Non-verbal Predication in Tigrinya and Variable Subject Marking

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1 Introduction

Tigrinya "Clefts". Cleft constructions in Tigrinya (Ethiosemitic; SOV) have a copular verb between a focused constituent and a presupposed relative clause (Leslau 1941, Palmer 1962, Gragg 1972, Appleyard 1989, Zellou 2010, Nazareth Amlesom 2011, Nazareth Amlesom & Gasser 2026).

(1) [$_{DP}$ səgɛn]$_{F}$ **ʔɨjj-a** [$_{RC}$ dəbdabe-tat zɨ-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.'

Variable Subject Marking. The copular verb of cleft constructions carries subject marking that can optionally cross-reference various elements of the cleft construction or show default agreement (Gragg 1972, Overfelt submitted).

(2) a. **dəbdabe-tat** **ʔɨjj-om** [$_{RC}$ səgɛn zɨ-ts'əħaf-ət-tom]
letter-PL COP.NPST-S.3MP Segen.F REL-write.PRF-S.3FS-O.3MP

b. dəbdabe-tat **ʔɨjj-a** [$_{RC}$ **səgɛn** zɨ-ts'əħaf-ət-tom]
letter-PL COP.NPST-S.3FS Segen.F REL-write.PRF-S.3FS-O.3MP

c. dəbdabe-tat **ʔɨjj-u** [$_{RC}$ səgɛn zɨ-ts'əħaf-ət-tom]
letter-PL COP.NPST-S.3MS Segen.F REL-write.PRF-S.3FS-O.3MP
'It's the letters that Segen wrote.'

The Emphatic Component. Controlling the subject marker on the copular has an additional effect of adding "emphasis" to the cross-referenced constituent (possibly a Contrastive Topic marking).

The Syntax of Clefts. Cleft constructions in Tigrinya are derived from specificational copular clauses via remnant movement of the predicate.

Remnant Predicate-Fronting Analysis of Tigrinya Clefts

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

The Empirical Generalization. The morphological shape of the copula can and should be described with respect to the free relative clause.

The Source of Subject Marking in Tigrinya Clefts

Subject marking in Tigrinya clefts is controlled by the free relative clause subject or a constituent thereof.

Variability is Structure Dependent. Variability in the controller of subject marking is not found in predicational copular constructions (nor in the context of verbal predication).

(3) a. bəlaħi-ti **ʔɨjj-om** [$_{RC}$ ts'əga zɨ-ħagəz-ət-tom]
smart-PL COP.NPST-S.3MP Tsega.F REL-help.PRF-S.3FS-O.3MP

b. *bəlaħi-ti **ʔɨjj-a/u** [$_{RC}$ **ts'əga** zɨ-ħagəz-ət-tom]
smart-PL COP.NPST-S.3FS/3MS Tsega.F REL-help.PRF-S.3FS-O.3MP
'The ones who Tsega helped are smart.'

Copular Clause Morphosyntax. Differences in subject marking motivate representational and derivational distinctions between copular clauses.

Specificational v. Predicational Morphosyntax

- **Specification :** PredP projections that license the subject and predicate though an AGREE relation.
- **Predication :** Small Clause projections that value features of the predicate through a CONCORD relation.

2 Background on Tigrinya

2.1 Ethnographic Information

Classification. Tigrinya (ትግርኛ) is an Ethiosemitic language, making it is closely related to 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 Tigrinya is not currently endangered, it is under-studied and arguably under-resourced.



Credit: Ronny Meyer (Weninger 2011)

2.2 Basic Morphosyntax

Word Order. The default word order is SOV with a strongly head-final verbal domain.

(4) ʔɨt-i təmaharaj n=ət-a mətsʼħaf bɨqɨltʼuf jɨ-nbɨb-a ʔall-o
DIST-MS student ACC=DIST-FS book quickly S.3MS-read.IPFV-O.3FS AUX.NPST-S.3MS
‘The student is quickly reading the book.’

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

(5) Yonas n=ət-a tʼɨrmuz **səbir-u-wa**
Yonas ACC-that-FS bottle break.PFV-S.3MS-O.3FS
‘Yonas broke the bottle.’

(6) ʔɨt-a tʼɨrmuz **tə-səbir-a**
that-FS bottle DT-break.PFV-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 Amlesom 2011, Tesfay Tewolde 2016).

3 Non-verbal Predication in Tigrinya

3.1 The Verbal Copula

Predication and Specification. The verbal copula *ʔɨjj-* mediates predicational and specificational copular constructions (Nazareth Amlesom 2011, Gebregziabher 2014, Cacchioli 2026).

(7) *Predicational copula construction*
səgɛn məmhɨr **ʔɨjj-a**
Segen.F teacher COP.NPST-S.3FS
'Segen is a teacher.'

(8) *Specificational copula construction*
ʔɨt-a məmhɨr səgɛn **ʔɨjj-a**
DIST-FS teacher Segen.F COP.NPST-S.3FS
'The teacher is Segen.'

Subject Marking. The copula, as well as agreeing predicates, carry subject agreement morphology that is typically controlled by the grammatical subject from Spec-TP (Gebregziabher 2014, Tesfay Tewolde 2016).

(9) səgɛn **bɛlaħ** **ʔɨjj-a**
Segen.F smart.F COP.NPST-S.3FS
'Segen is smart.'

(10) tɛsfaj **bɛliħ** **ʔɨjj-u**
Tesfay.M smart.M COP.NPST-S.3MS
'Tesfay is smart.'

Morphological Alternations. Copulas inflect for tense/aspect, drawing from a suppletive paradigm for past and negative forms (Leslau 1941, Nazareth Amlesom 2011, Gebregziabher 2014, Cacchioli 2026).

(11) aster memhɨr **nəjr-a**
Esther teacher COP.PST-S.3FS
'Esther was a teacher.'
(Gebregziabher 2014:7, (11b))

(12) təməharaj **ʔaj-kon-ku-n**
student NEG-COP.NPST-S.1S-NEG
'I am not a student.'
(Cacchioli 2026:243, (65b))

SUBJ	NPST	PST
S.3MS	ʔɨjj-**u**	nəjr-**u**
S.3MP	ʔɨjj-**om**	nəjr-**om**
S.3FS	ʔɨjj-**a**	nəjr-**a**
S.3FP	ʔɨjj-**ən**	nəjr-**ən**
S.2MS	ʔi-**ka**	ner-**ka**
S.2MP	ʔi-**kum**	ner-**kum**
S.2FS	ʔi-**ki**	ner-**ki**
S.2FP	ʔi-**kɨn**	ner-**kɨn**
S.1S	ʔɨjj-**ə**	nəjr-**ə**
S.1P	ʔi-**na**	ner-**na**

Table 1: Copular auxiliary *ʔɨjj-* by tense in Tigrinya.

