

Condition, topic and focus in African languages: why conditionals are not topics

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► **To cite this version:**

Bernard Caron. Condition, topic and focus in African languages: why conditionals are not topics. ZASPiL, Berlin, 2006, 46, pp.69-82. <halshs-00644434>

HAL Id: halshs-00644434

<https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00644434>

Submitted on 27 Nov 2011

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Condition, topic and focus in African languages: Why conditionals are not topics.

Bernard Caron

LLACAN

Since Haiman (1978), a general assumption concerning the information structure of conditional sentences is that “conditionals are topics”. However, in Chadic South Bauchi West languages spoken in Northern Nigeria, as well as in Banda Linda, an Adamawa language spoken in RCA, conditionals share their structure with focus, not topic. This seriously questions Haiman’s claim and forces us to reconsider the facts and characterizations of conditionals, topic and focus in general.

In order to do this we will first examine the facts of conditionals in some Chadic languages, then their information structure. We will see how both data and theory invalidate Haiman’s claim. Then we will see that if they are not topics, they are different from focus as well. We will argue that if the elements which make a topic or a focus can appear in conditionals, these must be separated from what constitutes the identity of conditions. Then, we will see if these can be characterized in the same way as Lambrecht (1994) characterizes temporal clauses, *viz* as « activated propositions » (Lambrecht 1994). We will finally conclude that they should rather be defined as « fictitious assertions » (Culioli 2000).

Abbreviations:

1,2,3, person; ACC, completed; ANAPH, anaphora; COMP, complementizer; COND, conditional; CONT, continuous; COP, copula; DEICT, deictic; DUR, durative; FOC, focus; FOC S, subject focus; FUT, future; GL, genitive link; IMPERF, imperfective; INCH, inchoative; INJ, injunctive; IRR, irrealis; MID, middle; NEG, negation; P, plural; PERF, perfective; POS, positive; PUNCT, punctiliar; REL, relative pronoun; S, singular; SUBJ, Subjunctive; TAM, Tense-Aspect-Mood; VN, verbal noun.

It is generally assumed, following Haiman (1978) that in the information structure of conditional sentences, conditionals play the role of topics. However, in a few isolated cases, such as the Chadic languages spoken in the South of Bauchi State (Nigeria), henceforth SBW, or Banda Linda, an Adamawa language spoken in the République Centre-Africaine, the marking of conditionals is identical with that of focus. Even if only a few languages are concerned, this brings forward a flaw in the usual analysis of the information structure of conditional systems. Faced with this kind of data, we have to reconsider the analysis of conditionals as topics, and examine precisely the respective properties of topics and foci, and whether they match those of conditionals. Actually, conditionals have as many properties in common with antitopics and questions as they have with topics. This leads to the redefinition of the information status of conditionals as frames rather than topics. However, this does not account for the morphological exponents that conditionals share with focus in SBW and Banda Linda. Our hypothesis is that, since focus is a complex operation¹, conditionals need not share its whole information structure, but may share one of its components, viz the assertive component. We want to explore the possibility of characterizing conditionals as a type of assertion, viz fictitious assertions, which, according to languages, may borrow different means of expression, such as the assertive component of focus or yes/no questions.

1 Conditional Systems

When two clauses X (protasis) and Y (apodosis) entertain a relation, whether conditional or temporal, they form a Conditional System if the existence of X must be ascertained (whether in reality or in imagination) in order for Y to be realized. X is called a conditional clause or conditional.

