Chapter 16

TOPIC in Lisu

1. Introduction

Lisu is a member of “the Lolo-ish group of Tibeto-Burman languages” (Hope 1974.1) spoken in “at least five major dialects” by 200,000+ inhabitants of southwestern China, eastern Burma and Thailand. The last named variety is the one presented here; and although it shows heavy Chinese influence in its vocabulary, it is otherwise generally similar to the others.

Li & Thompson’s (1976) article “Subject and Topic: A typology of language” has inspired a reconsideration of the notion ‘topic’ that continues even though their specific typological hypothesis must be (and has been) abandoned. In that article, Li & Thompson present a taxonomy of languages that depends upon the idea of “prominence”, with a language being possibly “Subject prominent” (Sp), “Topic prominent” (Tp), or both “Topic and Subject prominent”, or neither. There were five languages identified as being Topic prominent: Mandarin Chinese (Tp), Japanese (both Tp and Sp), Korean (both Tp and Sp), Lahu (Tp), and Lisu (Tp). Mandarin Chinese, Korean, and Japanese have been heavily studied from this perspective, but Lahu and Lisu less so.¹ And Lisu, the least. As far as I can determine, D. Haigh Roop’s (1970) Yale University dissertation and Edward Hope’s (1974) dissertation at Australian National University remain the sole sources of data on Lisu. Roop’s fieldwork spanned two years from 1965 to 1967, yet his dissertation has not figured in the discussion of Lisu.² Durrenberger (1978) is a folk-

¹ For Lahu, see all the bibliography associated with James A. Matisoff.

² There may be several reasons for this in addition to the dissertation never having been published. Roop’s analysis is more in the tradition of American structuralism, and the description is analytic, ending with the recognition of an inventory of grammatical morphemes. There is little of the synthesis that is present in Hope (1974). The examples are presented in phonemic transcription with no indication of grammatical boundaries within words. Hope’s examples are presented in a more grammatically transparent transcription. Roop’s dissertation contains a short procedural text of 22 utterances that concerns singing and songs. It does not lend itself to analysis in the way that the text in Hope (1974) does. In short, the fact that Roop’s dissertation has not figured in the discussion of Lisu may come
lorist’s interpretation of a Lisu text, and it derives from Durrenberger’s own fieldwork during 1968-1970. Durrenberger’s article, however, contains no examples cited in Lisu. There is no further fieldwork on Lisu which has led to publication. And the language has had little further (re)examination.\(^3\) Hope (1974) contains one brief Lisu text, and that affords us an opportunity to search for grammatical patterns that may implement TOPIC in a language whose grammar is supposedly given over to the expression of TOPIC.

2. Brief Sketch of Lisu Grammar

Lisu is a V final language and the so-called S and O vary freely in their syntactic positioning, so that one cannot say that the language is either SOV or OSV. Lisu appears to distinguish sharply between a grammatical class of Verbs and a class of Nouns. The Lisu treatment of this difference allies Verbs with what we might recognize as Adjectives, thereby isolating the Nouns. Where a Verb appears finally, it requires a Declarative marker, e.g. -४ (The subscript “४” indicates a laryngealized vowel; /\^/ marks a high tone, /\^\/, a low tone; /\^\/, a mid-rise; /\^\/, a high-fall; and midtone is unmarked (Hope 1974.vi). For example (Hope 1974.7):

\[
(1) \quad \text{lāmā nyu ánā khù-४}
\]
\[
[\text{tiger TOP dog bite-Dec}]
\]

‘The tiger bit the dog’

And where — from our English perspective — an Adjective occurs finally, so does the Declarative marker (Hope 1974.30):

\[
(2) \quad \text{āsa nyu tshī-४}
\]
\[
[\text{Asa TOP fat-Dec}]
\]

‘Asa is fat’

The assertion of ni ‘sick’, the ‘clever’, dywū ‘withered’, zi ‘spinning’, etc. all require a Declarative marker; but where, from our perspective a Noun appears finally, that marker is absent (Hope 1974.58):

\[
(3) \quad \text{ni-४}
\]
\[
[\text{ni-Dec}]
\]

‘I am sick’

from the perception of little additional return for the effort required to work with it.

\(^3\) Manaster-Ramer (1988) is one apparent exception. Manaster-Ramer takes exception with the classification of Lisu as Topic prominent, and ultimately with Li & Thompson’s typological frame. The typology is clearly inadequate for various reasons. Manaster-Ramer cites the one text included in Hope (1974), but does not examine it.
TOPIC in Lisu

(3) (a) ása phwu gò-qi mata nya alè [Asa money give-Dec one TOP Ale]
‘The one Asa gave money to is Ale’

(b) *ása phwu gò-qi nya alè-a

Simultaneously, we see in (3) what happens when a Verb, e.g. gò ‘give’, appears non-finally. Like Nouns, it accepts the TOPIC marker nya, in the same manner that Yogad mabútut ‘is greedy [with EXECUTOR VOICE]’ accepts yu to produce yu mabútut ‘the one who is greedy’, and in the same way Bella Coola lıkları ‘run’ accepts ti — tx to yield ti-lässm-tx ‘the one who is running’. But unlike the Lisu Nouns, e.g. làma nya ‘tiger’ and ása nya ‘Asa’, the Verb requires the additional element ma ‘one’ (Hope 1974.12, 85ff.). Hence (Hope (1974.12):

(4) (a) dye-a mata nya ása [go-Dec one TOP Asa]
‘The one who is going is Asa’

(b) *dye-a nya ása

and (Hope 1974.81-82):

(5) (a) láthyu the-qi mata nya ása [person clever-Dec one TOP Asa]
‘The clever person is Asa’

(b) *láthyu the-qi nya ása

As Verbs and Adjectives require mata in their designation of PARTICIPANTS, so do Nouns reject it:

(6) *làma mata nya the-qi

This asymmetry can be understood if we assume that certain semantic DOMAINS, e.g. ása ‘Asa’, làma ‘tiger’, ánà ‘dog’, etc. appear to be inherently characterized as PARTICIPANTS independently of their relation to PROPOSITIONAL organization. For example, phwu ‘money’ is the DOMAIN of past, KNOWN, and also future, to-be-recognized individuals. The DOMAIN of phwu is not the more neutral ‘moneyness’ — as is tāla ‘money’ in Bella Coola
— that acquires the increment of PARTICULAR-PARTICIPANT or EVENT in the manifestation of a PROPOSITION. These Lisu DOMAINS contain PARTICIPANT as a characterizing property and the expectation that they will be used in the designation of PARTICULARS. It is the opposition of these DOMAINS to those that are not so understood that underlies the Noun versus Verb/Adjective schism in Lisu. The latter then require some additional mark when they designate a PARTICULAR-PARTICIPANT to signal precisely that, i.e., the content of PARTICULAR-PARTICIPANT, a content that nya ‘Topic’ does not by itself convey; and this is why Verbs and Adjectives occur with ma in (3) - (5), or with some equivalent mark, a so-called Classifier dependent upon the semantics of the DOMAIN (Cf. Hope 1974.88ff.).

If one were to ask the question (Hope 1974.56):

(7) ása nya phwu òma lè gà-à
    [Asa TOP money who to give-Question]
    ‘Who did Asa give the money to?’

the answer must be as follows:

(8) ása nya phwu nya alè lè gà-à
    [Asa TOP money TOP Ale to give-Dec]
    ‘Asa gave the money to Alé’

with the answering information in penultimate (bold and italicized) position before the Verb and not followed by nya:

(9) %ása nya phwu nya alè lè nya gà-à
    ‘Asa gave the money to Alé’

Sentence (9), although correct Lisu grammatically, is not a response to (7). The answer of (8) is also appropriate to another question (Hope 1974.56):

(10) ása nya phwu ali yà-à
    [Asa TOP money how do-Question]
    ‘What did Asa do with the money?’

Recall that English sentence can be ambiguous in that

(11) Asa ate the cãke.
is answer to both questions of (12):

(12) (a) What did Asa eat?
(b) What did Asa do?

The extent of FOCUS is potentially ambiguous in (8) as it is in (11), for example, when cited outside the context of its performance. In both English and Lisu, FOCUS can coincide with one item of a PROPOSITION or more than one. (Recall here Bemba -à- vs. -àlá-.) In English, sentence final accent is the mark that enables the greater extent of FOCUS; any alternative identifies a single term as FOCUS. In Lisu, the greater extent is possible when a PARTICIPANT is not marked for TOPIC, i.e., with nya as in (8), in which case the PARTICIPANT must also occur immediately before the Verb (Hope 1974.12). Hope calls this non-Topic marked PARTICIPANT the “Focus” and declares that it is the “semantic crux of the sentence. It is always ‘new information’, never in any sense ‘given’” (Hope 1974.10). Notice, however, that alê in (8) is obviously ‘given’. Where a PARTICIPANT is not marked for TOPIC, FOCUS will encompass it and potentially the Verb as well. The grammar fails in that case to provide sufficient information; and what the speaker and listener know, their common experience of the conversation, will determine which alternative of Figure 1 is operative.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FOCUS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Topic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Noun</td>
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<td>Verb</td>
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Figure 1: Alternative extents of FOCUS in Lisu.

Depending upon what is being questioned, possible permutations of the question of (7) are:

(13) alê là nya phwu àma gê-à
    [Ale to TOP money who give-Question]
    ‘Who gave the money to Ale?’
(14)  ása  nya  alë  lë  ásyè  gè-à  
[Asa  TOP  Ale  to  what  give-Question]  
‘What did Asa give to Ale?’

Lisu uses the Interrogative athè ‘when’ and alà ‘where’ as the other question words (Hope 1974.159), placing them in penultimate position. There is, however, a second pattern available to the expression of questions, one that in surface appearance is more akin to Tagalog and Bella Coola. Parallel to the Tagalog

(15)  sino  ba  ang  gumawa  noon  
[who  question  do  that]  
‘Who did that?’

Lisu has (Hope 1974.158):

(16)  ása  lë  dè-à  ima  nya  ñama-à  
[Asa  to  hit-Dec  one  TOP  who-Question]  
‘Who is the one who hit Asa?’

(17)  alë  lë  phwugè-à  ima  nya  ñama-à  
[Ale  to  money  give-Dec  one  TOP  who-Question]  
‘Who is the one who gave the money to Ale?’

The responses to these require that they parallel the question (cf. sentence [4]):

(18)  ása  lë  dè-à  ima  nya  alë  
‘The one who hit Asa is Alé’

(19)  alë  lë  phwu  gè-à  ima  nya  ása  
‘The one who gave the money to Ale is Ása’

This is because the questioned — and answering — PARTICULAR is the only non-Topic in the sentence. Everything else in the PROPOSITION, including the Verbs dè ‘hit’ and gè ‘give’, is within the TOPIC, that is, everything lies to the left of nya, and, therefore, cannot be FOCUS.

It is, of course, possible to question the Verb, i.e., to construct questions that require yes-no responses. In Tagalog, this is done by using the familiar ba Question with no wh-word, e.g. sino ‘who’ (Schachter & Otanes 1972.502):
(20) B=um=ili ba ng karne ang Nanay
‘Did Mother buy some meat?’

In Bella Coola, this is accomplished by using a different marker a, i.e., one
that does not appear in wh-questions:

(21) 'akʷat-is-a ci-stan-cx ti-sxʷpani̱-tx
[buy-she.it-Question -mother- -deer- ]
‘Did the mother buy the deer?’

In Lisu, the yes-no question is marked by ā or ù; ā is the “tenseless”
Declarative marked glossed, for example, with dye ‘go’ as ‘going, ‘goes’,
‘will go’ or ‘went’; and ù is the “tensed” Declarative marker, that with dye
produces the glosses ‘has gone’ or ‘went’ (Cf. Hope 1974.156). In each case,
the question is indicated by altering the tone on the Declarative from mid to
high-fall, much in the way English may convert a statement 2You’re
3gōing!1'T into a question 2You’re 3gōing!1U. Thus (Hope 1974.157):

(22) ása nya dye-ā
‘Is Asa going?’

