

A Predicate-Fronting Analysis of Tigrinya Clefts

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1 Introduction

(1) [DP səgɛn] ʔijj-a
 Segen.F COP.NPST-SM.3FSG
 [RC dəbdabe-tat zi-ts'ħaf-ət-tom]
 letter-PL REL-write.PRF-SM.3FSG-OM.3MSG
 'It is Segen who wrote the letter.'

cleft and pseudocleft constructions in the language. This will include some of the more basic properties of these constructions as well as the exceptional case and agreement properties that serve as desiderata for any theoretical analysis. We will then briefly examine two previous approaches to Tigrinya clefts in §4, finding that they rely on syntactic operations that are difficult to independently motivate in the language. The proposed predicate-fronting analysis will be presented in more detail in §5 before the paper is summarized and concluded in §6.

2 Background on Tigrinya

2.1 Ethnographic information

Tigrinya is an Ethiosemitic language on the Semitic branch of the Afro-Asiatic language family. It is, therefore, closely related to both Tigré and Amharic and more distantly related to Arabic and Hebrew. Although the language is spoken primarily in Eritrea and Northern Ethiopia, Tigrinya is estimated to be spoken by 10 million people world-wide (Eberhard et al. 2024). The language is not currently considered endangered, but it is arguably under-resourced.

Unless otherwise noted, the data presented in this paper were collected in individual interviews conducted by the author. The interviews involved standard judgment tasks that asked the consultant to provide intuitions about the grammaticality or acceptability of utterances in Tigrinya. Test sentences were typically paired with contexts or translations to demonstrate the intended interpretation and to facilitate judgments. The primary consultant for the research reported here is from the Maekele region of Eritrea and is proficient in English. Some data were contributed or verified by a second consultant, also proficient in English, who is from the Tigray region of Ethiopia. While there is appreciable variation between dialects of Tigrinya (see especially Tsehay 2009 and Niguss 2021), no significant morphosyntactic variation was observed in the relevant constructions.

2.2 Morphosyntactic profile

As noted previously, Tigrinya is a fairly well-behaved SOV language with a strongly head-final verbal domain. The example in (3) shows that the typical placement of the lexical verb and auxiliary verb in clause-final position.

- (3) *hanti səbajti maj ti-səttij ʔall-a*
 INDF woman water SM.3FSG-drink.IPFV AUX.NPST-SM.3FSG
 ‘A woman is drinking water.’

As the example above also serves to illustrate, subject markers on both the lexical verb and the auxiliary verb are controlled by the grammatical subject, *hanti səbajti* ‘a woman’ in this example. Although the head-finality of the language makes it difficult to precisely identify grammatical positions in a clause, I follow [Tesfay 2016](#) in treating the specifier of TP as the grammatical subject position.

Turning to example (4), we see that Tigrinya is a nominative-accusative language with respect to both case-marking and agreement alignment.

- (4) *Causative-inchoative alternation in Tigrinya*
- a. *jonas n=ət-a t'irmuz səbir-u-wa*
 Yonas.M ACC=that-FSG bottle.F break.PFV-SM.3MSG-OM.3FSG
 ‘Yonas broke the bottle.’
- b. *ʔit-a t'irmuz tə-səbir-a*
 that-FSG bottle INTR-break.PFV-SM.3FSG
 ‘The bottle broke.’ ([Nazareth 2011](#): 56, (55))

The grammatical subject of transitive and intransitive predicates is morphologically unmarked with nominative case and consistently controls subject marking (SM) morphology on the predicate. Grammatical objects are differentially marked with *n(i)=*, the accusative case preclitic ([Weldu 2004](#)). Accusative-marked nominals in mono-clausal structures standardly control object marking (OM) morphology on the verb and undergo Object Shift ([Overfelt 2022](#)). While object marking and accusative case marking are strongly correlated, both are tied to notions such as definiteness, specificity, epistemic familiarity, discourse prominence, and topicality; see [Kievit & Kievit 2009](#), [Nazareth 2011](#) and [Gebregziabher 2021](#) for discussion.

3 Cleft and Pseudocleft Constructions in Tigrinya

The empirical interest of the paper involves so-called cleft constructions. The discussion to follow, which draws from research presented by [Gragg \(1972\)](#), [Nazareth](#)

(2011), and Nazareth & Gasser (2026), presents some of the more basic properties of these constructions. I will also highlight some of the remarkable properties of these constructions that set the agenda for the theoretical analysis to follow.

3.1 Some basic properties

The familiar example in (5) and the example in (6) present typical cleft constructions in Tigrinya.

- (5) [DP səgen]_{FOC} ?ijj-a
 Segen.F COP.NPST-SM.3FSG

 [_{RC} dəbdabe-tat zi-ts’ħaf-ət-tom]
 letter-PL REL-write.PRF-SM.3FSG-OM.3MPL

 ‘It is Segen who wrote the letter.’
- (6) [DP n=ət-i məskot]_{FOC} ?ijj-u
 ACC=DIST-MSG window COP.NPST-SM.3MSG

 [_{RC} səlam zi-səbər-ət-to]
 Selam.F REL-break.PRF-SM.3FSG-OM.3MSG

 ‘It is the window that Selam broke.’

Due to an absence of overt expletives, Tigrinya lacks the canonical cleft constructions that are described by Jespersen (1927) for English and which are typically used as translations for Ethiosemitic clefts. In the constructions above, the copular auxiliary verb ?ijj- follows a focused constituent and precedes a presupposed relative clause (Gragg 1972; Nazareth 2011; Nazareth & Gasser 2026). Like similar cleft constructions in Amharic (see Kramer & Eilam 2012 and §6), the focused element is always initial and the relative clause final.

The focused element in the cleft constructions above is a nominal constituent with the logical role of either the subject (5) or the object (6). As shown in the following examples, prepositional and adverbial constituents may also serve as the initial focused element of the construction.¹

¹Transcription and glossing conventions for Tigrinya can vary significantly between authors. I have chosen to reproduce transcriptions as faithfully as possible but to adapt glosses to the Leipzig Glossing Rules.

- (7) [PP ba=abto_{bus}]_{FOC} iy-ε [RC zi-məts'a-ku]
INS=bus COP.NPST-SM.1SG REL-come.PRF-SM.1SG
'It is by bus that I came.' (Zellou 2010: 117, (27))

- (8) [AdvP häğgi]_{FOC} 'iy-u
now COP.NPST-SM.3MSG
[RC b=əz-a kəsad zə-tä-'azr-e]
INS-PROX-FSG pass REL-INTR-disappear.PRF-SM.3MSG
'It is just now that he has disappeared in this pass.' (Palmer 1962: 43, (37))

The verbal copula that appears in cleft constructions in Tigrinya is the same element *?ijj-* that is found in instances of individual-level non-verbal predication. As shown in the examples below, this copula mediates both predicational and specificational predication constructions (Nazareth 2011; Gebregziabher 2014).²

- (9) *Predicational copula construction in Tigrinya*

səgen məmhir ?ijj-a
Segen.F teacher COP.NPST-SM.3FSG
'Segen is a teacher.'