3.2 Cleft and Pseudocleft Constructions

"Clefts" in Tigrinya. The absence of expletives in Tigrinya means that there are not word-for-word parallels for canonical clefts (e.g., Jespersen 1927). The Ethiosemitic literature uses this term to refer to constructions with clause-medial copulas (see Gragg 1972, Appleyard 1989, and references).

(13) n=ət-i məskot **ʔɨjj-u** [$_{RC}$ səlam zɨ-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.'

Pseudoclefts in Tigrinya. To a lesser extent, Tigrinya employs pseudocleft constructions and, to a much lesser extent, reverse pseudocleft constructions, both of which have a clause-final copula (see also Gragg 1972, Nazareth Amlesom 2011).

(14) *Pseudocleft Construction in Tigrinya*
[$_{RC}$ səlam zɨ-səbər-ət-to] n=ət-i məskot **ʔɨjj-u**
Salam.F REL-broke.PRF-S.3FS-O.3MS ACC=DIST-MS window COP.NPST-S.3MS
'What Salam broke is the window.'

(15) *Reverse Pseudocleft Construction in Tigrinya*
ʔɨt-om təmharo [$_{RC}$ n=ət-i dəbdabe zɨ-ts'əħaf-u-wa] **ʔɨjj-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.'

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

(16) *Headed relative clause in Tigrinya*
ʔɨt-a [$_{RC}$ ʔɨt-i səbʔaj **zɨ**-ts'əħaf-∅-**a**] dəbdabe
DIST-FS DIST-MS man REL-write.PRF-S.3MS-O.3FS letter
'the letter that the man wrote'

(17) *Embedded constituent question in Tigrinya*
ʔaman [$_{CP}$ **ʔɨntaj kɛmz**-ɨ-fɛttu] ħatit-u-ni
Aman what COMP-S.1S-like.IPFV ask.PFV-S.3MS-O.1S
'Aman asked me what I like.' (Cacchioli & Caponigro 2026:8, (23))

3.3 Exceptional Subject Marking in Tigrinya Clefts

Factors for Subject Marking. The subject marker on the copular verb of Tigrinya clefts may variably cross-reference different elements of the construction as a function of the grammatical role that is relativized (Gragg 1972, Overfelt submitted).

- **Subject-Gap :** The copula can cross-reference the subject argument of the relative clause or it can or it can realize default 3MS features.

(18) səgɛn **ʔɨjj-a/u** [$_{RC}$ ____ dəbdabe-tat zɨ-ts'ħaf-ət-tom]
Segen.F COP.NPST-S.3FS/3MS letter-PL REL-write.PRF-S.3FS-O.3MP (✓**ʔɨjj-a** / *ʔɨjj-**om** / ✓**ʔɨjj-u**)
'It is Segen who wrote the letters.'

- **Object-Gap :** The copula can cross-reference the subject or object argument of the relative clause, or it can realize default 3MS features.

(19) dəbdabe-tat **ʔɨjj-a/om/u** [$_{RC}$ səgɛn ____ zɨ-ts'əħaf-ət-tom]
letter-PL COP.NPST-S.3FS/3MP/3MS Segen.F REL-write.PRF-S.3FS-O.3MP (✓**ʔɨjj-a** / ✓**ʔɨjj-om** / ✓**ʔɨjj-u**)
'It's the letters that Segen wrote.'

- **Adjunct-Gap :** The copula can cross-reference the subject argument of the relative clause or it can or it can realize default 3MS features.

(20) ʔab lajbreri **ʔɨjj-a/u** [$_{RC}$ *pro*$_S$ n=ət-om təmharo ____ ∅-tɨ-ħɨgɨz-om]
LOC library COP.NPST-S.3FS/3MS 3FS ACC=DIST-MP student.PL REL-S.3FS-help.IPFV-O.3MP (✓**ʔɨjj-a** / *ʔɨjj-**om** / ✓**ʔɨjj-u**)
'It is in the library that she helped the students.'

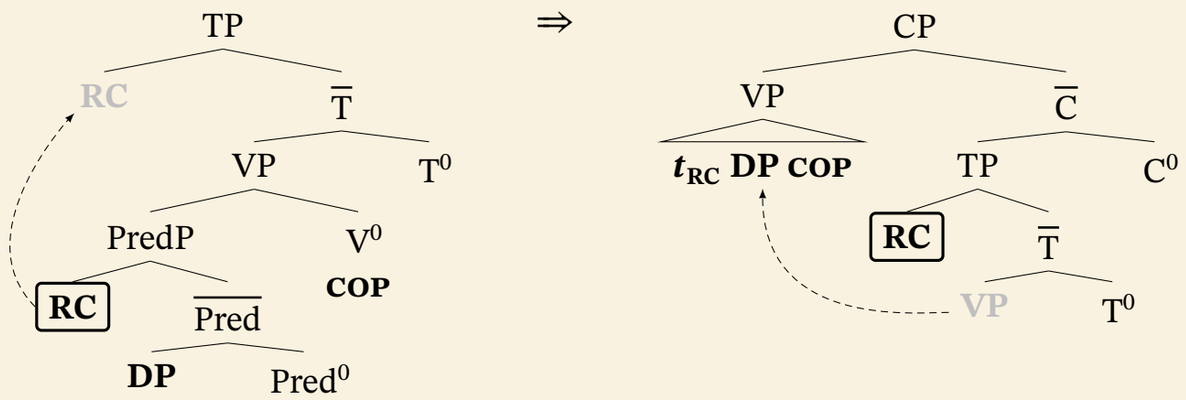
The Empirical Generalization. The morphological shape of the copula can and should be described with respect to the free relative clause.

- **Free Relative Subject :** Subject marking can always cross-reference the gap position of the free relative clause.
- **Embedded Subject :** Otherwise, subject marking can cross-reference the subject of the free relative clause.
- **Default Agreement :** Otherwise, subject marking can be realized as default agreement.

4 The Pre-theoretic Analysis: Clefts as Predicate-Fronting Constructions

The Syntax of Tigrinya Clefts. Clause-medial clefts in Tigrinya are derived from specificational copular clauses via remnant movement of the predicate (Overfelt submitted; compare to Gragg 1972, Frascarelli 2010, Cacchioli 2024).