(23) ása nya dye-ù
‘Has Asa gone?’

The answers to questions of this type place the answering, i.e. ‘focussed’ or
FOCUS information in final position. The response to (22) is then

(24) ása nya dye-ā
‘Asa is going’

Lisu appears not to closely associate FOCUS ≡ EVENT as West Greenlandic
Eskimo did in its exploitation of sentence final position. It is the variable
extent of the PROPOSITION that is also FOCUS, which is in contrast with WGE
and which suggests this conclusion. FOCUS is not always sentence-final — as
in (8) in response to (7) shows — nor is it always penultimate — as (18)
shows. This variation is summarized in Figure 1. But other questions and their
answers demonstrate a still greater extent in the compass of FOCUS (Hope
1974.71):
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(25) ása nya ásyè ye-a
[Asa TOP what do-Question]
‘What is Asa doing?’

A first response takes the shape:

(26) ása nya ávè læ nætshè ká-a
[Asa TOP pig to medicine prick-Dec]
‘Asa is giving the pig an injection’

Here, everything to the right of ása nya is the FOCUS, i.e., ‘focussed’. And notice that in contradiction to Hope’s (1974.10) claim that “focussed” information is “never in any sense ‘given’” that the gloss for ávè læ in (26) is ‘the pig’, not ‘a pig’. Not only that, but answers such as

(27) %ása nya ávè læ nya nætshè (nya) ká-a

are inappropriate to (25). What is in fact FOCUS in (27), i.e., ávè læ, is marked as non-FOCUS. The schema of Figure 1 is, more generally, that of Figure 2; and the non-TOPIC may contain one or more members. One will

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Figure 2: Propositional organization in Lisu.

never, however, encounter the schema of Figure 3, so that Hope’s (1974.13)

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Figure 3: A non-configuration in Lisu.

assertion that there is but one ‘focus’/FOCUS per utterance must be altered to say that there is but one contiguously expressed FOCUS per PROPOSITION. The
question of (25) has the equally possible answer of (28) (Hope 1974.71):

\[ \text{(28) } \text{ása nya ávè lá nætshì ká yè-ù} \]
\[ \text{[Asa TOP pig to medicine prick do-Dec]} \]
\[ \text{‘Asa is (doing) giving the pig an injection’} \]

in which the FOCUS continues to be ávè lá nætshì ká; it is penultimate with yè being the non-FOCUS Verb of Figure 2, whereas in (26) the same sequence constitutes an utterance final expression of FOCUS.

Notice that the two responses of (26) and (28) each contain a Declarative mark $q$, but differ in that the first has it on ká ‘prick’ while in the second it occurs with yè ‘do’. Verb-final languages — whether Amerindian (e.g. Navajo, Mojave, Yavapai, etc.) or other (e.g. Japanese, Korean, etc.) — frequently (but still not without exception, e.g. WGE and Eastern Armenian) possess a well developed Auxiliary system. And that is what we’ve found here with yè “attracting” the Declarative marker, leaving the Verb ká with a bare stem. In Lisu, the inflection includes, as well, a value for Aspect that usually occurs between the Verb and the Declarative. Lisu auxiliaries range semantically from specification of direction of motion “towards [some] presupposed point of reference” (Hope 1974.134), e.g. dwà ‘enter’, du ‘exit’, dæ ‘climb’, yà ‘descend’, ye ‘go’, and la ‘come’ as in (Hope 1974.134):

\[ \text{(29) } \text{ása nya hipywè wa tê la-à} \]
\[ \text{[Asa TOP shack to run come-Dec]} \]
\[ \text{‘Asa came running to the shack’} \]

to modal-like specifications (e.g. thyì ‘weakly expedient’, wa ‘obligatory’, tyũ ‘needful’, thyì ‘common, usual’, tyú ‘unprecedented’, and tyè ‘free from taboo/safe’), as in (Hope 1974.122):

\[ \text{(30) } \text{ása nya ami khwa thyì-à} \]
\[ \text{[Asa TOP field hoe expedient-Dec]} \]
\[ \text{‘Asa may as well hoe the field’} \]

to adjectival-like elaborations (e.g. xà ‘good’, dyu ‘fearsome’, ña ‘factual’, sàtu ‘shameful’, mà ‘genuine’, etc.) as in (Hope 1974.130):

\[ \text{(31) } \text{ása nya ami khwa xà-ù} \]
\[ \text{[Asa TOP field hoe good-Dec]} \]
\[ \text{‘It is good that Asa hoes the fields’} \]
to more state-aspectual-like meanings (e.g. tyɛ ‘cause’, kæle ‘happen, and le ‘become’) as in (Hope 1974.144):

\[(32) \text{ása nьu zànwё lё thùrё sù tyɛ-а} \]
\[\text{[Asa TOP child to book study cause-Dec]}\]
\[\text{‘Asa made the children study [go to school]’} \]


\[(33) \text{ása nьu alё lё áʃá vwù dźа-а} \]
\[\text{[Asa TOP Ale to fowl sell eat-Dec]}\]
\[\text{‘Asa sold a chicken to Ale’} \]

\[(34) \text{ása nьu alё lё hi gà syā-а} \]
\[\text{[Asa TOP Ale to house give make-Dec]}\]
\[\text{‘Asa allowed Ale to build a house’} \]

These do not exhaust the specific Auxiliaries, nor their types, but it is sufficient to illustrate their grammar.

Our remarks on Lisu sentences have centered upon the expression of FOCUS; and we now turn to discussion of what—as in Bella Coola, Chatino, and Yogad—is called “Topic”

3. **TOPIC**

In discussing TOPIC in Lisu, we shall concentrate on the one available Lisu text, presented below in the Appendix. Since Hope (1974.8 et passim) and Li & Thompson (1976.472 et passim), following Hope, associate the sense of ‘topic’ with the presence of nьa, a natural beginning point is to identify those places in the text where nьa appears. If it is indeed the mark of TOPIC, we should expect a usage that is compatible with the grammars of TOPIC found in Bella Coola, Chatino, and Yogad. Initially, we may suppose that if nьa is the mark of TOPIC, that it should be present in all but the initial utterance (or perhaps, the first few). If it is otherwise absent, we might expect a change in the TOPIC. If if doesn’t pattern like this, it may not be TOPIC at all.

