

Clefting and beyond in Tigrinya

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Abstract

This paper aims to give a preliminary analysis of focus marking constructions in Tigrinya within the Universal Dependency (UD) framework. We identify three types of constructions that we consider clefting. All three involve a copula placed after the focus element, the UD root, and a subordinate verb form representing the presupposed information. Tigrinya has three possibilities for this subordinate verb, which we annotate as *csubj*, *advel*, and *xcomp*. In each, we use the subrelation *cleft* to indicate the common structure and function of the different cleft types on a par with the use of subrelations *pass* for passive in different languages.

Keywords: Tigrinya, cleft construction, focus, copula, UD annotation, relative clause

1. Introduction

Cleft sentences are very common in Tigrinya (Palmer, 1962), a property the language shares with other members of the Ethio-Eritrean Semitic (EES) family (Appleyard, 1989; Fulass, 1972; Kapeliuk, 2005). Clefting is an information structure manipulating device that divides the proposition in the sentence into *presupposition* and *focus* elements (Lambrecht, 2001, 489). Syntactically speaking, the structure results when an element in the matrix clause, the *clefted constituent*, is extracted for emphasis and put in a prominent position with respect to the other elements of the clause, the *cleft clause*.

- (1) ስላብ ጸ ላስቴር
Hisab ጸyy-a ጸaster
math IMPR.BE-3FS Aster
ዝምሃረት
zi-mihar-ət
REL-teach:PFV-s3FS

‘It is math that Aster taught.’

In this example, we see the typical features of cleft sentences: (1) the use of the copula adjacent to the clefted constituent (following it in this SOV language), and (2) a sentence-final subordinate clause, the cleft clause.

As we shall see, however, Tigrinya cleft sentences go beyond the type shown in (1), including variants characterized by other forms of subordination in the presupposition clause and a copula with multiple functions. These types are apparently not found in other languages in the EES family and, as far as we know, have not been studied systematically before. In this paper, we present a unified analysis of the different clefting constructions in the language and propose UD relations that reflect the syntactic differences and a subrelation to reflect the syntactic and functional similarities.

2. Overview of morphosyntax

In Tigrinya, the unmarked word order is SOV. However, the SOV order can vary for purposes of information structuring, for example, in cleft sentences. Tigrinya is a pro-drop language, a property which is apparent in cleft sentences, which lack the dummy pronoun of languages such as English. Finite verbs in Tigrinya feature obligatory subject agreement and object agreement for definite objects (Kifle, 2011, 2007). Subjects are unmarked for case, whereas objects are differentially marked through the prepositional case *ጸ- ni-* based on definiteness.

As in other Semitic languages, aspectual categories are distinguished by templates and by different sets of subject agreement affixes. Tigrinya has a present-tense copula, ጸጸ ጸyyu, which agrees with its subject and may take nominals, adjectives, and adverbials as predicates.

The heads of subordinate clauses may be finite or non-finite. Relative clause verbs, which we shall refer to as *relativized verbs*, take finite agreement affixes and perfective or imperfective aspect. Relativized verbs are distinguished by a relativizing prefix which has two allomorphs, ጸ- *zi-* and ጸ- *ጸi-*. The allomorph ጸ-*ጸi-* is used with some derived stems and with subject markers that employ the prefix ጸ-*ti-* or ጸ-*ni-* (Kifle, 2011, 38). Relative clauses precede their head nouns (2a).

- (2) a. ጸጸ ጸ ላስቴር
ጸit-i ጸaster
the-3MS Aster
ጸጸጸጸ
ጸi-tti-mihir-o
REL-s3FS-teach:IMPR-o3MS
ዓውደ ጸጸጸጸጸጸ
ጸawde timhirti
subject

‘the subject that Aster teaches’

- b. አስቴር እትምህር
ʔaster ʔi-tti-mihir-o
 Aster REL-s3FS-teach:IMPR-o3MS
 ‘what/the thing that Aster teaches’

The relative marker is both a relativizer (2a) and, when it appears without a head nominal, a nominalizer (2b). In this example, the relativized verb bears agreement values for both the object and the subject and has the interpretation ‘the one (3MS) who/which’.

