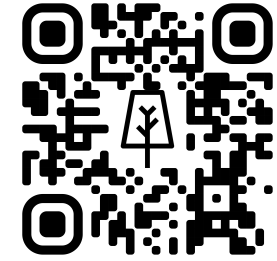


A Predicate-Fronting Analysis of Tigrinya Clefts

Jason Overfelt
Oakland University



1 Introduction

Tigrinya Clefts. The language Tigrinya (Ethiosemitic; SOV) has “cleft” constructions in which the copula typically appears between a contrastively focused constituent and a presupposed relative clause (Leslau 1941, Palmer 1962, Gragg 1972, Appleyard 1989, Zellou 2010, Nazareth 2011).

- (1) $[_{DP} \text{ s\text{ə}g\text{ɛ}n }]_F$ **ʔijj-a** $[_{RC} \text{ d\text{ə}b\text{d}a\text{b}e-tat \text{ z}i-t\text{s}'\text{h}a\text{f}-\text{ət}-\text{tom}]$
 Segen COP.NPST-S.3FS letter-PL REL-write.PRF-S.3FS-O.3MP
 ‘It is Segen who wrote the letters.’

The Proposal. Clause-medial clefts in Tigrinya are derived from specificational copular clauses via remnant movement of the predicate.

Remnant Predicate-Fronting Analysis of Clause-Medial Pseudoclefts in Tigrinya

$$[_{TP} \text{ RC } [_{VP} t_{RC} \text{ DP COP }]] \quad \Rightarrow \quad [_{CP} [_{VP} t_{RC} \text{ DP COP }] [_{TP} \text{ RC } t_{VP}]]$$

The Benefits. This analysis offers explanation for several remarkable properties of cleft constructions in Tigrinya.

- **Head-Finality** : The otherwise reliably head-final nature of the language is preserved.
- **Case Connectivity** : The possibility for accusative Case-marking on the pre-copular nominal is accounted for.
- **Variable Agreement** : The variation in agreement marking that is observed on the coupla is accounted for.

2 Background on Tigrinya

2.1 Ethnographic Information

Classification. Tigrinya is an Ethio-Eritrean language on the Semitic branch of the Afro-Asiatic language family. It is closely related to Tigré and Amharic and more distantly to Arabic and Hebrew.

Distribution. Tigrinya is spoken predominantly in central highland Eritrea and the Tigray region of Northern Ethiopia on the Horn of Africa. Diaspora populations exist world-wide.

Population. There are approximately 10 million speakers. Although it is arguably a minoritized language, Tigrinya is not currently endangered.

2.2 Basic Morphosyntax

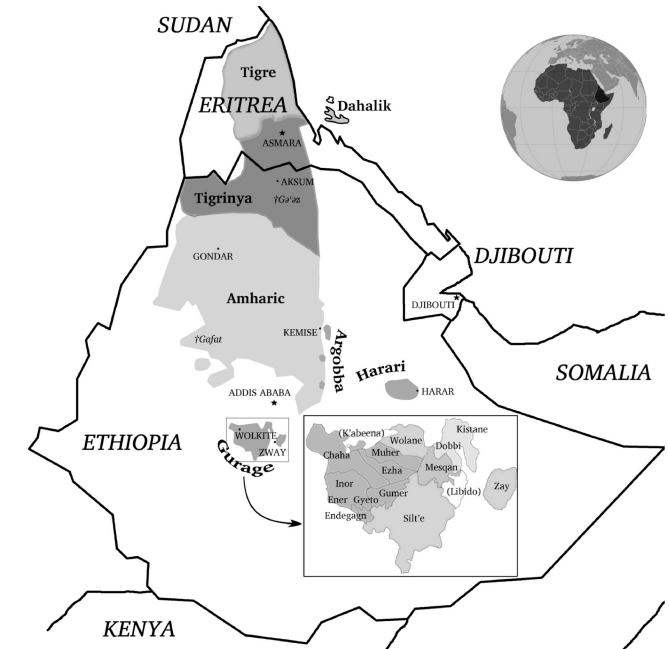
Word Order. The default word order is S-O-V-AUX with a strongly head-final verbal domain.

- (2) ʔit-i təmaharaj n=ət-a məts'ħaf biqilt'uf ji-nbib-a ʔall-o
 DIST-MS student ACC=DIST-FS book quickly S.3MS-read.IPFV-O.3FS AUX.PRES-S.3MS
 'The student is quickly reading the book.'

Nominative-Accusative Alignment. Subjects of transitive and intransitive predicates are aligned with respect to both case and agreement. Internal arguments are differentially accusative case marked on the basis of definiteness/specificity and relative prominence (Weldu 2004, Nazareth 2011).

- (3) Yonas n=ət-a t'irmuz səbir-u-wa
 Yonas ACC-that-FS bottle break.GER-S.3MS-O.3FS
 'Yonas broke the bottle.'
- (4) ʔit-a t'irmuz tə-səbir-a
 that-FS bottle DT-break.GER-S.3FS
 'The bottle broke.' / 'The bottle was broken.'

Agglutinating Synthetic Morphology. Main verbs carry affixal markers that cross-reference subject, object, and oblique arguments. Auxiliary verbs carry markers that cross-reference the grammatical subject (Leslau 1941, Nazareth 2011, Tesfay 2016).



Credit: Ronny Meyer (Weninger 2011)

3 Cleft and Pseudocleft Constructions in Tigrinya

3.1 Some Basic Properties of (Pseudo)Clefts in Tigrinya

Predication and Specification. The *i*-level copula /ʔij/ mediates predicational and specificational predications (Nazareth 2011, Gebregziabher 2014).

(5) *Predicational copula construction*

səgen məmhir ʔij-a
 Segen.F teacher COP.NPST-S.3FS
 ‘Segen is a teacher.’

(6) *Specificational copula construction*

ʔit-a məmhir səgen ʔij-a
 DIST-FS teacher Segen.F COP.NPST-S.3FS
 ‘The teacher is Segen.’

Pseudoclefts in Tigrinya. Tigrinya has both pseudocleft and reverse pseudocleft constructions (see also Nazareth 2011).

(7) *Pseudocleft Construction in Tigrinya*

[_{RC} səlam zi-səbər-ət-to] n=ət-i məskot ʔij-u
 Salam.F REL-broke.PRF-S.3FS-O.3MS ACC=DIST-MS window COP.NPST-S.3MS
 ‘What Salam broke is the window.’

(8) *Reverse Pseudocleft Construction in Tigrinya*

ʔit-om təmharo [_{RC} n=ət-i dəbdabe zi-ts’əhaf-u-wa] ʔij-om
 DIST-MP student.PL ACC-DIST-FS letter REL-write.PRF-S.3MP-O.3FS COP.NPST-S.3MP
 ‘The students are (the ones) who wrote the letter.’

“Clefts” in Tigrinya. The absence of expletives in Tigrinya means that there are not word-for-word parallels for canonical clefts in the language. The Ethiosemitic literature uses this term to refer to constructions with clause-medial copulas (see Appleyard 1989 and references).

(9) *“Cleft” construction in Tigrinya*

n=ət-i məskot ʔij-u [_{RC} səlam zi-səbər-ət-to]
 ACC=DIST-MS window COP.NPST-S.3MS Salam.F REL-broke.PRF-S.3FS-O.3MS
 ‘It is the window that Salam broke.’

Focus First. In Tigrinya clefts, the focused constituent is always initial and the relative clause is always final (see Kramer & Eilam 2012 on Amharic).

Category of the Focus. Both phrasal and clausal elements of various categories can serve as the focused element of a Tigrinya cleft.

(10) *Focused nominal constituent*

[_{DP} **n=ət-i məskot**] ?ijj-u [_{RC} səlam zi-səbər-ət-to]
 ACC-DIST-MS window COP.NPST-S.3MS Salam REL-break.PRF-S.3FS-O.3MS
 ‘It is the window that Salam broke.’

(11) *Focused prepositional constituent*

[_{PP} **ba=abto bus**] iy-ε [_{RC} zi-məts’a-ku]
 INS=bus COP.NPST-S.1S REL-come.PRF-S.1S
 ‘It’s by bus that I came.’

(Zellou 2010:117, (27))

(12) *Focused adverbial constituent*

[_{AdvP} **həgği**] ’iy-u [_{RC} b=əz-a kəsad zə-tä-’azr-e]
 now COP.NPST-S.3MS INS=PROX-FS pass REL-INTR-dissapear.PRF-S.3MS
 ‘It is by this pass that I came.’

(Palmer 1962:43, (37))

A Free-Relative Counterweight. The clausal counterweight shows the morphosyntactic properties of relative clause constructions, namely the relative prefix *zi-* and an obligatory gap position with no overt operator (Palmer 1962, Overfelt 2009, Cacchioli 2026, Cacchioli & Caponigro 2026).

(13) *Free relative clause in Tigrinya*

[_{RC} **zi-ts’əħaf-na-jo**] bi=?aster tə-nəbib-u
 REL-write.PRF-S.1P-O.3MS INS=Aster INTR-read.GER-S.3MS
 ‘What we wrote was read by Aster.’

(14) *Headed relative clause in Tigrinya*

?it-a [_{RC} ?it-i səb?aj **zi-ts’əħaf-Ø-a**] dəbdabe
 DIST-FS DIST-MS man REL-write.PRF-S.3MS-O.3FS letter
 ‘the man who wrote the letter’

Comparison to Embedded Questions. Embedded constituent questions are unambiguously signaled by distinct complementizer morphology (*kəmzi-*) and dedicated *wh*-proforms (Cacchioli & Caponigro 2026).

(15) ?aman [_{CP} ?intaj **kəmz-i-fəttu**] ħatit-u-ni
 Aman what COMP-S.1S-like.IPFV ask.GER-S.3MS-O.1S
 ‘Aman asked me what I like.’

(Cacchioli & Caponigro 2026:8, (23))

3.2 Some Remarkable Properties of (Pseudo)Clefts in Tigrinya

Unexpected Morphosyntactic Properties. Cleft constructions in Tigrinya display several properties that appear to be exceptional from the perspective of the typical morphosyntactic patterns observed in the language (see especially Gragg 1972):

- **Head-Finality** : The copula unexpectedly appears in a clause-medial position.
- **Case Connectivity** : The differential object marker appears on the nominal that controls subject agreement.
- **Variable Agreement** : The subject of the relative clause can control agreement on the copula.