Remnant Predicate-Fronting Analysis of Tigrinya Clefts



Desirable Consequences. The properties associated with a predicate-fronting analysis of Tigrinya clefts help us to understand the puzzle of variable subject marking with reference to grammatical mechanism independently attested in the language:

Properties of a Predicate-Fronting Analysis of Tigrinya Clefts

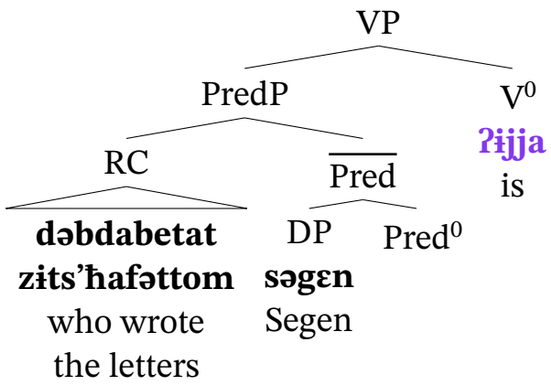
- **Predicate Fronting :** Tigrinya clefts are derived from head-final specificational pseudocleft constructions.
- **Predicate in Focus :** The focused constituent consists of material that is contained in the fronted predicate (Appendix A).
- **Free-Relative Subject :** The free relative clause controls subject marking as the grammatical subject.

4.1 Tigrinya Clefts as Predicate-Fronting

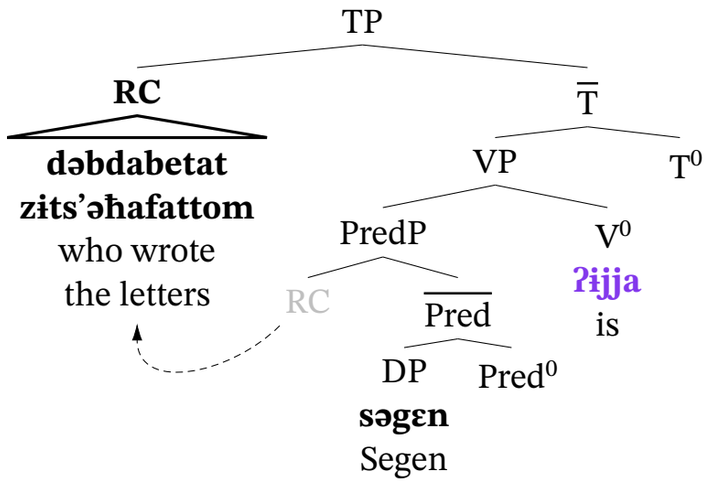
Remnant Predicate-Fronting. Promotion of the free relative to subject position, followed by remnant movement of the predicate results in the clause-medial word order that characterizes Tigrinya clefts (Overfelt submitted).

(21) səgɛn **ʔɨjj-a** [$_{RC}$ ____ dəbdabe-tat zɨ-ts'əħaf-ət-tom]
Segen COP.NPST-S.3FS letter-PL REL-write.PRF-S.3FS-O.3MP
'It's Segen who wrote the letters.'

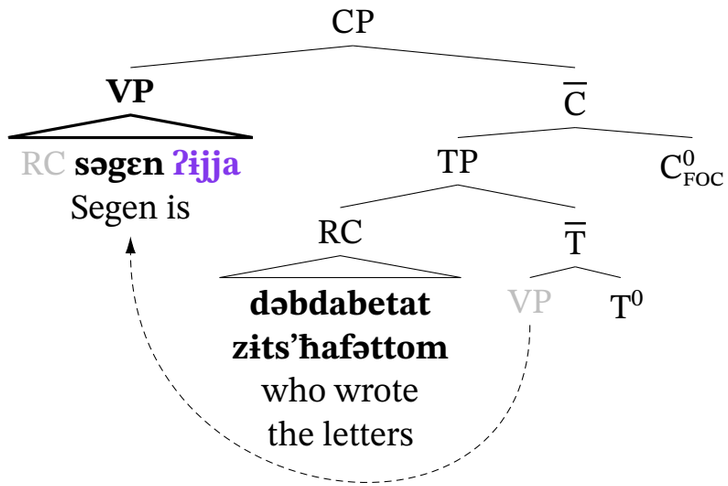
(22) i. *Specificational Predication*



ii. *RC Promotion to Subject*



iii. *Remnant Predicate Movement*



Pseudocleft Sources Attested. A derivational step of this analysis involves a well-formed RC-DP-COP word order, which is independently available as a pseudocleft that reflects the head-finality of the verbal domain.

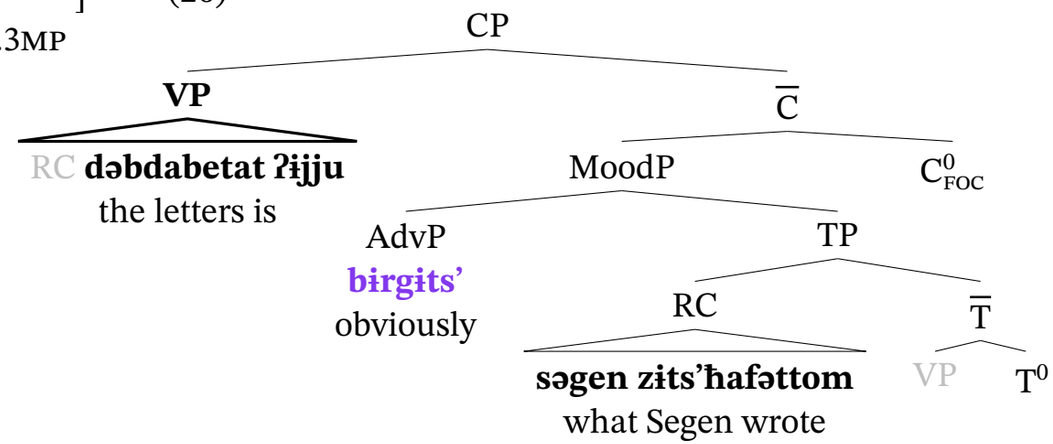
(23) [$_{RC}$ ____ n=ət-om dəbdabe-tat zɨ-ts'əħaf-ət-tom] səgɛn **ʔɨjj-a**
ACC=the-FS letter-PL REL-write.PRF-S.3FS-O.3MP Segen.F COP.NPST-S.3FS
'The one who wrote the letters is Segen.'

High Adverb Placement. Speaker-oriented adverbs, which are typically left-adjoined high on the clausal spine, locate the clause-medial copula and focused constituent at the left edge of the clause.

(24) **{bɨrgɨts'}** səgɛn n=ət-om dəbdabe-tat tɨ-ts'ɨħɨf-om ʔall-a **{*bɨrgɨts'}**
obviously Segen.F ACC=DIST-MP letter-PL S.3FS-write.IPFV-O.3MP AUX.NPST-S.3FS obviously
'Obviously, Segen wrote the letters.'

