



## EXPLORING THE PRECISION PHRASE (PRECP) IN BÚLU: A SYNTACTIC APPROACH

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### Abstract

The aim of this paper, carried out under a generative grammar framework, is to describe and analyze an aspect of the left edge of the clause structure in Búlu, a Bantu language spoken in Cameroon. Indeed, the previous works on the left periphery of the language have not clarified the nature, the position of the item "ə" in the architecture of the relative clause. Following Abney (1987), Pollock (1989), and subsequent works on the determiner phrase and the split CP hypothesis (Rizzi, 1997), the paper reexamines some types of relative clauses (De Vries, 2002) attested in Búlu and concludes that the item "ə" should be considered as a kind of "preciser" hence the "Precision Phrase" (PrecP) explored here to account for the functioning of this important element in the relative clause structure of the Búlu language. Most of the data exploited in this work come from our intuition as a native speaker of the language although we referred to some other native speakers to confirm or infirm our intuition. In order to carry out this study, we exploit the phenomenological observation of facts and the Minimalist Program as developed by Chomsky (1995, 1998, 2001) and Lasnik and Uriagereka (2004).

**Key words:** determiner phrase, relativization, relative clause, preciser, precision phrase

### Résumé

L'objectif de cet article, mené sous le prisme de la grammaire générative, est de décrire et analyser un aspect de la lisière gauche de la proposition relative en búlu, une langue bantoue parlée au Cameroun. En effet, les travaux antérieurs sur les propositions relatives de cette langue n'ont pas clarifié le fonctionnement et la position du constituant "ə" dans l'architecture de la relativisation. Ainsi, à partir de Abney (1987), Rizzi (1989), et les travaux subséquents sur le syntagme du déterminant et l'hypothèse du SC éclaté (Rizzi, 1997), cet article réexamine certaines formes de relativisation (De Vries, 2002) attestées en búlu et conclut que l'élément "ə" doit être considéré comme un "préciseur" d'où le "Syntagme de Précision" (SPrec) exploré ici pour rendre compte du fonctionnement de cet important élément dans la structure de la relative en langue búlu. La plupart des données exploitées dans ce travail provient de nous en tant que locuteur natif de la langue. Mais avons quelques fois consulté d'autres locuteurs natifs pour confirmer ou infirmer nos intuitions.

**Mots-clés :** syntagme du déterminant, présentatif, relativisation, préciseur, syntagme de précision

## INTRODUCTION

Many reasons can justify the present work. Generally, in theoretical and descriptive linguistics, a scientific work is carried out either to fill a gap on the description of a language, that is to give answers to a certain number of questions, or to expose to the knowledge of future describers, data that would help to boost original and innovative studies. The purpose of this study is to carry out a deep and global

reflexion on the functioning of a particular element “*ǎ*” of the left edge of the Búlu clause structure in order to bring out the formal properties that regulate it in the sentence. Indeed, previous works carried out by Mvondo (1992, 2002), Onguene Essono (2000), Ondoua Engon (2007), have not clarified the landing site of the item “*ǎ*” attested in the clause structure of the Beti-Fang, especially as far as relative clauses are concerned. The research questions here are: which role does “*ǎ*” play in the Búlu relative clause, what are its characteristics and what is its impact in the relative clause? The work is articulated in three main aspects: the first is a general observation on relativization and about the item “*ǎ*”, the second is based on its functioning and the third on its impact on the relative clause.

### 1. About relativization

Relative clauses have been abundantly described and it is theoretically admitted that they are presented in various manner. This leads Downing (1978, p.378) to affirm that it is not possible to give a universal syntactic characterization of relative clauses; it could only be given in semantic terms. According to Downing, there are co-reference and assertion: there is co-reference between the inner and outer terms of the relative clause and the relative is an assertion about the relative NP.

