Tigrinya fronted copula constructions: Focus and evidence of speaker marking information relevant to hearer expectations[1]

Georgia Zellou
University of Colorado, Boulder

Abstract

This study examines the presence of a copula and fronted copula constructions in Tigrinya (Ethio-Semitic). The aim of this investigation is to outline the distribution of the copula in Tigrinya, to further investigate the function coded by the fronted copula construction, and explore the source of this construction. This study demonstrates that the fronted copula construction marks focus in Tigrinya.

Keywords: Tigrinya, functional syntax, pragmatics, focus, copula

1 Introduction

Tigrinya is an Ethio-Semtic (Afro-Asiatic) language spoken mainly in Eritrea and Ethiopia by over 5 million people. Tigrinya is most closely related to other Ethio-Semitic languages, such as Ge'ez and Amharic. Most literature on Tigrinya refers to the form of /i(y)-/ with subject agreement as the "copula" (Leslau 1941, Kogan 1997, Voight 1977). Tigrinya and related languages differ from the other languages in the Semitic family in their SOV syntax and the presence of an overt copula in the present tense. However, there are two possible hypotheses about this morpheme. First, that it is a copula, and second, that it is a subject agreement pronoun suffix that attaches to verbs (as it often occurs post-verbally).

Additionally, Tigrinya has a unique fronted copula construction where a copula occurs earlier in an utterance than the standard phrase final position[2]. The function and source of this fronted copula construction is explored here. Cross-linguistically, copula constructions are utilized for discourse functions such as coding new information, contrastive focus, and

[2] I am not aware of a similar construction in the neighboring or related languages.

focus, in general (c.f. Hickmann et al 1996, Ghomesi et al. 2004, Lehman 2008). Thus, the function of the fronted copula construction in Tigrinya as it relates to information structure is the focus of this investigation.

In section 1, the existence of a copula in Tigrinya is analyzed. Section 2 introduces the fronted copula construction as it alternates with non-fronted copula constructions. In section 3, the distribution of the fronted copula construction is delineated. In section 4, the function coded by the fronted copula construction is investigated using elicited data. Finally, in section 5 the source and structure of the fronted copula construction will be examined.

1.1 Tigrinya copula

A copula can be defined as the element utilized in predication where no other lexical verb is employed. Following Curnow (2000), there are four types of copulas that can be found cross-linguistically: verbal, particle, inflectional, and zero. Tigrinya displays a verbal copula. This form consists of the root /i(y)-/ and subject agreement suffixes. The non-past form of the Tigrinya copula is given below in Table 1.

	Singular	Plural
1	iy-ɛ[3]	i-na
2, M	i-xa	i-xum
2, F	i-xi	i-xɛn
3, M	iy-u	iy-om
3, F	iy-a	iy-ɛn

Table 1. - /i-/ paradigm

This morpheme also has a suppletive form used in the perfective[4], beginning with /nɛr-/ and consisting of subject agreement suffixes. The paradigm of this form is given below in Table 2.

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3 The [y] is an epenthetic glide inserted between two vowels.
4 It is typical, in Semitic languages, to have different forms of the copula depending on aspect. For example, in Arabic and Hebrew there is a null copula in the imperfective and an overt copula in the perfective (Zewi 1999).

	Singular	Plural
1	nɛr-ɛ	nɛr-na
2, M	nɛr-ka	nɛr-kum
2, F	nɛr-ki	nɛr-kɛn
3, M	nɛr-u	nɛr-om
3, F	nɛr-a	nɛr-ɛn

Table 2. - /nɛr-/ paradigm

The hypothesis that the /i(y)-/ forms a present tense copula is evidenced by nominal equational clauses, such as those illustrated below in (1) and (2). Crunow defines a copula construction as the most basic construction used in a language to encode identity of two participants normally encoded as two noun phrases in that language such as 'that man is my father' (2000: 1). Examples (1) and (2) illustrate that the morpheme /iy-u/ is linking a nominal subject and a nominal predicate. Following Curnow's definition, we can consider these as copula constructions.