Head-Finality The copula verb in Tigrinya clefts appears in a clause-medial position, as opposed to its expected clause-final position.

- (16) səgen **?ijj-a** [RC dəbdabe-tat zi-ts'ħaf-ət-tom]
 Segen COP.NPST-S.3FS letter-PL REL-write.PRF-S.3FS-O.3MP
 'It is Segen who wrote the letters.'

Case Connectivity. The apparent grammatical subject of the cleft can carry the differential object marker.

- (17) **n=ət-i** **məskot** ?ijj-u [RC səlam zi-səbər-ət-to]
 ACC=DIST-MS window COP.NPST-S.3MS Salam REL-break.PRF-S.3FS-O.3MS
 'It is the window that Salam broke.'

Variable Agreement. The copula can variably agree with elements inside the relative clause. Note that controlling agreement has an additional effect of adding “emphasis” on the cross-referenced constituent (possibly a Contrastive Topic marking).

- (18) ?ab lajbreri **?ijj-a/u** [RC **pro** n=ət-om təmharo Ø-ti-ħigiz-om]
 LOC library COP.NPST-S.3FS/3MS 3FS ACC=DIST-MP student.PL REL-S.3FS-help.IPFV-O.3MP
 'It is in the library that she helped the students.'

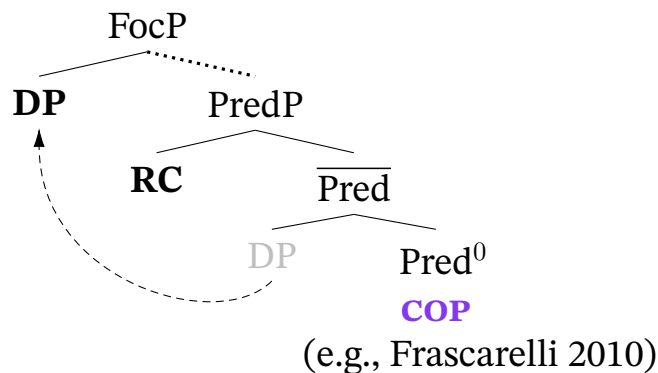
4 Considering Available Analyses

Desiderata of an Analysis. An analysis of Tigrinya clefts should fit within the general confines of the grammar while delivering the following remarkable properties:

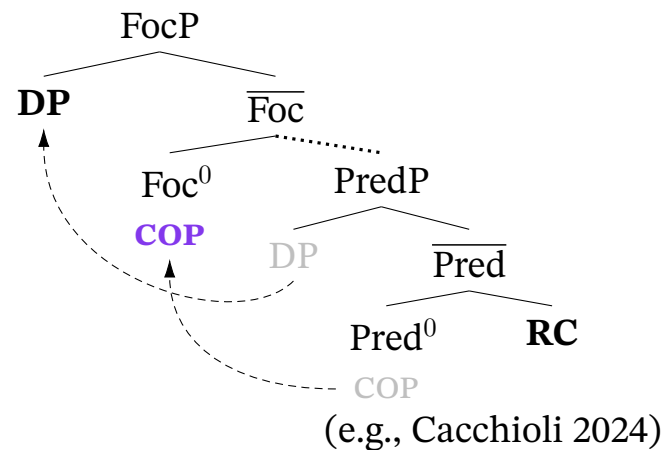
- **Head-Finality** : The copula unexpectedly appears in a clause-medial position.
- **Case Connectivity** : The differential object marker appears on the nominal that controls subject agreement.
- **Variable Agreement** : The subject of the relative clause can control agreement on the coupla.

The Candidates. The generative linguistics literature on Ethiosemitic languages has seen several analyses offered for deriving cleft constructions.

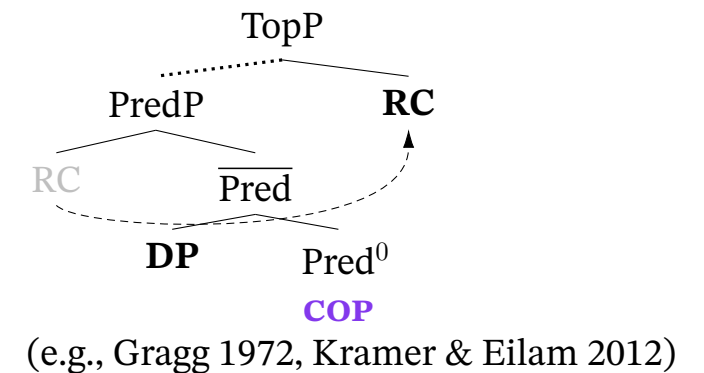
(19) *Predicate-Inversion*



(20) *Second-Positioning*



(21) *Rightward Movement*



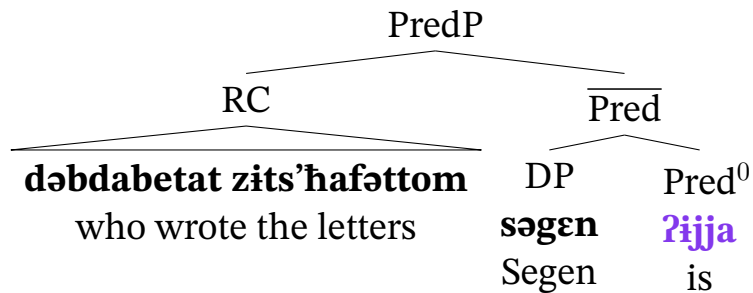
The Assessment. Available analyses do not deliver the remarkable word order, rely on movements that are difficult to independently motivate, and do not explicitly address the remarkable Case and agreement properties.

4.1 Predicate Inversion

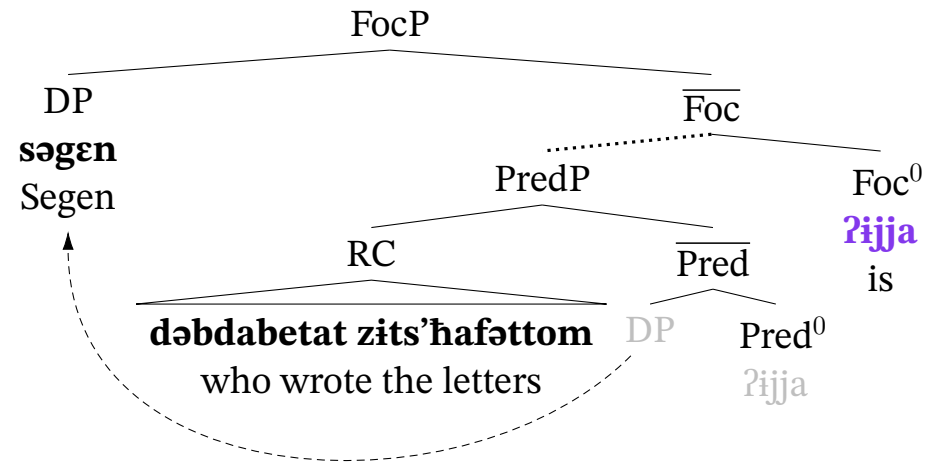
The Derivation. Frascarelli (2010) argues that Tigrinya has “cleft-like” constructions, in which the focused element is the predicate of a specificational copular sentence and is fronted via predicate inversion (den Dikken 2006).

- (22) [DP səgɛn]_F **?ijja** [RC dəbdabe-tat zi-ts’ħaf-ət-tom]
 Segen COP.NPST-S.3FS letter-PL REL-write.PRF-S.3FS-O.3MP
 ‘It is Segen who wrote the letters.’

- (23) i. *Specificational Small Clause*



- ii. *Predicate-Inversion*



Incorrect Word Order. This derivation does not derive the intended DP-COP-RC word order without a head-initial domain (see the next section).

Case Connectivity. Frascarelli (2010) asserts that languages that employ this clefting do not mark the focused constituent with case. Recall that Tigrinya clefts permit an accusative-marked focus element.

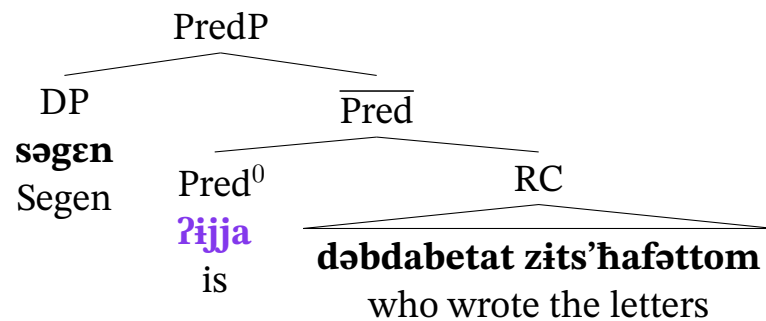
Exceptional Agreement. Frascarelli (2010) asserts that languages that employ this clefting strategy display reduced agreement within the relative clause (“antiagreement”). The relative clause of Tigrinya clefts shows full agreement with its arguments.

4.2 Second-Positioning

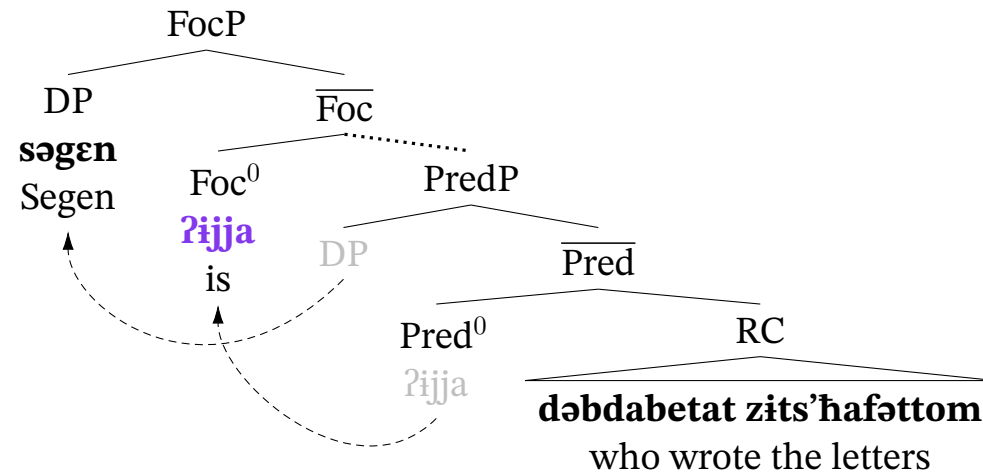
The Derivation. Extrapolating from the discussion in Cacchioli 2024, the copula *?ijj-* is moved to the left periphery, followed by the focused element, as part of an antisymmetric syntax.