Generally, Conditional Systems in African languages are not very different from their European counterparts. In Hausa² for example, the Conditional System is very much like the French or English ones. It follows the order <protasis, apodosis> , <if..., (then)....> under the form <**in/idan** X, **(sai)** Z>:

1	in if	mutà:ne:	sun	shiryà:,	(sai) (then)	mù	tàfi.
		people	3P.PERF	get.ready		1P.SUBJ	leave
	<i>If people are ready, let's go.</i>						

However, one difference arises from the relationship between temporal clauses, and the potential, temporal and irrealis readings of conditional clauses. It is most common in European languages to find a morphological difference drawn between conditional clauses introduced by **if** (English) or **si** (French) and temporal clauses introduced by **when** (English) or **quand** (French). Then

¹ (Caron 2000)

² Our Hausa examples are borrowed from Jaggar (2001) and Newman (2000). The African languages quoted in the article are tone languages. High (H) and Low (L) tones are transcribed respectively by acute (á) and grave (à) accents. Falling (F) and Rising (R) tones are marked respectively by a circumflex accent (â) or a chevron (ǎ). Length in vowels is marked by a colon.

the TAM in the conditional clause may introduce a further difference between the potential and irrealis readings of the conditional such as English **If you come, I will pay you.** (potential) and **If you had come, I would have paid you.** (irrealis).

The situation is different in the African languages studied here. In Hausa for example, the conditionals introduced by **in**, 'if' can have both a temporal and a potential reading but cannot have an irrealis reading.

Hausa Conditional Clause : potential reading

2	in	za:	kà	hu:tà: ,		kà	zaunà:	nân.
	if	futl	2s	rest		2s.subj	sit	here

If you want to rest, sit here.

Hausa Conditional Clause : temporal reading

3	in	mun	gamà	cî-n	àbinci		sai	mù	fità	ya:wò:.
	if	1p.perf	finish	eat-gl	food		then	1p.subj	go out	stroll

When we have finished eating, we'll go for a walk.

The irrealis hypothesis where the protasis expresses a counterfactual past event uses a construction different from the Conditional System, involving a discontinuous morpheme **dà: ... dà:.**

5	dà:	sun	tàimàke:	mù,	dà:	mun	gamà:.
	irr	3perf	help	1p	irr	1p.perf	finish

If they had helped us, we would have finished.

We will now proceed to study the informational structure of conditionals.

2 Conditionals and topicality

A) HAIMAN: CONDITIONALS ARE TOPICS

In his seminal 1978 paper³, Haiman compares Conditional Clauses to topics: they have the same distribution at the initial of sentence and have the same information status.

Conditionals are topics (= givens, presuppositions of their sentences. (p. 567). The topic represents an entity whose existence is agreed upon by the speaker and his audience. As such, it constitutes the framework which has been selected for the following discourse. (p. 587)

³ Haiman, John. 1978. Conditionals are Topics. *Language* 54:564-589.

This seems to be confirmed by the existence in South Bauchi Chadic languages of paratactic Conditional Systems where the Conditional Clause appears like an unmarked topic. The conditional readings are inferred from the mere juxtaposition of protasis and apodosis:

Zaar⁴ : paratactic Conditional System; potential reading

[Context : in this traditional riddle, the narrator asks the hearers to solve the following problem: how do you take a hyena, a goat and beans across a river on a boat that can only take two at a time?]

6	kyá: 2s.imperf	mbí: take	ma:t, goat						
	kə 2s.subj	ga: leave	mbárgə̀ptəŋ hyena	ɗaɗáni there	tá with	zà:m. beans			

If you take the goat, you leave the hyena with the beans. (Caron 2005)

Zoɗi : paratactic Conditional System; iterative/habitual reading.

[Context : A chief narrates his role in former local wars.]

7	áma: 1s.imperf	wu say	ya:kóŋ saliva	ŋak acc					
	to: well	man 1p.fut	ʔí-ni eat-mid	gálba victory	a at	bət on	'yerám friend	ma:ŋti war	gəm. 1p.poss

When I bless them, we beat our enemies. (Caron 2002)

Topics can be multiple, and likewise Conditional Clauses. See the following examples in Zaar.