Another verb form relevant for this paper is the perfective form. Tigrinya has two perfective forms which Kifle (2011, 41) identifies as simple perfective and historic perfective. The simple perfective has two functions in the language, as a main verb and as a subordinate converb (3).

- (3) አስቴር ምሂራ ከይዳ
ʔaster mihir-a kayd-a
 Aster teach:PFV-s3FS go:PFV-s3FS
 ‘Aster left after having taught.’

The converb expresses an event simultaneous with or preceding that expressed by a main verb (Amha and Dimmendaal, 2006).

The simple perfective form is incompatible with the relative marker **zi-mihir-a*; for relativized verbs, the second form, *zi-mihar-ət* ‘that she taught’, the historic perfective is used.

Also relevant for our purposes is a further subordinate form, the “purposive,” consisting of a finite imperfective verb marked with the conjunctive prefix *h- ki-*, meaning ‘in order to V’ (4).

- (4) አስቴር ሕሳብ ክትምህር
aster Hisab ki-t-mihir
 Aster math PURP-s3FS-teach:IMPV
 ደልዳ
dəly-a
 want:PFV-s3FS
 ‘Aster wants to teach math.’

The purposive clause and the matrix clause share a subject, as it can be seen from the subject agreement, the 3FS, which is associated both with the main verb and purposive verb.

In combination with the copula, the purposive form expresses future tense (Kifle, 2011, 45), as in (5). The copula agrees with the subject of the purposive verb.

- (5) ጽባሕ አስቴር ሕሳብ
s'baH aster Hisab
 tomorrow Aster math
 ክትምህር እዮ
ki-t-mihir ʔiyy-a
 PURP-s3FS-teach:IMPV IMPR.BE-3FS

‘Tomorrow Aster will teach math.’/ Lit. Aster is to teach math.

3. Clefting in Tigrinya

3.1. Clefting with relativized verbs

In cross-linguistic perspective, the syntactic configuration of a cleft sentence can be described as a complex sentence that has the form of a specificational sentence with a subordinate clause, the cleft clause, and a focused element, the clefted constituent, in a subject-predicate-like relation (Malcher, 2023). According to Creissels (2021, 7), if a language has an equative predication construction and a participant nominalization construction, then it is always possible to combine these structures “to make explicit the exclusive identification of a participant in a presupposed event.”

Tigrinya has cleft constructions which contrast with copula predicational sentences in the way different elements are focused and linked by a copula to a presupposition (Gragg, 1974; Kifle, 2011, 64) (6).

- (6) አስቴር እዮ ሕሳብ
ʔaster ʔiyy-a Hisab
 Aster IMPR.BE-3FS math
 ዝምህረት
zi-mihar-ət
 REL-teach:PFV-s3FS
 ‘It is Aster who taught math.’

In (6), we have a relativized verb form, and a copula which agrees with this verb—and hence its subject—in person, number, and gender. The clefted constituent appears right before the copula and the cleft clause follows it. This is the most common clefting type. In the TLMD corpus (Gaim et al., 2021), 141 sentences of this type are found within the first 10,000 sentences.¹ We will call such sentences *canonical cleft sentences*.

¹We applied the morphological analyzer HornMorpho (Gasser, 2025) to the unannotated TLMD corpus, permitting us to isolate copulas and the relevant subordinate verb categories and thus count instances of the cleft types.

It is also possible for the relativized cleft clause to appear sentence-initially, though this is less common.

- (7) **ሕሳብ ዝምሃረት ኣስቴር**
Hisab zi-mihar-at ?aster
 math REL-teach:PFV-s3FS Aster
እያ
?iyy-a
 IMPR.BE-3FS

‘It is Aster who taught math.’ / ‘The one who taught math is Aster.’