- (24) [DP səgɛn]_F **?ijj-a** [RC dəbdabe-tat zi-ts'haf-ət-tom]
 Segen COP.NPST-S.3FS letter-PL REL-write.PRF-S.3FS-O.3MP
 'It is Segen who wrote the letters.'

- (25) i. *Head-Initial Predicational Small Clause*



- ii. *Second-Position Fronting*



No Verb-Fronting (VSO). Second-Position Ordering relies on the fronting of verbs, which is difficult to independently confirm in Tigrinya.

- (26) ***ts'ihif-a** səgɛn n=ət-om dəbdabe-tat
 write.GER-S.3FS Segen ACC=DIST-MP letter-PL
 'Segen wrote the letters.'

- (27) ***?iyy-a** niss-a məmhir
 COP-S.3FS PRO.NOM-3FS teacher
 'She is a teacher'

(Nazareth 2011:65, (67e))

Case Connectivity. This analysis does not offer an account of the Case properties of the focused element.

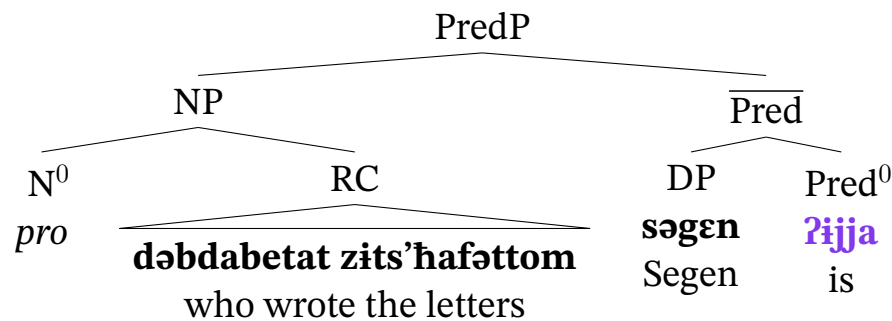
Exceptional Agreement. This analysis does not offer an account of the agreement properties of the copula.

4.3 Rightward Movement

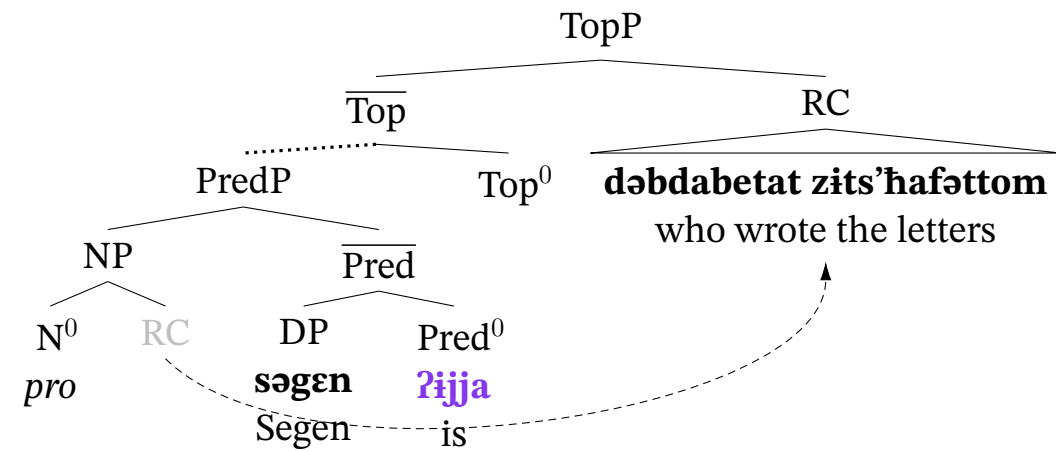
The Derivation. Gragg (1972) adopts the approach to clefts in Akmajian 1970, whereby that the relative clause is extraposed rightward away from a null nominal host. A variation on this analysis might shift the relative clause rightward to a high Topic position (Kramer & Eilam 2012).

- (28) [DP səgɛn]_F **?ijj-a** [RC dəbdabe-tat zi-ts'haf-ət-tom]
 Segen COP.NPST-S.3FS letter-PL REL-write.PRF-S.3FS-O.3MP
 'It is Segen who wrote the letters.'

- (29) i. *Specificational Small Clause*



- ii. *Rightward Extraposition*



Contradictory Ordering. The placement of structurally high, left-adjoined speaker-oriented adverbs suggest the relative clause remains low.

- (30) dəbdabe-tat ?ijj-u **birgits'** [RC səgɛn zi-ts'əhaf-et-tom]
 letter-PL COP.NPST-S.3MS obviously Segen REL-write.PRF-S.3FS-O.3MP
 'It's obviously the letters that Segen wrote.'

Case Connectivity. The analysis asserts that accusative case is inserted “where required or allowed”.

Exceptional Agreement. Concord rules applied at various points in the derivation determine the morphological shape of the copula.

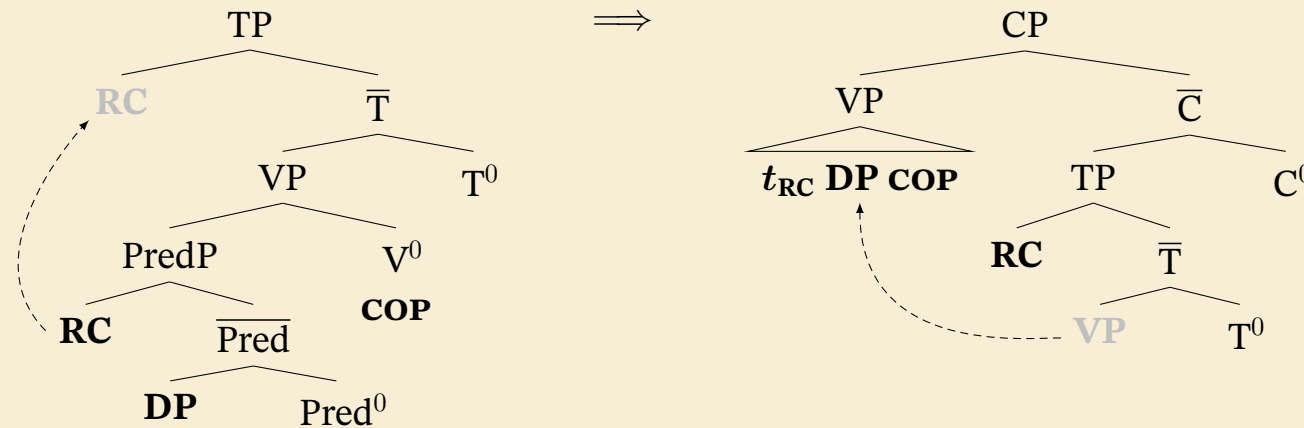
5 The Predicate-Fronting Analysis

Desiderata of an Analysis. An analysis of Tigrinya clefts should fit within the general confines of the grammar while delivering the following remarkable properties:

- **Head-Finality** : The copula unexpectedly appears in a clause-medial position.
- **Case Connectivity** : The differential object marker appears on the nominal that controls subject agreement.
- **Variable Agreement** : The subject of the relative clause can control agreement on the copula.

The Proposed Analysis. Clause-medial clefts in Tigrinya are derived from specificational copular clauses via remnant movement of the predicate.

Remnant Predicate-Fronting Analysis of Clause-Medial Clefts in Tigrinya



The Remarkable is Unexceptional. The remarkable properties of cleft constructions in Tigrinya can be understood through independently observable properties of the grammar.

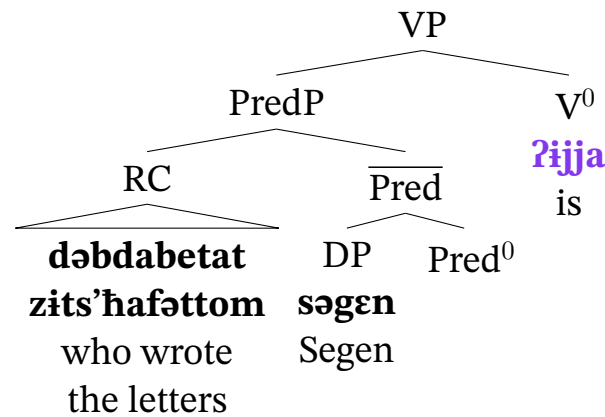
5.1 Clause-Medial Copulas

Remarkably Non-Head-Final. Tigrinya clefts are remarkable for the non-final positioning of the copula.

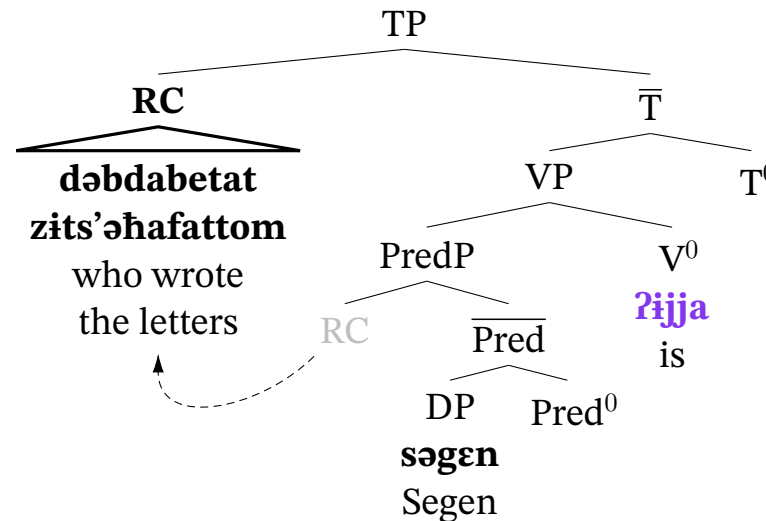
- (31) [DP səgɛn]_F **ʔijja-a** [RC dəbdabe-tat zi-ts'əhaf-a-ttom]
 Segen COP.NPST-S.3FS letter-PL REL-write.PRF-S.3FS-O.3MP
 'It's Segen who wrote the letters.'