(1) *abbu-ʔum   t'ɛbbib iy-u*
     father-3PL:M:GEN smith   COP-3SG:M
     'Their father is a smith.'

                                                             (Kogan 1997: 444)

(2) *zar sem   fɛrɛs iy-u*
     Zar name horse COP-3SG:M
     'Zar is the name of a horse.'

                                                                   (*Ibid.*)

Crucially, the data given above rule out the possibility that this morpheme simply codes subject agreement on a verbal element, because the phrases in (1) and (2) have no verbal element other than the form of /i(y)-/. Thus, we can be confident that the form of /i(y)-/ is, in fact, a non-past copula in Tigrinya.

1.2 Methodology

The data examined in this paper was collected through elicitation sessions from a native speaker of Tigrinya. When constructions were encountered that could not be straight-forwardly described, as in the case of the fronted copula construction examined here, hypotheses of the function of these constructions were tested by further data elicitation or by proposing novel constructions for speaker grammaticality judgments.

2 Problem: The fronted copula construction

In Tigrinya, we can observe a construction where the present tense copula verb occurs directly after a noun phrase in an utterance, as opposed to post-verbally. One context where this construction appears, in a narrative, can be seen below in (3). Notice in line b. how the copula *iyɛ*, which consistently appears in post-verbal position, occurs directly after the prepositional phrase. We will call the present tense copula element that occurs directly after the argument (in the case of (3) - the prepositional phrase) a fronted copula.

(3)a *saʕa* *šowwate* *bil-ɛ* *market* *street* *station* *bits'iħ-ɛ*
    hour seven   say-1SG market street station reach:PRF-1SG
    'At about seven o'clock, I reached Market Street Station.'

(3)b *lowmi maʕalti ba abtobus iy-ɛ*   *mɛts'iyɛ*
    today day   by bus   COP-1SG come:GER
    'Today, I came by bus.'

(3)c *səluzi abtobus kab*   *Market* *Street Station ksub* *Boulder a-mts'iattɨn-ni*
    then bus   from market street station up.to boulder CAUS-come:PRF:3SG:F-1SG
    'Then, the bus brought me from Market Street Station to Boulder.'

The fronted copula takes the same agreement with the subject as a phrase-final verb. Constructions such as those in (3)b., where a fronted copula occurs in an utterance in addition to a phrase final lexical verb or copula verb, as fronted copula constructions. The fronted copula construction in (3)b. can be contrasted with the utterance given below in (4), where there is only a phrase-final verb.

(4)   *ba* *abtobus* *mɛts'iyɛ*
    by   bus   come:GER
    'I came by bus.'

Thus, there are two alternating constructions in Tigrinya: one with a fronted copula occurring directly after an argument, as seen in (3)b., and one without the copula, as seen in (4). The problems investigated in this paper concern the fronted copula construction illustrated in (3)b. This paper will address two questions. First, what is the distribution of the copula – and the fronted copula - in Tigrinya? Secondly, what function is coded by the fronted copula construction in Tigrinya?

3 Distribution of the Tigrinya copula

The Tigrinya copula is used in a variety of constructions. In order to better understand the function of the fronted copula construction, it is necessary to understand the role and distribution of the copula within the language. In addition to its primary role in equational clauses, there are two secondary constructions in which the copula appears: in future tense constructions and in the fronted copula construction.

3.1 Equational clauses

The copula is the sole verb that occurs in equational clauses in the present tense. An example of this is illustrated below in (5).

(5) *zar   sem   fɛrɛs   iy-u*
     Zar   name   horse   COP-3SG:M
     'Zar is the name of a horse.'

<div align="right">(Kogan 1997: 444)</div>

The copula always occurs in nominal equational clauses, linking two noun phrases, as those shown in section 1 above in (1) and (2).