- (10) *Specificational copula construction in Tigrinya*

?it-a məmhir səgen ?ijj-a
DIST-FSG teacher Segen.F COP.NPST-SM.3FSG
'The teacher is Segen.'

Notably, *?ijj-* appears clause-finally and carries subject marking morphology that is controlled by the grammatical subject, indicators of its status as a verbal element of the predicate.

This same copula is also found in pseudocleft and reverse pseudocleft constructions (Nazareth 2011). These constructions are characterized by the presence of a relative clause in the grammatical subject position in (11) or, in the case of the reverse pseudocleft in (12), in the predicate position.

²Stage-level non-verbal predication employs the copular verb *?all-*, which does not appear in cleft or pseudocleft constructions; see Nazareth 2011; Gebregziabher 2014, and Cacchioli 2024 for discussion.

(11) *Pseudocleft construction in Tigrinya*

[_{RC} səlam zi-səbər-ət-to]
Salam.F REL-break.PRF-SM.3FSG-OM.3MSG

n=ət-i məskot ʔijj-u
ACC=DIST-MSG window COP.NPST-SM.3MSG

‘What Salam broke is the window.’

(12) *Reverse pseudocleft construction in Tigrinya*

ʔit-om təmharo
DIST-MPL student.PL

[_{RC} n=ət-i dəbdabe zi-ts’əḥaf-u-wa]
ACC=DIST-FSG letter REL-write.PRF-SM.3MPL-OM.3FSG

ʔijj-om
COP.NPST-SM.3MPL

‘The students are who wrote the letter.’

The clausal component of both cleft constructions and pseudocleft constructions in Tigrinya is unambiguously a relative clause. The lexical verb is marked with the relative clause prefix *zi-* and a gap is found in the position of the grammatical role served by the focused element.³ The presence of the relative clause prefix and the presence of a gap position are both properties found in headed relative clauses (13) and headless relative clauses (14) (Palmer 1962; Overfelt 2009; Cacchioli 2026; Cacchioli & Caponigro 2026).

(13) *Headed relative clause in Tigrinya*

ʔit-a [_{RC} ʔit-i səbʔaj zi-ts’əḥaf-Ø-a] dəbdabe
DIST-FSG DIST-MSG man REL-write.PRF-SM.3MSG-OM.3FSG letter

‘the letter that the man wrote’

³Zellou (2010) draws attention to and discusses constructions in which the lexical verb appears without the relative clause marker and in its “gerundive” (i.e., perfective) aspectual form. I leave these data to future research with the hope that they are amenable to the proposals here.

(14) *Headless relative clause in Tigrinya*

[_{RC} **zi-ts'**əḥaf-na-jo] bi=aster tə-nəbib-u
REL-write.PRF-SM.1PL-OM.3MSG INS-Aster.F INTR-read.PRF-SM.3MSG

‘What we wrote was read by Aster.’

As such, the embedded clauses of cleft and pseudocleft constructions are clearly distinct from embedded constituent questions like the one below.⁴

(15) *Embedded constituent question in Tigrinya*

ʔaman [_{CP} **ʔintaj kəmz-i-fəttu**] hatit-u-ni
Aman.M what COMP-SM.1SG-like.IPFV ask.PFV-SM.3MSG-OM.1SG

‘Aman asked me what I like.’ (Cacchioli & Caponigro 2026: 8, (23))

Note that an embedded constituent is introduced by the prefixal complementizer *kəmzi-* and employs dedicated *wh*-proforms, including *ʔintaj* ‘what’, that typically appear in-situ.

3.2 Some remarkable properties

In addition to those basic properties above, Gragg (1972) documented several properties that are exceptional from the perspective of the typical morphosyntactic patterns that are observed in the language. These include the clause-medial positioning of the copular, case-connectivity, and exceptional subject marking.

The first of these, which was pointed out in the introduction, is the clause-medial position of the copula, illustrated by the familiar example in (16).

(16) *Clause-medial position of the copula in Tigrinya clefts*

səgen ʔijj-a
Segen.F COP.NPST-SM.3FSG

[_{RC} dəbdabe-tat zi-ts'ḥaf-ət-tom]
letter-PL REL-write.PRF-SM.3FSG-OM.3MSG

‘It is Segen who wrote the letter.’

⁴See den Dikken 2017: sec.5 on debates regarding the grammatical status of the embedded clause in pseudocleft constructions.

This is a characteristic property of Tigrinya clefts and one that contrasts with the typical positioning of verbal elements, including lexical verbs as well as copulas in other instances of non-verbal predication that were presented in the previous section with examples (9)–(12). Any analysis of cleft constructions in Tigrinya would ideally provide some explanation for the non-canonical positioning of the copula verb that was also consistent with the information-structural properties of the major constituents.

A second notable property of Tigrinya clefts involve connectivity effects that can be observed between the clause-initial focused constituent and the free-relative. For example, in (17) the focused constituent *nəti meskot* ‘the window’ carries the preclitic *ni-*, the differential object marker. At a purely descriptive level, this is naturally understood as the morphological realization of accusative case, seeing as the interpretive role of this constituent is the grammatical object of the free-relative.

(17) *Case-connectivity in Tigrinya clefts*

n=ət-i məskot ʔijj-u
ACC=DIST-MSG window COP.NPST-SM.3MSG

[_{RC} səlam zi-səbəɾ-ət-to
Səlam.F REL-break.PRF-SM.3FSG-OM.3MSG]

‘It is the window that Selam broke.’

Interestingly, we observe these case-connectivity effects despite the fact that relative clauses robustly act as opaque domains for extraction. This is demonstrated in (18), where we see that the grammatical subject of the relative clause *Segen* cannot be moved to a position in the superordinate clause.

(18) *Relative clauses are opaque for extraction in Tigrinya*

a. bizgirom [DP n=ət-ən [RC səgen
surprisingly ACC=DIST-FPL Segen.F
zi-ts'ihaf-ət-ən] debdabe-tat]
REL-write.PRF-SM.3FSG-OM.3FPL letter-PL
ni-nbib-ən ?allə-na
SM.1PL-read.IPFV-OM.3FPL AUX.NPST-SM.1PL

‘Surprisingly, we are reading the letters that Segen wrote.’

- b. *səgeŋ₁ bizgirom [DP n=ət-ən [RC t₁
 Segen.F surprisingly ACC=DIST-FPL
 zi-ts'ihaf-ət-ən] debdabe-tat]
 REL-write.PRF-SM.3FSG-OM.3FPL letter-PL
 ni-nbib-ən ?allə-na
 SM.1PL-read.IPFV-OM.3FPL AUX.NPST-SM.1PL
 'Surprisingly, we are reading the letters that Segen wrote.'

