



## ANALYSING EMPHATIC CONSTRUCTIONS IN DHOLUO: A FUNCTIONAL GRAMMAR PERSPECTIVE

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**Abstract:** *This paper analyses emphatic constructions in Dholuo, a Western Nilotic language spoken in Kenya, within the framework of Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG). The study identifies three broad classes of emphatic constructions in Dholuo — the reordering class, the postponement class, and the dislocation class — and analyses each class in terms of clause as exchange, clause as message, and clause as representation. The reordering class encompasses passive, cleft, topicalised, and inverted constructions. The postponement class includes existential, occurrential, extraposed, and discontinued nominal element constructions. The dislocation class involves subject and object dislocation. The analysis reveals that Dholuo emphatic constructions generate three types of prominence: topical/thematic, end focus, and end weight prominence. The paper demonstrates that Halliday's Functional Grammar provides an adequate theoretical framework for analysing emphatic constructions in a non-Indo-European African language, thereby contributing to cross-linguistic evidence for the theory's universality.*

**Keywords:** *Dholuo, emphatic constructions, functional grammar, clause as exchange, clause as message, clause as representation, information structure*

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### 1. Introduction

Dholuo is a Western Nilotic language spoken by approximately 5,066,966 speakers according to Kenya's 2019 Census. It belongs to a family that includes Anywai, Shilluk, Acholi, and Nuer, and is predominantly spoken in the Nyanza region of western Kenya. Despite being one of Kenya's major indigenous languages, Dholuo remains relatively understudied from a functional-grammatical standpoint, particularly with respect to how emphasis is grammatically encoded in its clausal structures.

In any natural language, emphasis is a central communicative function. Speakers manipulate the order and position of clause elements to highlight particular information, signal contrast, and manage the flow of discourse. While formal grammar approaches describe such manipulations in terms of syntactic well-formedness, Functional Grammar (FG) — as developed by Halliday (1985, 1994) — analyses them in terms of the communicative meanings they encode. Under this framework, the clause simultaneously enacts three

meta-functions: textual (clause as message), interpersonal (clause as exchange), and ideational (clause as representation).

Previous scholarship on Dholuo has largely concentrated on formal grammatical approaches. Works by Omondi (1982), Okoth (1982, 1997), Ochola (2003), and Suleh (2013) have addressed phonology, morphophonemics, morphosyntax, and clause structure using frameworks such as Generative Grammar and the Minimalist Programme. Okoth (1997) offers the only full-length functional grammar of Dholuo but does not address emphatic constructions. The present paper fills this gap by providing a systematic analysis of Dholuo emphatic constructions using Halliday's SFG, extending the theory's application to an African language in the Nilotic family.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Language is inherently a communicative tool, and the grammatical structures speakers employ are shaped by the informational and interactional goals they seek to achieve. Among the most pervasive of these goals is emphasis — the need to foreground particular elements of a message, signal contrast, or manage the flow of new and given information across discourse. In syntactic terms, emphasis is realised through a range of structural configurations collectively referred to as emphatic constructions, which include passive clauses, cleft sentences, topicalised structures, existentials, and dislocations, among others. While these constructions have been extensively described for English and other Indo-European languages within both formal and functional frameworks, the documentation of emphatic constructions in African languages remains sparse, particularly within the paradigm of Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG).

Dholuo, a Western Nilotic language spoken by over five million people in Kenya, offers a rich and underexplored site for this inquiry. Despite the existence of several grammatical studies on the language — covering phonology (Oduor, 2002; Okoth, 1982), morphosyntax (Ochola, 2003; Suleh, 2013), and constituent ordering (Okoth, 1997) — the literature consistently approaches Dholuo grammar through formal-generative lenses. The one exception, Okoth's (1997) functional grammar of Dholuo, provides a broad structural overview but does not examine emphatic constructions or their informational functions. As a consequence, a critical domain of Dholuo grammar — how speakers deploy syntactic structure to encode emphasis, prominence, and information-structural contrast — remains unaccounted for. This represents not merely a gap in the description of the language, but also a gap in the evidence base available to linguistic theory regarding the applicability of SFG to non-Indo-European, non-Bantu African languages.

The present study addresses this problem directly. By analysing Dholuo emphatic constructions within Halliday's (1994) SFG framework — specifically in terms of clause as exchange, clause as message, and clause as representation — the study seeks to determine whether the meta-functional architecture of SFG holds for a typologically distinct language in the Nilotic family. At the same time, the study provides a principled descriptive account of the structural classes and prominence types available in Dholuo emphatic syntax, contributing to the broader documentation of the language's grammatical resources.