3.2 Future (kə + imperfective V + iyɛ)

The copula is also used in the future tense construction where the main verb is in the imperfective form and takes the prefix *kə-*[5]. This construction is illustrated in (6).

(6) *ane   ab-ti   gobot-at   kə-gwoyyi iy-ɛ*
     PRO:1SG in-DEF mountain-PL   FUT-run   COP-1SG
     'I will run in the mountains.'

The use of the copula is limited to the future tense in this construction as evidenced by the example below in (7), where the same verb as that given in (6) is in the imperfective and the copula is not present.

(7) *ane   ab-ti   gobot-at   yə-gwoyyi*
     PRO:1SG in-DEF mountain-PL 1SG-RUN:IMPF
     'I run in the mountains.'

There is no evidence that the copula is used in the imperfective except to mark future tense (Kogan 1997:438).

3.3 Fronted copula constructions

Finally, the copula occurs fronted in constructions, like those first seen in the narrative given in (3), repeated below in (9).

(9) *lowmi maʕalti ba   abtobus iy-ɛ   mɛts'iyɛ*
     today   day   by   bus   COP-1SG come:GER
     'Today, I came by bus.'

There are several striking properties of the fronted copula construction. First, as illustrated in the example above, while Tigrinya is a verb-final language, and the copula (and any

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[5] When /kə-/ or other verbal prefixes (i.e. /tə-/ for reflexive) combines with an imperfective verb, the subject prefixes are dropped. (Kogen 1997: 438)

lexical verb) occurs in final position in all the previously discussed contexts, the fronted copula element does not occur at the end of the utterance. In fact, when an adverbial element is introduced into the utterance, the fronted copula must occur before this adverbial element, as illustrated below in (10).

(10) *ba abtobus iy-u   q'alt'ɛfu mɛts'iyu*
    by   bus   COP-3SG:M quickly   come:GER
    'He came quickly by bus.'

    * ba abtobus q'alt'ɛfu iyu mɛts'iyu
      (for 'he came quickly by bus')

The utterance in (10) is odd considering the strictly verb-final typology of Tigrinya.

Finally, while the (non-fronted) present tense copula only occurs in non-past constructions, the fronted copula can occur in utterances of all tenses. Notice how in constructions with only one copula this copula can occur as the past tense variant, as shown in (11).

(*11*) *nəssu   nawiħ neɾ-u*
    PRO:3SG:M tall   COP:PRF-3SG:M
    'He was tall.'

However, when the fronted copula occurs in a past tense construction it is the non-past form of the copula, even while the verb-final copula is the past tense form. This is illustrated below in (12).

(12) *john ay-konn-an   nawiħ ner-u,   berhɛ iy-u   nawiħ   ner-u*
    John NEG-be:PRF-NEG tall   COP:PRF-3SG Berhay COP-3SG:M tall   COP:PRF-3SG:M
    'John was not tall, Berhay was tall.'

Examples such as those shown above in (12) give evidence that there actually is no copula doubling process that occurs. If there was a copula doubling process, we would expect that both the post-verbal copula and the fronted copula would be in the same aspect. For example, Alice Harris describes cases of exuberant agreement, which occurs in several Nakh-Daghestanian languages, whereby multiple agreement morphemes marking the same argument occur on a single verb (2008). Furthermore, exuberant agreement is multiple use of the same morpheme. That is not the case in (12). Furthermore, there is no extraposition movement process that occurs where a post-verbal copula moves to a post-argument position because we see a post-verbal verb (either a copula or a lexical verb) in the fronted copula construction.

Thus, we have delineated the constructions in which the copula occurs in Tigrinya. Next, the function that is coded by the fronted copula construction is investigated using elicited data.