3.1  **Variation and dimensions in Lisu TOPIC**

Let us begin then by inspecting the text for the occurrence of nьa. The first four numbered utterances in “The Orphan and the Buffalo” are without nьa.
An absence of the grammar of TOPIC at the beginning of a narrative has not been uncommon. We found that the first two utterances in the Bella Coola text failed to partake in the grammatical pattern of TOPIC, using them to intro-

<table>
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<th>Sentence Number</th>
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<td>11 12 13</td>
<td>15 17</td>
<td>1  2  3  4</td>
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<td>9 10 14 16 18 19 20 21 22 23</td>
<td>24 25 26 27 30 31 32 33 34 35 37 38 40 42 43</td>
<td>28 29 36 39 41</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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Figure 4: Occurrences of nya in a Lisu text.

duce the story and the speaker’s relation to it; the Chatino story took ten sentences to establish the narrative thread; and the Yogad text employed its first five utterances to ground the story. In the Lisu text, the speaker uses the first four sentences to introduce the story in (1) and to set the characters in (2) - (4): initially, two brothers and the miniature buffalo. It is only in (5) that some action occurs ... and the first nya is used. Having said this, we have to acknowledge that the distribution of nya in Figure 1 looks spotty. In the 39 utterances following the introduction, nya is present only in 24 of them. That is, nya is absent 38% of the time we would expect it to be present. This is not much of a pattern. But let us also note that in the 15 sentences in which nya is absent, 13 of them are quoting the direct speech of the characters.

But before we consider, the ‘exceptions’ in detail, let us look at the 24 utterances where nya is present. The first occurrence of nya is in (5), where it follows a longer sequence:

\[
\begin{align*}
(5) & \quad \text{áŋà-bûḻu-á ti mê dûu-à bë-à nya} \\
& \quad \text{buffalo-ant-DIM one one have-DEC say-DEC TOP} \\
& \quad \text{‘And so the younger brother was made to look after it daily’}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
& \quad \text{yí nyîñzà lû tyê-à thi nyî thi} \\
& \quad \text{WH Y.Bro. watch cause-DEC one day one}
\end{align*}
\]

4 Examples from the text will be cited using their textual numbers, and they will be placed in boldface to differentiate them from other examples of Lisu.
The free gloss of the Lisu preceding nya in (5) is ‘it’, but a closer gloss might be ‘And so the younger brother was made to look after the miniature buffalo they had, day after day’. The Lisu material ḍaŋ-bû́lu-š thî ma dîy-š is an exact repetition of the Lisu content in (4). This grammar of repetition immediately recalls the Yogad grammar of using the position before ay to reach into the preceding utterance and identify some portion that would constitute the connection with the current one. The second appearance of nya in (6) is analogous to (5). The Lisu phrase lû tyê ṣu bë-š nya, that begins (6), repeats material that was used in (5), lû tyê ‘made to look after’. The same occurs in (7), where the verbal link to (6) is pûxwá thîyê ṣā-š ‘said’. In (8), the sequence ḍaŋ-bû́lu-š nya ‘the buffalo’ has to reach back to (6) to establish a connection, but it does so. In (32), khwû sâtyî-š ṣu bë-š nya ‘after he had hidden it’, repeats the last clause of (31), khwû sâtyî-š. ⁵

These uses do not exhaust the use of nya in at least two ways. First, there is additional material that may accompany and precede nya, and this material is not part of the topicalized content itself, but modifies the way the content is topicalized. Second, more than one nya may appear in the same utterance. We will consider the presence of the modification of nya first. In (5), nya is accompanied by bë-š, and in (6) by ṣu bë-š. We thus have three expressions to consider: ⁶

\[
\text{nya} \quad \text{bë-š nya} \quad \text{ṣu bë-š nya}
\]

*Figure 5: Alternate expressions using nya.*

Nyā alone occurs 13 times in (8), (11), (17), (24), (25), (32), (33), (34), (35), (37), (38), (40), and (42). The bë-š nya implementation appears 6 times in (5), (7), (15) twice, (30), and (31), while the ṣu bë-š nya expression is present 11 times in (6) twice, (7), (12), (13), (17) twice, (26), (27), (32), and (43). We may begin to get a sense of the difference by noticing some of the glosses that associate with the three:

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⁵ Although Hope glosses (32) as ‘And then the people all went home, the friends that is, but she stayed’, I think that one which better reflects the Lisu would be ‘When he had hidden it, her friends [the sisters of the one with the green goat] returned home’.

⁶The reasons for listing the forms in this order will become clear below.
‘If’  nya in (34), (37), (40), (42)
‘If’  bγε-ą nya in (30)
‘And then after’  ēu bγe-ą nya in (6), (13), (27), (32)
‘When in fact’  ēu bγe-ą nya in (12), (17)
‘Being so’  ēu bγe-ą nya in (26), (43)

The if’s in (34), (37), (40), and (42) seem to be different from that in (30). In (30), the miniature buffalo is speaking to the orphan. The miniature buffalo knows that the orphan wants a wife. This has become apparent from their conversation in (18) - (23). And in the sentence immediately preceding (30), the orphan identifies the girl he wants. The piece of information being established, it might even be possible to see a ‘since you want her’ in (30) as easily as a ‘if you want her’. The if’s in (34), (37), (40), and (42) are of a different sort. In (34), the orphan and the girl are talking after he has stolen and hidden her coat. She says ēu satyi-ą nya ‘if you stole it’ twice, once in (34) and again in (37):

(34)  zàthyi-ą ēu satyi-ą nya átí lí ｒɔ-ą
orphan-VOC you hide-DEC TOP little return give-IMP
“Orphan, if you have hidden it, please give it back”

(35)  ēwa nya mà satyi,
I TOP not hide
“I didn’t hide it”

(36)  ēu satyi-ą ʃu phá
you hide-DEC fact EXPECT
“I expect you really did.