Zaar multiple Conditional Clauses:

8	kúmá also	tsə̀tn-kə̀ni-atn live-vn-1s.poss	ɗangə̀ni, now					
	<i>As for my life today,</i>							
	ló:kaci time	yó:ɗaŋ rel	mi-ká 1s-cont	tsə̀tn-kə̀ni, live-vn				
	<i>what I live today,</i>							
	ra: heart	wum-kə̀ni feel-vn	gə̀tn 1s.poss	ɗaŋ rel	á-tá-yá: 3s-past3-imperf	wum feel		
	<i>the sadness I used to feel</i>							
	á-tá-yi 3s-past3-punct	tu comp	murkə̀dən-atn husband-1s.poss	tà past3	məs-í: die-acc			
	<i>(because) my husband had died,</i>							
	tó: well	ra:-atn heart-1s.poss	bà: neg	á-tá-yá: 3s-past3-imperf	mbút rest	ɗa at	gì:ri well	háŋ, neg

⁴ Zaar, Zoɗi and Polci are South Bauchi West (SBW) languages spoken in Northern Nigeria, dominated and endangered by Hausa. They belong to the same West branch of Chadic languages as Hausa.

well, I was not happy,

àmmá:	ɗangəní	rá:s?	à:	mbút-ni.
but	now	heart.anaph	3s.perf	rest-inch

but now I am happy. (Caron 2005)

[Context : A butcher boasts of being able to drink and go on working without getting drunk.]

9	yâ:n	ka	vər-əm	ɣwà:p-kôn	
	if	2s.fut	give-1s	skewer-vn	
	<i>If you give me [meat] to skewer,</i>				
	kyá:	jòm	ɬú:-wà:	ɗan	ni:
	2s.imperf	pile	meat-3s.poss	like	what
	<i>if you pile up a huge amount of meat,</i>				
	myá:	ɬyá	jíkô	á	ɓân-í
	1s.imperf	drink	beer	3s.subj	finish-acc
	<i>if I drink a lot of beer,</i>				
	wállây	ma	ɣwá:p-í	swâtswât.	
	oath	1s.fut	skewer-acc	perfectly	
	<i>I swear I will skewer [the meat] perfectly. (Caron 2005)</i>				

B) *CONDITIONAL CLAUSES ARE NOT PRESUPPOSED TOPICS*

First, let us remove a small problem which arises from the characterization given by Haiman in terms of truth value:

"[...] topics, like conditional clauses, are presuppositions of their sentences. [...] For an NP, it is the EXISTENCE of its referent which is presupposed. [...] For an S, however, it is the TRUTH of the proposition of the sentence which is presupposed." (Haiman 1978: 586)

The definition of presupposition in terms of truth value is the first problem with Haiman's characterization of conditionals. The concept of truth value borrowed from the world of mathematical logic refers to a stable and objective referent, to a state of affairs than can be verified by everyone. When dealing with the information structure of natural languages, we must provide a means to account for activities whose referents do not exist in external reality, such as lies, imagination, etc.

Lambrecht (1994) avoids this problem when he redefines a number of concepts in terms of information structure by using the notion of 'state of mind of the speakers', as it is expressed in utterances, without involving the extra-linguistic dimension. His definitions of topic and presupposition (as opposed to assertion) are as follows:

- **Topic expression**

a constituent is a topic expression if the proposition expressed by the clause with which it is associated is pragmatically construed as conveying information about the referent of the constituent (131)

- **Pragmatic presupposition**

the set of propositions lexico-grammatically evoked in an utterance which the speaker assumes the hearer already knows, believes or is ready to take for granted at the time of speech (52)

- **Pragmatic assertion**

the proposition expressed by a sentence which the hearer is expected to know, to believe or take for granted as a result of hearing the sentence uttered (52)

If we combine these definitions with Haiman’s claim, Conditional Clauses are still characterized as (presupposed⁵) topics, falling outside the scope of the assertion. We will see that Conditional Clauses share properties with questions and antitopics which makes them incompatible with this status of presupposed topics.