4 Function of the fronted copula construction

As shown above, we have a fronted copula construction that alternates with standard verb-final constructions in Tigrinya. However, the function of the fronted copula construction, in light of the other constructions in which the copula appears, is not apparent. It is evident that this construction plays some role in information packaging in the discourse[6]. Thus, it is necessary to entertain several hypotheses as to the function coded by this construction, and use elicited utterances to refute or accept one of those hypotheses.

4.1 New information

The first hypothesis concerns information packaging as the function of the fronted copula construction. The hypothesis that this construction is an indicator of discourse-new information must be explored. Cross-linguistically, languages use word order to mark new information, including French, English and German (Hickmann et al. 1996). Furthermore, existential expressions including copulas are often utilized by languages to introduce new information (*Ibid.*). It is possible that the fronted copula construction in Tigrinya introduces new information. For instance, it is evident from the context of the construction in the narrative, repeated below in (17), that this information is new to the discourse.

New information, fronted copula form
(17) *lowmi maʕalti ba abtobus iy-ɛ   mɛts'iyɛ*
      today day   by bus   COP-1SG come:GER
      'Today, I came by bus.'

However, other data elicited are not consistent with this hypothesis. For example, take the exchange illustrated below in (18). In this conversation segment, the question is eliciting information not known by the questioner. When the responder answers, it is implied that the information conveyed was not known by the questioner; therefore, it should be marked as new information. If new information is marked by the fronted copula construction, it would be present in the answer. However, this is not the case. Notice that in the response the fronted copula construction is not used.

New information, no fronted copula
(18)
      Q:
      bi mɛntɛ mɛts'ixa?
      by how   come:GER
      'How did you come today?'

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[6] Several tests were conducted to determine whether there were semantic or valency limitations on this construction, none of which proved to play a role.

A:
ba abtobus mɛts'iyɛ
by bus   come:GER
'I came by bus.'

Therefore, based on the data, the fronted copula construction does not code for discourse-new information.

4.2 Focus

The most widely used definition of focus is that proposed by Lambrecht which is "the new information conveyed about a topic" (1994: 206). However, I will refer to Jackendoff's definition of the "presupposition of a sentence" as "the information in the sentence that is assumed by the speaker to be shared by him and the hearer" to be the operationally defined focus (1972: 230). Thus, if there is evidence that a speaker is using the fronted copula construction to mark information as relevant to the hearer, I will consider this a focus function. In this section, the possibility that the fronted copula construction marks a type of focus in Tigrinya is explored.

4.2.1 Contrastive focus

Cross-linguistically, reduplication is one method for marking contrastive focus, as discussed by Ghomesi et al. (2004) for English. While it was stated in section 3 that the fronted copula construction does not appear to be a doubling process, it is similar to reduplication in that in some utterances the same form of the copula occurs twice in a phrase, as in (17). Thus, the possibility that this construction codes contrastive focus must be explored.

    The first hypothesis regarding focus as the function for the fronted copula construction is that this construction is used to code for contrastive focus. An example where this construction was elicited in a contrastive focus context is illustrated below in (19).

Contrastive focus, fronted copula form
  (19) bi   makina ay-mɛts'-an,   bə ʔəgruw **iy-u**   mɛts'iyu
         by   car   NEG-come:PRF-NEG by foot   COP-3SG:M come:GER
         'He didn't come by car, he came by foot.'

In the example above, the speaker is contrasting a statement that someone did not come by car, with a statement using the fronted copula construction to indicate that the person actually came by foot. Thus, the example in (19) is consistent with this construction coding for contrastive focus. However, another elicited example is incongruous with this account. In the example (20) below, the utterance contains two phrases, with the second phrase contrasting with the first – a context where contrastive focus marking would be triggered. Notice that the fronted copula construction is not utilized in the contrastive focus phrase.

<u>Contrastive focus, no fronted copula form</u>

(20) ab   sofa   kof   ay-bil-kun,   ab   məmbər kof il-ɛ
       on   couch   sit   NEG-say-NEG   on   chair   sit   say-1SG
       'I didn't sit on the couch, I sat on the chair.'