(37)  ēu satyi-ą nya átí lí ｒɔ mà
you hide-DEC TOP little return give PLEAD
If you hid it please give it back to me, I beg you”

The difference between this if and the one in (30) is certainty. The activity is not only not a reality in (34) and (37); it is only a suspicion. The if’s in (40) and (42) are of the same sort. The orphan is explaining the conditions for the return of the coat, and they depend upon the girl loving him:
It is only a possibility that the girl will love him in (40). She declares that she will, but it will take three years to make it certain. So in (42), the orphan continues to say ‘if’ and to use *nya* alone. This contrast in status — <not realized, but certain> in (30) vs. <not realized, but less certain> in (34), (37), (40), and (42) — contrasts in turn with a third *if*. In (21), the miniature buffalo and the orphan are talking, and the buffalo wants to know why the boy rides him so much. He conjectures:

(21) *πw u zâm â πw e-å, ıwa båg ê ˚ä-a*  
    *you wife want-DEC me say give-IMP*  
    “If you want a wife, tell me”

Here, the *if* is one of pure supposition and is the least certain of the three *if*’s. In this context, we can look at (7) from the text and comment reasonably on the two expressions, *ųu båg-å *nya and *båg-å *nya.
mâkhə bĕq-ə nya ɪwu kûkû ɪwu
evening say-DEC TOP you E.Bro. you
“This evening your elder brother and his wife will give you

máḷə, ɪwu lë hi bwe ḡə-ə
E.Bro.Wi. you to house apportion give-DEC
your share of the household goods”.

A closer gloss than the one Hope gives to this might be ‘[He] spoke [to him thus], “When it is evening, your ...”’ The first expression contains ngu bĕq-ə nya because the previous sentence (6) establishes that after three years the miniature buffalo spoke up. Sentence (7) begins with that now established fact. The second expression contains bĕq-ə nya because evening is certain, but not realized. It has the same combination of properties as that in (30).

The most established in this sequence are those pieces of content marked by ngu bĕq-ə nya. The ‘after X’ and ‘having Xed’ and ‘being X’ glosses all reflect the combination of <realized, certain>. Notice that both the ‘when’ glosses given to ngu bĕq-ə nya in (12) and (17) are not the kind that can have ‘if’ substituted. In each instance, the event is realized: ‘When in fact they did return home’ in (12) and ‘When they had finished the building’ in (17). All eleven usages of ngu bĕq-ə nya in the text are of this sort. Something contingent, an event, is made not contingent, and established.

We may observe now that everyone of the simple participant-like contents (i.e., nouns and pronouns) that precedes some expression containing nya appears with nya alone, and never with the other two expressions of TOPIC. It is as if there are two opposed semantics in Figure 5. First, there are the established, extant realities on the left extreme and the unestablished, non-extant contingencies on the right: things-that-are and things-that-can-happen. Each piece of content qualified by TOPIC brings its own contribution to the complex, and what is lacking is completed by selecting from the choices in Figure 5. If little is lacking, i.e., if it is a noun like zăthyi-ə nya ‘orphan’ in (25) or pronoun like ŋwa nya ‘I’ in (24), only nya is needed to set them forth as <realized, certain> in that context. So nya contributes the least to this complex. Because nga contributes the least of the three expressions to the establishment of <realization> and <certainty>, combining it with clausal, i.e. not-already-real content, produces a result that has the weakest status of the three choices nya, bĕq-ə nya, and ngu bĕq-ə nya. and we get a sense of ‘if’ of the speculative kind. Using bĕq-ə nya reduces the uncertainty, and using ngu bĕq-ə nya removes it completely. Figure 6 summarizes the relevant discussion so far.
3.2 The absence of TOPIC in Lisu

With this background, we can now look at the instances in which some form of nya is absent in the course of the narrative. Although all instances in which nya is absent occur in quoted speech,\(^7\) not all quoted speech fails to have nya. Sentences (24), (30), (34), (37), (38), (40), and (42) are the instances which are quoted speech and which contain nya. In discussing (34), (37), (40), and (42), we have provided the basis for allowing expression in quoted material. But what is the motivation for confining its absence to quoted material? The examples from the internal portion of the text in which nya is absent are these:

- Commands: (9), (10), (18), (21)
- Yes/no Questions: (19), (20), (23), (28)
- Retorts: (22), (29), (41)
- Contradictions: (36), (39)
- Repetitions: (14), (16)

First, let us dispose of (14) and (16), the two cases of non-nya sentences that are not directly quoted speech. Each one repeats the end of the preceding sentence, duplicating the non-TOPIC, FOCUS content.

(37) ... the leŋ̂ nya
(38) this only want-DEC
(39) ... he took only this’

---

\(^7\) Except, of course, for the initial introductory portion. The two exceptions to this “all” are (14) and (16), which will be discussed immediately below.
Both (13) and (15) contain nya, as we might expect, and (14) and (16) simply are FOCUS tags conjoined to the preceding content to amplify by repetition in (14) or by adding a piece of content, lūkhwa 'lavender', in (16).

It is interesting that the remaining instances fall into such a small number of well-defined rhetorical usages: commands, yes/no questions, retorts, and contradictions. It must mean something that this is so. If we follow the emerging semantic character of TOPIC in Lisu, we may suppose that these speech types are of the sort that may lack, contextually, the properties of <realization> and <certainty>. Providing no support for the semantics of nya, TOPIC is absent from them. Plausibly, commands, yes/no questions, and contradictions share a sense of out-of-left-field unexpectedness and a corresponding lack of <realization> and <certainty>. That is, commands, yes/no questions, and contradictions may lack contextual motivation and constitute isolated irruptions into the text. Retorts to questions and commands as (22) and (29) or retorts to a proposition as in (41) share something with the repetitions. They merge their content with their verbal context, and depending upon it rhetorically, they are all FOCUS. Note these parallels:

(20) ῃwu ẓama nwe-ã
      [you wife want-QUEST]
     “Do you want a wife?”