In Tigrinya, any lexical constituent can be focused in clefted sentences. In the corpus data we find examples of subjects, objects, obliques, adjuncts, and adverbial modifiers. Sentence (8a) illustrates this for an oblique constituent and sentence (8b) for an adverbial modifier.

- (8) a. **ትማሊ እያ ኣስቴር**
timali ?iyy-a ?aster
 yesterday IMPR.BE-3FS/3MS Aster
ሕሳብ ዝምሃረት
Hisab zi-mihar-at
 math REL-teach:PFV-s3FS

‘It is yesterday that Aster taught math.’

- b. **ብወኒ እያ ኣስቴር ዝምሃረት**
bi-wəni ?iyy-a ?aster zi-mihar-at
 with-enthusiasm IMPR.BE-3FS/3MS Aster REL-teach:PFV-s3FS

‘It is with enthusiasm that Aster taught.’

3.2. Clefting without relativized verbs

Tigrinya also has focus constructions that resemble the canonical clefted sentence in which a copula is preceded by the clefted constituent and followed by non-relativized verb forms. We will refer to these as *non-relative cleft sentences*. Such cleft structures resemble the types *Khan (2019, 4)* identified as reduced clefts, where the relativizer that marks the subordinate clause or the copula is omitted.

The first type, which we will refer to as *converb cleft (9)*, has been identified as a cleft sentence in some studies (*Zellou, 2010; Bulakh, 2019; Gebregziabher and Duguine, 2024*). There are 102 instances of converb cleft sentences in the first 10,000 sentences of the TLMD corpus.

- (9) **ሕሳብ እያ ኣስቴር ምሃራ**
Hisab ?iyy-a ?aster mihir-a
 math IMPR.BE-3FS Aster teach:PFV-s3FS
 ‘It is math that Aster taught.’

The converb cleft involves a copula whose function is to mark focus (*Zellou, 2010, 112*), as in canonical cleft sentences, and a perfective form of the verb which is identified as a converb (*Bulakh, 2019, 186*), though, as we have seen, this form of the verb is ambiguous and can be used as a main clause perfective verb (*Kifle, 2011, 44*) as well (10).

- (10) **ኣስቴር ሕሳብ ምሃራ**
?aster Hisab mihir-a
 math IMPR.BE-3FS Aster
 ‘Aster taught math.’

The converb cleft seems to be related to sentences in which a copula is introduced to add emphasis to the whole proposition expressed by the main verb (*Kifle, 2011, 258*). *Cacchioli (2024, 25)* calls this kind of emphasis “*verum focus*”.

- (11) a. **ኣስቴር ሕሳብ ምሃራ**
?aster Hisab mihir-a
 Aster math teach:PFV-s3FS
እያ
?iyy-a
 IMPR.BE-3FS

‘Aster DID teach math.’

- b. **ኣስቴር ሕሳብ ትምህር**
aster Hisab ti-mihir
 Aster math s3FS-teach:IMPV
እያ
?iyy-a
 IMPR.BE-3FS

‘Aster DOES teach math.’

Preceding the copula, both perfective (11a) and imperfective (11b) verb forms are possible. However, interestingly, only the perfective form is possible in the converb cleft (12).

- (12) **እነ እያ ሕሳብ**
?ana ?iyy-a Hisab
 nom.Pro.1s IMPR.BE-1S math
***እምህር**
**?i-mihir*
 s1S-teach:IMPV

‘It is me *teach math.’

There is a syntactic property that distinguishes the converb clause from the relative clause in cleft sentences. Although both are allowed following the copula, as in (13a), only the relative clause is allowed in sentence initial position (13b). That is, unlike the relativized verb, the converb cannot function as a nominalization.

