

The background of the slide is a dense, abstract pattern of interlocking, three-dimensional rectangular blocks. These blocks are arranged in a way that creates a complex, textured surface. The colors of the blocks are varied, including shades of blue, green, purple, brown, and orange. The lighting is soft, giving the blocks a slight shadow and making them appear to have depth.

The innovative diachrony of Bantu clefts

Jenneke van der Wal



Initial focus and clefts

The CAT caught the mouse.

It's the CAT that caught the mouse.

Biclausal cleft constructions develop over time into monoclausal focus constructions. (Schachter 1973, Givón 1979, Heine & Reh 1983, 1984, Harris & Campbell 1995, Creissels 2020, among others)

[copula – NP]	+	[relative clause]	>	[NP _{FOC} verb]
(it) is		the cat that caught the mouse	>	the CAT caught the mouse



Grammaticalisation processes

1. **Morphological:** disappearance or reinterpretation of
 - a. Expletive
 - b. Copula
 - c. Relative marking
2. **Semantic:** broader functionality, less exhaustive interpretation
3. **Syntactic:** structural changes:
 - a. [nominal predicate] [DP free relative]
 - b. [nominal predicate] [CP relative]
 - c. [FocP [TP]]



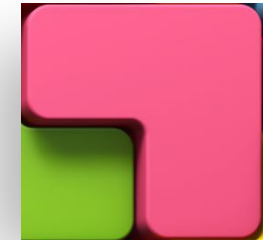
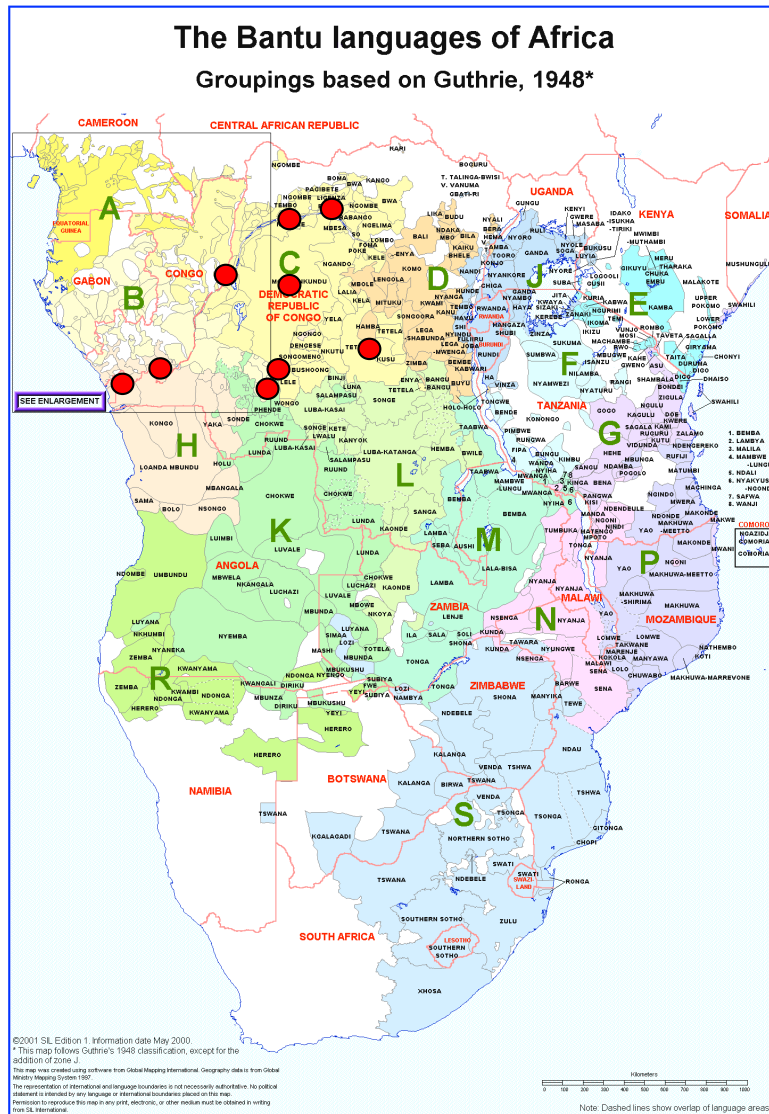
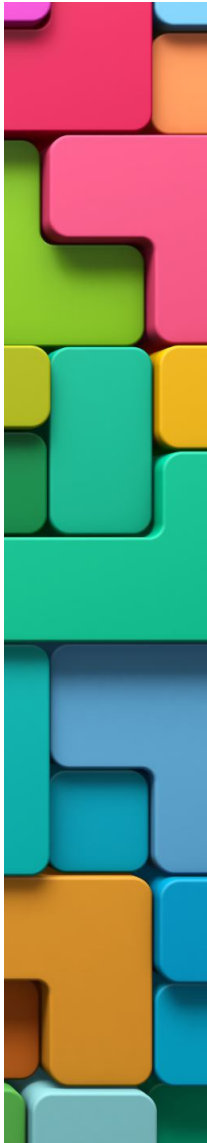
Insights from Bantu

There are more sources for focus constructions and focus marking.

1. The Lingala and Kituba focus marker derive from a head noun
2. Rukiga, Kîîtharaka, Kirundi, Kinyakyusa, Makhuwa, and Cicopi show a construction 'NP+pronominal cleft'

Synchronic variation (layering) suggests not only diachronic paths but also renewal. Could there be a 'cleft cycle'?