Remnant Predicate-Fronting. Promotion of the free relative to subject position, followed by remnant movement of the predicate results in the required word order.

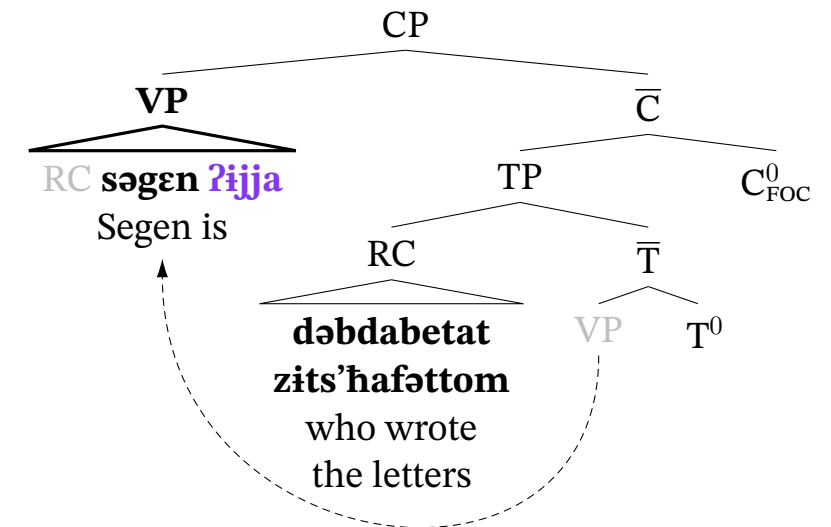
(32) i. *Specificational Predication*



ii. *RC Promotion to Subject*



iii. *Remnant Predicate Movement*



Underlying Word-Order. The analysis predicts an underlying RC-DP-COP word order, which is independently available as a pseudocleft.

- (33) [RC n=ət-om dəbdabe-tat zi-ts'əhaf-a-ttom] səgɛn **ʔijja-a**
 ACC=the-FS letter-PL REL-buy.PRF-S.3MS-O.3FS Segen.F COP.NPST-S.3FS
 'The one who wrote the letters is Segen.'

Predicate-Fronting. The analysis derives the DP-COP-RC order via remnant VP-movement, which is independently available.

(34) ʔit-ən ʔanɛsti n=ət-a mətʰaf ʔanbib-ən-a
 DIST-FP women ACC=DIST-FS book read.GER-S.3FS-O.3FS
 ‘The women read the book.’

(35) [VP n=ət-a mətʰaf ʔanbib-ən-a] ʔit-ən ʔanɛsti t_{VP}
 ACC=DIST-FS book read.GER-S.3FS-O.3FS DIST-FP women
 ‘The women read the book.’

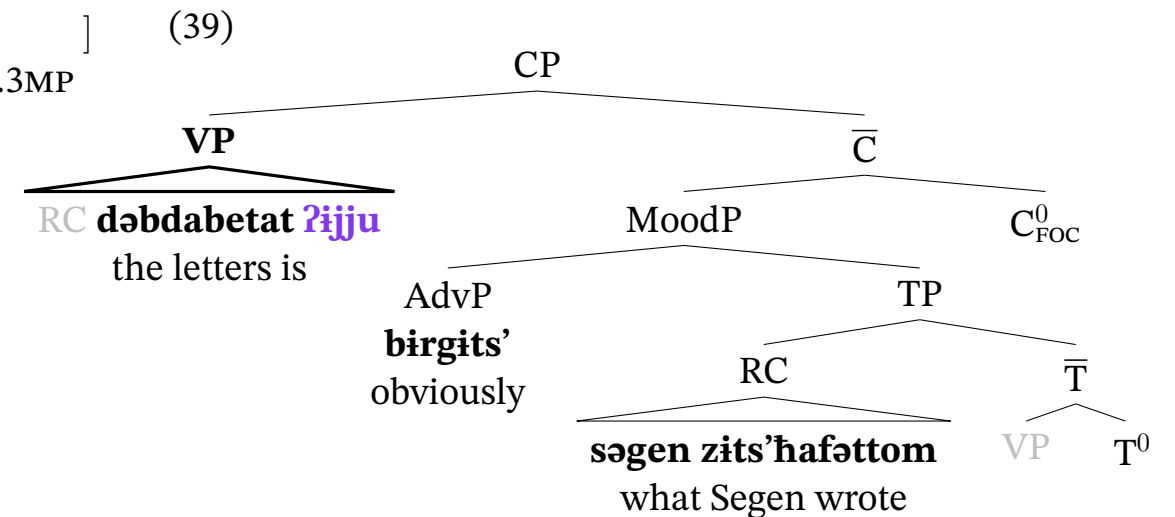
Clause-Medial Copulas. The *i*-level copula ʔijj- frequently appears in clause-medial positions.

(36) ʔit-a məmhir [VP səgen ʔijj-a]
 DIST-FS teacher Segen.F COP.NPST-S.3FS
 ‘The teacher is Segen.’

(37) [VP səgen ʔijj-a] ʔit-a məmhir t_{VP}
 Segen.F COP.NPST-S.3FS DIST-FS teacher
 ‘It’s Segen who is the teacher.’

Adverb Placement. High, left-adjoined speaker-oriented adverbs follow the high VP and precede the relative clause subject.

(38) dəbdabe-tat ʔijj-u **birgits’** [RC səgen zi-ts’əhaf-et-tom]
 letter-PL COP.NPST-S.3MS obviously Segen REL-write.PRF-S.3FS-O.3MP
 ‘It’s obviously the letters that Segen wrote.’



5.2 Case Connectivity

Differential Object Marking. Tigrinya clefts are remarkable for the accusative differential object marking on the apparent subject.

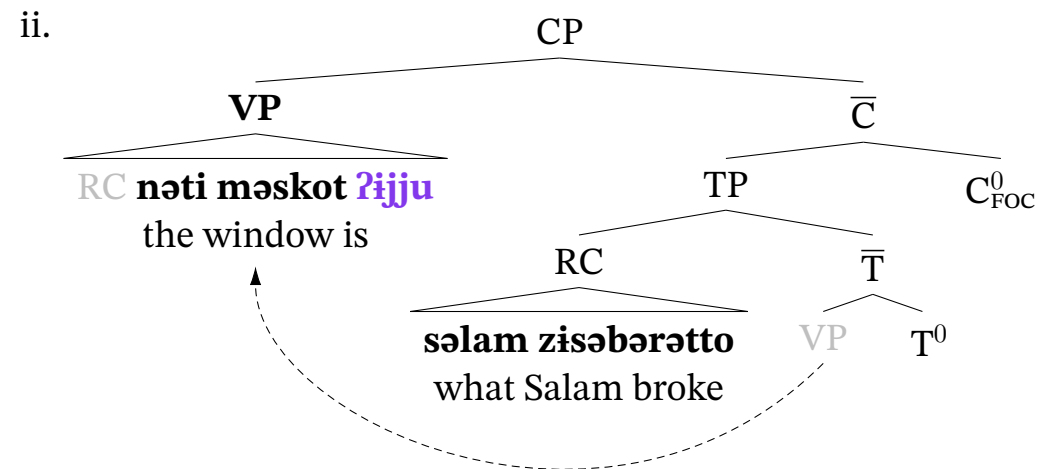
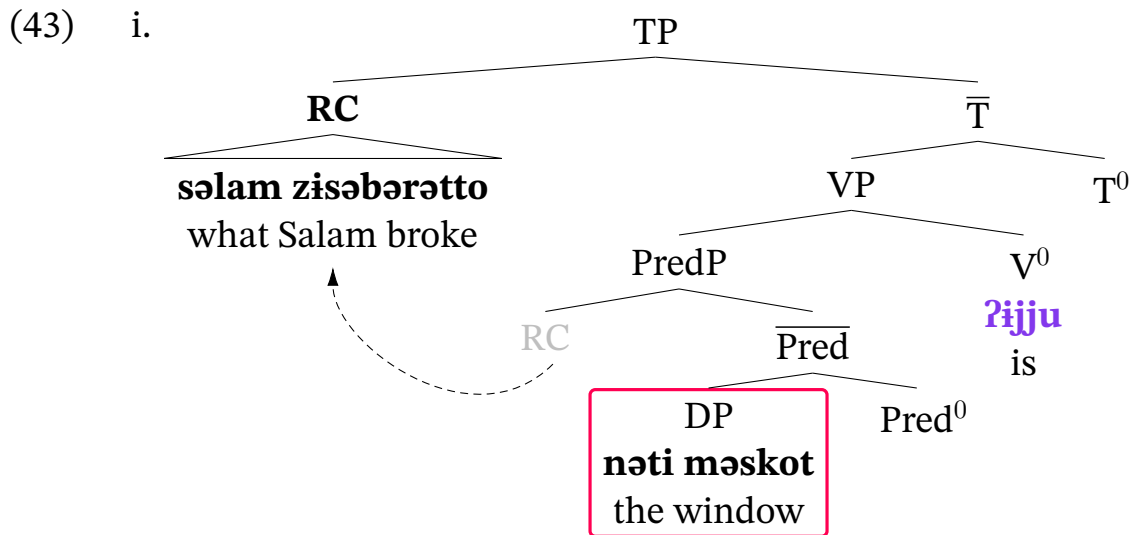
- (40) **n=ət-i** **məskot** ?ijj-u [RC səlam zi-səbər-ət-to]
 ACC-DIST-MS window COP.NPST-S.3MS Salam REL-break.PRF-S.3FS-O.3MS
 ‘It is the window that Salam broke.’

Case in Pseudoclefts. Predicates of specificational small clauses are known to show case connectivity (adapted from den Dikken 2017:18, (56))

- (41) *Pseudocleft construction with case connectivity in German*
 [CP Was Hans essen wollte] war **einen Apfel**
 what Hans eat wanted was a.ACC apple
 ‘What Hans wanted to eat was an apple.’

- (42) *Reverse Pseudocleft construction without case connectivity in German*
Ein(*en) Apfel war [CP was Hans essen wollte]
 a.NOM apple was what Hans eat wanted
 ‘An apple was what Hans wanted to eat.’

