Clefts in Tunen: A biclausal account

Cleft structures are common cross-linguistically and are often said to be composed of a background (or presupposition) component and an exhaustive focus component (Horn 1981, Delin & Oberlander 1995, i.a.). Structurally, clefts can be decomposed into a copular clause and a relative clause. Over time, the copula element of a cleft often develops into what is analysed synchronically as a focus marker (Harris & Campbell 1995). This means that the biclausal structure (copular clause + relative clause) develops into a monoclausal structure (focus-marked main clause). Languages can therefore be compared by the stage they are at in this grammaticalisation process.

In this talk I present results of investigations into the information structure of the Cameroonian Bantu language Tunen (Niger-Congo; Bantu A44), where such cleft structures were found in fieldwork as a frequent means of expressing focus, as exemplified in (1) below.

(1) Q: *á Pàsèkálè áná nìkí kúíyí èé?*

á	Basɛkalɛ	á-na	nɛ-ki	kuiyiə	e
COP	Pascal	REL.SM.2SG-PAST2	5-door	shut	Q

'C'est Pascale qui a fermé la porte?'
'Is Pascal the one who shut the door?' [PM, 761]

A: *ɛ́ɛ̀, á Pàsèkálè áná nìkí kúíyí*

ɛɛ	á	Basɛkalɛ	á-na	nɛ-ki	kuiyiə
yes	COP	Pascal	REL.SM.2SG-PAST2	5-door	shut

'Oui, c'est Pascale qui a fermé la porte.'
'Yes, Pascal is the one who shut the door.' [PM, 764]

I argue that these Tunen clefts are still biclausal, contra previous analyses where *á* was argued to be some sort of contrast or focus marker (Dugast 1971, Mous 2003). I support this claim with two pieces of evidence from elsewhere in the grammar: (i) investigation of copular clauses in Tunen, where *á* is found consistently in non-predicational copular clauses, supporting *á* functioning synchronically as a copula, and (ii) relative clauses marking in Tunen, where tonal evidence supports an analysis of cleft structures whereby the high tone realized on the subject is understood as marking a relative verb form. The latter piece of evidence is often opaque, given that high tones may arise from elsewhere in the syntax, and an underlying /H+H/ pattern is realized on the surface simply as a high. Furthermore, there are some inconsistencies in the tone-marking in my data, perhaps from inter-speaker variation or perhaps from transcription errors. These issues raise the question of how stable the biclausal pattern is synchronically, and whether Tunen can be considered to be partway on the grammaticalisation pathway discussed by Harris & Campbell (1995).

References

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