Among the works related to relative clauses on Cameroonian languages one can mention Schachter (1973) on Aghem, Tamanji (1991) on Bafut, Biloa (1991, 1994, 1995, 1998, and 2013) on Tuki, Fonkpu (2007) on Lamnso, Ngu (2009) on Mbələgi. Essono (1994, 2000) briefly presents relativization in a work describing Ewondo a Beti-Fang language, close to Búlu. Onguene Essono (2000, 2004) analyses subordinate clauses and indirect interrogatives in Ewondo. Mvondo (1992, 2002) works deal with the syntax of subordinate clause in Búlu. Ondoua Engon (2007) examines some aspects of the relativization as processes of emphasis which role is very important in communication and discourse analysis. Recent works (Bassong on Bassa 2014, Brahim Adam, 2019 on Musgum and Olowa, 2020 on Fulfulde) also describe relativization. All these works seem to show that relative clauses have a common basis.

If it right that the syntactic aspect of the Beti-Fang has not been largely studied, it is to be notice that some of the studies done in this domain have resulted into distinct points of view concerning relativization and precisely as far as the item “*ǎ*” is concerned. Indeed, no matter the dialect studied, all the describers agree that at least four relative structures are attested in the language as shown in the examples below:

(1)a. Presentative *ǎ* + NP + relative marker *yaá* +...

- b. Presentative é + NP + relative marker ø +...
- c. Presentative ø + NP + relative marker yaá +...
- d. Presentative ø + NP + relative marker ø +...

For the moment the terminology “presentative” (Ptive) borrowed from Essono (2000) is used to refer to “é”, the item that precedes the NP. The following examples illustrate the said structures:

- (2)a. é mɪŋgá [yaá] mə a- ká- diŋ  
Ptive woman RM I SM- P2- love  
“The woman that I loved”
- b. é mɪŋgá [ø] mə a- ká - diŋ  
Ptive woman RM I SM- P2- love  
“The woman that I loved”
- c. mɪŋgá [yaá] mə a- ká - diŋ  
woman RM I SM- P2- love  
“The woman that I loved”
- d. mɪŋgá [ø] mə a- ká - diŋ  
woman RM I SM- P2- love  
“The woman that I loved”
- e. \*é yám [yaá] mə a- ká - bə  
Inf cook RM I SM- P2- cook  
“Cook that I did”
- f. \*a a Ela [yaá] mə a- a-kə  
with SM Ela RM (that) I SM- Pres.go  
“With Ela that I going”

One can observe through the examples in Búlu above that relative clause in this language presents some characteristics. Firstly, we observe that the main noun precedes the relative clause; the fact that it inevitably precedes the relative clause suggests that there is a local relation between the relative and this main noun. Secondly, one remarks that only the nouns phrases can be relativized and lastly it is observed that be it a relative with a subject antecedent (2a), objet (2b), or a locative antecedent (2c), the item *yaá* can adjoin them. Sentences (2d) and (2e) are ungrammatical because other items than the NP have been relativized, namely a VP (2d) and a PP (2e).

Now let’s observe the structure below:

- (3) éyɔŋ [yaá] ésaá a- ngá-wú  
The time RM father SM- P3- die

“When his father died”

It could also be noticed by observing example (3) above that the subordinate conjunctive clauses of time behave as a relative in Búlu. It is even possible to say they are relative clauses because if it is admitted that subordinates are introduced by a pronoun or a relative adverb, which antecedent is a noun or a pronoun, it is normal that the subordinate in (3) behaves in that way in the sense that *éyɔŋ* (the time, the moment) plays the role of a subordinate conjunction which is the antecedent of the optional item *yaá*. This state of affair explains why the structure *éyɔŋ yaá ésaá a-ngá-wú* “When his father died” can be considered as a relative clause. This idea is defended by (Mvondo, 2002) who believes that in Beti-Fang languages, some temporal subordinate clauses are considered to be relatives.