Thus, the data examined in (19) and (20) are not consistent with the hypothesis that the fronted copula construction codes for contrastive focus.

4.2.2 Speaker assumptions about listener expectations

Recent typological literature has provided evidence of a category called "mirative" marked in languages and that it is distinct from evidentiality. The function of mirative is described as "report[ing] information which is new or surprising to the speaker" (DeLancy 1997: 33). Studies have shown the category of mirative to be marked in languages like Tibetan and Hindu/ Urdu, where the morpheme for mirativity has been grammaticalized from aorist constructions (DeLancy 2001, Montaut 2006). Thus, if there is cross-linguistic evidence that speakers code for information that is surprising to them, it is possible that we may find evidence that speakers mark information they assume may be new or surprising to the hearer. Following Jackendoff's assumption that focus is something "that is assumed by the speaker to be shared by him and the hearer," I will consider such evidence of speaker marking information for the hearer as a form of focus (1972: 230).

     A final hypothesis is that this construction is used by the speaker as a focus marker, and possibly to convey that the information is somehow relevant to the expectations of the listener. In other words, if this was the case we would expect to see that information that is focused, or that the speaker intends that the listener expected and that information that the speaker intends the listener did not expect, will be marked with the fronted copula construction. Meanwhile, if our hypothesis that this construction marks focus then we predict that information that is not focused, or not relevant to speaker expectations, will be unmarked. In fact, these predictions are borne out in the data.

     For example, we can first look at phrases couched in utterances with the construction "*you thought.*" Utterances with a "*you thought*" phrase would overtly express speaker assumptions about listener knowledge. Lehmann, for example, notes that the use of lexical verbs like this in phrases "make explicit the relation of the referent to predication or to the hearer's consciousness" (2008: 211). Thus, if a speaker is focusing a phrase in order to mark it as something unexpected by the listener it would be most evident when the speaker begins by a "*you thought*" phrase.

     In the utterance given below in (21), the speaker makes a statement about the expectations of the hearer, "*you thought I sat on the couch,*" and then makes a statement about the reality, "*I sat on the chair.*" In this example, the second phrase is indicating that the information is not what the hearer expected. Crucially, the fronted copula construction is used to convey this. I would argue that the second phrase is being focused to mark that this is knowledge that is new or unexpected to the hearer.

Listener unexpected information, fronted copula

(21) *ab sofa kof zə-bel-ku   mɛsilu-ka   nɛr-u,   ab məmbər **iy- ɛ***
    on couch sit COMP-say-2SG think:PRF-2SG:M COP-3SG on chair   COP-1SG

    kof il-ɛ
    sit   say-1SG

    'You thought I sat on the couch; I sat on the chair.'

On the other hand, in the example given below in (22), the first phrase "*you thought I sat on the chair*" indicates what expectations the hearer has about the event. Yet the second utterance "*yes, I sat in the chair*" indicates to the hearer that the event that occurred is in line with their expectations about that event. In that utterance, the fronted copula construction is also used. I would argue that this is also an instance of marking focus, along the lines of Jackendoff's definition. In this case, the speaker is again focusing the second phrase in order to indicate to the hearer that this information is relevant to their knowledge.

Listener expected information, fronted copula

(22) *ab məmbər zə-bɛl-ku   mɛsilu-ka   nɛr-u,   ɨwɛ ab məmbər **iy-ɛ***
    on chair   COMP-say-2SG think:PRF-2SG:M COP-3SG yes on chair   COP-1SG

    kof il-ɛ
    sit   say-1SG

    'You thought I sat on the chair; yes I (did) sit on the chair.'

Furthermore, the fronted copula construction is not limited to contexts where the speaker overtly states what the hearer thought. It is also used in a discourse context where the hearer has made a statement and the speaker responds to that statement. This is probably the most common discourse context for this construction. Thus, the example given below in (23) shows two utterances from two speakers. Speaker a. makes a statement about an event, "*you didn't come by the river.*" Speaker b. then conveys the correct information about the event and marks the information as unexpected in regards to the hearer. Notice how the fronted copula construction is used in this context.