This suggests that the clause-initial focused constituent in Tigrinya clefts is not extracted from the relative clause, as doing so should be expected to induce a Complex-NP Island violation (Ross 1967). It therefore must be explained why it is possible for a clause-initial focused DP to be marked with accusative case.⁵

Finally, the subject agreement marking that we observe in Tigrinya clefts is more variable than we observe elsewhere in the grammar. Within a single cleft construction, including the example provided in (19), the subject marker on the copula ?ijj- is capable of cross-referencing either the initial focused constituent *nəta debdabetat* 'the letters', the subject of the relative clause *Segen*, or it can display default 3MSG marking. While the choice of agreement morphology is optional at some level, controlling the subject marker comes with an added effect of "emphasis" on the cross-referenced constituent. In the case of default agreement, the consultant reported emphasis on what happened with the letters.

⁵It also possible to observe disjoint reference effects in Tigrinya clefts that suggest Condition C connectivity between an R-expression like *Tsega* and an argument of the free-relative.

- (1) *ni=naj ts'əga haw ?ijj-u
 ACC=GEN Tsega.F brother COP.NPST-SM.3MSG

[RC zi-ħagəz-ət-to]
 REL-help.PRF-SM.3FSG-OM.3MSG

'*It is Tsega₁'s brother that she₁ helped.'

As will be discussed in §5.2, connectivity effects are a robust property of specificational pseudo-clefts, although they not entirely well-understood (Higgins 1979; Mikkelsen 2011; den Dikken 2017). For this reason, the argument to come will focus on case-connectivity with that understanding that this is an opportunity for future research.

- (19) a. $n=\text{ət-a}$ $dəbdabe-tat$ $?ijj-om$
 ACC=that-FSG letter-PL COP.NPST-SM.3MPL
 [RC $səgən$ $zi-ts'əhaf-ət-tom$]
 Segen.F REL-write.PRF-SM.3FSG-OM.3MPL
 ‘It is the letters that Segen wrote.’
- b. $n=\text{ət-a}$ $dəbdabe-tat$ $?ijj-a$
 ACC=that-FSG letter-PL COP.NPST-SM.3FSG
 [RC $səgən$ $zi-ts'əhaf-ət-tom$]
 Segen.F REL-write.PRF-SM.3FSG-OM.3MPL
 ‘It is the letters that Segen wrote.’
- c. $n=\text{ət-a}$ $dəbdabe-tat$ $?ijj-u$
 ACC=that-FSG letter-PL COP.NPST-SM.3MSG
 [RC $səgən$ $zi-ts'əhaf-ət-tom$]
 Segen.F REL-write.PRF-SM.3FSG-OM.3MPL
 ‘It is the letters that Segen wrote.’

Any analysis of cleft-like constructions in Tigrinya should also offer some traction on the exceptional behavior of the subject marker in cleft constructions and would ideally do so within the general confines of what can be independently motivated in the the grammar of the language.

4 Previous syntactic analyses of Tigrinya clefts

The generative linguistics literature on Ethiosemitic languages has seen two previous analyses offered for deriving cleft constructions in Tigrinya, as well as the related language Amharic. Broadly speaking, previous analyses involve either Predicate Inversion and displacement of the copula (Frascarelli 2010; Cacchioli 2024) or rightward extraposition (Gragg 1972; Kramer & Eilam 2012).⁶ With reference to the Tigrinya exemplar, repeated below for convenience, I will argue in what follows that each of these approaches primarily suffers from the fact that they only deliver the word-order of Tigrinya clefts by appealing to movements that are difficult to independently motivate in the language.

⁶See Nazareth & Gasser 2026 for a non-generative analysis of Tigrinya clefts and related constructions.

- (20) [DP səgɛn] ʔijj-a
 Segen.F COP.NPST-SM.3FSG
 [RC dəbdabe-tat zi-ts'ħaf-ət-tom]
 letter-PL REL-write.PRF-SM.3FSG-OM.3MSG
 'It is Segen who wrote the letter.'

4.1 Predicate Inversion and second-positioning

Frascarelli (2010) proposes that cleft constructions in Tigrinya are derived from an underlying specificational small clause configuration, labeled as PredP in Figure 2, as part of a Predicate Inversion construction (e.g., den Dikken 2006). The intended derivation is one in which *Segen* is generated as the predicate of the small clause and is inverted with the free-relative by movement to a Focus position at the left-periphery of the clause. Although it is not explicitly discussed, one could surmise that the copula verb is generated as the head of the small clause and possibly moves into the head of the Focus projection.

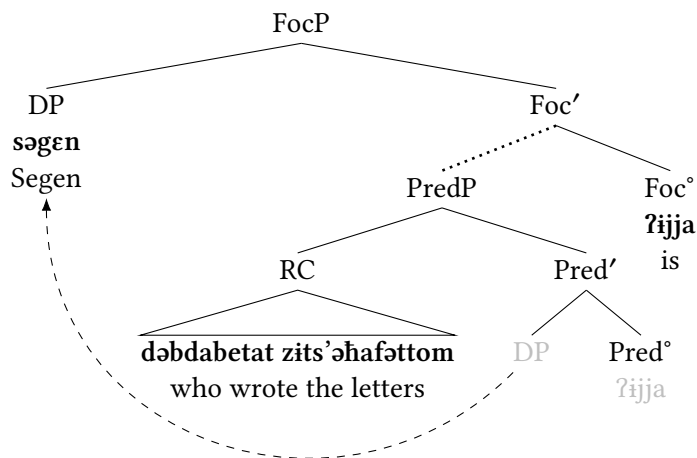


Figure 2: Predicate Inversion analysis of Tigrinya clefts

Notably, this derivation does not deliver the clause-medial position of the copula without movement of the copula into some head-initial projection. Caccioli (2024) proposes that this is precisely what happens. Within a head-initial syntax, the copula is claimed to undergo movement to the head of a Focus position at the left periphery of the clause, as shown in Figure 3.

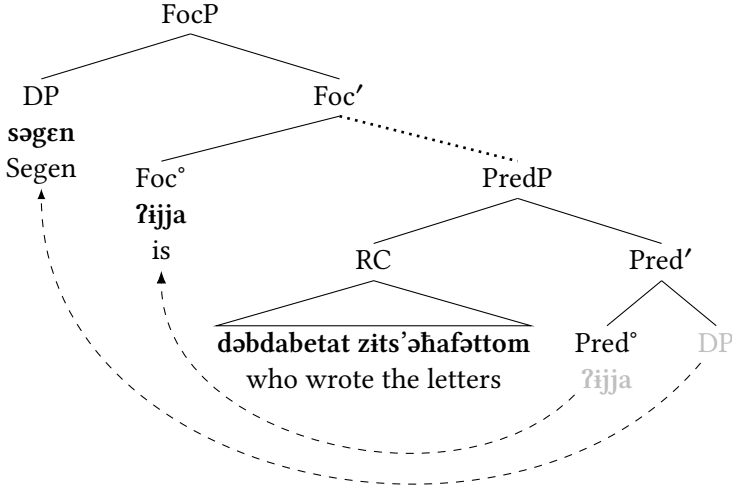


Figure 3: Second-position fronting of the copula in Tigrinya clefts

While this derivation is capable of deriving the intended DP-cop-RC word-order, it does so with appeal to an instance of movement that is difficult to independently confirm in the language. In example (21), for instance, we see that altering a canonical SOV structure to have a VSO word-order results in ungrammaticality. Significantly, [Nazareth \(2011\)](#) makes the same observation regarding the copula in constructions with non-verbal predication; see (22).