Predicational Copular Structure. For any analysis that employs a predicational copular structure, the logical subject of a Tigrinya cleft is not a grammatical subject of a clause, making it eligible for differential object marking (Baker 2012). (Appendix B)



5.3 Variable Copula Agreement

5.3.1 Establishing the Generalization

The Empirical Generalization. The morphological shape of the copula can be, and should be, described with respect to the free relative component of the specificational predication.

- **Subject Relativization** : If the subject position is relativized, the copula must cross-reference the subject argument of the relative clause.

(44) səgen ʔijj-a [RC pros dəbdabe-tat zi-ts'ħaf-ət-tom] (✓ʔijj-a / *ʔijj-om / *ʔijj-u)
 Segen.F COP.NPST-S.3FS 3FS letter-PL REL-write.PRF-S.3FS-O.3MP
 'It is Segen who wrote the letters.'

- ↪ **Object Relativization** : If the object position is relativized, the copula can cross-reference the subject or object argument of the relative clause, or it can realize default 3MS features.

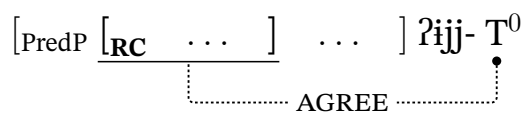
(45) dəbdabe-tat ʔijj-a/om/u [RC səgen pro_O zi-ts'əħaf-a-ttom] (✓ʔijj-a / ✓ʔijj-om / ✓ʔijj-u)
 letter-PL COP.NPST-S.3FS/3MP/3MS Segen.F 3MP REL-write.PRF-S.3FS-O.3MP
 'It's the letters that Segen wrote.'

- ↪ **Adjunct Relativization** : If an adjunct position is relativized, the copula can cross-reference the subject argument of the relative clause or it can realize default 3MS features.

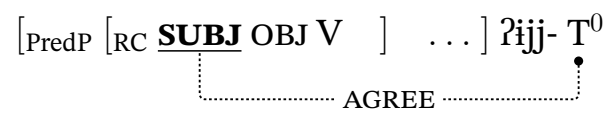
(46) ʔab lajbreri ʔijj-a/u [RC pros n=ət-om təmharo pro_{LOC} Ø-ti-ħigiz-om] (✓ʔijj-a / *ʔijj-om / ✓ʔijj-u)
 LOC library COP.NPST-S.3FS/3MS 3FS ACC=DIST-MP student.PL REL-S.3FS-help.IPFV-O.3MP
 'It is in the library that she helped the students.'

The Theoretical Generalization. Matrix subject agreement can target the free relative or the highest argument of the free relative. (Appendix D)

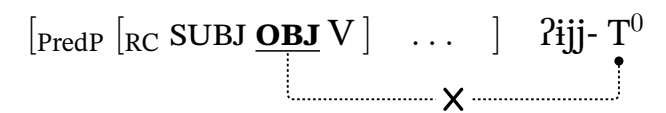
(47) *Agreement with the free relative*



(48) *Agreement with the relative clause subject*



(49) *Agreement with the relative clause object*



5.3.2 Towards a Theory of Free Relatives in Tigrinya

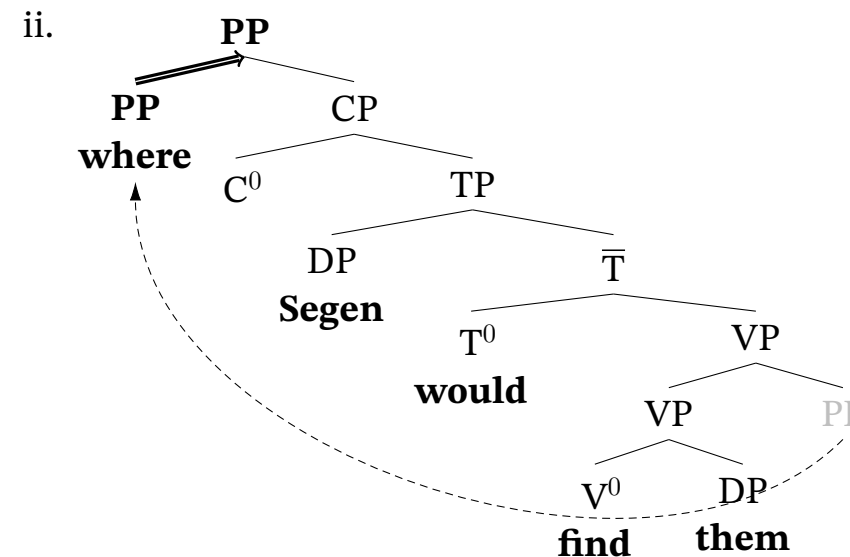
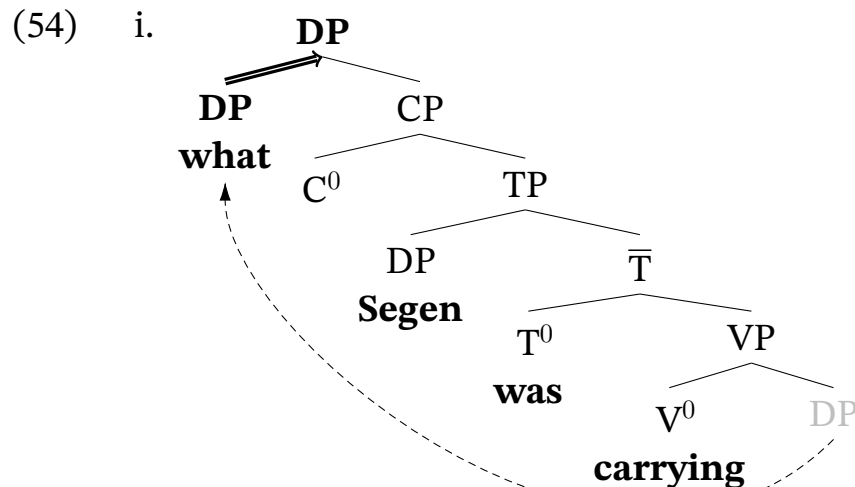
Free Relatives Are Not (Just) CPs. Despite their similarities, free relatives do not have the distribution of interrogative clauses.

- (50) a. Biniam put the letters *(in) [**the bag**]
 b. Biniam put the letters *(in) [**what Segen was carrying**]
- (51) *Biniam put the letters in [**whether Segen was carrying a bag**]

Categorized Free Relatives. The distribution of free relatives is determined by the category and grammatical role of the *wh*-element (Bresnan & Grimshaw 1978).

- (52) a. Biniam put [**the letters**] in the bag
 b. Biniam put [**what Segen was carrying**] in the bag
- (53) a. Biniam put the letters [**in the bag**]
 b. Biniam put the letters [**where Segen would find them**]

Move-and-Project. These kinds of observations motivate the idea that the *wh*-operator of a free relative clause projects its category from its derived position (e.g., Bresnan & Grimshaw 1978, Donati & Cecchetto 2011, Caponigro 2023).



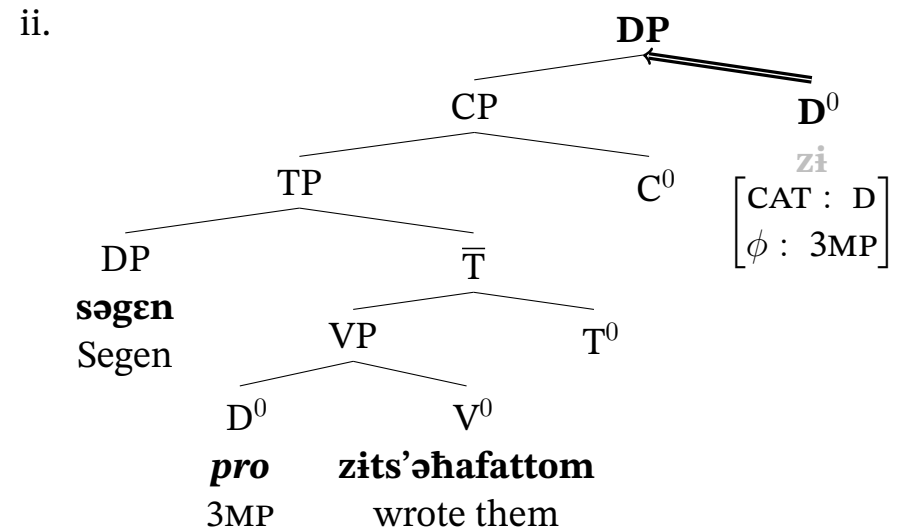
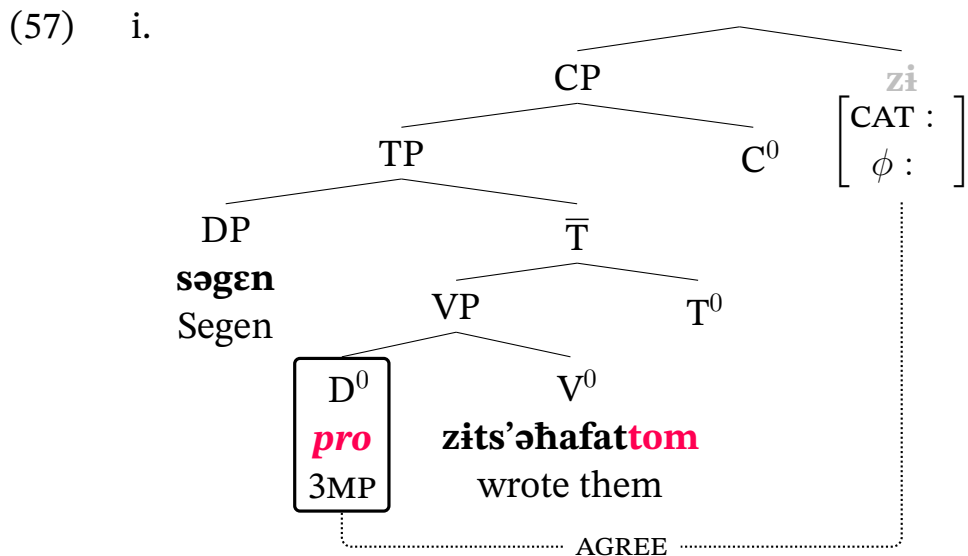
Categorized Tigrinya Free Relatives. Free relatives in Tigrinya have similarly been found to have the syntactico-semantic distribution that would be expected if it has the syntactic category that is appropriate for the gap position (Cacchioli & Caponigro 2026).