Listener unexpected information, fronted copula

(23)a   *bitiq'a ɨti   ruba   ay-mɛts'axa-n*
        near   DEF   river   NEG-come:GER-2SG:M-NEG
        'You didn't come near the river.'

(23)b   *ay-konn-an   bitiq'a ɨti   ruba iy-ɛ   mɛts'iyɛ*
        NEG-be:PRF-NEG near   DEF   river COP-1SG come:GER
        'No, I came near the river.'

Again, the fronted copula construction is used when the speaker makes a statement and the hearer expected that information. For example, in (24), speaker a. states "*you came by*

the river". Speaker b. responds by saying "*yes, I came by the river.*" In other words, speaker b. is affirming that the expectations made by speaker a. are correct, and the fronted copula construction is present.

<u>Listener Expected Information, fronted copula</u>

(24)a   *bitiq'a ɨti   ruba mɛts'axa*
         near   DEF   river come:GER
         'You came by the river.'

(24)b   *bɨwɛ bəwuwu iy-ɛ   mɛts'iyɛ*
         yes   it.is.so   COP-1SG   come:GER
         'Yes, I came by the river.'

Further evidence that focus, or possibly speaker marking focus for the listener, is the correct function being coded by the fronted copula construction can be seen below in (25). In (25), the speaker is making a statement about what the listener knows. Thus, listener expectation is not relevant to this utterance. The prediction in this case would be that the fronted copula construction would not be used. This prediction is borne out; the fronted copula construction is not present.

<u>Information not relevant to Listener Expectations, no fronted copula</u>

(25) *bitiq'a*   *ɨti*   *ruba*   *kə-mɛts'-ɛ*   *k-allo-xu*   *i-xa*
      near   DEF   river   COMP-come-1SG   COMP-PROG-1SG   COP-2SG:M

      riʔan-ni   *bi*   *magadi*   *ay-konn-an*
      see:PRF-1SG   by   road   NEG-be:PRF-NEG
      'You saw me come by the river, not by road.'

Finally, it is possible that focusing as a means to mark information as relevant to hearer expectations is a cross-linguistic phenomenon. One example of this is the different forms of the word "yes" in French: *oui* and *si*. While *oui* is the standard "yes" form used in non-marked contexts, the use of *si* is limited to contexts where the speaker is marking the information as relevant to hearer knowledge, specifically to affirm a fact that has recently been negated. The examples in (26) illustrate this.

(26)a   *Elle n'est pas blonde*
         'She is not blond.'
         Response: *Oui*
         'Yes.' (She is not blond)

(26)b   *Elle n'est pas blonde*
         'She is not blond.'
         Response: *Si*
         'Yes.' (She IS blond)

Both the examples in (26) can have a response of "yes". However, the difference between the response in (26)a. and (26)b. is that in the latter the responder is specifically marking

the "yes" as relevant to hearer knowledge in that the reality is different from what the hearer expects.

Further cross-linguistic evidence is needed to conclude that focusing to mark information as relevant to hearer expectations is a category separate from other types of focusing. Here, I classify it as focusing, in general.

The evidence given for the fronted copula construction confirms that its function is to mark the focus of an utterance and, more specifically, as relevant to listener expectations. However, the question arises of whether this "fronted copula" is not actually a copula, but a focus marker with the same form as the copula. In order to explore this question, it is necessary to investigate where this construction came from. In the next section, the source of the fronted copula coding this function is explored and a description of the structure of this clause is outlined.

5 Source and structure of the fronted copula construction

Thus far, we have found that the data gives evidence of two things in Tigrinya concerning the morpheme /i(y)-/. First, the data suggests that this form is indeed a non-past copula. Second, the data elicited in context suggest that the fronted copula construction is used by speakers as a form of focus and to mark information that is assumed to be relevant to listener expectations.