- (13) a. አስቴር እያ ሕሳብ
 Aster ገገሃ-*a* Hisab
 Aster IMPR.BE-3FS math
 ዝምሃረ/ምሃራ
zi-mihar-ət/mihir-a
 teach:REL/PFV-s3FS/PFV-s3FS
 ‘It is Aster who taught math.’
- b. ሕሳብ ዝምሃረት/ *ምሃራ
 Hisab *zi-mihar-ət/*mihir-a*
 math teach:REL/PFV.s3FS/PFV-s3FS
 አስቴር እያ
 Aster ገገሃ-*a*
 Aster IMPR.BE-3FS
 ‘The one who taught math is Aster.’

The second type of non-relative cleft is possible with the purposive form expressing future, which was discussed above (5). When this form appears in cleft sentences, the copula, which is already a component of the future tense construction, is not duplicated, and the verb appears in its non-relativized purposive form. We shall refer to such sentences as *future cleft sentences*. There are 10 instances of future cleft sentences among the first 10,000 sentences of the TLMD corpus.

- (14) ጽባሕ እያ
*sʹbaH ገገሃ-*a**
 tomorrow IMPR.BE-3FS
 ክትምህር
ki-t-mihir
 PURP-s3FS-teach:IMPV
 ‘It is tomorrow that she will teach.’

4. UD annotation

Cleft sentences, in languages that have them, consist of a nonverbal clause, containing the clefted constituent, and a subordinate verb, the cleft clause, following the nonverbal clause. As in other nonverbal clauses, the root in UD annotation is the clefted constituent (rather than the copula) (de Marneffe et al., 2021, 273), and a dependency joins the root to the cleft clause. The relation on this dependency varies with the language; there are at least seven possibilities, and in at least one

language, Polish, two different relations are used for the cleft clause dependency. In 14 languages, the dependency has *cleft* as a subrelation. For English, the relation is *advcl:relcl*, as illustrated in Figure 1.

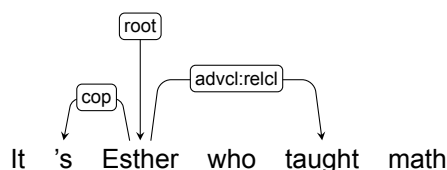


Figure 1: Annotation of English cleft sentences.

For Tigrinya, we have seen that there are three sentence types that, on functional and syntactic grounds, can be called *cleft*. Although the clefted clause is subordinate in each type, morphosyntactically its verb takes different forms, motivating the use of more than one relation for these clauses. However, we would like at the same time to indicate that these variants share the same focusing function, that all of the cleft sentences can be seen as related to non-cleft sentences that are simpler syntactically and/or have canonical word order. We propose to do this using the subrelation *cleft*, as in other languages such as Polish, French, and Irish.

Let’s consider first *canonical cleft sentences*, in which the clefted clause has a relativized verb. As we have seen, relativized verbs in the language function as relative clauses, but these can appear without head nouns, in which case the verb functions as a nominalization, as in Example (2b). In this form it takes a *csubj* relation because the cleft clause syntactically functions as a clausal subject linked to the cleft element through the copula similar to copula predication sentences.

The less common variant of the canonical cleft sentence has the relative clause in the usual subject position.

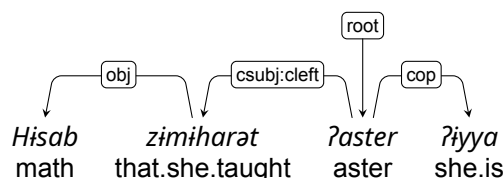


Figure 2: Dependencies in (7), ‘it is Aster who taught math’.

The more frequent pattern for the *canonical cleft sentences* differs only in word order; the clefted clause is sentence final.

Now consider the *converb cleft* pattern. Here the sentence-final constituent, rather than being a relativized verb, takes the form of a converb. Else-

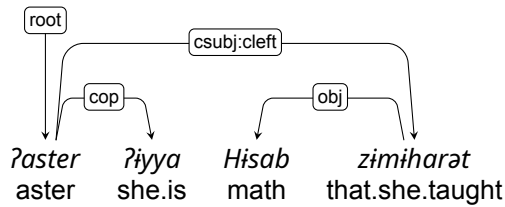


Figure 3: Dependencies in (6), ‘it is Aster who taught math’.

where we annotate converbs as adverbial clauses (Figure 4).