### **Objective of the Study**

The overarching aim of this study is to provide a systematic functional-grammatical analysis of emphatic constructions in Dholuo. This aim is pursued through three specific objectives, each corresponding to a distinct dimension of the inquiry.

The main objective is to identify and classify the categories of emphatic constructions available in Dholuo grammar. This entails a structural examination of naturally elicited Dholuo data to determine the range of construction types through which emphasis is syntactically encoded, and to group these types into principled classes based on the mechanism by which clause elements are repositioned for prominence.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study makes a dual contribution — to linguistic theory and to the documentary record of Dholuo — that positions it as significant on multiple levels. From a theoretical standpoint, the application of Halliday's SFG to Dholuo emphatic constructions offers new cross-linguistic evidence for the framework's universality. SFG was developed primarily on the basis of English data and has since been extended to a range of languages, including several Bantu languages of Africa. However, its application to Nilotic languages remains limited. By demonstrating that Dholuo emphatic constructions can be fully analysed within the meta-functional architecture of SFG, the study strengthens the empirical foundation of the theory and advances the argument that the three meta-functions constitute a universal dimension of grammatical organisation rather than a property specific to Indo-European or Bantu languages.

From a documentary and descriptive standpoint, the study enriches the linguistic record of Dholuo in a domain that has hitherto received no dedicated attention. Dholuo is one of Kenya's major indigenous languages, yet its functional grammatical resources remain poorly described. A principled account of its emphatic construction inventory — including the structural classes, the positional mechanics of prominence assignment, and the informational roles these constructions serve — adds substantially to what is known about the language's syntax. This is of value not only to theoretical linguists but also to applied linguists, language educators, and lexicographers working with Dholuo, for whom a richer grammatical description provides an important reference point.

Beyond these primary contributions, the study has methodological significance. By combining elicitation-based data collection with SFG analysis in the context of an under-described language, the study models a replicable research design that can be extended to other syntactic domains in Dholuo — such as relative clauses, subordinate structures, and modal constructions — as well as to related Nilotic languages such as Acholi, Anywai, and Nuer. It thus opens productive avenues for comparative Nilotic linguistics within a functional paradigm, contributing to a growing body of work demonstrating the fruitfulness of applying established linguistic theories to African languages for which the evidence base remains thin.

The paper is organised as follows. Section 2 outlines the theoretical framework. Section 3 describes the three classes of emphatic constructions in Dholuo. Section 4 presents the Functional Grammar analysis in terms of clause as exchange, clause as message, and clause as representation. Section 5 discusses findings and Section 6 concludes.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

This study employs Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) as its analytical framework. SFG treats language as a 'network of systems or interrelated sets of options for making meaning' (Halliday, 1994, p. 15). The term 'functional' signals that the approach is concerned with meaning as realised in communicative contexts. Language is simultaneously organised around three meta-functions, each corresponding to a distinct dimension of meaning in the clause.

## 2.1 Textual Meta-function: Clause as Message

The textual meta-function concerns the organisation of information within a clause and across a text. Under this function, the clause is analysed as a message structure consisting of a theme and a rheme. The theme is the point of departure — the element the clause is about — while the rheme carries the remainder of the message. Theme is realised by initial position in the clause. When a non-subject element occupies the initial position, it constitutes a marked theme and typically signals informational emphasis.

## 2.2 Interpersonal Meta-function: Clause as Exchange

The interpersonal meta-function relates to the clause as an interactive event — a turn in dialogue. The clause divides into a mood block and a residue. The mood block comprises the subject (a nominal group) and the finite (part of the verbal group), and carries the argumentative burden of the exchange. The residue consists of the predicator, complement(s), and adjunct(s). Dholuo, being an agglutinative language, frequently conflates subject, tense, and object within a single verbal word form, which has implications for the clause as exchange analysis.

## 2.3 Ideational Meta-function: Clause as Representation

The ideational meta-function is concerned with how the clause construes experience of the world. It is analysed through the system of transitivity, which comprises processes (expressed by verbal groups), participants (nominal groups), and circumstances (adverbial or prepositional phrases). Halliday identifies six process types: material, mental, relational, behavioural, verbal, and existential. The analysis of Dholuo emphatic constructions under this meta-function reveals the experiential roles assigned to participants in different structural configurations.

## 3. Emphatic Constructions in Dholuo

Dholuo emphatic constructions fall into three broad classes based on how elements are repositioned for prominence: the reordering class, the postponement class, and the dislocation class. These classes parallel those identified for English by Bloor and Bloor (1995), Collins and Hollo (2000), Leech and Svartvik (1975), and Quirk et al. (1985), though their specific realisations in Dholuo reflect language-particular features.