It is also important to precise that standard Búlu (SB) (Pierre Alexandre 1966) prefers the item *yaá* as far as relativization is concerned. One could think that according to the previous examples in Búlu only the direct and the indirect subject and object can be relativized. In the examples below one will notice that the indirect object and the possessor can be relativized in Búlu :

- (4)a. *é miŋgá yaá mə a- ká- diŋ a- nə mən Evina*  
 Ptive woman RM (that) I SM- P2- love SM- Pres.be daughter Evina  
 “The woman that I loved is the daughter of Evina ”
- b. *é mən Evina yaá mə a- ká- diŋ a- nə - abəŋ*  
 Ptive daughter Evina RM (that) I SM- P2- love SM -Pres.be beauty  
 “ The daughter of Evina that I loved is beautiful ”

According to Mvondo (1992, p.56), adverbial clauses can function as relative clauses. Let’s observe the following examples:

- (5)a. *bəŋgó bá- dí osusua nâ bə á- kə sikóló*  
 children SM- Pres.eat before that they SM- Pres.go school  
 “Children eat before going to school”
- b. *bəŋgó bá- dí mvús nâ bá- kə sikóló*  
 children SM- Pres.eat before that SM- Pres. go school  
 “Children eat after having gone to school”
- c. *bəŋgó bá- dí ntéyá nâ bá- kə sikóló*  
 children SM- Pres.eat while that SM- Pres.go school  
 “Children eat while they are going to school”

There are two comparative complementizers that mostly appear together, namely *avál* (as, like) et *aná* (as, like) :

- (6)a. *Ango a- a- kəbo avál a- a- yəm*  
 Ango SM- Pres.speak as SM- Pres-know

“ Ango speaks as he knows”

b. Ango a- a- kəbo avál anə a- a- yəm

Ango SM- Pres.speak as SM- Pres.know

“ Ango speaks as he knows”

c. Ango a- a- kəbo avál (yaá) a- a- yəm

Ango SM- Pres.speak as Comp SM- Pres.know

“ Ango speaks as he knows”

d. \* Ango a- a- kəbo avál anə (yaá) a- a- yəm

Ango SM- Pres.speak as Comp SM- Pres.know

“ Ango speaks as he knows”

The grammaticality of (6c) and the ungrammaticality of (6d) lead us to observe that if *avál* (as, like) can be used with the optional complementizer *yaá*, it is not the same case with *anə* (as, like).

### 1.1. Types of relative clauses

It is important to present the difference between relatives. Indeed, there are two types of relatives, namely determining relatives and restrictive relatives or affixing or explanatory relatives. Determining relatives specify the reference of the noun they modify by limiting it. In this perspective, they cannot modify a proper noun because it has a unique reference that cannot be limited, whence the ungrammaticality of the following sentences in Búlu:

(7)a.\*Ondoua (yaá) má kə - bom a- a- kən

Ondoua whom I P2- beat SM- Pres.sick

“ Ondoua whom I beat is sick”

b. \*Bika (yaá) má kə - lúk anə abəŋ

Bika whom I P2- marry is beauty

“ Bika whom I married is beautiful “

On the contrary, affixing or explanatory relatives give new information on the name meaning without limiting the reference. Generally they are characterised by a pause and have an incidentally expression value. This type of relatives can refer to a proper noun:

(8)a. Ondoua (yaá) má kə - bom a- a-kən

Ondoua who I P2- beat SM- Pres.sick

“ Ondoua, who I beat, is sick “

b. Bika (yaá) má kə - lúk anə abəŋ

Bika whom I P2- marry is beauty  
 “ Bika, whom I married, is beautiful “

The pause in the examples above are materialized by a “comma”. It is important to remind that the analysis on relative clauses on this piece of work will be done essentially on determining relative.

Among the structures presented till now, (2a and b) have always been a real challenge as far as their description is concerned?

## 2. The problem of the item “ é ”

The problem is at the level of the status and the role that plays the element “é” which is attested in the structure of the relative clause. The question to answer here is what is its status and its function in the clause structure? Which position does it occupy in the cartography of the left periphery of the clause in Búlu?

To answer these questions, it is important to first solve the problem that raises this element. Many attempts of solutions have been proposed.

For those who described and analyzed Ewondo, one of the Beti-Fang dialects, the proposals suggested diverge. According to Essono (2000), this element which he calls “augment” is optional. The author observes that usually : “ on antépose [l’augment] au substantif déterminé suivi du relateur”. This ‘adnominal’, thinks Essono (2000, p. 186): “ concourt à la formation du nominal antécédent dans les constructions relatives”. Given the optional character of the “augment”, one can therefore conclude that to Essono, all the relative forms are identical despite some variations.