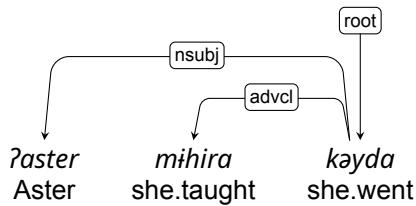


Figure 4: Dependencies in (3), ‘Aster left, after having taught’.

For *converb cleft* sentences, we again make use of the *advcl* relation but add the *cleft* subrelation, as before, to indicate that the sentence is related to a non-cleft sentence (Figure 5). Note that *csubj* would be inappropriate for the *converb cleft* because, as we have seen (13b), the converb lacks the nominalizing function of relativized verbs.

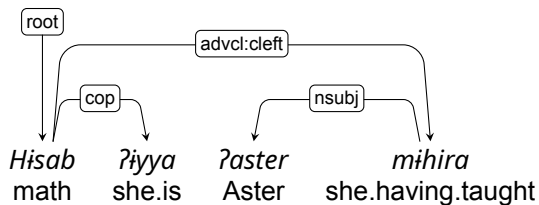


Figure 5: Dependencies in (9), ‘it is math that Aster taught’.

Finally, consider *future cleft sentences*. Here the clefted clause contains a subordinate verb with a purposive prefix conjunction. We analyze these sentences in terms of their relationship to unclefted sentences with the purposive future, sentences in which the purposive verb is the root. In this case, clefting simply moves the purposive verb form, possibly along with one or more arguments, after the copula, leaving the focused element immediately before the copula.

To determine how to annotate such sentences, we again look at how the subordinate verb form is used in non-clefted sentences. Besides its use in the purposive future, these purposive verbs function as *xcomp* arguments of verbs such as ጸለጽ

ጸለጽ ‘want’ (4). Consequently we annotate the verb in the cleft clause in future cleft sentences with *xcomp:cleft* (Figure 6).

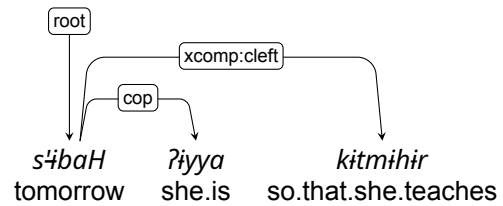


Figure 6: Dependencies in (14), ‘it is tomorrow that she will teach’.

5. Conclusion

In this preliminary study, we have described various types of focus marking constructions in Tigrinya and shown how such constructions can be annotated in UD in a unified manner. Focus marking through clefting is claimed to be widespread in the language, and any type of constituent can be clefted. We have identified canonical clefting types, where the verb in the cleft clause is relativized, and non-relative clefting, where the verb in the cleft clause is either a converb/perfective or a purposive verb form. We argue that the non-relative cleft types are instances of focus marking on a par with canonical cleft constructions. In both types, the copula is the main feature enabling focus and there is some sort of dependent verb, a converb or purposive verb, in the residual part of the sentence.

As with the Polish treebank, we propose different relations for the cleft categories: *csubj*, *advcl*, and *xcomp* for the canonical cleft, converb cleft and purposive future, respectively, and assign the *cleft* subrelation to each to reflect the syntactic and functional similarities. For the canonical clefts, we opt for *csubj:cleft*, rather than *acl:cleft* (as in Swedish), because in Tigrinya the relative verb is a nominalized form.

As part of our study, we would like also to compare focus marking in predicational sentences as these also use word order variation to create focus by placing the focus element before the copula and the presupposed constituent after it. In the perfective, predicational focus sentences may involve copula doubling where the focusing copula is in the present while the predicational copula is in the perfective aspect. We leave these issues for future research.

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