### 3.1 The Reordering Class

Constructions in the reordering class involve moving an element from its canonical position to a more prominent position in the clause. This class comprises four construction types.

The passive construction promotes the patient or affected participant to subject position, while the agent is realised in a by-phrase introduced by the preposition *gi* (by). Example (1) illustrates:

(1a) *Onyango tedo kuon.* (Active: 'Onyango is cooking ugali')

(1b) *Kuon itedo gi Onyango.* (Passive: 'Ugali is being cooked by Onyango')

In (1b), *kuon* (ugali) is topicalised into subject position, thereby receiving thematic prominence. The agent *Onyango*, placed at the end in the by-phrase, receives end focus prominence.

The cleft construction divides a clause into a main clause and a subordinate clause, foregrounding the focused element. In Dholuo, clefts are introduced by *en* (it is), which conflates the anticipatory subject and copula:

(2a) *Otieno obiro.* ('*Otieno has come*')

(2b) *En Otieno ema obiro.* ('*It is Otieno who has come*')

*En* in (2b) functions as a dummy subject-finite conflation, while *Otieno* receives focal prominence as the clefted element. The relative clause *ema obiro* (who has come) constitutes the subordinate component.

Topicalisation fronts a predicate-internal element to the initial position, making it the theme of the clause without changing its grammatical function:

(3a) *Nyithindo owinjo puonj.* ('*The children understood the teaching*')

(3b) *Puonj nyithindo owinjo.* ('*The teaching, the children understood*')

*Puonj* (teaching) receives thematic prominence in (3b) despite retaining its complement function.

Inversion in Dholuo involves the switching of subject and complement positions. Three subtypes have been identified: direct subject-complement (S-C) inversion, inversion with emphatic *mar adier* (truly), and inversion with a restrictive enclitic pronoun:

(4a) *Nyathini en macha.* ('*Your child is that one*' — direct inversion)

(4b) *Gima rach mar adier en ng'ato ndhogre owuon.* ('*The worst thing truly is a person betraying oneself*')

(4c) *Omondi e nyinge.* ('*Omondi is his name*' — inversion with restrictive pronoun)

### 3.2 The Postponement Class

The postponement class groups constructions that move an element from an initial or pre-verbal position to the end or towards the end of the clause, assigning it end focus or end weight prominence.

Existential constructions in Dholuo introduce a nominal element as the complement of an existence predicate. The existential marker conflates the locative dummy subject with the tense marker. Present tense existentials use *nitie* (there is/are); past tense uses *nenitie* (there were); future uses *biro betie* (there will be):

(5a) *Jok moko timbegi richo.* ('*Some people are ill-mannered*' — basic)

(5b) *Nitie jok moko ma timbegi richo.* ('*There are some people who are ill-mannered*')

The occurrence of *ji mang'eny* (many people) as a complement in (5b) assigns it end focus prominence.

Occurrential constructions signal the notion of occurrence rather than mere existence. The introductory expression specifies the nature of the event:

(6a) *Gima lich nobiro.* ('*A scary thing came*' — basic)

(6b) *Nobiro gima lich.* ('*There came a scary thing*')

Extraposed constructions postpone a clausal subject to the end of the clause, introducing a substitute *en* (it is) in its place:

(7a) *Tiyo matek en gima ber.* ('To work hard is a good thing' — basic)

(7b) *En gima ber tiyo matek.* ('It is a good thing to work hard')

Discontinued nominal element constructions separate a post-modifier from its head noun and move it to clause-final position:

(8a) *Jok moko ma oting'o ligangla biro.* ('Some people who are wielding swords are coming')

(8b) *Jok moko biro ma oting'o ligangla.* ('Some people are coming who are wielding swords')

### 3.3 The Dislocation Class

Dislocation involves the movement of a nominal element to the left or right periphery of a clause, with a pronominal element filling the original position. This class comprises subject dislocation and object dislocation.

In subject dislocation, the subject is dislocated and a coreferential pronoun occupies the canonical position:

(9a) *Puotha, (en) ema ipure.* ('My farm, it is being ploughed' — left dislocation)

(9b) *Gin ema gibiro, nyithinde.* ('They are the ones who have come, his children' — right dislocation)

In object dislocation, the object is dislocated and replaced by an enclitic pronoun attached to the verb:

(10a) *Chiembra, ng'ato ne okwalo e.* ('My food, someone stole it' — left dislocation)

(10b) *Ng'ato ne okwalo e, chiembra.* ('Someone stole it, my food' — right dislocation)

Left dislocation assigns thematic prominence to the dislocated element, while right dislocation assigns end focus prominence.