(55) *təsfaj n=it-i hābereta ni=[_{DP} zi-ḥatot-∅-o] hib-w-o*
 Tesfay.M ACC=DIST-MS information DIR= REL-ask.PRF-S.3MS-O.3MS give.GER-S.3MS-O.3MS
 ‘Tesfay gave the information to whoever asked him.’ (adapted from Cacchioli & Caponigro 2026:18, (74))

(56) *rut nab [_{DP} ?aman zi-tiwəlīd-ε-lu] kəjid-a*
 Ruth ALL Aman.M REL-be_born.PRF-S.3MS-A.3MS go.GER-S.3FS
 ‘Ruth went to wherever Aman was born.’ (adapted from Cacchioli & Caponigro 2026:17, (72a))

No Movement for Projection. The absence of relative pronouns and the lack of island effects and reconstruction effects in Tigrinya relatives leads Overfelt (2009) to propose that relative clauses not derived via movement (e.g., Aoun & Li 2003).

AGREE-and-Project. The relative-clause marker *zi-* is not a complementizer (Cacchioli 2026); it is a variable-binding operator that is unspecified for its syntactic category (Wood & Marantz 2017, which it receives by binding the resumptive pronoun (see Bresnan & Grimshaw 1978).



5.3.3 Accounting for Variable Agreement in Object Relatives

Copula Agreement Options. If the object position is relativized, the copula can cross-reference the subject or object argument of the relative clause, or it can realize default 3MS features.

- (58) **dəbdabe-tat** **ʔijj-a/om/u** [RC **səgen** **pro** *zi-tš'əhaf-a-ttom*] (✓ʔijj-a / ✓ʔijj-om / ✓ʔijj-u)
 letter-PL COP.NPST-S.3FS/3MP/3MS Segen.F 3MP REL-write.PRF-S.3FS-O.3MP
 'It's the letters that Segen wrote.'

Agreement with the Free Relative. Agreement with the categorized free relative results in agreement that cross-references the object argument.

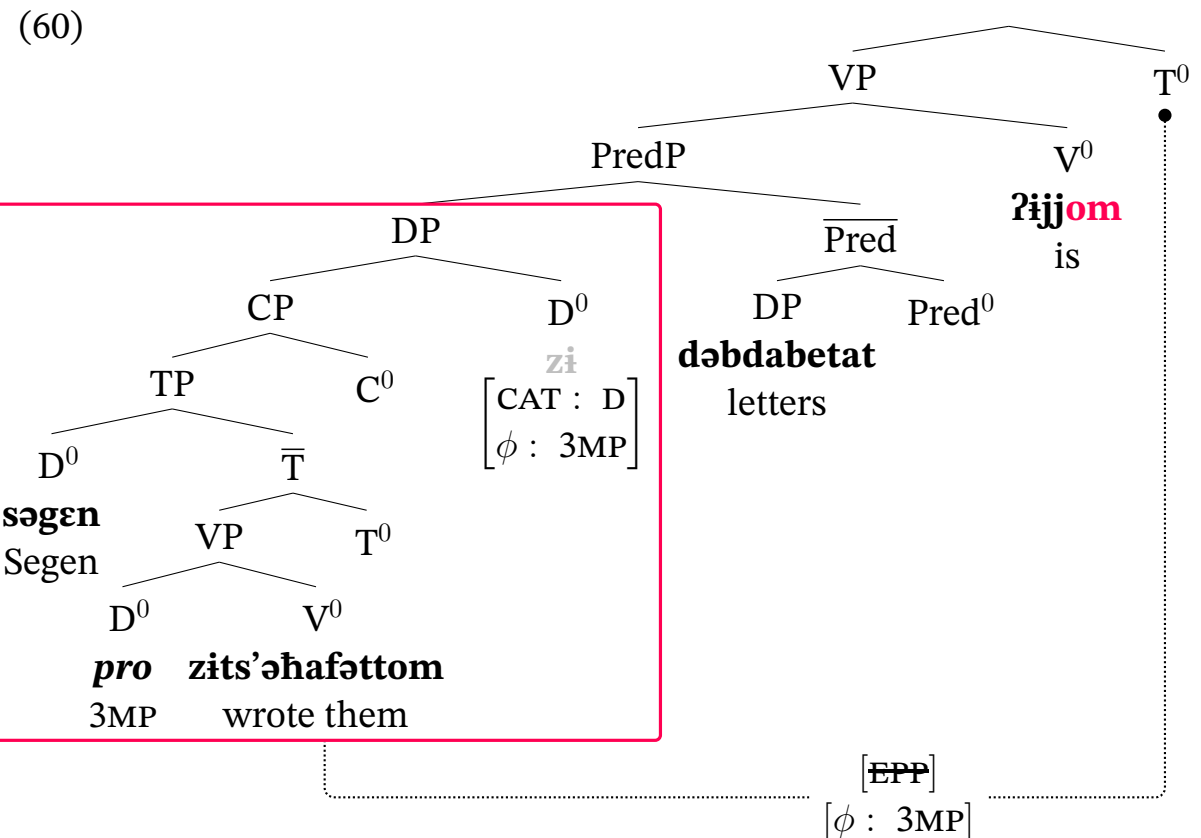
The Agreement Probe. The matrix T⁰ head that controls subject agreement is specified with an [EPP] feature as well as a separate set of ϕ-features.

- (59) T⁰ : [EPP]
 [ϕ :]

Proxy Agreement. The relative-clause marker *zi-* essentially passes the features of the resumptive object pronoun up the tree (e.g., Legate 2005).

Promotion to Subject. As an EPP-satisfying constituent the free-relative is promoted to matrix subject.

Default with Expletives. Assume that the insertion of an expletive results in default subject agreement.



Subject Agreement with Relativized Object. Cleft and pseudocleft constructions in Tigrinya are remarkable for the fact that the copula variably shows default agreement or agrees with the subject of the relative clause. The choice has an effect of emphasis or focus.

- (61) **dəbdabe-tat** **ʔijj-a** [RC **səgən** *pro*_O zi-ts'əhaf-a-ttom] (✓ **ʔijj-a** / ✓ **ʔijj-om** / ✓ **ʔijj-u**)
 letter-PL COP.NPST-S.3FS Segen.F 3MP REL-write.PRF-S.3FS-O.3MP
 'It's the letters that Segen wrote.'

Agreement with the Relative Subject. Agreement with the subject of the relative clause results in agreement that cross-references the subject argument.

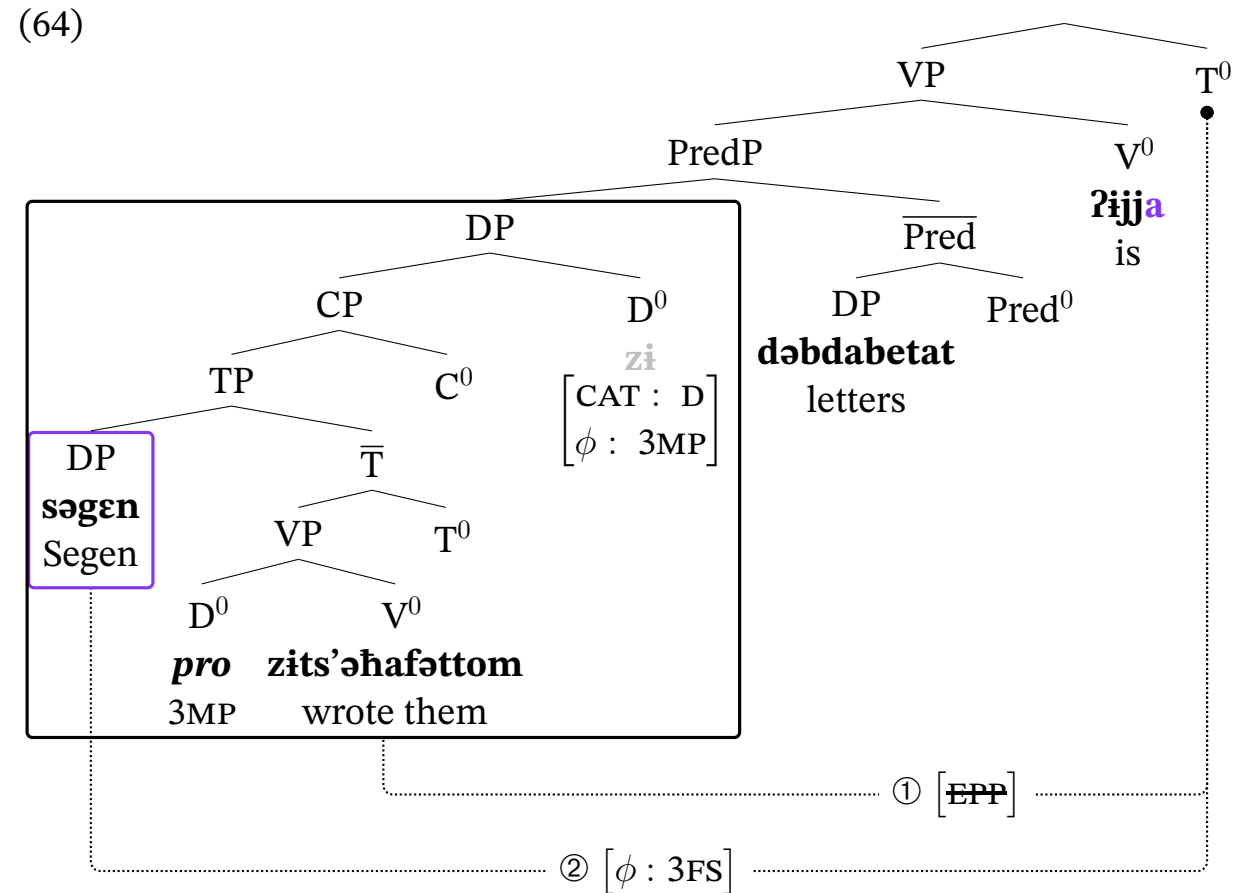
Cyclic AGREE. The features on T⁰ sequentially probe for goals in the c-command domain of the specified head (e.g., Béjar & Rezac 2009, Keine & Dash 2022).