(25) dəbdabe-tat ʔɨjj-u **bɨrgɨts'** [$_{RC}$ səgɛn zɨ-ts'əħaf-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.'

(26)



Relative Clause Islands. Relative clauses are islands, suggesting that the focused constituent of a cleft is not promoted to subject.

(27) ***səgɛn** bɨzgɨrom [$_{DP}$ n=ət-ən [$_{RC}$ səgɛn zɨ-ts'ɨħaf-ət-tən] dəbdabe-tat] nɨ-nbɨb-ən ʔallə-na
Segen.F surprisingly ACC=DIST-FP REL-write.PRF-S.3FS-O.3FP letter-PL S.1P-read.IPFV-S.3FP AUX.NPST-S.1P
'Surprisingly, we are reading the letters that Segen wrote.'

(28) ***səgɛn** ʔɨjj-**a** [$_{RC}$ ***t*$_1$** dəbdabe-tat zɨ-ts'əħaf-ət-tom]
Segen.F COP.NPST-S.3FS letter-PL REL-write.PRF-S.3FS-O.3MP
'It is Segen who wrote the letters.'

4.2 Free-Relative Subjects Control Agreement

Free Relatives as Grammatical Subjects. Free relative clauses are otherwise able to serve as a grammatical subject and control agreement on subject markers and agreement, both in verbal predications and other non-verbal predications.

(29) [$_{RC}$ n=ət-i məskot zɨ-səbər-**a**-ʔo] ħadim-**ən**
ACC=DIST-MS window REL-break.PRF-S.3FP-O.3MS flee.PFV-S.3FP
'The ones(f.) who broke the window ran away.'

(30) [$_{RC}$ səgɛn zɨ-ts'əħaf-ət-**tən**] ħats'ər-**ti** ʔɨjj-**ən**
Segen REL-write.PRF-S.3FS-O.3FP short-PL COP.NPST-S.3FP
'The ones(f.) that Segen wrote are short.'

Manipulating the Free-Relative. The variability of subject marking arises as a function of whether the relative clause is free or headed.

(31) məskot **ʔɨjj-u/a** [$_{RC}$ **səlam** ____ zɨ-səbər-ət-to]
window COP.NPST-S.3MS Salam.F REL-break.PRF-S.3FS-O.3MS
'What Salam broke is the window.'

(32) məskot **ʔɨjj-u/*a** **ʔɨt-i** [$_{RC}$ **səlam** ____ zɨ-səbər-ət-to] **(nəgɛr)**
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.'

Long-Distance Hyperagreement. The grammatical subject of indicative and subjunctive clausal complements can control agreement on the embedded predicate and object marking in the matrix clause (Cacchioli & Overfelt submitted, Overfelt & Cacchioli resubmitted, Overfelt in preparation).

(33) *pro* [$_{CP}$ **ʔɨt-a** **səbajti** n=ət-om təmharo **kəmzɨ**-rəxab-**ət**-tom] rəsiʕ-om-(**wo**/**wa**)
3MP DIST-FS woman ACC=DIST-MP student.PL COMP-meet.PRF-S.3FS-O.3MP forget.PFV-S.3MP-O.3MS/3FS
'They forgot that the woman met the students.'

(34) [$_{IP}$ **ʔɨt-a** **sebajti** n-ət-ən dəbdabe-tat **kɨ**-**tɨ**-ts'ɨħɨf-ən] ji-gɨbbaʔ-(**a**)
DIST-FS woman ACC=DIST-FP letter-PL SBJV-S.3FS-write.IPFV-O.3FP S.3MS-need.IPFV-O.3FS
'The woman needs to write the letters.'

4.3 Interim Summary and Looking Ahead

Variable Subject Marking. The copular verb of cleft constructions carries subject marking that can optionally cross-reference various elements of the cleft construction or show default agreement (Gragg 1972, Overfelt submitted).

(35) dəbdabe-tat **ʔɨjj-a/om/u** [$_{RC}$ səgɛn ____ zɨ-ts'əħaf-ət-tom]
letter-PL COP.NPST-S.3FS/3MP/3MS Segen.F REL-write.PRF-S.3FS-O.3MP (✓**ʔɨjj-a** / ✓**ʔɨjj-om** / ✓**ʔɨjj-u**)
'It's the letters that Segen wrote.'

The Theoretical Generalization. By treating the free relative clause as the grammatical subject of an underlying pseudocleft, we can develop an analysis whereby matrix subject marking is controlled by the free relative clause subject or a constituent thereof.

(36) [$_{PredP}$ [**RC** …] …] ʔɨjj - T^0
AGREE

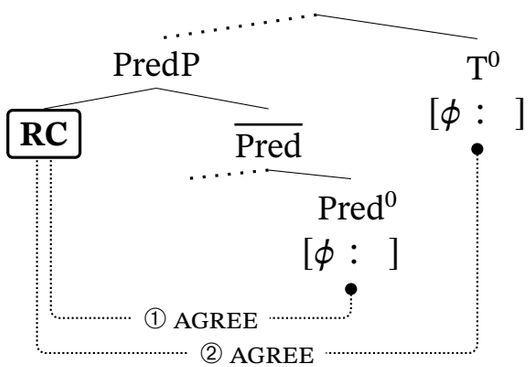
(37) [$_{PredP}$ [$_{RC}$ **SUBJ** …] …] ʔɨjj - T^0
AGREE

Structure Dependence. Any analysis must distinguish predicational structures, which do not show variable subject marking.

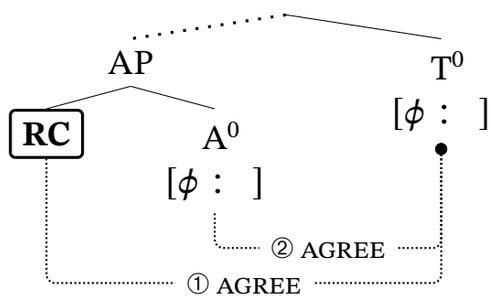
(38) bəlaħi-ti **ʔɨjj-om** [$_{RC}$ ts'əga ____ zɨ-ħagəz-ət-tom]
smart-PL COP.NPST-S.3MP Tsega.F REL-help.PRF-S.3FS-O.3MP (*ʔɨjj-a / ✓ʔɨjj-om / *ʔɨjj-u)
'The ones who Tsega helped are smart.'

Copular Clause Morphosyntax. These differences motivate representational and derivational distinctions between types of copulas.