I) *CONDITIONAL CLAUSES AND QUESTION*

Haiman notices the affinities between conditionals and Yes/No questions, and gives the following examples where a Conditional Clause can be glossed by a question:

Is any among you afflicted? Let him pray.

If any among you is afflicted, let him pray. (Haiman, op.cit. p. 570)

Likewise, Frajzyngier (1996) states that morphemes marking condition and Yes/No questions are often related in Chadic, to the extent that he thinks the former are derived from the latter.

This points in a new direction for conditionals. Questions are not presupposed, they are a different type of assertion: they are not asserted as regards polarity: the speaker is unable to do so, and resorts to the co-speaker to assert the corresponding proposition. In the case of Yes/No questions, the proposition is neither presupposed, nor asserted positively or negatively. We want to argue that the status of Conditional Clauses is, to a certain extent, similar to that of those questions.

II) *CONDITIONAL CLAUSE AND ANTITOPIC*

Conditional Clauses can occur in the same position as antitopics:

Postposed Hausa virtual Conditional Clause

10	kaɗà	kà	sàya:	in	ya:	yi	tsà:da:.
	neg	2s.subj	buy	if	3s.perf	do	expensiveness

Don't buy [it] if it is [too] expensive.

⁵ In our own terminology, we would use the term “preconstruct” rather presupposition. Cf. (Caron 2000).

Postposed Hausa habitual Conditional Clause

11	ta-kàn	gan	shì		in	ta:	je:	kà:suwa:.
	3s-hab	see	3s		if	3s.perf	go	market

She always sees him when she goes to the market.

Antitopics have a different information function from topics: as afterthoughts, antitopics are used to add some information to utterances that are usually incomplete. If Conditional Clauses have the same function as antitopics, they convey some kind of unshared knowledge that is subject to some sort of assertion.

Given the fact that the information function of Conditional Clause is not different, whether they appear on the left or the right of the main clause, we want to argue that Conditional Systems are complex utterances articulating two propositions which entertain a relation different from that of topic-comment, while each of them has its own type of assertion.

C) *CONDITIONAL CLAUSES ARE FRAMES*

Broadly speaking, conditionals belong to the same syntactic class as adverbial clauses. We have seen in ex. (3) that conditionals can have a temporal reading, and this ambiguity is commonly tolerated in Hausa, whereas counterfactual hypotheses are specifically marked with the discontinuous marker **dàa ... dàa**. (cf. ex. 5 *supra*).

Both adverbial and Conditional clauses appearing in the left periphery of the sentence have to be distinguished from the topic proper. We owe the proof that this left periphery has its own complex structure to Morel and Danon-Boileau (1998, 1999). It is called the 'preamble' when it is associated with a predication which functions as a rheme. Within the preamble, the 'topic' has to be distinguished from the 'frame'. The topic is a referential construct which will become an argument of the rheme; the frame is the area in which the predication holds true. Conditionals and initial adjuncts are just different types of frames.

D) *CONDITIONAL CLAUSES AND ACTIVATED PROPOSITIONS*

Lambrecht (1994) notices that initial adverbial clauses in English bear a special type of stress. Now, in English, stress has always been associated with focus while topics are never focussed. Stress indicates the existence of an assertion-bearing element, whereas the topic is not asserted. K. Lambrecht interprets this stress as a mark of *reactivation* :

'the function of the accent is to reactivate the referent of the presupposed proposition and to announce its role as a scene-setting topic for the main-clause proposition.' (Lambrecht 1994: 219)

However, not all adverbial clauses are presupposed, and conditionals are not, as we have seen *supra*. In the same way that initial adverbial clauses in English seem to share stress with focus, some African languages seem to have a common structure for Conditional Clauses and focus.

3 Conditionals and focus

A) POLCI (SBW ; NORTHERN NIGERIA)

In Polci, a Chadic language of Northern Nigeria, focussed constituents and Conditional Clauses appear on the left periphery marked by the identifying copula **kən**, 'it is'.