Nevertheless, questions remain regarding the fronted copula form. Why was the copula used in this construction? It must also be determined why other morphemes are not used in this construction; for example, the perfective variant of the copula /nɛr-/ in past-tense utterances.

5.1 Source of the Fronted Copula Construction

To answer these questions, it is necessary to consider cleft constructions in Tigrinya. The example given below in (27) illustrates a cleft construction.

(27) *ba abtobus iy-ɛ   zə   mɛts'aku*
       by bus   COP-1SG COMP come:PRF-1SG
       'It is by bus that I came.'

Notice in (27) how main verb "came" is preceded by a complementizer "zə", takes agreement suffixes to indicate the subject, and is in the perfective form. Additionally, the copula is the present tense variant and also agrees with the subject. Here, the translation is "It is by bus that I came." The same can be seen below in (28) and (29) with overt nominal subjects.

(28) *Berħɛ iy-u   zə   mɛts'ɛ*
       Berhay COP-3SG:M COMP come:PRF-3SG
       'It is Berhay who came.'

(29) *ni   gwal iy-ɛ   zə   hiq'a-ku*
     DEF   girl COP-1SG COMP smile.at:PRF-1SG
     'It is the girl that I smiled at.'

Crucially, cleft constructions are a common source for focus clauses cross-linguistically (Heine and Kuteva 2005, Lehmann 2008). This is the case, for example, in French (Lehmann 2008: 213). Thus, regarding the questions of why the present tense copula was used in the fronted copula construction, we must examine the cleft construction as being the source for the focused copula construction.

Typically, cleft constructions consist of a fronted verbal argument with a copular element. This is followed by a complement clause. In the cleft construction, the argument followed by the copula is analyzed as a *unit of focus* within the cleft, indicated in example (30) below by square brackets marked "F".

(30) *[ba abtobus iy-ɛ]F   zə   mɛts'a-ku*
     by bus   COP-1SG   COMP   come:PRF-1SG
     '[It is by bus]ꜰ that I came.'

When the argument + copula element is analyzed as a unit of focus, it can then be generalized to non-cleft constructions. Evidence that this chunk is an independent unit can be seen by use of the present-tense copula variant /i(y)-/ in non-present cleft clauses, like those given above. The complement clauses in the examples above, for instance "that I smiled at", have perfective verb forms. However, the clefted clause uses the imperfective copula /iyɛ/.

Therefore, cleft sentences being the source for fronted copula constructions also explain the fact that the present-tense variant of the copula is always used in the fronted copula construction, even when the utterance is in the past-tense. An example of this is given below in (31).

(31) *John ay-konn-an nawiħ ner-u   berhɛ   **iy-u**   nawiħ **ner-u***
     John NEG-be-NEG tall   COP-3SG:M Berhay COP-3SG:M tall   COP-3SG:M
     'John was not tall, Berhay was tall.'

Here, the focused copula is the present tense variant, while the copula in the predicate is the past tense variant. In light of examples such as these, there is no evidence that the construction consists of a reduplicated copula. The evidence suggests that the copula also acts as a focus marker in pragmatically relevant contexts.

5.2 Structure of the fronted copula construction

The issue of the structure of the focused sentences can be solved by interpreting the verbal argument + copula construction as one unit. This is also evident from examples where adverbs cannot occur before the fronted copula, as illustrated in (32).

(32) [ba abtobus iy-u]ₑ   q'alt'ɛfu mɛts'iyu
    by bus   COP-3SG:M   quickly   come:GER
    'He came quickly by bus.'

    * ba abtobus q'alt'ɛfu iyu mɛts'iyu
      (for 'he came quickly by bus')

Examples such as that given in (32) demonstrate that the argument + copula element has been analyzed as one element and cannot be separated in the fronted copula construction, despite the fact that there is nothing ungrammatical about a verbal argument being followed by an adverbial phrase, as evidenced by the example in (32), the non-fronted counterpart to the example in (33).