According to Abega (1968), the “augment” is essential in the relatives. The same point of view is defended by Onguene Essono (2000, 2004) who thinks that the insertion of the “augment” is the first step in the formation of relative clauses. In order words, without the “augment” there is no possible relative in Ewondo as the author affirms:

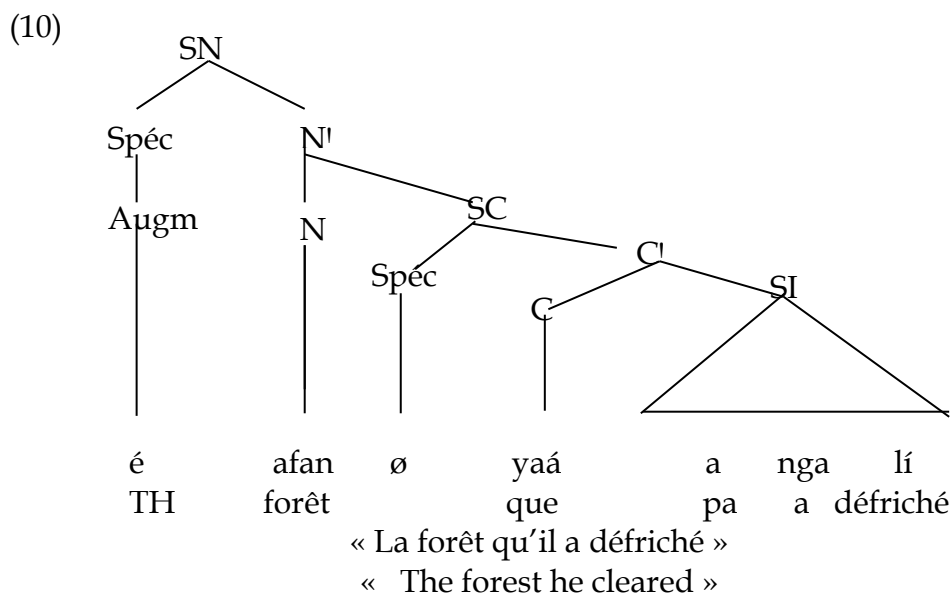
La première étape de la formation des relatives est sans doute l’insertion de l’augment. Par son TH, l’augment s’érige en un constituant obligatoire pour la formation des relatives. Placé en position frontale, il fait du nom un antécédent de relative et introduit la principale. De plus, il module, par son TH, le ton du morphème temporel du V subordonné au présent. Au passé, son action n’est pas visible à cause des TH qui caractérisent les MT des différentes formes du passé. (Onguene Essono, 2004, p. 121).

To be convinced, the author proposed the following examples in Ewondo, Onguene Essono (2004, p.121):

(9)a. é ndá Owona à á kus è à ku  
 Aug maison Owona pa prés achète pa prés tomber  
 « La maison que Owona achète tombe »

- “The house Owona buys is falling”  
 b. é fia Owona à á dí è à jèb  
 Aug avocat Owona pa prés manger pa prés bon  
 « L’avocat que mange Owona est bon »  
 “The pear Owona eats is appetizing”  
 c. é élé Owona à á tsig è à lád  
 Aug arbre Owona pa prés couper pa prés dur  
 « L’arbre qu’abat Owona est dur »  
 “The tree Owona cuts is strong”

It should be noted that the translated version in English are ours. The author concludes that the relative marker in Ewondo being a conjunction, the structure of the relative is therefore the following (Onguene Essono 2004, p. 125):



Onguene Essono (2004, p. 125) justifies the tree digramme above by the following idea “La relativation ewondo s’opère donc par l’introduction de plusieurs éléments : d’une part l’augment et son impact tonal, et d’autre part, l’insertion d’une anaphore préfixe d’accord ou pronom, dont l’apparition ou non varie selon le N à relativiser, et la fonction grammaticale du N à relativiser”.