- (21) a. səgeŋ n=ət-om dəbdabe-tat ts'ihif-a-wom
 Segen.F ACC=DIST-MPL letter-PL write.PFV-SM.3FSG-OM.3MPL
 'Segen wrote the letters.'
- b. *ts'ihif-a-wom səgeŋ n=ət-om dəbdabe-tat
 write.PFV-SM.3FSG-OM.3MPL Segen.F ACC=DIST-MPL letter-PL
 'Segen wrote the letters.'
- (22) a. niss-a məmhīr ʔiyy-a
 PRON.NOM-3FSG teacher COP.NPST-SM.3FSG
 'She is a teacher.'
- b. *ʔiyy-a niss-a məmhīr
 COP.NPST-SM.3FSG PRON.NOM-3FSG teacher
 'She is a teacher.' (adapted from [Nazareth 2011](#): 64–65, (67))

These facts suggests that it is not generally possible to move a verbal element

on its own to the left-periphery of the clause in the way required by this analysis.

Neither Frascarelli (2010) nor Cacchioli (2024) explicitly address the issue of subject marking on the copula. It is, therefore, unclear what predictions this type of analysis should make. With regard to case-connectivity, Frascarelli (2010) asserts that languages that employ this clefting strategy do not mark a focused element with the case morphology expected from its grammatical role, but instead uses default case morphology. As we have previously seen in §3.2, however, Tigrinya does mark the focused constituent with accusative case when it serves the grammatical role of the object of the relative clause. I take this as another indication that a Predicate Inversion analysis is not suited for cleft constructions in Tigrinya.

4.2 Rightward extraposition

Gragg (1972) motivates an approach to cleft constructions in Tigrinya that was originally proposed by Akmajian (1970). On this type of analysis as well, the cleft construction is derived from an underlying specificational small clause. The observed word is achieved through rightward movement of the relative clause. A modern implementation of this idea can be found in Kramer & Eilam 2012, where it is proposed that the relative clause lands in a high Topic position at the right-periphery of the clause; see Figure 4.

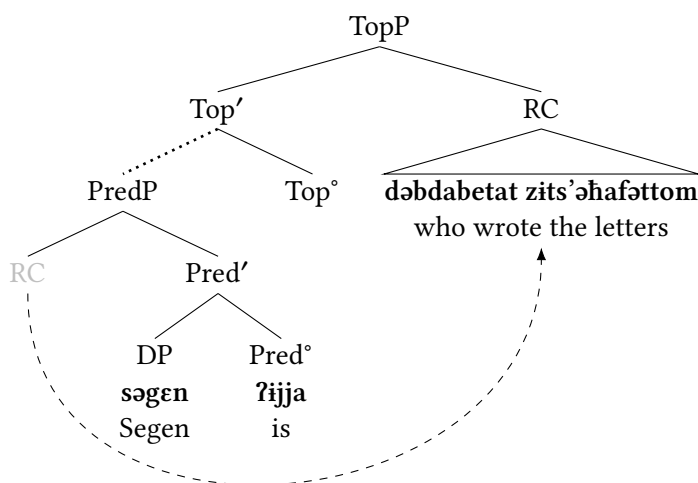


Figure 4: Rightward extraposition analysis of Tigrinya clefts

Rightward displacement can be independently observed in Tigrinya. It is, however, typically associated with marked registers, eliciting comments that it would be appropriate for artistic or poetic language, but “not for everyday use.” Cleft constructions, on the other hand, have been noted to be “particularly widespread in Tigrinya” (Palmer 1962: 42) and “very common” (Nazareth & Gasser 2026: 54). The consultants for the data presented here consider clefts a part of any “normal conversation.” I take this to suggest that Tigrinya clefts do not employ the grammatical strategies that are responsible for rightward displacement.

The placement of speaker-oriented adverbs, including *birgits*’ ‘obviously’ in (23), offers an empirical argument against a rightward movement approach. In standard registers, these types of adverbs are ubiquitously left-adjoined in a relatively high position on the verbal spine. Thus, they regularly appear clause-initially, but they do not appear in structural positions that would order them after the verbal elements of the clause.

- (23) a. **birgits**’ səɣɛn n=ət-om dəbdabe-tat
 obviously Segen.F ACC=DIST-MPL letter-PL
 ti-ts’ihif-om ?all-a
 SM.3FSG-write.IPFV-OM.3MPL AUX.NPST-SM.3FSG
 ‘Obviously, Segen is writing the letters.’
 b. ??səɣɛn n=ət-om dəbdabe-tat
 Segen.F ACC=DIST-MPL letter-PL
 ti-ts’ihif-om ?all-a **birgits**’
 SM.3FSG-write.IPFV-OM.3MPL AUX.NPST-SM.3FSG obviously
 ‘Obviously, Segen is writing the letters.’

In cleft constructions, however, speaker-oriented adverb quite naturally appear in a position following the copular verb and preceding the relative clause. This is shown below in example (24):

- (24) dəbdabe-tat ?ijj-u **birgits**’
 letter-PL COP.NPST-SM.3MSG obviously
 [RC səɣɛn zi-ts’əhaf-ət-tom]
 Segen.F REL-write.PRF-SM.3FSG-OM.3MPL
 ‘It is obviously the letters that Segen wrote.’

With the structure in Figure 4 in mind, achieving this word order would require right-adjunction of the adverb in a structural position that would order it after the predicate. As just mentioned, this is not generally permitted.

Extraposition analyses are also not entirely explicit regarding how the observed case and agreement patterns arise. The focus for [Kramer & Eilam \(2012\)](#) is on other aspects of verb-mediality in the grammar of Amharic, thus there is no discussion of case-connectivity and agreement variability. In fact, it is unclear at present whether the kind of case-connectivity and agreement variability that we find in Tigrinya is observed to the same extent in Amharic. Relevant data are presented in [Leslau 1995](#), but more work will be required to identify the relevant generalizations.

For [Gragg \(1972\)](#), agreement variability in Tigrinya is suggested to arise from differences in the point of application of concord rules over the course of the derivation, either before or after the extraposition of the relative clause. Case-marking on the focused constituent is suggested to appear “when required or allowed” ([Gragg 1972](#): 82). In the proposal to follow, I will attempt to formalize these suggestions within a modern Minimalist framework ([Chomsky 1995 et seq.](#)).

5 A Predicate-Fronting analysis of Tigrinya clefts

I will propose here an alternative treatment of cleft constructions in Tigrinya. This proposal involves promotion of the free-relative to subject position followed by remnant-movement of the head-final predicate to the left-periphery of the clause. I will argue that a derivation along these lines generates the clause-medial position of the copula and offers explanation for the case-connectivity and variable agreement behaviors. Moreover, this can be done with reference to theoretical mechanisms that are rooted in independently observable properties of the grammar.