## 4. Functional Grammar Analysis of Dholuo Emphatic Constructions

This section applies the three meta-functions of Halliday's SFG to the analysis of Dholuo emphatic constructions. Each subsection addresses one meta-function in turn.

### 4.1 Clause as Exchange

The clause as exchange analysis partitions the clause into mood (subject + finite) and residue (predicator + complement + adjunct). In Dholuo, the agglutinative nature of the verbal complex frequently results in conflation of functions within a single word. Table 1 below illustrates the analysis of a passive construction.

Table 1: *Passive Construction — Clause as Exchange*

<b>Kuon (Ugali)</b>	<b>o- (has been)</b>	<b>tedi (cooked)</b>	<b>gi Onyango (by Onyango)</b>
Subject	Finite	Predicator	Adjunct
← Mood →		← Residue →	

In the passive construction, the patient *kuon* (*ugali*) assumes subject position and takes the subject function in the mood. The agent is realised as an adjunct in the residue via the *by*-phrase. The finite *o-* can be separated from the predicator *tedi* to identify both functions within the verbal complex.

Cleft constructions yield a unique mood structure. The introductory *en* conflates the subject and finite in the present tense, while everything following constitutes the residue as complement. There is no predicator since the verb is equivalent to the copula 'be'. Table 2 shows the analysis.

Table 2: Cleft Construction — Clause as Exchange

En (It is)	Otieno ema obiro (Otieno who has come)
Subject + Finite (Mood)	Complement (Residue)

Topicalised constructions produce a discontinuous residue structure, since the topicalised element retains its residue function (complement or adjunct) but appears before the mood elements. Table 3 illustrates this with a complement-initial topicalisation.

Table 3: Topicalised Construction — Clause as Exchange

Puonj (Teaching)	nyithindo (children)	owinjo (understood)
Complement [Residue]	Subject [Mood]	Finite+Predicator [Residue]

In subject-complement inversion, the mood and residue functions themselves are inverted relative to the clause-initial position. The complement occupies the initial position while the subject follows, resulting in a residue-mood ordering. In existential and occurrential constructions, the existential marker conflates subject and finite in the mood block, while the introduced nominal element functions as complement in the residue.

For extraposed constructions, two elements share the subject function — the dummy *en* and the postponed clausal subject — producing a discontinuous mood. Object dislocation results in a dual complement structure: the enclitic pronoun and the dislocated object share the same referent and thus the same complement function, yielding a discontinuous residue.

#### 4.2 Clause as Message

The clause as message analysis identifies the theme (point of departure) and the rheme (the development of the message). In unmarked clauses, the subject is the theme. Emphatic constructions typically produce marked themes, placing non-subject elements in the initial position to signal informational foregrounding.

Table 4: Selected Constructions — Clause as Message

Construction	Theme	Rheme
Passive	Kuon (Ugali)	otedi gi Onyango (was cooked by Onyango)
Cleft	En Otieno (It is Otieno)	ema obiro (who has come)
Topicalised	Puonj (Teaching)	emane nyithindo owinjo (is what the children understood)

Existential	Nenitie (There were)	ji mang'eny mane odhi lime (many people who went to visit)
Extraposed	En gima ber (It is a good thing)	tiyo matek (to work hard)
Object dislocation	Chiemba (My food)	ng'ato ne okwalo e (someone stole it)

In passive constructions, the patient kuon (ugali) becomes the marked theme, foregrounding the affected entity over the agent. The rheme then provides the new information about what was done to it and by whom. In cleft constructions, the introductory en and the focused element together form a marked theme that signals the informational focus of the utterance. The relative clause in the rheme constitutes the given information or elaboration.

Topicalised constructions are canonically marked themes, as a non-subject predicate-internal element is placed initially. The rheme provides the predicating information about this theme. Existential and occurrential constructions use a textual theme — a grammatical placeholder without representational content — which organises the clause to introduce the pivotal nominal in the rheme as new information. Extraposed constructions similarly use a dummy theme to allow complex clausal subjects to appear in the rheme with end weight prominence.

### 4.3 Clause as Representation

The clause as representation analysis examines transitivity: the processes, participants, and circumstances encoded in the clause. Dholuo emphatic constructions alter the canonical arrangement of these elements, foregrounding particular participant roles.