In the postface of Essono (2000), the postfacier noticed the lack of lighting concerning the “augment” in the relatives analysed by the author. These first points of view testify the fact that this element exhibits a serious descriptive problem. Indeed, when we observe the tree diagram in (10), one is tempted to ask the question what is the grammatical category of the element é (é in Búlu). Is it a specifier of the relativized noun? To understand the nature of this element, let’s examine it deeply.

### 2.1. The function of the element á

Many describers of the Beti-Fang paid attention to this element in the syntax of the relative clauses. According to Antoine Mvondo (1992), the particle "á" does not have a clearly defined grammatical status. In other words, the "augment" cannot be classified in a real grammatical category. Abéga (1968) thinks that it is simply considered as a "presentative".

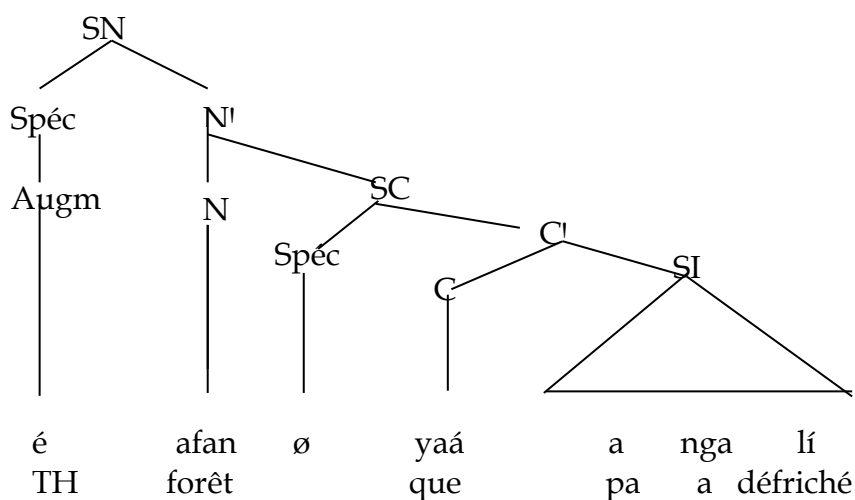
In the African languages, the "augment" is perceived differently. Some Bantuists described it as the initial vowel of the nominal and pronominal prefixes, always at the initial position; it carries a high tone which can delete due to certain phonological reasons. Others compare it to the definite article in the European languages (Redden 1979, P. 59). According to Meeussen (1967, p. 99), the "augment" is "a partial pre-doubling of nominal and pronominal prefixes (...)". Gregersen (1967) uses the term "preprefix". He affirms then "it has been described in various ways. The use of the preprefix varies considerably from language to language".

The above conclusion of Gregersen is exploited here to analyze the "augment" which seems to be very important in the Force-Finiteness system in Búlu.

### 2.2. The syntactic role of the "augment"

Among all the describers who analyzed the relatives in Beti-Fang, Onguene Essono (2000, 2004) is the only one who tried to bring a clear explanation about the role and the function of this element in this type of transformation. According to the author (Onguene Essono 2000, p. 856), the "augment" and the relator *yaá* constitute a discontinuous relative. To be convinced, the author proposes the following structure, which is repeat of (10) above:

(11)



« La forèt qu'il a défriché »  
 " The forest the cleared "



Onguene thinks that in the tree diagram above the “augment” is part of the constitution of the relative. Thus, it belongs to the specifier of the noun phrase where according to him there is also the class prefix. The author precises that it finds an echo in the relative *yaá*. Recall that according to Onguene Essono the relative in ewondo constitutes a complex noun phrase: the tree diagram in (11) is therefore not surprising. To put it bluntly, Onguene Essono (2000, p.872) affirms that “la relative en ewondo et dans d’autres langues voisines est tout simplement une proposition qui vient en expansion d’un nom pour le déterminer”. The affirmation leads him to conclude that relativization requires the movement of noun phrases as he mentions (2000, p. 871): “si *yaá* assume le rôle de complémenteur, s’il n’y a aucune trace d’accord entre le SN relativisé et lui, ni même avec l’antécédent, nous ne voyons pas pourquoi s’opérerait un éventuel déplacement du SN relativisé”.