Focus

12	<table border="0" style="display: inline-table;"> <tr> <td style="padding: 0 5px;">wún</td> <td style="padding: 0 5px;">gi</td> <td style="padding: 0 5px;">kən</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="padding: 0 5px;">girl</td> <td style="padding: 0 5px;">deict</td> <td style="padding: 0 5px;">cop</td> </tr> </table>	wún	gi	kən	girl	deict	cop	yu	ɲen	a	ga:	gi.
wún	gi	kən										
girl	deict	cop										
		pour	milk	in	calabash	deict						

THE GIRL poured milk into the calabash.

Conditional

13	<table border="0" style="display: inline-table;"> <tr> <td style="padding: 0 5px;">Gǎrbà</td> <td style="padding: 0 5px;">kən</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="padding: 0 5px;">Garba</td> <td style="padding: 0 5px;">cop</td> </tr> </table>	Gǎrbà	kən	Garba	cop	ndɔ̃aŋ	ɬo:	wú		ɖe	kə	fũ:-m.
Gǎrbà	kən											
Garba	cop											
		cut	meat	acc		inj	2s.subj	tell-1s				

If Garba slaughters an animal (lit. GARBA slaughters an animal), tell me.

B) ZODI (SBW ; NORTHERN NIGERIA)

The same applies to Zodi, another Chadic language of the same area, where the identifying copula is **si**. The following example has an ambiguous reading between conditional and focus :

14	<table border="0" style="display: inline-table;"> <tr> <td style="padding: 0 5px;">sáŋ</td> <td style="padding: 0 5px;">si</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="padding: 0 5px;">3p</td> <td style="padding: 0 5px;">foc</td> </tr> </table>	sáŋ	si	3p	foc	ní:	rás-ti	re:	máɬ	ma:ŋti	a	ga	eróm	ma:ŋti.
sáŋ	si													
3p	foc													
		fut	leave-3p	go	take	war	at	near	thing.of	war				

THEY will go and fight the enemies. If/when they go, they fight the enemy.

In the following Conditional System, the protasis could be an autonomous utterance with the reading 'THEY (are the ones who) will follow them.':

15	<table border="0" style="display: inline-table;"> <tr> <td style="padding: 0 5px;">sáŋ</td> <td style="padding: 0 5px;">si</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="padding: 0 5px;">3p</td> <td style="padding: 0 5px;">foc</td> </tr> </table>	sáŋ	si	3p	foc	ɖo:	sáŋ	ŋak,	
sáŋ	si								
3p	foc								
		follow	3p	acc					

to:	ta:	tsúl-ti	səŋ	gu	doŋ	səŋ	ndi.
well	3p.prog	follow-vn	3p	rel	come.back	3p	neg

If they follow them, they leave and don't come back.

C) *BANDA LINDA (ADAMAWA, RCA)*

This phenomenon is not limited to these few Chadic languages. It was first noticed in Banda-Linda - an Adamawa language spoken in RCA - by France Cloarec-Heiss (1982, 1995, 2000).

The “usual” Conditional System of Banda-Linda uses **ədə**, ‘if’ to introduce the protasis, and the verb of the protasis is prefixed with **kə**.

16	ədə	gbəlákà	kə-ká	gáé	
	if	tray	cond-perf.is_finished	pos	
	ənjà	vôtá-wà	ónú	nə	
	one	perf.inch-cut	sesame	the	

When the tray is finished, one starts cutting the sesame. (Cloarec-Heiss 1986)

Another strategy uses the same markers as focus. In Banda-Linda, when a constituent is focussed it is fronted and followed by **kə** when it is the subject and **də** when it has another syntactic function:

17	əmə	kə	zí	səngba	nə.
	I	focS	acc.eat	meat	the

I (am the one who) ate the meat. (Cloarec-Heiss 2000)

The same structure can be observed for the Conditional System. Compare examples (18) and (19) where the Conditional Clause in (19) can stand on its own as an utterance where the subject **əbə** is focussed:

18	əbə	kə	gbôgbô.
	you	focS	dur.is_strong

You are the strongest.