Table 5: Selected Constructions — Clause as Representation

Construction	Process Type	Key Participants
Passive (1b)	Material	Goal: kuon; Actor: Onyango
Cleft (2b)	Relational: Identifying	Token (en/it); Value (Otieno); Behavioural (obiro)
Topicalised (3b)	Mental (owinjo)	Phenomenon: puonj; Senser: nyithindo
Existential (5b)	Existential (nitie)	Existent: jok moko ma timbegi richo
Extraposed (7b)	Material (tiyo)	Actor: dummy en; Circumstance: tiyo matek
Object dislocation (10a)	Material (kwalo)	Actor: ng'ato; Goal: chiemba

In passive constructions, the goal participant kuon (ugali) is placed in the initial position, receiving experiential foregrounding. The actor Onyango is demoted to a circumstantial role via the by-phrase. This aligns the

ideational analysis with the textual analysis: both indicate a shift of focus away from the actor and towards the affected entity.

Cleft constructions involve a relational identifying process. The *en* introduces the identifying process, with the clefted element functioning as the value (the identifier). The complement clause in the rheme contains the token whose identity is being specified. In topicalised constructions, when the topicalised element is a mental process participant (e.g. *puonj* — what is sensed), the fronting foregrounds the phenomenon role.

Existential constructions assign the existent role to the nominal introduced after the existential marker. The existential process *nitie/nenitie/biro betie* is realised by the expression that introduces the clause. The participant in the existent role receives end focus prominence as it is the entity whose existence is being asserted. Occurrential constructions similarly introduce an existent participant, but through an occurrence process rather than a pure existence predicate.

In object dislocation, the goal participant *chiemba* (my food) is moved to the clause periphery. When left-dislocated, it appears as the theme, foregrounding the goal role. The enclitic pronoun *e* (it) in the verb form maintains the complement slot within the clause, creating an internal double-reference to the dislocated goal.

## 5. Discussion

The analysis establishes that Dholuo emphatic constructions systematically deploy the three SFG meta-functions in tandem. Every emphatic construction simultaneously reorganises informational structure (theme-rheme), enacts an interpersonal positioning (mood-residue), and encodes a particular experiential representation (process-participant-circumstance). These three dimensions reinforce one another in realising emphasis.

The three types of prominence — topical/thematic, end focus, and end weight — correlate predictably with the three classes. Reordering class constructions typically yield thematic prominence, as the reordered element occupies the initial theme position. Postponement class constructions yield end focus prominence (for simple nominal elements) or end weight prominence (for complex nominal or clausal elements). Dislocation class constructions can yield either thematic prominence (left dislocation) or end focus prominence (right dislocation) depending on the direction of movement.

A notable feature of Dholuo is the agglutinative nature of its verbal complex. The fusion of subject, tense, and object into a single verbal word form means that in the clause as exchange analysis, a single phonological word may simultaneously realise multiple functional categories — subject, finite, predicator, and complement. This is most visible in existential and occurrential constructions, where the introductory expression conflates the locative dummy subject, the tense marker, and the existential verb.

The Dholuo cleft construction differs from its English equivalent in that it has only two possible informational variants (compared to three in English), reflecting language-particular constraints on the cleft structure. The Dholuo cleft-introducing *en* is not merely a pronoun but a conflated subject-finite unit analogous to 'it is' in English, suggesting typological parallels in how languages construct the cleft even across language families.

The findings support the position that SFG is not merely a grammar of Indo-European languages but has cross-linguistic applicability. Previous applications to Bantu languages (e.g. Wakarindi's 2010 study of Gikuyu

emphatic clauses) have shown comparable patterns. The current study extends this evidence to a Nilotic language, strengthening the case for the universality of Halliday's meta-functional architecture.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper has analysed emphatic constructions in Dholuo within the framework of Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar. The study has demonstrated three findings. First, Dholuo emphatic constructions fall into three classes — the reordering class (passive, cleft, topicalised, and inverted constructions), the postponement class (existential, occurrential, extraposed, and discontinued nominal element constructions), and the dislocation class (subject and object dislocation) — each characterised by a distinctive mode of element repositioning.

Second, the repositioning of elements in these constructions produces three types of prominence: topical/thematic prominence (for elements moved to clause-initial position), end focus prominence (for simple elements moved to clause-final position), and end weight prominence (for complex elements moved to clause-final position).

Third, Dholuo emphatic constructions can be fully analysed using Halliday's SFG in terms of clause as exchange, clause as message, and clause as representation. Each meta-function provides a complementary lens on the communicative significance of the emphatic reordering. The agglutinative morphology of Dholuo requires attention to function conflation in the clause as exchange analysis, but this does not challenge the adequacy of the framework — it simply reflects a typological feature of the language.

The study recommends further research into other construction types in Dholuo under the SFG framework, including relative clauses and subordinate structures. It also invites comparative work examining emphatic constructions across Nilotic languages, where similar typological features might be expected to produce comparable functional patterns.

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