For now, the comment above permits to retain that “*é*” does not have an autonomous status, therefore it could not alone stand for a grammatical category. If the element “*é*” is not autonomous it means that its presence in the clause structure depends on another element of the clause. Which is this element?

### 3. The relative with *é* .....*yaá*

As we mentioned in the beginning of the paper, our main interest is a meticulous analysis of the relative with *é* .....*yaá* in order to find the landing site of the “augment” in the relative clause structure. Analysing embedded relatives in Ewondo, Onguene Essono (2000) thinks that the model *é* ..... *yaá* is probably the fundamental model which according the author is the most difficult structure to explain and analyse. According to Abéga who quotes Onguene Essono, this double connector might provide from the copula *nə* followed by *náà* which he considers as a universal complementizer. To explain it, the author suggests that one should consider *yèè* as being initially a primitive copula.

The matter here is not to discuss about the origin of this connector, but show the status and the site of “*é*” in the left periphery of the clause. It has been observed in the previous examples which display the particle “*é*” that this one is used to relativize. It has been considered as a “presentative” or an “annunciative” particle. For the moment we maintain the same terminology. Given that the particle “*ə*□” immediately precedes the antecedent of the relative it refers to, one can say it plays the role of a determiner. To better understand the situation, let’s talk about the notion of determiner following the traditional grammar.

#### 4. About the notion of determiner

Determiners are parts of grammatical categories and they belong to a closed class. In a large view, determiners are constituents of the noun phrase which depend on the head noun. In this logic, one will consider articles, adjectives, and noun complements as determiners. They could also be grammatical morphemes specifying the noun. To better understand the notion of determiner in Búlu, let's examine the structure of the Noun in Búlu.

##### 4.1. The double determination

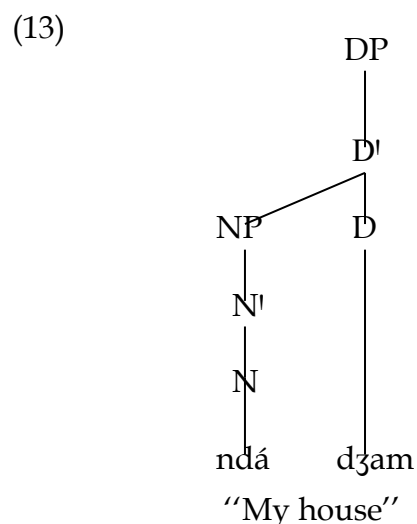
As in the majority of Bantu languages, Búlu is a language that displays the determiner in a postnominal position as in the following examples:

(12)a. ndá dʒam  
 House my  
 "My house"

b. mvú ji  
 dog this  
 "This dog"

c. soto ji  
 trouser this  
 "This trouser"

The tree diagram below gives a representation of the structures above:



We should observe in the example above that, “ é ” is absent. Now let’s try to insert it in the noun phrase:

(14)a. é ndá dʒam  
 Aug house my  
 “My house”

b. é mvú ji  
 Aug dog this  
 “This dog”

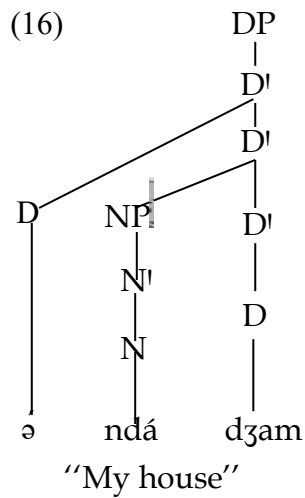
c. é sɔto ji  
 Aug trouser this  
 “This trouser”

It is important to notice that, in Búlu, preposition marking the possession, the manner and the source are not phonetically represented in the singular. In other words, if the particle “ é ” is omitted in phrases such as (14a), it could be a prepositional phrase as in the examples below:

(15)a. Engon a- ká kə é ndá dʒam  
 Engon SM- P2-go in house my  
 “ Engon went to my house”

b. Engon a- ká kə ndá dʒam  
 Engon SM- P2-go house my  
 “ Engon went to my house”