- (62) *Order of Agree Operations*
 ① [EPP]
 ② [ϕ :]

Principle of Minimal Compliance. Once a probe has agreed with some goal XP, that XP is no longer an intervenor to further probing (Richards 1998, Rackowski & Richards 2005, Halpert 2019).

Long-Distance Agreement. Optional long-distance agreement can be independently observed with clausal complements in Tigrinya (Overfelt 2026, submitted).

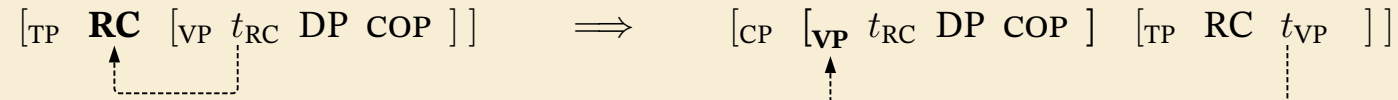
- (63) *pro* [CP **ʔit-a** **səbajti** kəmzi-xəd-ət] fəlit'i-na-**ja/jo**
 1P DIST-FS woman COMP-go.PRF-S.3FS know.GER-S.1P-O.3FS/3MS
 'We knew that the woman left.'



6 Conclusion

The Proposed Analysis. Clause-medial clefts in Tigrinya are derived from specificational copular clauses via remnant movement of the predicate.

Remnant Predicate-Fronting Analysis of Clause-Medial Pseudoclefts in Tigrinya



The Benefits. This analysis offers several benefits over alternative approaches to clause-medial constructions in Ethiosemitic languages.

- **Head-Finality** : The otherwise reliably head-final nature of the language is preserved.
- **Case Connectivity** : The possibility for accusative Case-marking on the pre-copular nominal is accounted for.
- **Variable Agreement** : The variation in agreement marking that is observed on the coupla is accounted for.

Looking Ahead. The components of this analysis may have utility with Amharic (pseudo)clefts (Appleyard 1989, Kramer & Eilam 2012:2, (4)).

- (68) $[_{RC} \text{doro wät'-u-n yä-bälla-w }] \text{astämari-w } \mathbf{näw}$ (69) $\text{astämari-w } \mathbf{näw} [_{RC} \text{doro wät'-u-n yä-bälla-w }]$
 chicken stew-DEF-ACC REL-ate.3MS-DEF] teacher-DEF is teacher-DEF is chicken stew-DEF-ACC REL-ate.3MS-DEF]
 'The one who ate the chicken stew is the teacher.' 'It is the teacher who ate the chicken stew.'

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Kibrom Gebre Medhin and Biniam Tesfai, for their time and for their willingness to teach me about their language. Kibrom is from the Tigray region of Northern Ethiopia. Biniam is from Maekel region of Eritrea. The work presented here has also benefited from discussion with Mengistu Amberber and comments from the anonymous reviewers for ACAL 57.

The responsibility for any errors or misrepresentations of the ideas of others lies solely with the author.

References

- Akmajian, Adrian. 1970. On deriving cleft sentences from pseudo-cleft sentences. *Linguistic Inquiry* 1:149–168.
- Aoun, Joseph, & Yen-hui Audrey Li. 2003. *Essays on the representational and derivational nature of grammar: The diversity of Wh-constructions*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Appleyard, David L. 1989. The relative verb in Focus constructions: An Ethiopian areal feature. *Journals of Semitic Studies* 34:291–305.
- Baker, Mark C. 2012. On the relationship of object agreement and accusative case: Evidence from Amharic. *Linguistic Inquiry* 43:255–274.
- Béjar, Susana, & Milan Rezac. 2009. Cyclic agree. *Linguistic Inquiry* 40:35–73.
- Bresnan, Joan, & Jane Grimshaw. 1978. The syntax of free relatives in English. *Linguistic Inquiry* 9:331–391.
- Cacchioli, Gioia. 2024. A note on verum focus in Tigrinya. In *Language use and linguistic structure: Proceedings of the Olomouc Linguistics Colloquium 2023*, ed. Markéta Janebová, Michaela Čakányová, & Joseph Emonds, 24–41. Olomouc, Czech Republic: Olomouc Modern Language Series.
- Cacchioli, Gioia. 2026. The syntax of clausal prefixes in Tigrinya. Doctoral Dissertation, Université de Genève, Geneva.
- Cacchioli, Gioia, & Ivano Caponigro. 2026. *Varieties of headless relative clauses in Tigrinya*. Ms., Université de Genève and University of California San Diego.
- Caponigro, Ivano. 2023. Still free to have a *wh*-phrase: A reply to Donati, Foppolo, Konrad, and Cecchetto (2022). *Linguistic Inquiry* 56:374–400.
- Deal, Amy Rose. 2023. *Current models of Agree*. University of California Berkeley, Berkeley, CA.
- den Dikken, Marcel. 2006. *Relators and linkers*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- den Dikken, Marcel. 2017. Pseudoclefts and other specificational copular sentences. In *The companion to syntax, second edition*, ed. Martin Everaert & Henk van Riemsdijk, 1–138. John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Donati, Caterina, & Carlo Cecchetto. 2011. Relabeling heads: a unified account of relativization structures. *Linguistic Inquiry* 42:519–560.
- Frascarelli, Mara. 2010. Narrow focus, clefting and predicate inversion. *Lingua* 120:2121–2147.
- Gebregziabher, Keffyalew. 2014. *Copular clauses in Ethio-semitic languages: A case of Amharic, Ge'ez and tigrinya*. Ms., University of Toronto, Toronto, ON.
- Gragg, Gene B. 1972. Cleft sentences in Tigrinya. *Journal of African Languages* 11:74–88.
- Halpert, Claire. 2019. Raising, unphased. *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory* 37:123–165.
- Higgins, Roger. 1979. *The pseudo-cleft construction in English*. New York, NY: Garland.
- Jespersen, Otto. 1927. *A Modern English Grammar on Historical Principles*. Part III: Syntax. Heidelberg: Winter.
- Keine, Stefan, & Bhamati Dash. 2022. Movement and cyclic Agree. *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory* 41:679–732.
- Keine, Stefan, & Hedde Zeijlstra. 2025. Clause-internal successive cyclicity: Phasality or DP intervention. *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory* 43:1119–1182.
- Kramer, Ruth, & Aviad Eilam. 2012. Verb-medial word orders in Amharic. *Journal of Afroasiatic Languages* 5:75–104.
- Legate, Julie Anne. 2005. Phases and cyclic agreement. In *Perspectives on Phases*, volume 49, 147–156. Cambridge, MA: MIT Working Papers in Linguistics.
- Leslau, Wolf. 1941. *Documents Tigrigna*. Paris: La Société de Linguistique de Paris.
- Mikkelsen, Line. 2005. *Copular clauses: Specification, predication, and equation*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Nazareth Amlesom Kifle. 2011. Tigrinya applicatives in Lexical-Functional Grammar. Doctoral Dissertation, University of Bergen, Bergen.
- Overfelt, Jason. 2009. The syntax of relative clause constructions in Tigrinya. Master's thesis, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN.
- Overfelt, Jason. 2026. *Factors for hyperactivity in Tigrinya*. Lectures given the Morphology, Syntax & Semitic Languages Workshop, Université de Genève.
- Overfelt, Jason. submitted. Factors for hyperactivity in Tigrinya. In *Selected Papers from the 56th Annual Conference on African Linguistics*. Berlin: Language Science Press.
- Palmer, Frank R. 1962. Relative clauses in Tigrinya. *Journal of Semitic Studies* 7:36–43.
- Rackowski, Andrea, & Norvin Richards. 2005. Phase edge and extraction: A Tagalog case study. *Linguistic Inquiry* 36:565–599.
- Richards, Norvin. 1998. The Principle of Minimal Compliance. *Linguistic Inquiry* 29:599–629.
- Rizzi, Luigi. 1990. *Relativized Minimality*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Tesfay Tewolde Yohannes. 2016. *DPs, Phi-features and tense in the context of Abyssinian (Eritrean and Ethiopian) Semitic languages*. Firenze, Italy: Firenze University Press.
- Weldu Michael Weldeyesus. 2004. Case marking systems in two Ethiopian Semitic languages. In *Colorado research in linguistics*, volume 17, 1–16. Boulder: University of Colorado.
- Weninger, Stefan, ed. 2011. *The Semitic Languages: An international handbook*. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton.
- Wood, Jim, & Alec Marantz. 2017. The interpretation of external arguments. In *The verbal domain*, ed. Roberta D'Alessandro, Irene Franco, & Ángel J. Gallego, 255–278. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Zellou, Georgia. 2010. Tigrinya fronted copula constructions: Focus and evidence of speaker marking information relevant to hearer expectations. In *Rice Working Papers in Linguistics*, 106–121.

Appendix A : Properties of Non-Verbal Predication in Tigrinya

Grammaticalization of Copulas. Tigrinya distinguishes between an *individual*-level and *stage*-level copula, both of which canonically appear in clause-final position (Nazareth 2011, Gebregziabher 2014, Cacchioli 2024).

- (70) *Individual-level predication: /ʔj/*
pro bəlah ʔijj-a
 3FS intelligent.FS COP.NPST-S.3FS
 ‘She is intelligent.’ (Cacchioli 2024:28, (12))
- (71) *Stage-level predication: /hlw/*
pro ʔab gəza ʔallə-xu
 1S LOC home COP.NPST-S.1S
 ‘I am at home.’ (Cacchioli 2024:27, (10))

Predication and Specification. The copula /ʔj/ mediates predicational and specificational predications (Nazareth 2011, Gebregziabher 2014).

- (72) *Predicational copula construction*
səgen məmhir ʔijj-a
 Segen.F teacher COP.NPST-S.3FS
 ‘Segen is a teacher.’
- (73) *Specificational copula construction*
ʔit-a məmhir səgen ʔijj-a
 DIST-FS teacher Segen.F COP.NPST-S.3FS
 ‘The teacher is Segen.’

Morphological Agreement. Copulas inflect for tense—drawing from a suppletive paradigm for past and negative forms—and carry subject agreement markers that are controlled by the grammatical subject (Leslau 1941, Nazareth 2011, Gebregziabher 2014).