5.1 Clause-medial copulas

As demonstrated by the exemplar, reproduced in (25), Tigrinya clefts are remarkable for the clause-medial positioning of the copula.

- (25) səgen ʔijj-a
 Segen.F COP.NPST-SM.3FSG
 [RC dəbdabe-tat zi-ts'əhaf-ət-tom]
 letter-PL REL-write.PRF-SM.3FSG-OM.3MSG
 'It is Segen who wrote the letter.'

Like Gragg (1972) and Frascarelli (2010), I propose that clefts in Tigrinya are underlyingly specificational copular constructions. This aligns with the intuitive conversational value that such structures have as assertions that specify the referential value (*Segen*) for an open variable introduced by the relative clause (see Mikkelsen 2011; den Dikken 2017 for references and discussion). As shown in Figure 5, this involves a small clause predication, still labeled as PredP, and which has the relative clause as its subject and the DP *Segen* as its predicate. This representation also shows the promotion of the relative clause to the grammatical subject position, understood to be Spec-TP.

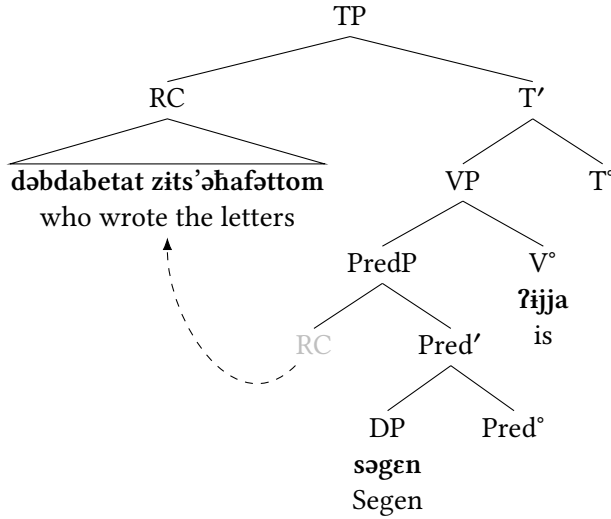


Figure 5: Specificational pseudocleft construction

This representation and its derivation are independently motivated as the syntax that generates the pseudocleft construction presented in §3.1 and repeated below in (26).

- (26) [_{RC} n=ət-om dəbdabe-tat zi-ts'əħaf-ət-tom]
 ACC=DIST-MPL letter-PL REL-write.PRF-SM.3FSG-OM.3MPL

səgen ʔijj-a

Segen.F COP.NPST-SM.3FSG

‘The one who wrote the letters is Segen.’

From the representation above, the cleft word order of DP-COP-RC can be straightforwardly derived by remnant movement of the remainder of the VP to a focus position at the left-periphery of the clause.⁷ The resulting structure is shown in Figure 6.

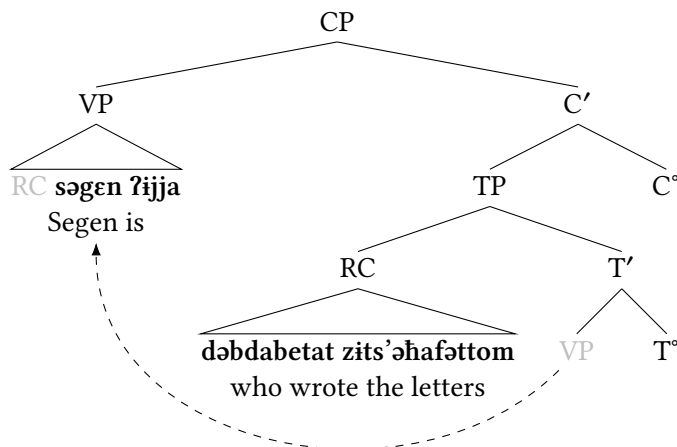


Figure 6: Remnant movement of the predicate

Unlike the derivations in the previous section, which relied on movements that are otherwise difficult to motivate, there is independent evidence for remnant VP-fronting. In addition to the canonical SOV word order in (27a), the non-canonical OVS word order in (27b) is generally possible and results in a focused interpretation of the predicate.

⁷In order to ensure that the copula is fronted as part of the VP, it is necessary to assume the copula does not raise to T⁰ and otherwise remains within the predicate. See Overfelt 2009; van Urk 2024; Cacchioli 2026 and Cacchioli & Overfelt submitted for relevant discussion.

(27) *Remnant predicate fronting in verbal predication*

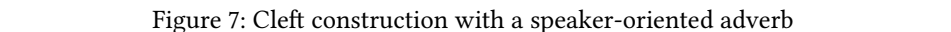
- a. $\text{ʔit-en} \quad \text{ʔanɛsti}$
DIST-FPL woman.PL
 $[\text{VP } n=\text{ət-a} \quad \text{mɔts}^h\text{haf } \text{ʔanbib-en-a}]$
ACC=DIST-FSG book read.PFV-SM.3FPL-OM.3FSG
‘The women read the book.’
- b. $[\text{VP } n=\text{ət-a} \quad \text{mɔts}^h\text{haf } \text{ʔanbib-en-a}]_1$
ACC=DIST-FSG book read.PFV-SM.3FPL-OM.3FSG
 $\text{ʔit-en} \quad \text{ʔanɛsti} \quad \text{t}_1$
DIST-FPL woman.PL
‘The women read the book.’

In fact, we can observe the same word order variation in the context of other specificational copular constructions. The typical copula-final word order in (28a) gives way to the order in (28b) with a focused predicate and a clause-medial copula (see also Nazareth 2011).

(28) *Remnant predicate fronting in non-verbal predication*

- a. ʔit-a məmhir [VP səgen ʔijj-a] DIST-FSG teacher Segen.F COP.NPST-SM.3FSG
'The teacher is Segen.'
- b. [VP səgen ʔijj-a]₁ ʔit-a məmhir t₁ Segen.F COP.NPST-SM.3FSG DIST-FSG teacher
'It is Segen who is the teacher.'

This analysis is also able to offer an account for the positioning of the speaker-oriented adverb from the example in (24). Consider Figure 7.



The representation above left-adjoins the speaker-oriented adverb *birgits* ‘obviously’ to a projection of Mood that, as noted, is relatively high on the clausal spine. Assuming that this position is higher than the grammatical subject, but lower than the focused position of the VP, it is expected to be linearized in its observed position following the copula.

Tigrinya clefts, as we have seen, are also remarkable for the fact that the focused constituent shows case-connectivity with the relative clause. The example below shows again that a focused constituent interpreted as the grammatical object of the relative can be marked with accusative case.