(39) *Specification: Unlocking by AGREE*



(40) *Predication: No Unlocking by CONCORD*



5 Free-Relatives Control Subject Marking by Cyclic Agreement

5.1 An AGREE-and-Project Analysis of Free Relative Clauses

Resumptive Φ-Features. In headed relative clauses, the gap position of a relative clause contains a resumptive pronoun that is specified for a set of ϕ-features corresponding to the clause-external head; these provide the values for the agreement markers on the relative predicate (Overfelt 2009).

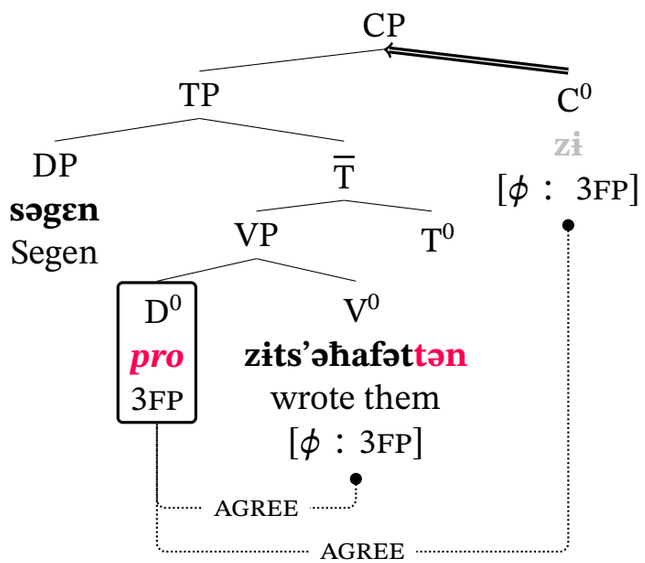
(41) **ʔɨt-a** [$_{RC}$ ʔɨt-i səbʔaj ***pro*** zɨ-ts'əħaf-∅-**a**] **dəbdabe** nəwaħ ʔɨjj-a
DIST-FS DIST-MS man 3FS REL-write.PRF-S.3MS-O.3FS letter long.F COP.NPST-S.3FS
'The letter that the man wrote is long.'

AGREE-and-Project. The relative-clause marker *zɨ-* is a variable-binding operator that inherits and projects the properties of the resumptive pronoun, allowing it to control agreement on the matrix predicate (compare Bresnan & Grimshaw 1978, Donati & Cecchetto 2011, Caponigro 2023).

(42) *Context* : There is a pile of letters on the table and I'm trying to help figure out which ones Segen wrote. So, I tell you:

[$_{RC}$ səgɛn ***pro*** zɨ-ts'əħaf-ət-**tən**] ħats'ər-**ti** ʔɨjj-**ən**
Segen 3FP REL-write.PRF-S.3FS-O.3FP short-PL COP.NPST-S.3FP
'The ones(f.) that Segen wrote are short.'

(43)



No Movement. This analysis reflects previous findings that relative clauses fail to display evidence for movement of a relative operator (Overfelt 2009; compare Cacchioli 2026).

(44) **ʔɨt-i** [$_{RC}$ nahor [$_{CP}$ sɨləmɨntaj ____ n=ət-a dəbdabe
DIST-MS Nahor.M why ACC=DIST-FS letter
ts'ɨħif-u-wa ʔil-u] zɨ-∅-gəram] **səbaj**
write.PFV-S.3MS-O.3FS AUX.NPST-S.3MS REL-S.3MS-wonder.IPFV man
Lit: 'the man that Nahor wonders why wrote the letter.'

5.2 Cyclic Agreement with Free Relatives

Object Agreement with Relativized Object. If the object position is relativized, the copula can cross-reference the object gap of the relative clause.

(45) dəbdabe-tat **ʔɨjj-om** [$_{RC}$ səgɛn ***pro***$_{O}$ zɨ-ts'əħaf-ət-tom]
letter-PL COP.NPST-S.3MP Segen.F 3MP REL-write.PRF-S.3FS-O.3MP
'It's the letters that Segen wrote.'
(✓**ʔɨjj-a** / ✓**ʔɨjj-om** / ✓**ʔɨjj-u**)

Free Relative Controls Agreement. Agreement with the categorized free relative results in agreement that cross-references the object gap of the relative clause.

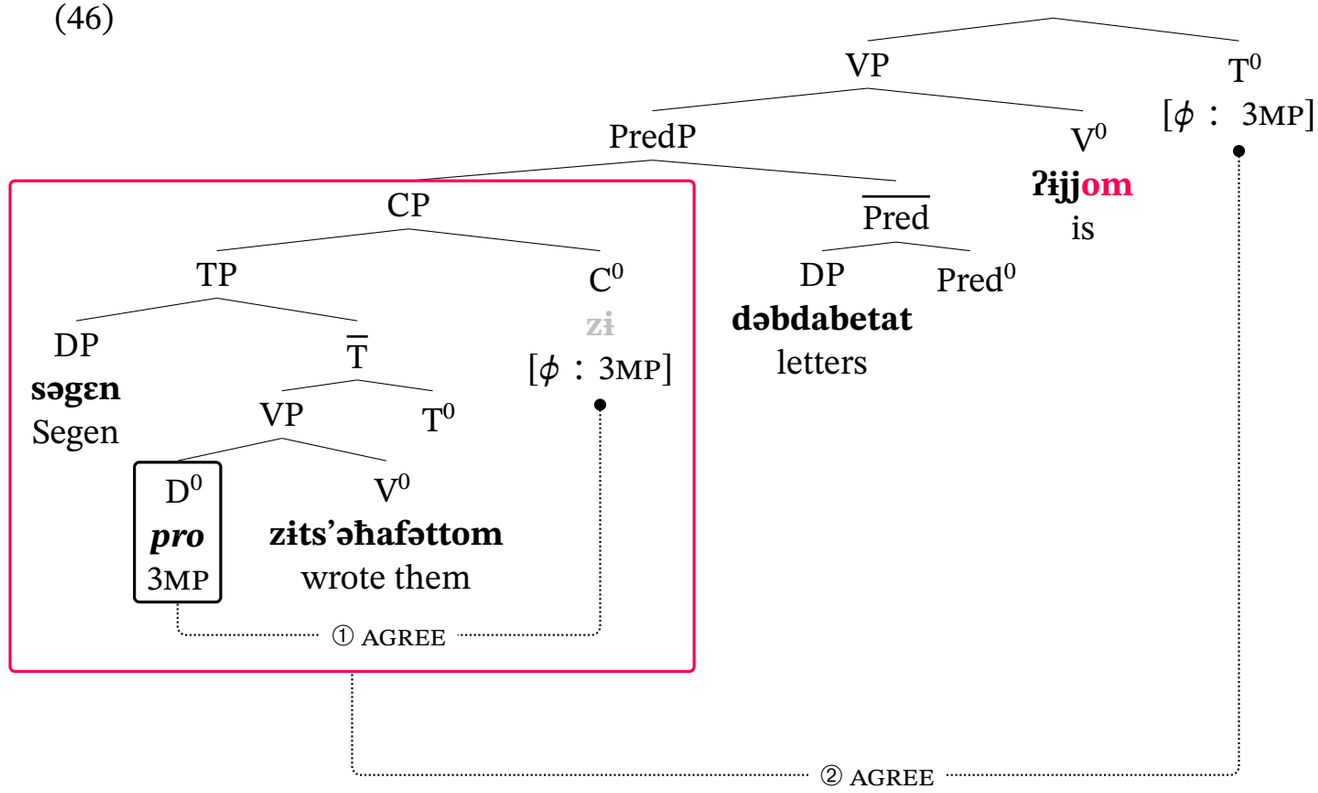
① AGREE-and-Project. The relative-clause marker *zɨ-* agrees with the resumptive pronoun and projects those ϕ-features to the CP node.

