Left periphery in ŋgᲔΘmba and the feature-based approach

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ŋgᲔΘmba is a Grassfields Bantu language which realises focus fronting by clefting (1b)–(1c) with a sentence final determiner and topic fronting by preposing the topicalized constituent clause initially (1d) with an optional resumptive inside the clause.

(1) a. mə̀ndʒwí   kâ   há ʒûtsɔ́ mbᲔΘ pə̀nkhú   ʒǒ
    woman   PST2 give food PREP children yesterday
    'The woman gave food to the children yesterday.'

  b. á   **kɔ́**   jè mə̀ndʒwí kə̀ hǎ mbᲔΘ pə̀nkhú   ʒó   à
    EXPL what PRT woman   PST2 give PREP children yesterday DET
    Literal: 'What did the woman give to the children yesterday?'

  c. á mbᲔΘ   pə̀nkhú   pè mə̀ndʒwí kə̀ hǎ jûtsɔ́ ʒó   à
    EXPL PREP children PRT woman   PST2 give food yesterday DET
    'It is to the children that the woman gave the food yesterday.'

  d. **jûtsɔ́**ᵢ á mə̀ndʒwí kə̀ hǎ (**jé**ᵢ) mbᲔΘ pə̀nkhú   ʒó
    food that woman   PST2 give it   PREP children yesterday
    'As for (that) food, the woman gave to the children yesterday.'

Multiple focus fronting is allowed in (3b) and disallowed in (3a). The topic-focus articulation appears as in (4a) while the focus-topic ordering is ungrammatical in (4b).

(3) a. *á   dʒì?kɔ̀ jè   á   pà mè ì   kə̀ ʒú à
     EXPL when PRT EXPL bag PRT she PST2 buy DET

  b. á   **pə̀nkhú**ᵢ pè á   kɔ́ é ì kə̀ hǎ mbᲔΘ **pó**ᵢ à
    EXPL children PRT EXPL what PRT she PST2 give prep them DET
    Literally: It is **the children** that it is *what* that she gave to **them**?'

(4) a. **pə̀nkhú**ᵢ pè, á   mə̀ndʒwí è kə̀ hà mbᲔΘ **pó**ᵢ jútsɔ̀   á
    children those EXPL woman   PRT PST2 give PREP them food   DET
    'As for those children, it is the woman who gave them the food'

  b. *á mə̀ndʒwí è **pə̀nkhú**ᵢ pè, kə̀ hà mbᲔΘ **pó**ᵢ jútsɔ̀ á
    EXPL woman   PRT children those PST2 give prep them food DET

(5a) and (5b) exhibit multiple focus and topic fronting respectively while (5c) displays a focus-topic articulation, in contradiction with (4b).

(5) a. á   **pə̀-wɔ́**ᵢ pè á   jûtsɔ́ⱼ è ì kə̀ hǎ proⱼ mbᲔΘ **pó**ᵢ à
     EXPL PL-who PRT EXPL food PRT she PST2 give   PREP them DET
     Literal: 'It is **who** that it is the food she that gave to **them**?.'

  b. pə̀nkhúⱼ pè, pâᵢ mà, mə̀ndʒwí kə̀ hà proᵢ mbᲔΘ póⱼ
    children those bag that woman   PST2 give   PREP them
    'As for those children, that bag, the woman gave to them.'

  c. á   **pə̀nkhú**ᵢ nè ŋwǎ'ɲə̀ⱼ à, ì kə̀ há proⱼ mbᲔΘ **pó**ᵢ à
    EXPL children PRT book this she PST2 give   PREP them DET
    Literal: 'It is the children that as for this book, she gave to them.'

At least three questions arise from these data: (i) is the focus-topic ordering free in ŋgᲔΘmba? (ii) How are focus and topic derived syntactically? (iii) what can ŋgᲔΘmba tell us about the left periphery? Building on Rizzi (1997, 2004), we argue that the focus-topic sequence is not free, but boils down to information structure and feature hierarchy (Starke 2001; Rizzi 2004; Endo 2007; Haegeman 2012). Word order variability is obtained by internal and external merge.

Keywords: *Feature hierarchy, focus, Grassfields Bantu, left periphery, topic.*