- (74) *aster memhir nəjr-a*
 Esther teacher COP.PAST-S.3FS
 ‘Esther was a teacher.’
 (Gebregziabher 2014:7, (11b))

	3		2		1
	M	F	M	F	
S	ʔijj- u	ʔijj- a	ʔi- xa	ʔi- xi	ʔijj- ə
P	ʔijj- om	ʔijj- ən	ʔi- xum	ʔi- xən	ʔi- na

Table 1: Agreement paradigm for the copular auxiliary /ʔj/.

Appendix B : More on Connectivity in Pseudoclefts

No Differential Object Marking. The predicate of small clause constructions otherwise does not carry differential object marking.

- (75) ?it-a məmhir (*ni=)səgen ?ijj-a
 DIST-FS teacher Segen.F COP.NPST-S.3FS
 ‘The teacher is Segen.’

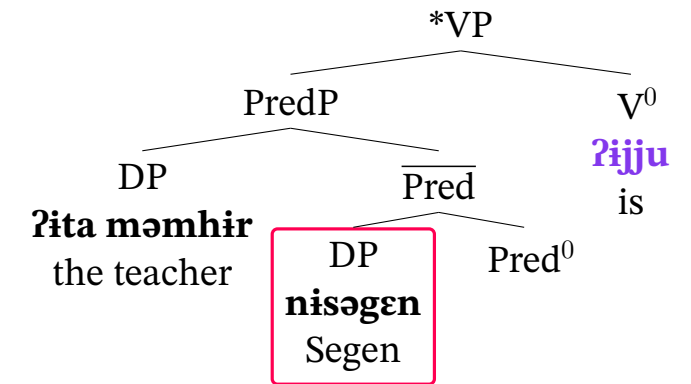
Connectivity and Ellipsis. Pseudoclefts are cross-linguistically special for showing unexpected connectivity effects with regard to case as well as other interpretation-sensitive phenomenon.

- (77) *Negative Polarity Item connectivity*
 [CP What Kibrom **didn't** buy] was [~~Kibrom didn't buy~~ **any wine**]
- (78) *Quantifier-Variable binding connectivity*
 [CP What **no professor** enjoys] is [~~no professor₁ enjoys~~ **her₁** grading]
- (79) *Condition C connectivity*
 *[CP Who **she₁** helped] was [~~she₁ helped~~ **Tsega₁**'s brother]

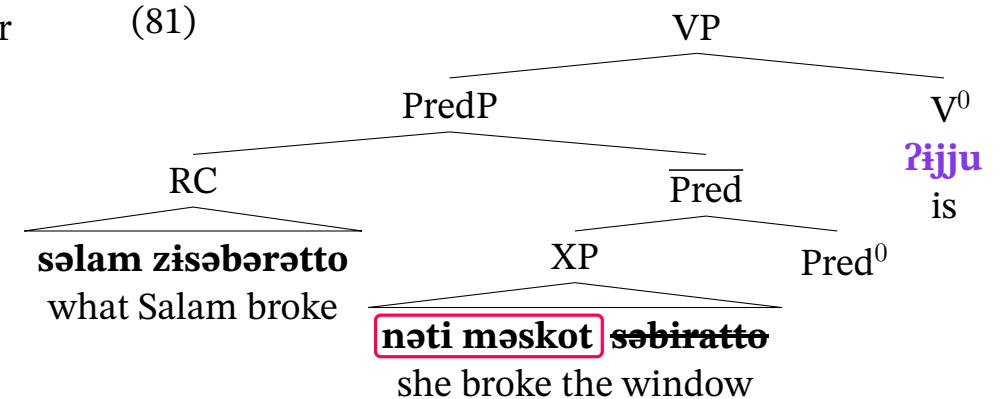
Ellipsis in Tigrinya (Pseudo)clefts. Disjoint reference effects point towards a similar treatment of (pseudo)cleft constructions in Tigrinya.

- (80) * [~~pro ni=naj ts'əga haw hāgiz-a-to~~] ?ijj-u
 3FS ACC=GEN Tsega.F brother help.GER-S.3FS-O.3MS COP.NPST-S.3MS
 zi-hagəz-ət-to
 REL-help.PRF-S.3FS-O.3MS
 ‘It's Tsega's brother who she_{1/2} helped.’

(76)



(81)



Appendix C : More on Agreement into Free Relatives

Free Relative Arguments. Free relative that serves as arguments of verbal predication are not transparent for agreement.

- (82) $[\text{RC } \text{zi-ts}'\text{əhaf-na-jo}] \text{ bi}=\text{?aster } \text{tə-nəbib-u}$
 REL-read.PRF-S.1P-O.3MS INS=Aster INTR-read.GER-S.3MS
 ‘What we wrote was read by Aster.’
- (83) $*[\text{RC } \text{zi-ts}'\text{əhaf-na-jo}] \text{ bi}=\text{?aster } \text{tə-nəbibi-na}$
 REL-read.PRF-S.1P-O.3MS INS=Aster INTR-read.GER-S.1P
 ‘What we wrote was read by Aster.’

Referentiality. Free relatives in verbal predications tend to be referential (Cacchioli & Caponigro 2026), unlike the free relatives that are typically found in pseudocleft constructions (see Mikkelsen 2005).

- (84) $[\text{RC } \text{zi-bəsəl-ka-jo}] \text{ t'imšim-ε-jo} \quad \text{gin } \text{ʔaj-fite-ku-wo-n}$
 REL-cook.PRF-S.2MS-3MS] taste.GER-S.1S-O.3MS but NEG-like.PRF-S.1S-O.3MS-NEG
 ‘I tasted what you cooked, but I didn’t like it.’

A Size-Opacity Correlation. It is reasonable to suspect that referentiality coincides with more structure, which induces blocking effects for agreement of the type observed with (light-)headed relatives in pseudoclefts.

- (85) $\text{məskot } \text{ʔijj-u} \quad \text{ʔit-i} \quad [\text{RC } \text{səlam } \text{zi-səbər-ət-to}] \text{ (nəgər)}$
 window COP.NPST-S.3MS DIST-3MS Salam.F REL-break.PRF-S.3FS-O.3MS thing
 ‘The thing that Salam broke is the window.’
- (86) $\text{məskot } \text{ʔijj-a} \quad [\text{RC } \text{səlam } \text{zi-səbər-ət-to}]$
 window COP.NPST-S.3MS Salam.F REL-break.PRF-S.3FS-O.3MS
 ‘The thing that Salam broke is the window.’

Appendix D : More on Copula Agreement

D.1 The Generalizations Again

The Empirical Generalization. The morphological shape of the copula can be, and should be, described with respect to the free relative subject of the specificational predication.

- **Subject Relativization** : If the subject position is relativized, the copula must cross-reference the subject argument of the relative clause.

(87) səgen ʔijj-a [RC *pros* dəbdabe-tat zi-ts'əhaf-ət-tom] (✓ʔijj-a / *ʔijj-om / *ʔijj-u)
 Segen.F COP.NPST-S.3FS 3FS letter-PL REL-write.PRF-S.3FS-O.3MP
 'It is Segen who wrote the letters.'

- **Object Relativization** : If the object position is relativized, the copula can cross-reference the subject or object argument of the relative clause, or it can realize default 3MS features.

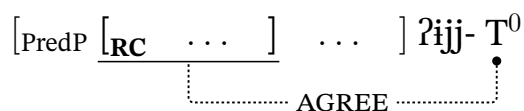
(88) dəbdabe-tat ʔijj-a/om/u [RC səgen *pro* zi-ts'əhaf-a-ttom] (✓ʔijj-a / ✓ʔijj-om / ✓ʔijj-u)
 letter-PL COP.NPST-S.3FS/3MP/3MS Segen.F 3MP REL-write.PRF-S.3FS-O.3MP
 'It's the letters that Segen wrote.'

- **Adjunct Relativization** : If an adjunct position is relativized, the copula can cross-reference the subject argument of the relative clause or it can realize default 3MS features.

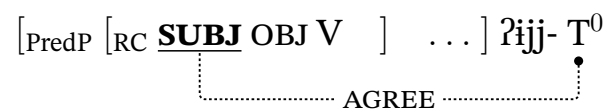
(89) ʔab lajbreri ʔijj-a/u [RC *pros* n=ət-om təmharo *pro*_{LOC} Ø-ti-higiz-om] (✓ʔijj-a / *ʔijj-om / ✓ʔijj-u)
 LOC library COP.NPST-S.3FS/3MS 3FS ACC=DIST-MP student.PL REL-S.3FS-help.IPFV-O.3MP
 'It is in the library that she helped the students.'

The Theoretical Generalization. Matrix subject agreement can target the free relative or the highest argument of the free relative.

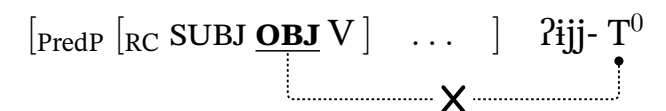
(90) *Agreement with the free relative*



(91) *Agreement with the relative clause subject*



(92) *Agreement with the relative clause object*



D.2 Relativization of the Subject

Agreement Only with Subjects. If the subject position is relativized, the copula must cross-reference the subject argument of the relative clause.

- (93) *səgen* *ʔijj-a* [RC *pros* *dəbdabe-tat zi-ts'ħaf-ət-tom*] (✓ *ʔijj-a* / **ʔijj-om* / **ʔijj-u*)
 Segen.F COP.NPST-S.3FS 3FS letter-PL REL-write.PRF-S.3FS-O.3MP
 'It is Segen who wrote the letters.'

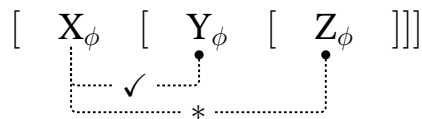
Two Paths to Agreement. It is in principle possible for subject agreement to arise from either:

- A: Free Relative :** Full agreement with the free relative values 3FS or
- B: Relative Subject :** Φ -agreement with the embedded subject values 3FS.

Expletives Blocked. It has to be stipulated that expletive insertion is not possible with subject relativization (see also Gragg 1972).

Relativized Minimality. The subject presents a set of intervening ϕ -features (Halpert 2019, Keine & Zeijlstra 2025).

- (94) *Relativized Minimality* (Rizzi 1990)



Ban on Improper Agreement. \bar{A} -movement bleeds A-relations, otherwise scrambling would feed agreement.