Minimal Probing. The free relative clause is the structurally highest argument that carries features matching those on the probing matrix T^0.

② Cyclic Agreement. Matrix T^0 agrees with the CP node of the free-relative which has inherited its ϕ-features from the resumptive object pronoun (e.g., Legate 2005).

Remnant-Predicate Fronting. As an EPP-satisfying constituent the free-relative is promoted to matrix subject followed by remnant movement of the predicate.

(46)



6 The Structural Dependence of Variable Subject Marking

6.1 Obviating Minimality with Specificational PredPs

Specificational PredPs. The Pred^0 of specificational copular sentences licenses its subject and predicate by matching their category and ϕ-features; this is accomplished by a (Cyclic) AGREE relationship with both arguments (Béjar & Rezac 2009, Clem & Deal 2026).

(47) **ʔɨt-a** **məmhɨr** **səgɛn** ʔɨjj-a
DIST-FS teacher Segen.F COP.NPST-S.3FS
'The teacher is Segen.'

(48) *~~**ʔɨt-i**~~ ~~**məmhɨr**~~ **səgɛn** ʔɨjj-u
DIST-MS teacher Segen.F COP.NPST-S.3MS
'The teacher is Segen.'

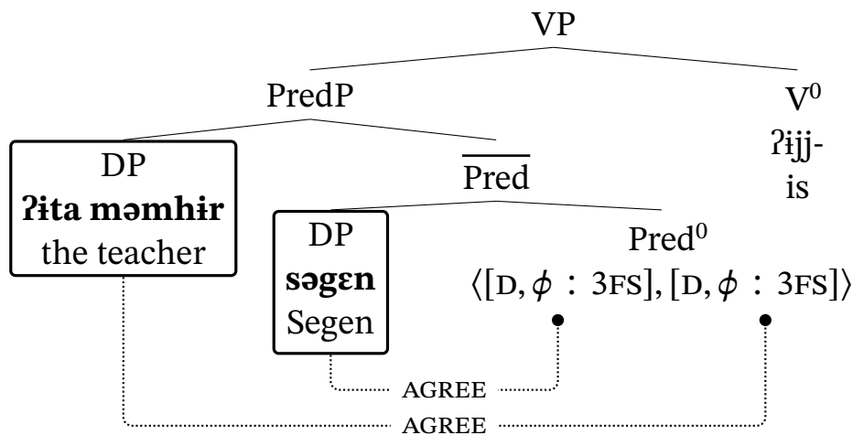
Licensing and Flagging. Arguments that are licensed under an AGREE relationship are **flagged*** by their licensing head (Kalin 2017, Deal 2023, Clem & Deal 2026).

Minimally Compliant. Arguments that have been licensed by previous AGREE relations can be ignored by additional licensing relationships (compare Richards 1998, Rackowski & Richards 2005, Halpert 2019, Halpert & Zeijlstra 2026, a.o.).

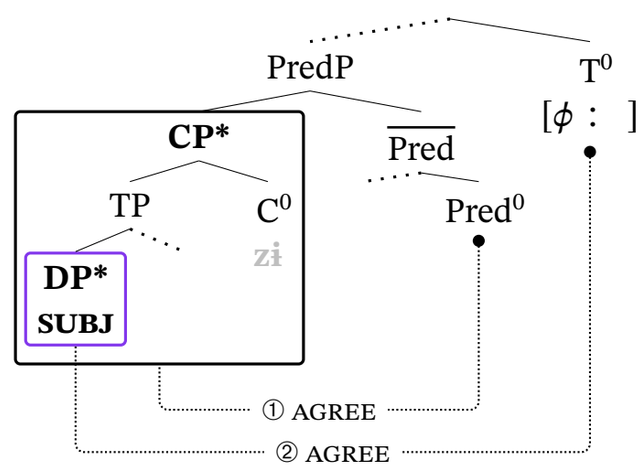
(50) *Hyperactivity Condition*
Once an argument is licensed under an AGREE relationship, that argument and its contents are accessible for additional A-relations.

Licensing and Expletives. The possibility for expletive agreement in cleft constructions speaks to the PredP-internal licensing of the free relative.

(49)



(51)



Subject Agreement with Relativized Object. If the object position is relativized, the copula can cross-reference the grammatical subject of the relative clause.

(52) dəbdabe-tat **ʔɨjj-a** [$_{RC}$ **səgɛn** *pro*$_{O}$ zɨ-ts'əħaf-a-ttom]
letter-PL COP.NPST-S.3FS Segen.F 3MP REL-write.PRF-S.3FS-O.3MP
'It's the letters that Segen wrote.'
(✓**ʔɨjj-a** / ✓**ʔɨjj-om** / ✓**ʔɨjj-u**)

Free Relative Controls Agreement. Agreement with a constituent of the free relative clause, i.e. the embedded subject, results in agreement that cross-references the embedded subject argument.