19	əbə	kə	gbôgbô	bə	zá	ngá	zə	gáfú.
	you	focS	dur.be_strong	you	perf.put	friend_of	you	out

If you are strong, you throw your friend out. (Cloarec-Heiss op.cit.)

D) *IS THE CONDITIONAL CLAUSE THE FOCUS OF THE CONDITIONAL SYSTEM?*

If conditional clauses are not topics, they are not focuses either. Lambrecht (1994), defines focus as ‘the semantic component of a pragmatically structured proposition whereby the assertion differs from the presupposition’ (213). In a focus structure, the focussed argument is asserted, whereas the

predication is presupposed, or preconstructed, following Caron (2000) terminology. If the Conditional Clause (protasis) were the focus, that would make the apodosis the presupposition of the Conditional System. Now, as we saw above, both apodosis and protasis are asserted. This means that the identification which functions both in focus and conditional structures has to be accounted for in a different way.

In Banda-Linda, the identification marker can have athetic reading inside a presentational structure. This is the case in ex. (20) below where the narrator introduces himself at the beginning of his tale.

20	əmə	meya	nə	ngɔnjɛɔ	<u>kə</u>	sə,	ʔa	pa
	I	Méya	from	Ngonjeno	foc.S	cop	then	say
	cémà	mā	kó					
	speech.of	me	anaph					

I am Méya of Ngonjeno [lit. It is I, M. of N.], I will tell you a story [of my own]. (Cloarec-Heiss 2000).

(20) can be compared to the following French example where the identifier (*c'est...*, 'it is') introduces the protagonist of a story:

21	C'	est	Cafougnette	qui	rentro	d'	l'	école
	it	is	Toto	who	come_back.imperf	from	the	school
	<i>It's (the story) of Toto who was coming back from school.</i>							

In examples (20) and (21), neither of the identified elements (Meya of Ngonjeno or Toto) is focussed. The sentences consist of two predications that are both asserted, and the information value of the first predication is thetic.

Our hypothesis is that the same type of thetic identification is used in Conditional Clauses, making them work as a frame for the following apodosis.

With 'if', the existence of p [protasis] is constructed in relation with a second term, q [apodosis] consequent to the first. The result is a chaining relation (p implies q : if p, then q) where nothing is said about p' (complementary of p) (Culioli, 1999: 179).

If they are a frame, what type of frame are they, and the result of what type of assertion ?

4 Conditionals are fictitious assertions

From the point of view of assertion, the protasis is a fictitious assertion, i.e. « *asserted from a subjective imaginary locator, detached from the present enunciator, and enabling a complex representation.* » (Culioli, *op.cit.*, p. 160). The Conditional Clause is a fictitious frame belonging to the preamble.

The construction of this fictitious frame is compatible with different syntactic structures such as paratax, thetic identification, or specialized conjunctions like English **if**, or Hausa **in**, Banda **àdó**. However, within the Conditional Clause, topic and focus structures can be used to build an

information layering where these structures are used as a foundation for the making of the Conditional Clauses which, itself, does not work as a focus or a topic, but as a referential frame, detached from the actual assertion situation (*hic et nunc*). This detachment explains the production of different referential values: temporal, habitual, future, irrealis (with the addition of specific morphemes).

The same process is used when asking a yes/no question. A yes/no question is not asserted from the point of view of polarity. The suspension of polarity has to do, from a cognitive point of view, with the fictitious assertion at work in Conditional System. Both are detached from the *hic et nunc* of straight assertion. This could explain the common morphological origin of yes/no question words and protasis markers in Chadic. (Frajzyngier 1996).

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