

Topicalisation, focus-clefts and stranded prepositions in Wa

Wa is a dialectally diverse northern Mon-Khmer language spoken in northern Burma and southwestern Yunnan by about 1 million people. A recent Wa dictionary project (Watkins to appear 2010) has amassed a large corpus of Wa texts from which the examples are taken.

The transitive verb **gah** [kah] has meanings 'untie', 'solve', 'cure' etc. (1, 2, 3). It grammaticalises into a very high-frequency semantically versatile preposition which can express location, direction, instrumentality, causation, etc., as in (4,5,6,7,8,9,10).

When information from an adverbial *gah*-headed prepositional phrase is fronted for topicalisation or focus, *gah* may be stranded. The information thus fronted may be a noun phrase (11,12,13), a (nominalised) verb phrase (14, 15), or a complete subordinate clause 'because his father scolded him' (16). The adverbial force of *gah* may sometimes be effectively translated with 'thereby'.

This paper discusses the distribution of these constructions in Wa in comparison with stranded prepositions generally (eg. English Wh-questions "[Who]_i are you going with []_i?", relative clauses "[the pen]_i that I wrote with []_i" and pseudo-passives "[The bed]_i was slept in []_i").

Stranded *gah* in (17) and (18) (derived from (17a) and (18a)) features alongside focus-cleft constructions using relativiser *ba*, analagous to the Chinese *shì...de* construction, with which they are compared in further details (Zimmerman et al. 2008).

(1) Yūh nbuan soun, gah maox mōi.

do favour, untie rope cow

“Please untie the rope tethering that cow.”

(2) Si ndah in gah saex aoh.

medicine this cure illness heat

“This kind of medicine relieves heatstroke.”

(3) Ba gah ndēe nbleeih mgūm loux ndōd (a) lāi gā la.

REL solve meaning phrase short or word foreign

“Explanation of the meaning of short phrases or foreign words.”

(4) Oud noh gah Gaeng Liam.

live he gah Menglian

“He lives in Menglian.”

(5) Yūm līen gah nāing.

die soldier gah battle

“The soldier died in battle.”

(6) Dāeg noh gah nqom saex dix.

tired he gah characteristic illness REFL

“He is tired because of his illness.”

(7) som gah tu.

eat gah chopsticks

“eat using chopsticks”

(8) Ex mad yūh daix dix gah mgōn.

I cut do hand REFL gah knife

“I cut my hand with a knife.”

(9) Lā ta in mōh ba haog gah ndaex Mēng Tā La.

train this is REL depart gah place Mandalay

“This train is the one which leaves for Mandalay.”

(10) Eix līh kaing ndaex nyīex mai hu bīang grax gah blag laih.

We leave from place home and go on road gah market

“We set out from home and went along the road towards market.”

(11) [Rom si ngāong an]_i goui gax dīng gaing gah []_i.

[water clear that]_i have fish big head gah []_i

“That clear water has big-headed fish in it.”

(12) [Nyīex brim]_i ang būi oud gah []_i.

[house old]_i not have people live gah []_i

“People don’t live in the old house.”

(13) [Rom raex]_i ang jū gon nyōm lāig gah []_i.

[water deep]_i not allow children enter gah []_i

“Children are not permitted to enter the deep water!”

(14) [Houig maix]_i, ex gīed mgāex hrom gah []_i.

[come you]_i I very happy heart gah []_i

“I’m very pleased that you came.”

(15) [Hoig goui nād]_i, dīd dix gox ang hlad gah []_i.

[PERF have gun]_i anything then not fear gah []_i

“If you’ve got a gun, there is nothing to fear.”

(16) Njāo [ah geeing noh gah noh]_i, geem yām gah []_i.

reason talk father his_j to him_j so weep gah

“Because his father scolded him, he cried (about it).”

(17) [Hngoux mgaox]_i mōh ba eei eix njū dix gah []_i heui.

[husked-rice unhusked-rice]_i is REL feed we life REFL

gah []_i EXCL

“Rice is the thing that we sustain our life with!”

(17a) Eix eei njū dix gah hngoux mgaox.

we feed life REFL gah husked-rice unhusked-rice

We sustain our life with rice.

(18) Ba ndaing gōuing būi gah []_i mōh būi bīe.

REL much hate people gah is people deceive

“What people despise most of all is liars.”

(18a) Būi ndaing gōuing gah būi bīe.

People very hate gah people deceive

“People really despise liars”

References

Watkins, Justin (to appear 2010). A Wa-Burmese-Chinese-English Dictionary. Leiden: Brill.

Zimmerman, Malte, Daniel Hole & Wolfram Schaffar (2008). Head-internal clefts in (South) East Asian: a cross-linguistic comparison of Burmese, Japanese and Chinese. Paper presented at the *Cleft 2008* workshop, ZAS Berlin, Nov 2008.