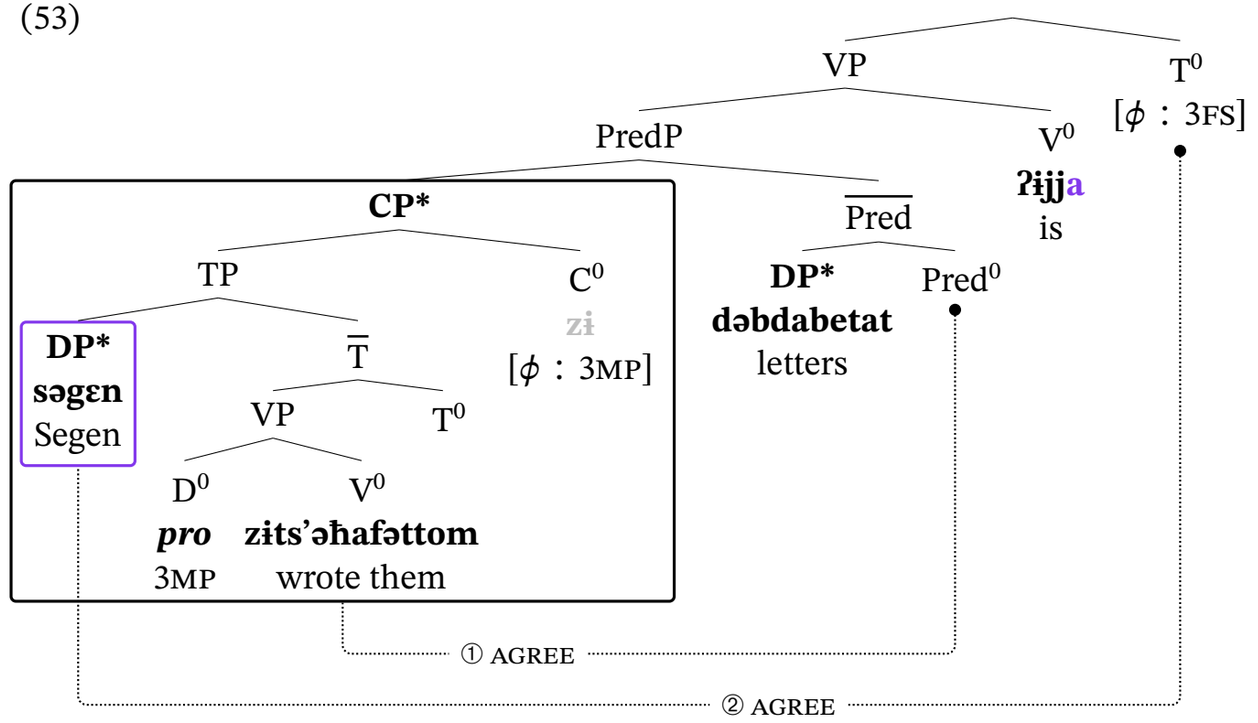
① AGREE with Pred^0. Agreement with the head of PredP matches the percolated features of the free relative with the predicate.

Licensing and Flagging. The initial instance of ① AGREE with Pred^0 is a licensing relationship that flags the free relative.

Unlocking. As an argument that has been flagged as licensed, an additional agreement relationship from the licensing T^0 head may ignore CP for the purpose of additional probing.

② Minimal Probing. The grammatical subject of the relative clause is necessarily the structurally highest argument beyond the licensed CP that carries features matching those on the probing matrix T^0.

(53)



6.2 Minimality in Predicational Small Clauses

Predicational Small Clause. Predicational structures match features of the non-verbal predicate with its argument through CONCORD; this is accomplished by a Multiple AGREE relationship between T^0 and A^0 (Henderson 2006, Wurmbrand 2012; cf. Kramer 2009, Norris 2014, et seq.).

(54) **səgɛn** **bɛlaħ** ʔɨjj-a
Segen.F smart.F COP.NPST-S.3FS
'Segen is smart.'

(55) ***səgɛn** **bɛliħ** ʔɨjj-a
Segen.F smart.M COP.NPST-S.3FS
'Segen is smart.'

No Unlocking without AGREE. Because the subject of a predicational copular constructions is not licensed within the small clause, it is not unlocked for additional licensing A-relations.

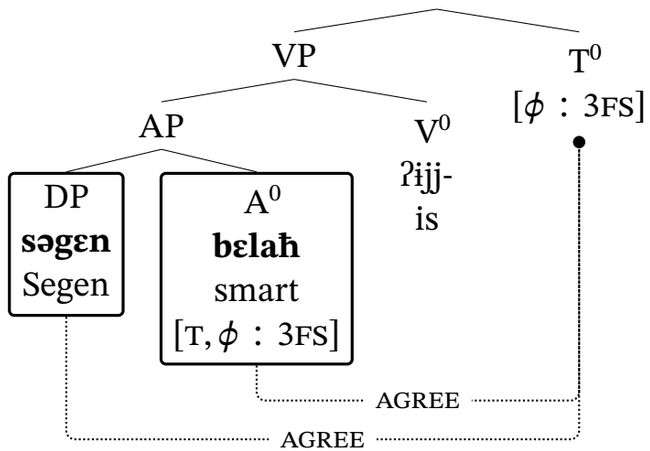
No Licensing, No Expletives. The lack of expletive agreement in predicational copular clauses can be understood as a reflection of the need for T^0 to license the argument of the predicate.

Concord in the Verbal Domain. Tigrinya shows most, if not all, of the indicators for Concord in the verbal domain that are listed in Norris 2014.

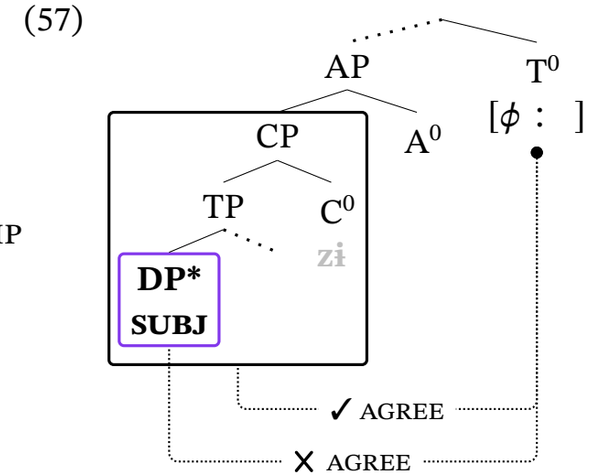
(58) **ʔɨt-om** **təmharo** n=ət-a mət͡sʼħaf kʼoltif-**om** **ji**-nɨbɨb-**u**-wa ʔallə-**wu**
DIST-MP student.PL ACC=DIST-FS book quickly-MP S.3MP-read.IPFV-S.3MP-O.3FS AUX.NPST-S.3MP
'The students are quickly reading the book.'

- Subject agreement appears on most elements within the clause (everything but the object).
- Subject agreement appears in a variety of syntactic positions (including adverbs).
- Subject agreement involves the expression of verbal features (ϕ-features and aspect).

(56)



(57)



Agreement Minimality in Small Clauses. If the object position is relativized, the copula only cross-references the object gap of the relative clause.