---

8 I have modified Hope’s gloss of (16) to highlight the purpose of the repetition.

9 Note that this does not claim that all examples of commands, yes/no questions, retorts, and contradictions will contextually lack <realization> and <certainty>, just that these are types of language use that may ... and in this text do ... not share in <realization> and <certainty>.
Sentence (22) repeats *nwe-á* ‘want-DEC’ from the preceding two utterances as response. And a similar relation holds for (29):

(28)  kānyā la-á bge-á zāthyí-á nwu ali thi
[pool come say-DEC orphan-VOC you which one
So, “Orphan, which one do you want?”

(29)  gwe b̥athyī nythyī̆ thi n̥a n̥we-á
[there coat green one one want-DEC]
“There, the one with the green coat”

The pairing here is almost identical with the repetition between (15) and (16) cited above: *house built* and then *lavender-bush house built*. Here, we first have ‘which one want’ and then ‘green coat one want’. Sentences (40) and (41) share a repeated *nwe-á* ‘want’.

4. **Conclusion**

Assuming that the grammar we have discussed in fact constitutes the implementation of TOPIC in Lisu, we can draw several conclusions.10 First,

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10 Hope (1974.58-62) discusses an additional form *ɔ* that he (Hope 1974.54) designates “secondary topicalization”. “One of the major differences between the two kinds of ‘topic’ is that the *nya* topics are presupposed and the *ɔ* topics are entailed” (Hope 1974.58).

We may examine briefly three illustrative sentences (Hope 1974.61):

(i)  ása n̥a thsibe thy̥-á / ál̥e xɔ̆ áthá dɔ̆-á
[Asa TOP banjo play-DEC / Ale TOP knife forge-DEC]
‘Asa was playing the banjo and Ale was forging a knife’

(ii)  ása n̥a thsibe thy̥-á / ál̥e n̥a áthá dɔ̆-á
[Asa TOP banjo play-DEC / Ale TOP knife forge-DEC]
‘Asa was playing the banjo, but Ale was forging a knife’
It is difficult to draw too much from these contrasts, but they suggest that *nya* may put forth its content as *realized & certain*; it **establishes** the condition, while *xə* simply **indexes** it as already there. This would be consistent with the descriptive information in parentheses in (iii) and with the gloss ‘and’ in (i) as opposed to ‘but’ in (ii). Sentence (33) — as well as (35) and (38) — add another illustration of the power to establish that *nya* has and the sense of contrast that can follow from it:

(33) **yí nya tyá-ŋ [he TOP be-DEC]**
    **but she stayed**

The text “The Orphan and the Buffalo” contains only four examples of *xə*:

(13) **bwe ɬə ɬə-ŋ [apportion give COM-DEC fact say-DEC TOP he]**
    ‘After they had given him his share, he took the buffalo’s

(27) **dye ɬə ɬə bg-ŋ [go COM fact say-DEC TOP Wusa daughter ENT]**
    ‘After they had done this, the daughters of Wusa came to play in the

(31) **áŋ-búlu-ŋ [buffalo-ant-DIM this say give-DEC say-DEC TOP]**
    ‘The miniature buffalo said this, and so the orphan boy went and

(43) **áthe ɬə bg-ŋ [this fact say-DEC TOP Wusa daughter ENT]**
    ‘This being the case, Wusa’s daughter married the orphan boy’
the semantic construction of TOPIC in Lisu —if we continue to believe that that is what we are encountering here — differs from Bella Coola, Chatino, and Yogad. Bella Coola is pointilistically concerned with the narrative connection of each utterance with the preceding through (usually) one PARTICIPANT. Chatino tracks a central PARTICIPANT through the narrative, identifying him grammatically by elision wherever he appears and the other PARTICIPANTS by ne7. This is a less compulsive take on the issue of TOPIC. It employs a two valued system of central and peripheral TOPICS that may also be present in Bella Coola if the deictic suffixes are included. The Bella Coola suffixes would be comparable to elision in Chatino, but still the essential pattern in Bella Coola is the one of micro-management of PARTICIPANT tracking. Yogad reaches back to the preceding utterance as does Bella Coola, but the concern is not confined to the particulars of PARTICIPANTS. Any commonality will suffice. Now, Lisu is clearly unlike Bella Coola and unlike Chatino, both of which focus on PARTICIPANTS. Lisu is more like Yogad in allowing connections to hold between larger pieces of organized content, whole propositions or whole circumstances, but also constraining it at times to a single PARTICIPANT.

Second, the semantics which these languages use to stitch narratives together differs. Lisu is concerned with the status of shared content as <realized> and <certain>. It uses this property to establish pieces of a PROPOSITION as TOPIC. Lisu differs in that, among the languages we have examined, it alone appears to have degrees of TOPIC.11 Recall the ‘if’, ‘when’, ‘having Xed’, etc. uses of TOPIC grammar which do not recapitulate, but which create new positions from which to absorb forthcoming content.12 There is a second dimension of degrees to TOPIC when χα is added to the mix.

One interesting observation is that (13), (31), and (43) all contain actions done in accord with earlier instructions. In (13), the orphan has previously — in (10) — been instructed to take only three parcels of milled rice and three of salt. He acts in accord with this in (13). In (31), the orphan has been previously advised by the buffalo — in (30) — to steal the girls coat. In (31), he does what he has been told. In (43), the green-coated girl follows up a previous promise to love the orphan and marries him. Sentence (27) is the only one that is not obviously in accord with this, but equally, it does not contradict the pattern. And the textual behavior of χα fits the suggestion about (i) - (iii), that χα indexes what has been established, is ‘in accord with’. At this point no more can be said of χα.

11 I guess the TOPIC differences in Bella Coola and Chatino are different kinds and not different grades of the same thing. But that remains to be discussed.

12 Recall also the degrees of FOCUS that were found in Haida.
While *nya*, *beg-qa nya*, and *yu beg-qa nya* grade the dimension of <realized & certain>, the contrast between *nya* and *xə* divvies the dimension of <establishment> vs. <acknowledgment>. The former *nya* acts to <establish> the content of <realized & certain>, while *xə* acts to <acknowledge> the presence of <realized & certain>. In all its occurrences, examples cited and textual, *xə* is constrained to following noun-like content. Unlike *nya*, it is confined to the <establishment> vs. <acknowledgment> dimension and does not partake in the gradation of <realization & certainty>. This complexity in the semantic organization of TOPIC is absent from the other languages we have looked at in detail.

