fell-L(SBJ).3PL
      'the floors all COLLAPSED, …'

The postverbal (or 'right-dislocated', see Lambrecht 1994: 202-204) topic construction appears to occur where the referent might well be retrievable from anaphora alone, but some potential ambiguity remains:

(2)   *K-MAZƏD'-ᴅ*   *baġdad.|*
      IND-frighten-S(SBJ).3FS   Baghdad(f.)
      'It's FRIGHTENING, Baghdad.'

This contrasts clearly with postposed focus, which would be take the nuclear stress.

When there is both a subject and an object nominal (or independent pronoun), usually the verb position is in the middle: i.e. either SVO or OSV. (This contrasts with some eastern dialects of Neo-Aramaic, which, probably under the influence of Iranian, typically have the verb following its NP arguments, i.e. SOV, OSV). The topic argument comes before the verb and the focus typically follows, taking the nuclear stress.

The position of the focussed argument after the verb may cause some ambiguity however: when there is broad focus (i.e. the whole phrase constitutes new information), the nuclear stress similarly comes on the final component of the intonational phrase. Thus the following phrase could be understood as either having focus on the whole phrase or just on the final element, the object:

(3)   *k-maḥk-ux-wᴅ*   *SŪRAθ,|*
      IND-speak-1PL(SBJ)-PST   Surath
      [We spoke SURATH.]_{FOC}
or   We spoke [SURATH]_{FOC}.
      (constructed example)

The first interpretation might be the answer to 'What did you do?' or 'What happened?', while the second would be the answer to 'What did you speak?'

There is an alternative strategy available to disambiguate between these two interpretations, where the (stressed) focussed element is positioned immediately before the verb:

(4)   *sūraθ_{FOC} k-maḥk-ux-wɒ,|*
        Surath   IND-speak-S(SBJ).1PL-PST
        'We spoke Surath.' / 'It was Surath that we spoke.'

This paper will address these and other strategies (DOM, cognate infinitive construction used for focus on the lexical content of the verb etc.) that are involved in the interaction of syntax and information structure in this dialect and consider how far they support proposed cross-linguistic tendencies in information structure expression.

References
Lambrecht, Knud. 1994. *Information structure and sentence form.* Cambridge: CUP.
Lyons, Christopher. 1999. *Definiteness.* Cambridge: CUP.