(33) ba abtobus q'alt'ɛfu mɛts'iyu
    by bus   quickly   come:GER
    'He came quickly by bus.'

Therefore, it is evident that the construction in Tigrinya consists of a [argument+ copula] unit. This element is autonomous from the phrase in which it is couched as evidenced by the fact that it occurs in perfective aspect phrases while the copula in the unit of focus remains in the imperfective form. Evidence supports the idea that this unit has been reanalyzed as an autonomous focus unit from cleft constructions. This data also suggests that this unit can occur in any sentence type.

6 Discussion

This study has made several intriguing conclusions on the form of the Tigrinya copula. First, it was proved conclusively that the form in Tigrinya consisting of the root /i(y)-/ with subject agreement suffixes is indeed a present tense copula. Next, the 'fronted copula' construction was introduced, showing how this construction alternates with standard, exclusively verb-final, phrases. Then it was illustrated that the fronted copula construction consistently marks focus.

Furthermore, this construction potentially codes that the speaker is marking information that they think is relevant to the expectations or knowledge of the hearer. Similar to the recently described category of mirative which "report[s] information which is new or surprising to the speaker," the Tigrinya construction may shed light on a related category which marks information which is assumed to be new or surprising to the hearer (DeLancy 1997: 33). This is a tentative conclusion which doubtless requires more cross-linguistic evidence to support. In any event, it is not clear that marking information relevant to speaker expectations is categorically different from focus in general.

Finally, the source of the fronted copula construction was demonstrated to be cleft constructions in Tigrinya – and can further be supported by cross-linguistic evidence that cleft constructions grammaticalize into focus constructions (Heine and Kuteva 2005, Lehmann 2008). Thus, the structure of the fronted copula construction was shown to consist of a [verbal argument + copula] unit. This further explains why the present tense copula is consistently used in all fronted copula constructions, even when couched in past-tense utterances.

Cross-linguistically, cleft constructions are used by a speaker to convey the information in an utterance is relevant to listener presuppositions. Lambrecht (1994), for instance, claims that this is the cause for English it-cleft constructions. Specifically, he claims that in order for a cleft construction to be used appropriately in English, "the proposition expressed in the relative clause must be pragmatically presupposed, i.e. assumed by the speaker to be known to the addressee" (1994: 70). In fact, Lambrecht states that "the pragmatic accommodation of certain presuppositional structures may to a greater or lesser extent become *conventionalized* and eventually *grammaticalized*" (1994:70, emphasis original). Thus, the nature of the grammaticalization process in Tigrinya, where a unit from a cleft clause construction became grammaticalized as a unit of focus that the speaker can use to mark presupposed information, appears to be cross-linguistically common.

There were limitations to this study: it relied primarily from data from one speaker in an artificial fieldwork setting. This methodology was chosen for convenience: there was only one speaker available and there is no Tigrinya corpus data available at this time. Given the pragmatic nature of the fronted copula construction, natural discourse data would be vital in order to do further research on this topic. Hopefully, future research on this topic can benefit from potential corpus data or work with other speakers in natural conversational settings.

The findings illustrated in this paper are significant for research in the domain of pragmatics (specifically: focus) and Semitic linguistics. While other Semitic languages are known for having a null copula in the present tense, Ethio-Semitic languages differ in that there is a present tense copula. Whether this fronted copula construction is present in other Ethio-Semitic languages and/or neighboring languages is yet to be determined and may perhaps shed light on the evolution of this construction. Additionally, more research needs to be done on whether the use of focus to mark information as relevant to hearer expectations and knowledge is indeed a category separate from focus proper and whether further cross-linguistic evidence for this function can be found. Furthermore, this construction in Tigrinya may contribute to typological studies of how copulas function and evolve cross-linguistically.

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