Third, because Lisu TOPIC has a more global character, it permits multiple occurrences in the same utterance. The Lisu sentence (35) has five TOPICS (*nime* ‘today’, *ngwa* ‘I’, *nwu-hi* ‘your house’, *ása* ‘Asa’, and *yí-nápu* ‘his ear’):\(^{13}\)

(35) **nime nya ngwa nya nwu hi basyia ása**

[**today TOP I TOP you house beside Asa**]

læ yí nápu bælætsha fwu ña-ų

to he ear slap send give-Dec]

‘This morning beside your house I gave Asa a slap on his ear’

This is something that is beyond the grammars of Bella Coola and Chatino. Only Yogad uses its grammar of TOPIC to create multiple connections like Lisu. It is possible in Lisu and Yogad because TOPIC is not constrained to managing PARTICIPANTS, but deals as well with larger arrays of content.

If they appear so different, how then are all these grammatical phenomena examined so far TOPIC? What they share, and what TOPIC accomplishes, is the creation of an orientation toward incoming content. The imperative that creates TOPIC is that speakers must know where they are in a narrative or conversation. Unknown experience (whether language or otherwise) is accommodated and made sense of by relating it to past experience. TOPIC is the language response to that demand. Nothing forces a prior prescription that the accommodation, TOPIC, should be implemented in a specific way, only that it will happen. And that is what creates and characterizes TOPIC.

\(^{13}\) “Where an NP is the focus an optional deletion of the topic marker *nya* can apply to topics” (Hope 1974.13). Where there are many TOPIC elements, as in (35), “the deletion is not applied to the first few ‘to the left’” (Hope 1974.13); and the PARTICIPANTS that are not followed by *nya*, but which remain TOPICS, nevertheless, are each marked “by a slight fall in pitch”.
Appendix

The following narrative text is from pages 169-172 of Hope, Edward. 1974. *The Deep Syntax of Lisu Sentences: A transformational case grammar* (= Pacific Linguistics, Series B, N° 34). Canberra: Australian National University. The abbreviations used in the second line of grammatical and lexical glosses are explained at the end. There is one important difference between the original printing of the text and its form here. The two versions differ in their total of numbered utterances. This one has 43, and Hope’s, 42. This is because the distribution of Lisu material into printed clauses differs. Hope makes use of a solidus, i.e. the symbol /, which is not used below. For example, the first three numbered utterances as printed in Hope (1974.169) are:

1. nó anyí thi ma dyu-ə / nyì syí / yìwà
   there last-year one one have-DEC / two siblings/ they

   There is a story of long ago. The two brothers.

2. nyì syí áŋŋà amyà ma dyu-ə / áŋŋà-bùlù-ə
   two siblings buffalo many ones have-DEC / buffalo-ant-DIM

   ‘The two of them had many buffalo.’

3. thi ma dyu-ə / áŋŋà-bùlù-ə thi ma dyu-ə
   they two siblings / buffalo-ant-DIM many ones have-DEC

   bë
   say

   They had a miniature buffalo. And so

The use of “/” is not explained, but it seems apparent that the Arabic numerals used at the beginning of each line are placed for typological convenience, and the “/” are, in fact, marking the divisions between Lisu utterances. One clear indication of this is that the last item in 3. is bë. It is followed in 4. by -ə, its Declarative suffix attached to bë. The gloss of 3. is interrupted and is completed in 4. with “the younger brother was made to look after it daily.” In presenting the text here, I have segmented it again according to the use of “/”, so Hope has three numbered items for this piece of the text, whereas I have five.

The Lisu text also uses the comma as a mark of internal punctuation. It is not explained how this is manifest in the telling of the story, or whether it is significant. We may note here that where it appears, it always follows nya.
The Orphan and the Buffalo

(1) nọ anyí thî ma dyu-à
[there last-year one one have-DEC]
‘There is a story of long ago’

(2) nyì syí
[two siblings]
‘The two brothers’

(3) yíwà nyì syí áŋà anyà ma dyu-à
[they two siblings buffalo many ones have-DEC]
‘The two of them had many buffalo’

(4) áŋà-bùlu-à
[buffero-ant-DIM one one have-DEC]
‘They had a miniature buffalo’

(5) áŋà-bùlu-à thî ma dyu-à bgè-à nìa
[buffero-ant-DIM one one have-DEC say-DEC TOP]
‘And so the younger brother was made to look after it daily’

yí¹⁵ nyízà lú tyè-à thî nyí thî
WH Y.Bro. watch cause-DEC one day one

nyí lè]
day ADV

(6) lú tyè imu bgè-à nìa, sà khụ lú
[watch cause fact say-DEC TOP, three year watch]
‘And then, after looking after it for three years, that miniature

¹⁵ The form yí, glossed here as ‘WH’, is elsewhere glossed as ‘he’ and ‘one’. Elsewhere, Hope (1974.107) comments on yí that it is “a general relative marker introduced by the pronominalization transformations”. Apparently, it has ‘he’, ‘she’, one’, and ‘a’ among its English equivalents.
û-û ṭu Ƅê-á ḥya, ṣàhà-ɓùlu-á ᬇu ƅùa
COMP-DEC fact say-DEC TOP, buffalo-ant-DIM that one
buffalo spoke to the orphan boy

zàthỳí-è lè Ḳùxwá thỳwê ɣè-á
orphan-DIM to speech speak give-DEC]

(7) Ḳùxwá thỳwê ɣè-á ṭu Ƅê-á ḥya, hà
[speech speak give-DEC fact say-DEC TOP soon
and said’,

màkhà ɓê-á ḥya ƅùwù kùku ƅùwù
evening say-DEC TOP you E.Bro. you
“This evening your elder brother and his wife will give you

màlhà, ƅùwù lé hi bwe ɣè-á
E.Bro.Wi. you to house apportion give-DEC]
your share of the household goods”.

(8) ṣàhà-ɓùlu-á ḥya the Ḳùxwá thỳwê ɣè-û
[miniature-buffalo-DIM TOP so speech speak give-DEC]
‘So said the miniature buffalo’

(9) zàthỳùì ƅùwù ɓàhà-é thà ḥwe
[orphan-VOC you what don’t want]
“Orphan, don’t you take anything.