(59) bəlaħi-ti **ʔɨjj-om** [$_{RC}$ ts'əga ***pro***$_{O}$ zɨ-ħagəz-ət-tom]
smart-PL COP.NPST-S.3MP Tsega.F 3MP REL-help.PRF-S.3FS-O.3MP
'The ones who Tsega helped are smart.'
(*ʔɨjj-**a** / ✓ʔɨjj-**om** / *ʔɨjj-**u**)

Free Relative Controls Agreement. Agreement with the categorized free relative results in agreement that cross-references the object gap of the relative clause.

Small Clause. Features on the predicate of a small clause are valued by CONCORD, not the argument licensing operation AGREE.

No Unlocking. Because the free relative clause has not been flagged, CP acts as an intervenor for additional licensing relationships from other heads.

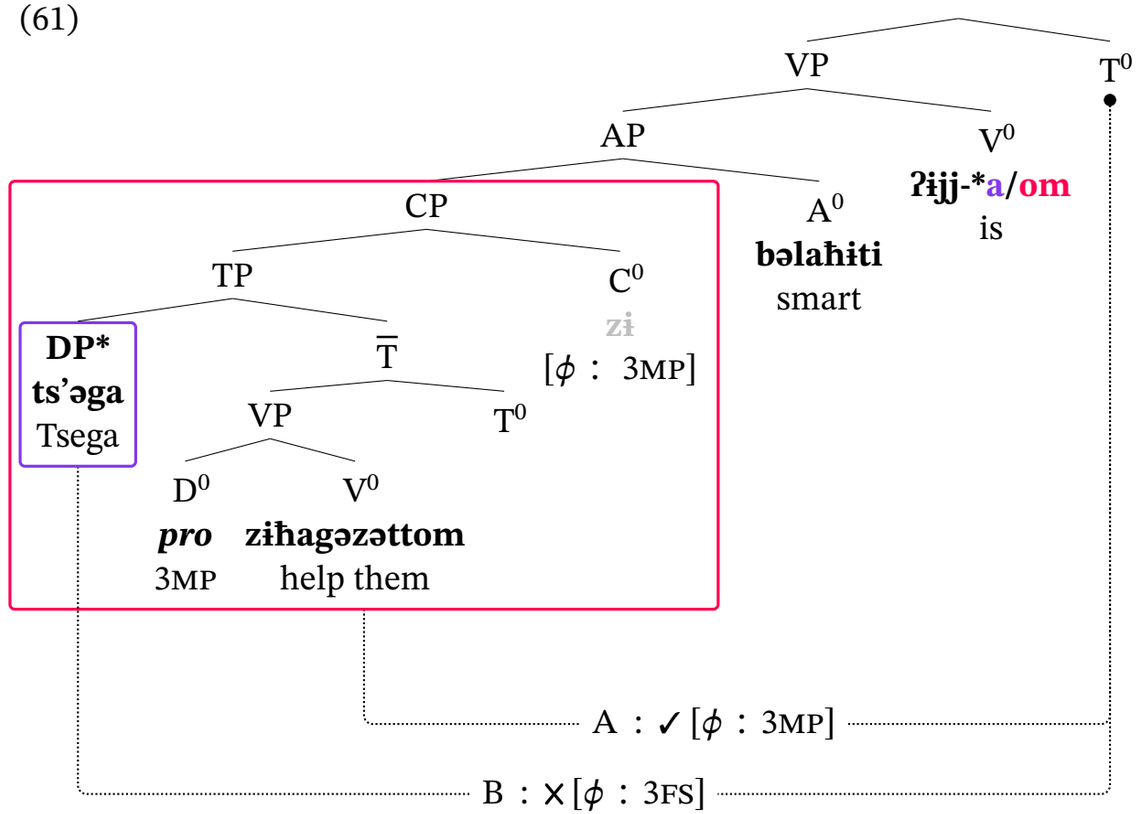
Minimal Probing. The free relative clause is the structurally highest argument that carries features matching those on the probing matrix T^0.

A: Free Relative : Φ-agreement with the free relative values 3MP.

B: Relative Subject : Φ-agreement with the embedded subject is disrupted by the intervening CP.

(60) *Minimality of AGREE*
[X$_{\phi}$ [YP$_{\phi}$ [ZP$_{\phi}$]]]
✓
*

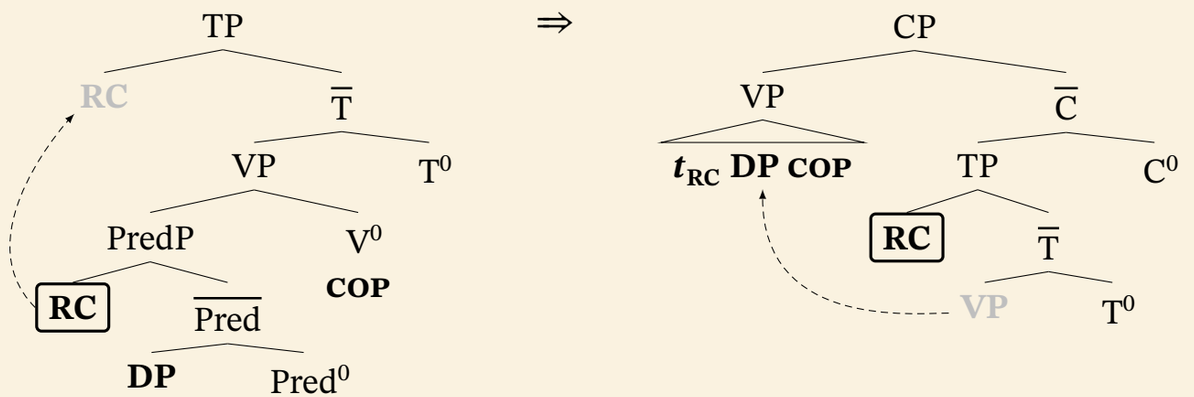
(61)



7 Conclusion

The Syntax of Clefts. Cleft constructions in Tigrinya are derived from specificational copular clauses via remnant movement of the predicate.

Remnant Predicate-Fronting Analysis of Tigrinya Clefts



The Empirical Generalization. The morphological shape of the copula can and should be described with respect to the free relative clause.

The Source of Subject Marking in Tigrinya Clefts

Subject marking in Tigrinya clefts is controlled by the free relative clause subject or a constituent thereof.

Copular Clause Morphosyntax. Differences in subject marking motivate representational and derivational distinctions between copular clauses.

Specificational v. Predicational Morphosyntax

- **Specification :** PredP projections that license the subject and predicate though an AGREE relation.
- **Predication :** Small Clause projections that value features of the predicate through a CONCORD relation.

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

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