- Connectivity effects are a robust, although not-entirely well-understood property of specificational pseudocleft constructions (see [Mikkelsen 2011](#) and [den](#)

Dikken 2017 for general discussion and Heller 2002 on Hebrew). For the purposes of this manuscript, I will simply note that the possibility for accusative case on the focused DP *nəta məskot* ‘the window’ reflects its role as part of the predicate. As such, the focused constituent is at no point the grammatical subject of the clause and, therefore, should not be required to surface with the nominative case standardly associated with T°. Instead, it is eligible for the differential object marking that we observe.⁸

Although somewhat vague in its formulation here, treating the focused element of a Tigrinya cleft as an element of the predicate in a specificational pseudocleft brings the construction into line with pseudoclefts in other languages. This includes German, which also shows case-connectivity effects, as shown below:

(30) *Pseudocleft construction with case-connectivity in German*

[Was Hans essen wollte] war **einen Apfel**
 what Hans eat wanted was a.ACC apple

‘What Hans wanted to eat was an apple.’ (den Dikken 2017: 28, (93a))

Just as we have seen in Tigrinya clefts, the DP element of the predicate *einen Apfel* ‘an apple’ can be marked with accusative Case, which is expected from its logical role as the object of the clausal subject.

5.3 Copula agreement

We turn finally to the exceptional agreement patterns displayed by the verbal copula in Tigrinya clefts. As the examples repeated below demonstrate, the subject marker may cross-reference the focused DP that constitutes the predicate or the subject of the relative clause or it may appear as a default agreement marker.⁹

⁸In light of the fact that we observe other connectivity effects in Tigrinya clefts—see footnote 5—one could hypothesize that the focused DP is the remnant of an elided clause (e.g., den Dikken et al. 2000; Schlenker 2003). Under this analysis, the presence of accusative case would follow straightforwardly from its grammatical role within the predicate of the elided clause. I leave it to future research to explore this analysis.

⁹For the sake of accuracy, the full agreement paradigm for the copula of Tigrinya clefts is somewhat more complex than what is reflected by the data in (31). For example, there appear to be Minimality effects that determine which argument of the relative clause can control agreement; see Gragg 1972 and Author Year for additional discussion. While accounting for these

- According to the derivation of Tigrinya clefts that has been presented, the grammatical subject of the examples in (31) above is the relative clause. It is, therefore, this element that should be expected to control subject marking. As a matter of fact, this seems to be exactly the case in other instances of non-verbal predication, including those we see in the examples below with adjectival predicates. The agreement markers on the embedded verbs, as well as the contexts provided with these examples, make clear that the free-relatives are referring to a grammatically 3FSG individual in (32) and a grammatically 3FPL collection of objects in (33). In each case, the adjectival predicate and the copular verb realize the corresponding ϕ -features.

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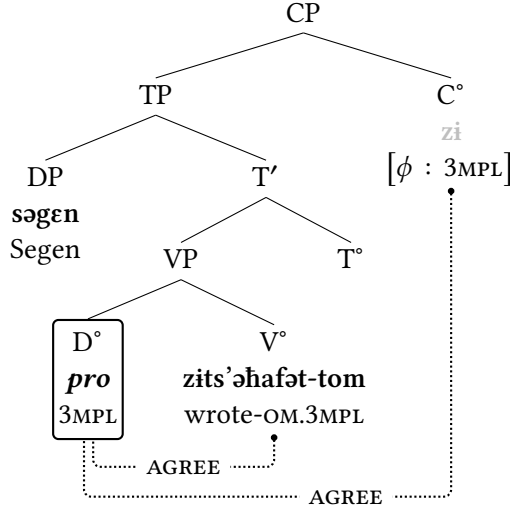


Figure 8: Feature inheritance of a relative clause

Both Figure 8 and the examples in (31) transparently show that the gap position of the relative clause is specified with a set of 3MPL ϕ -features. A formal AGREE relationship between the resumptive pronominal in the gap position and the embedded verb, or some extended projection thereof, values the ϕ -features of the object marker (e.g., Overfelt 2009; 2022; Gebregziabher 2021). It is through an additional AGREE relationship between the resumptive pronoun and the relative clause marker, treated here as a complementizer, that the free-relative inherits the ϕ -features of the resumptive pronoun.¹⁰

More specifically, as features of the head of the free-relative, the ϕ -features inherited from the resumptive pronominal are projected to the level of the CP (Chomsky 1995). Therefore, when the free-relative in Figure 9 below is targeted for agreement from matrix T⁰, these same features will provide the value for the matrix subject marker in what is essentially an instance of Cyclic Agreement (Legate 2005).¹¹

¹⁰This analysis reflects the assumption that nominal constituents in Tigrinya are not subject to the Activity Condition (Author Year).

¹¹While an alternative implementation of this idea might propose that successive-cyclic A'-movement transports the relevant ϕ -features of the gap into the CP-domain of Tigrinya relatives, there is little independent evidence for such movement (Overfelt 2009; though see Cacchioli 2024).

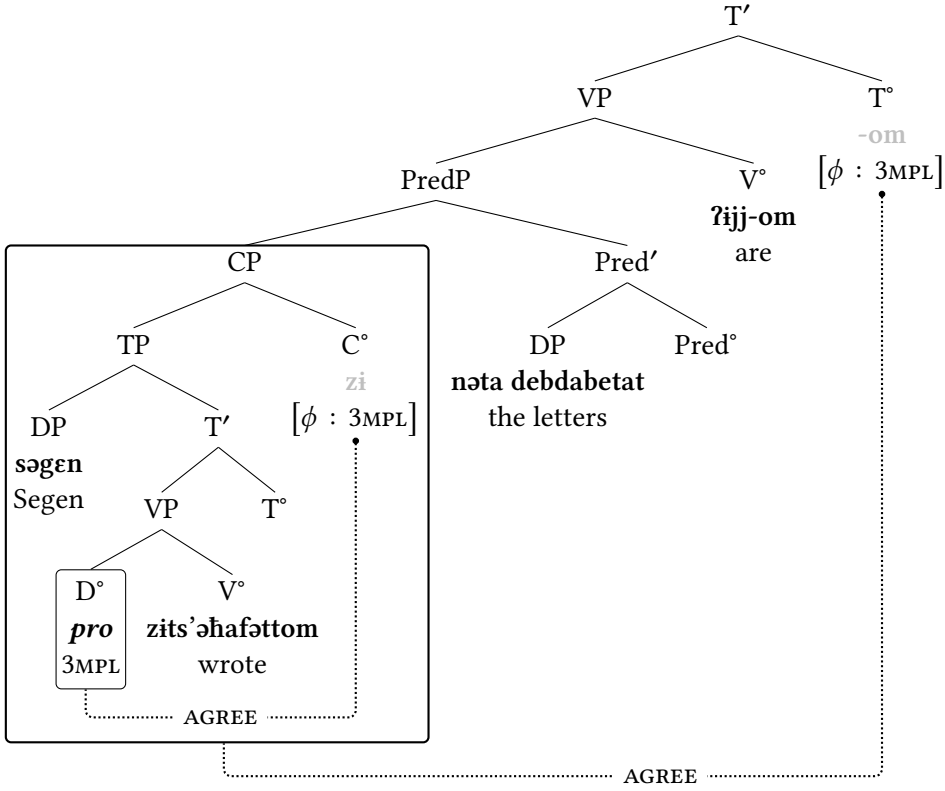


Figure 9: Cyclic agreement analysis of free-relative subjects

This analysis makes relative clauses in both cleft and pseudocleft constructions similar in a way to certain embedded complement clauses in Tigrinya verbal predication. Complement clauses marked with the prefixal complementizer *kəmzi-*, as in (34a), show a preference for controlling 3MSG object marking on the predicate. The difference between contentful agreement of the kind we observe above and the default agreement we observe here can plausibly be attributed to a lack of feature inheritance due the absence of a resumptive pronominal. The point, however, is that embedded clauses can independently be observe controlling agreement markers on verbal elements.