Given that the particle “ é ” in the sentence occupies a pre-nominal position and that the structure of the Búlu determiner occupies a post-nominal position, there is a problem, which is the site of “ é ” in the tree diagram of the phrase. One can consider it is possible that a noun has two determiners in Búlu, one, the “presentative” will be pre-nominal, and the other post-nominal. In this logic, one can postulate the structure below:



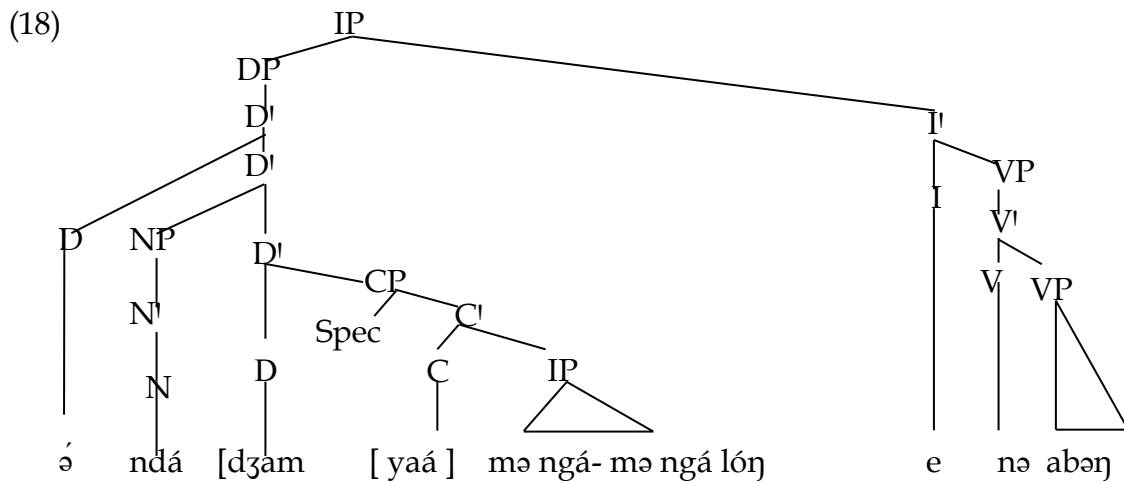
The position of the particle “ $\emptyset$ ” in the example that precedes shows that it may function as a determiner:

(17)a.  $\emptyset$     ndá dʒam (yaá) mə ngá lón- e    enə    abəŋ  
 Ptive house my    that    I    P3 build SM- be.pres beauty  
 “My house that I built is beautiful”

b.     $\emptyset$     biyé (yaá) Ela a-    a-    sob    bí-    enə    mvit  
 Ptive clothes that Ela SM- Pres.wash SM- be.Pres dirty  
 “The clothes that Ela washes are dirty”

c.     $\emptyset$     biyé (yaá) Ela a-    a-    sob    bí-    nə mvit  
 Ptive clothes that Ela SM- Pres.wash SM- be dirty  
 “The clothes that Ela washes are dirty”

If in the case of relativization a phrase that displays the particle “ $\emptyset$ ” is considered as a noun phrase, it is therefore possible to have in Búlu noun phrases with double determiners. In this logic, the tree diagram in (16) is pertinent as far as relatives are concerned. To account for this phenomenon one can, following Ondoua Engon (2007, 2012) explore a determiner phrase in order to adequately represent the double determination as illustrates the tree diagram below:



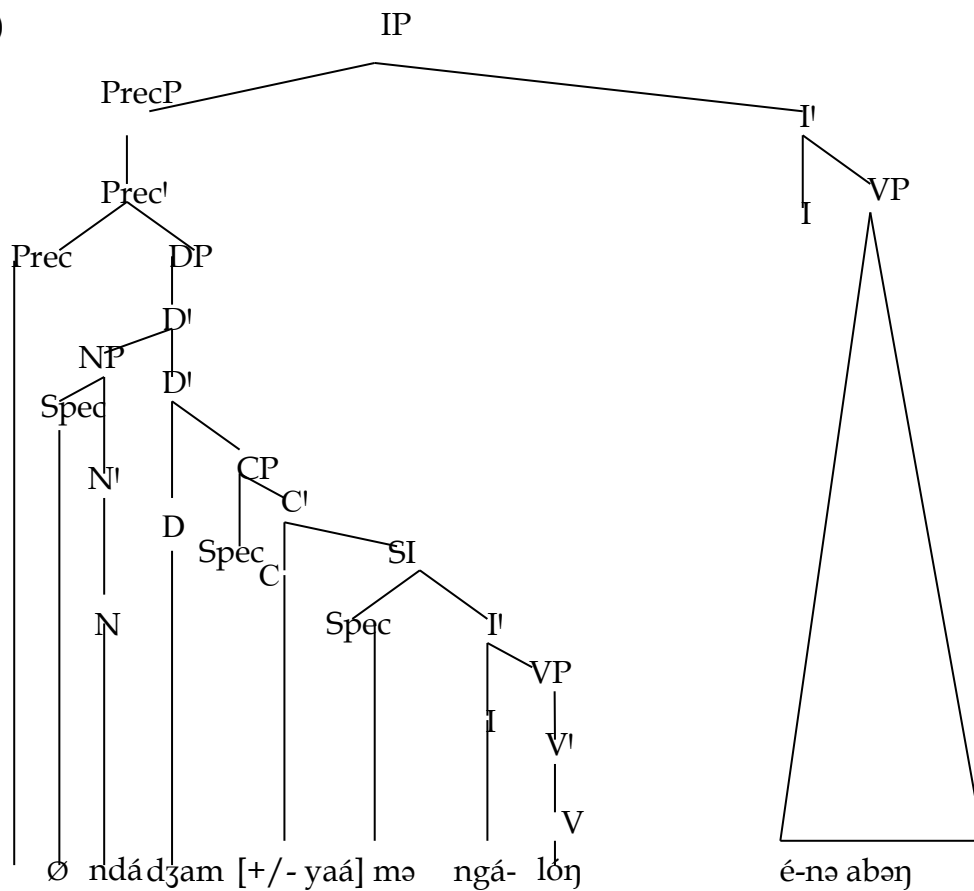
“My house that I built is beautiful”

The tree diagram above clearly shows how we could represent the double nominal determination in Búlu.

According to Antoine Mvondo (1992), the particle “ é ” which Abéga (1968) presents as an “annunciative”, and that Essono (2000) calls “augment”, does not have a clear grammatical status. Besides, it cannot be classified in a real grammatical category. In the frame of relativization in Búlu, it is possible to omit it without rendering the sentence ungrammatical. Moreover, its deletion permits to the real postnominal determiner to fundamentally play its role in the clause structure.

Thus, if we consider Mvondo’s (1992) point of view, Abéga (1968) and Essono (2000), we may not have a clear status of the particle “ é ”. So, given that this particle according to us has a precision effect as far as the meaning is concerned, we propose that it should be considered as a *precision pronoun* or an *emphatic preciser*. Thus, one can generate a Precision Phrase (PrecP) whose role would be to limit the relativized noun phrase and permits it to be cleft so as to be focus, in this vein, one could revise the structure in (18) and infer the following diagram to the relative in Búlu:

(19)



**CONCLUSION**

The analysis done in this paper aimed at describing relative clauses in Búlu, a Bantu language spoken in Cameroon, Central Afrika. It appears that the language displays four types of relatives. There is no relative pronoun clearly attested in the language. But the complementizer *yaá* can be optionally used in embedded clauses. The focus of the data analysis was based on one of the relative clause structures, which had never received more attention among the describers. It is the relative clause with the item “*é*” at the left periphery of the relative clause. The discussion of findings has enlightened the position of this element which some describers call the “augment” in the relative clauses. Given the complexity of the nature of this element, we proposed that it is a precisional pronoun or an emphatic preciser, therefore, its main role is to focus the noun phrase relativized that is to say an emphasis of the emphasis. We finally believe this item can generate a phrase called PRECP which head is the preciser “*é*”. This can be a significant contribution to account for the functioning of

this item, but more light should be thrown of this interesting element on the Beti-Fang language. It is an interesting field of research.

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