(10) ḋá ƅhùwù sà ɲà tshàбу sà ɲà the
[rice white three parcels salt three parcels this
Three parcels of milled rice, and three parcels of salt — take only

leì ḥwe’
only want]
this’”.

(11) ṣàhà-ɓùlu-á ḥya the thỳwê ɣè ɣè-û
[miniature-buffalo-DIM TOP this speak give COMP-DEC]
‘The buffalo said this to him’
In Hope’s translation, there is no English gloss assigned to this Lisu portion of the Lisu text. The Lisu repeats a clause in the preceding utterance that seems to have the gloss I have given it here.
(17) sya ṣe ụmu bọ-ẹ ọ ya. sya ụdụ
[make COMP fact say-DEC TOP make appear
‘When they had finished the building, and the house was complete,
le-ẹ ụmu bọ-ẹ ọ ya, ajá-bụlu-ẹ ọ ya
become-DEC fact say-DEC TOP buffalo-miniature-DIM TOP
the miniature buffalo told him’,
yi lẹ bẹ ṣe-ẹ]
he to say give-DEC

(18) dzwó dzwo yi kányá gá ye
[there there he after follow go]
“Go down there and follow them.

(19) zàthiyì-ụ ụmu thi ụyi thi ụyi ụwa the
[orphan-VOC you one day one day me this]
Orphan, about your riding me this much day after day,
kà dзи-ẹ ụmu ọsyì lu ụnụ dзи-ẹ
amount ride-DEC NOM what CAUSE ride-QUEST]
why do you do it?

(20) ụmu záma ụnwe-ị
[you wife want-QUEST]
Do you want a wife?

(21) ụmu záma ụnwe-ị, ụwa bẹ ṣe-ẹ
[you wife want-DEC me say give-IMP]
If you want a wife, tell me”

(22) ụnwe-ị
[want-DEC]
“I do.

(23) hàmọsà ali ịrị-ẹ
[now which do-QUEST]
But at the moment what can I do?
(24) ŋwa ŋya ásyī-é mà dyu
[me TOP what not have]
I have nothing”

(25) zàthỳì- ámbì a
[orphan-DIM TOP this say-DEC]
‘The orphan said this’

(26) áthe ˌu bā- ámbì a ɲa gwé lwùbè yí khè- ámbì
[this fact say-DEC TOP there pool WH edge-to]
‘This being so, “Let us both go over there to the edge of the pool”

dye-ʊ əzwù nyì zu]
go-IMP we two person

(27) dye ə ˌu bā- ámbì a ɲa wusa ámbì xə
[go COMP fact say-DEC TOP Wusa daughter ENT]
‘After they had done this, the daughters of Wusa came to play in the

ədyà kànyà la- ámbì a lwùbwè wa
water play come-DEC pool at]
water at the pool’

(28) kànyà la- ámbì a bā- ámbì zàthỳì- ámbì ɲu ali thì
[play come say-DEC orphan-VOC you which one
So, “Orphan, which one do you want?”

mà nwe- ámbì
one want-QUEST]

(29) gwe bəthỳì nyǐthỳì thì mà nwe- ámbì
[there coat green one one want-DEC]
“There, the one with the green coat”

(30) zàthỳì- ámbì nwe- ámbì bā- ámbì a ɲa gwa yì bəthỳì
[orphan-VOC want say-DEC TOP there one coat
“Orphan, if you want her, go there and steal her coat so that
ámé dye khwù sàtyì
quickly go steal hide[
you can hide it”

(31) áŋà-bůlù-à the bë gò-a bë-a nỳa,[buffalo-ant-DIM this say give-DEC say-DEC TOP
‘The miniature buffalo said this, and so the orphan boy went and
záthỳí-à xə yì báthỳí dye khwù sàtyì-à
orphan-DIM ENT he coat go steal hide-DEC]
stole he coat to hide it’

(32) khwù sàtyì-à ŋu bë-a nỳa, swu nỳa,[steal hide-DEC fact say-DEC TOP people TOP
‘And then the people all went home, the friends that is,
yìdye ŋə gwù-ŋ yì thỳwèphè thà
return COMP all-DEC he friends sort]

(33) yì nỳa tyã-a
[he TOP be-DEC]
but she stayed’

(34) záthỳí-û nỳu sàtyì-à nỳa átí lí gò-à
[orphan-VOC you hide-DEC TOP little return give-IMP]
“Orphan, if you have hidden it, please give it back”

(35) ŋwa nỳa mà sàtyì,
[I TOP not hide]
“I didn’t hide it”

(36) nỳu sàtyì-à ŋu phá
[you hide-DEC fact EXPECT]
“I expect you really did.

(37) nỳu sàtyì-à nỳa átí lí gò mà
[you hide-DEC TOP little return give PLEAD]
If you hid it please give it back to me, I beg you”
(38) á ɲwa nya mà lí yò
[ah I TOP not return give]
“Oh, no, I won’t give it back.”

(39) sâtyi-a ɲwa sâtyi-a ɲu
[hide-DEC I hide-DEC fact]
I did hide it.

(40) nwu ɲwa nwe-a ɲya ɲwa nwu láe lí
[you me want-DEC TOP I you to return
If you will love me I’ll give it back”

yò-a’
give-DEC]

(41) zàthyi-â nwe-a ɲu
[orphan-VOC want-DEC fact]
“Orphan, I will love you”

(42) á nwe-a ɲya sâ khù pê ye-a nwu láe
[ah want-DEC TOP three years reach go-DEC you to
“O.K., if you will love me, in three years time I will give it back

lí yò-a
return give-DEC]
to you”

(43) áthe ɲu bê-a ɲya wusa ámì xɔ
[this fact say-DEC TOP Wusa daughter ENT
‘This being the case, Wusa’s daughter married the orphan boy’

zàthyi-â láe fwudzà-a ɲu
orphan-DIM to marry-DEC fact]
ABBREVIATIONS

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[Version: November 29, 2008]