- (34) a. [CP ?it-a səbajti kəmzi-xəd-ət]
DIST-FSG woman COMP-go.PRF-SM.3FSG
rəsiŋi-na-jo
forget.PFV-SM.1PL-OM.3MSG
‘We forgot that the woman met the students.’
- b. [CP ?it-a səbajti kəmzi-xəd-ət]
DIST-FSG woman COMP-go.PRF-SM.3FSG
rəsiŋi-na-ja
forget.PFV-SM.1PL-OM.3FSG
‘We forgot that the woman met the students.’

A comparison with clausal complementation is also relevant for the fact that, here too, we observe variable agreement patterns. In example (34b) the object marker on the matrix verb may optionally cross-reference the embedded subject *?ita səbajti* ‘the woman’, adding an effect of emphasis in this case as well.¹²

Available evidence suggests that this agreement relationship is established long-distance, with the embedded subject being generated as, and remaining an argument of the embedded clause. The following examples involving passivization of the matrix predicate offer one such piece of evidence. In example (35a), we see the results of the strong preference for promoting the clausal complement to subject position under passivization: object marking is no longer possible and we observe default 3MSG agreement on the subject marker of the matrix verb. Notably, the logical subject of the embedded clause *?ita səbajti* ‘the woman’ necessarily moves as part of the promoted constituent and cannot be promoted to the matrix subject position on its own, as demonstrated by (35b).

- (35) a. [CP ?it-a səbajti kəmzi-xəd-ət]₁
DIST-FSG woman COMP-go.PFV-SM.3FSG
b=it-om səb-at t₁ tə-rəsiŋ-u
INS=DIST-MPL person-PL INTR-forget.PFV-SM.3MSG
‘That the woman left was forgotten by those people.’

¹²The full set of agreement facts in this domain is also more complex than what can be presented on the present occasion. See Author Year for more discussion.

- b. *ʔit-a səbajti b=it-om səb-at
 DIST-FSG woman INS=DIST-MPL person-PL
 [CP t₁ kəmzi-xəd-ət] tə-rəsiʔ-a
 COMP-go.PFV-SM.3FSG INTR-forget.PFV-SM.3FSG

Intended: 'The woman was forgotten by those people to have left.'

Understanding that promotion to subject under passivization targets only direct objects, these facts suggest that, despite controlling object agreement in the matrix clause in (34b), there is no point in the derivation at which *ʔita səbajti* ‘the woman’ serves as a direct object.

I propose that the mechanisms responsible for long-distance agreement in the context of clausal complementation are similarly responsible for generating the long-distance agreement relationship between the subject of the relative clause and the copula of a Tigrinya cleft in (31b). Of course, long-distance agreement of this type is notably problematic for standard conceptions of phase-based locality (e.g., Chomsky 2001; see Bhatt & Keine 2017 for discussion). As finite CPs, both *kəmzi*-clauses and relative clauses should present a barrier for agreement from the matrix predicate. One way to make sense of these facts is to adopt a particular model of the syntactic AGREE relation that underlines the morphological shape of agreement markers. There are two important components to this analysis, which I will introduce in the context of the cleft construction in (31b).¹³

First, let us assume that the features encoded on syntactic heads are grammatically specified to probe for appropriate goals sequentially (e.g., Georgi 2017; Pietraszko 2023; Poole 2024). Given the grammatical profile of Tigrinya, we can assert that T° is lexically encoded with both the familiar ϕ -features that determine the morphological shape of the subject marker as well as an EPP-feature that drives promotion to the grammatical subject position. By hypothesis, these features probe for a suitable goal according to the sequence in (36), which requires the EPP-feature to probe first and only then the ϕ -features.

- (36) *Order of AGREE operations in Tigrinya*
 ① [EPP]
 ② [ϕ :]

Second, we will assume that the AGREE operation is subject to a Principle of Minimal Compliance (Richards 1998, Rackowski & Richards 2005; compare

¹³The analysis can be adapted for clausal complements by ascribing to v^* the same properties to be ascribed to T^* ; see Author Year.

with Halpert 2019). The following formulation of this principle is adapted from Poole 2024.

(37) *Principle of Minimal Compliance*

Once a probe on a head H has established an AGREE-relation with a goal G, subsequent probes on H can ignore G for the rest of the derivation.

In practice, this principle says that, when a probe from some head finds a goal, any subsequent probes from that head have access to the contents of that initial goal, thereby circumventing typical Minimality constraints on AGREE. For example, given that the free-relative of a cleft construction satisfies the EPP-feature of T° , as evidenced by its promotion to subject, subsequent probing by the ϕ -features of T° will have access to the contents the free-relative.

This model of AGREE, I propose, is what allows the matrix T° of Tigrinya clefts to engage in long-distance agreement with the subject of the free-relative in (31b). Figure 10 illustrates the proposal.

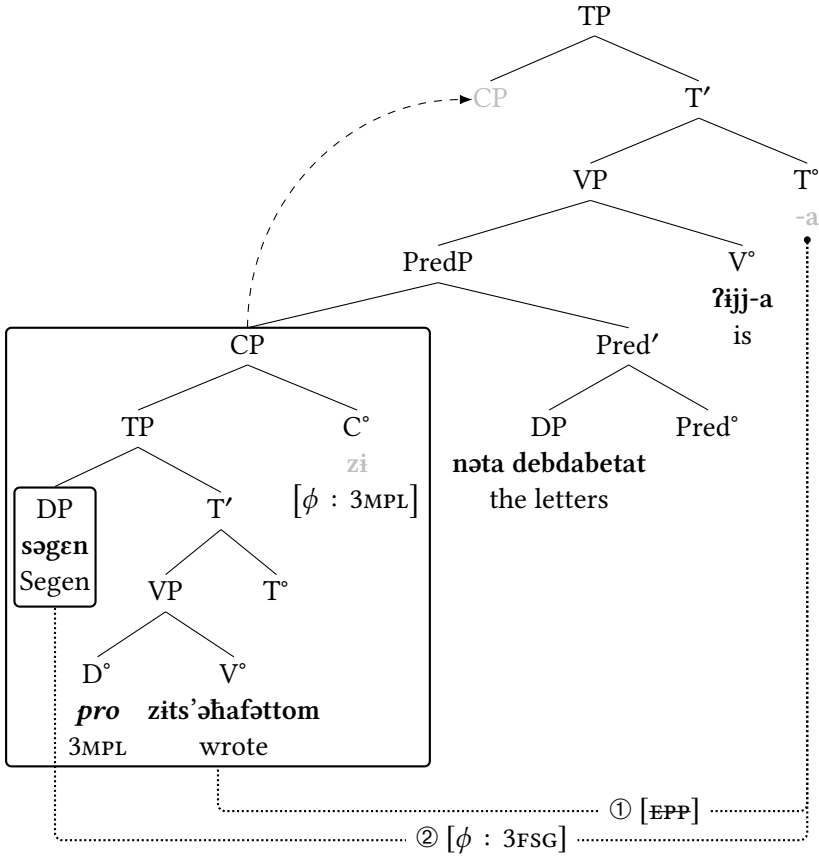


Figure 10: Long-distance agreement in a Tigrinya cleft

As hypothesized, matrix T° carries an *EPP*-feature and a set of ϕ -features that sequentially probe for possible goals. In both Figure 9 above and Figure 10, the relative clause is capable of satisfying the *EPP*-feature of T° . Given the Principle of Minimal Compliance, subsequent probing by the ϕ -features of T° can then play out in two different ways. In Figure 9 we saw the free-relative CP targeted for agreement. The alternative shown in Figure 10 illustrates the option to ignore this CP following an initial *AGREE* relation with T° . This gives the ϕ -feature probe access to the contents of the free-relative, including the embedded subject *Segen*, which accordingly controls agreement on the subject marker through the indicated *AGREE* relationship.¹⁴

¹⁴It remains an open question whether movement of the free-relative to the grammatical subject position actually precedes subsequent probing by the ϕ -features of T° , resulting in an instance

Finally, the option for default agreement on the copula in (31c) can be seen as a reflection of agreement with a null expletive subject, though with the slightly different derivation provided in Figure 11.

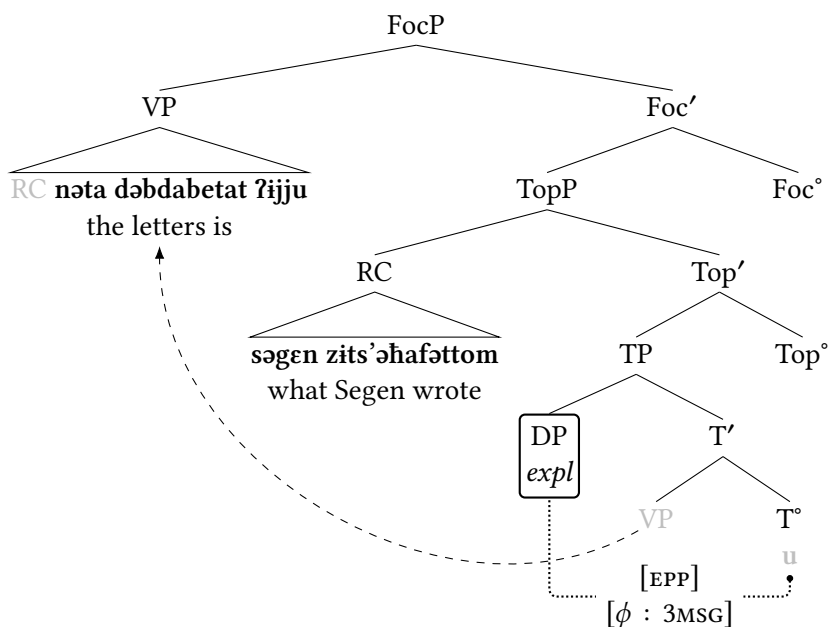


Figure 11: Default agreement with a null expletive subject.

Although somewhat baroque, this representation and its derivation generate default agreement while also generating the clause-medial position of the copula and preserving the information-structural roles of the major constituents. This derivation forgoes promotion of the free-relative to grammatical subject in favor of inserting a null expletive in Spec-TP, where it satisfies the EPP-feature and triggers default ϕ -agreement on matrix T°. The relative clause on this occasion is instead extracted to the specifier of a low Topic phrase in the left periphery of the clause (e.g., Rizzi 1997). Although different in its nature, this movement of the free-relative similarly feeds remnant movement of the VP to the same Focus position that was proposed in §5.1.

Thus, in the way that was desired out the outset of this section, it is the grammatical subject of the matrix clause, whether this is the free-relative or an expletive, that controls agreement on the copula. Moreover, the observed mor-

of Cyclic AGREE (Béjar & Rezac 2009). I leave this issue to future research.

phological variation of the copula is a reflection of the mechanics of the formal AGREE relation that can be independently motivated by the availability of long-distance agreement elsewhere in the grammar.

6 Conclusion

This paper has presented a remnant predicate-fronting analysis of cleft constructions in Tigrinya. I have argued that this analysis offers an account for several characteristics that are otherwise exceptional given the typical grammatical properties of the language. The proposed derivation preserved the head-finality of the language by allowing the copula to be final within the fronted predicate. Furthermore, by treating the initial focused constituent as part of the fronted predicate, it was possible to understand its case-connectivity with the free-relative component of the cleft. Finally, when augmented with a particular model of the operation AGREE, the exceptionally variable subject marking on the copula reflects the standard agreement relationship between the grammatical subject of a clause and T°.

As mentioned in a couple of footnotes along the way, there is more work to be done in order to understand the full agreement paradigm observed in Tigrinya clefts. The analysis could also benefit from more systematic investigations of the movement operations that are employed. Finally, I believe that a productive line of future research will involve a comparative investigation of similar constructions that have been identified in the closely related language Amharic (Apple-[yard 1989](#); [Leslau 1995](#); [Kramer & Eilam 2012](#)):

(38) *Pseudocleft and cleft constructions in Amharic*

- a. [RC doro wät'-u-n yä-bälla-w] astämari-w nāw
 chicken stew-DEF-ACC REL-ate.3MSG-DEF teacher-DEF is
 'The one who ate the chicken stew is the teacher.'
- b. astämari-w nāw [RC doro wät'-u-n yä-bälla-w]
 teacher-DEF is chicken stew-DEF-ACC REL-ate.3MSG-DEF
 'It is the teacher who ate the chicken stew.'

([Kramer & Eilam 2012](#): 2, (4))

Just as we have seen in Tigrinya, Amharic has cleft constructions that are characterized by a clause-medial copula (38b). Interestingly, we also find in Amharic that these constructions alternate with pseudocleft constructions such as (38a),

where the copula appears in its canonical clause-final position. This raises the possibility that Amharic also employs a remnant predicate-fronting derivation for clefts. It remains to be seen, however, whether Amharic clefts are otherwise exceptional with regard to their case and agreement properties.

Abbreviations

1 = first person, 3 = third person, ACC = accusative, AUX = auxiliary, COMP = complementizer, COP = copula, DEF = definite, DIST = distal, F = feminine, GEN = genitive, INDF = indefinite, INS = instrumental, INTR = intransitive, IPFV = imperfective, M = masculine, NOM = nominative, NPST = non-past, OM = object marker, PFV = perfective, PL = plural, PRF = perfect, PRON = pronoun, PROX = proximal, REL = relative, SG = singular, SM = subject marker.

Acknowledgments

Acknowledgments to be provided.

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