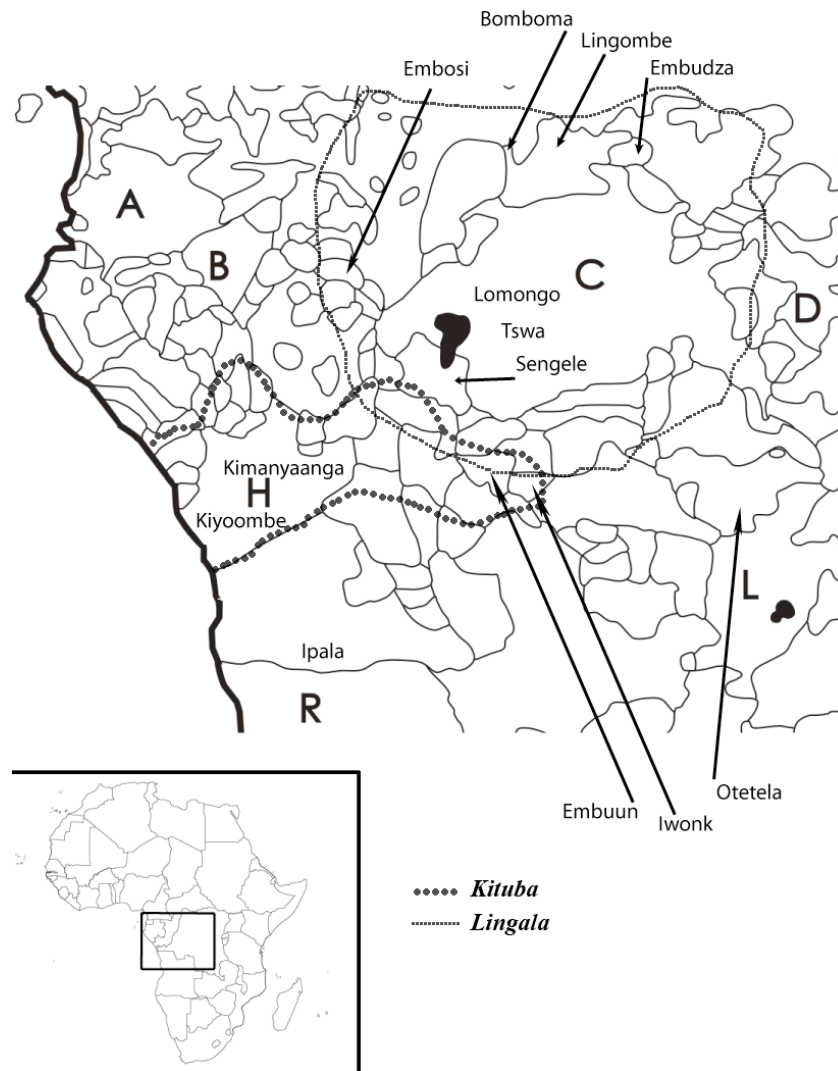
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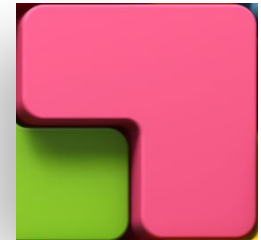
Fourth source of focus marker



Jacky Maniacky



Fourth source of focus marker

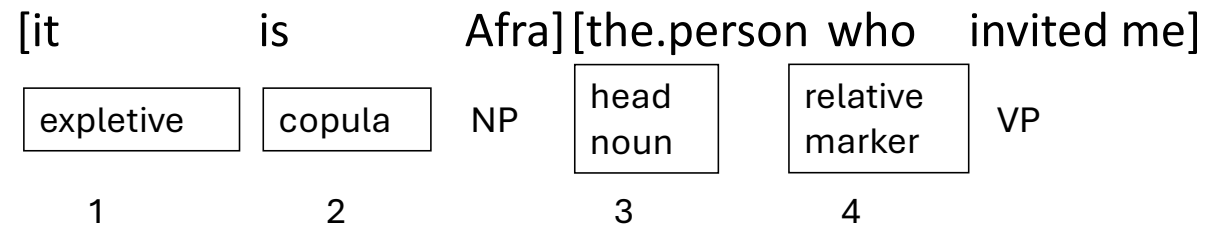


Kituba

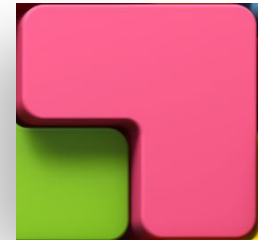
- (1) *pusu muntu mekudya mbisi*
cat FOC PRF.eat.INF fish
'It's the cat that has eaten the fish.'

Sources of focus marker:

- Heine & Reh (1984): copula
- Harris & Campbell (1995): (a combination of) expletive, copula, relative marker



Fourth source of focus marker



Lingala

(2) (Ezalí) nyáu **moto** azalí kolía mbísi
COP cat FOC 3SG.be.PRF eat fish
'It's the cat that is eating the fish.'

(3) Namóní **moto** mǎkó.
I.see.PRF person one
'I have seen one person / I have seen someone.'

Moto from cleft



Kiyoombe

- (4) a. `Wwááyí **múútú** voondidi thúúmbi
7.cat.PRED moto 1SM.kill.PRF.REL 9.mouse
'It is a cat that killed the mouse.'
- b. `Wwááyí **'bbuulu** kí-voondidi thúúmbi
7.cat.PRED 7.animal 7SM-kill.PRF.REL 9.mouse
'It is a cat that killed the mouse.'
- c. Nttí **kíima** kí-voondidi báana
3.tree 7.thing 7SM-kill.PRF.REL 2.children
'It is a tree that killed the children.'

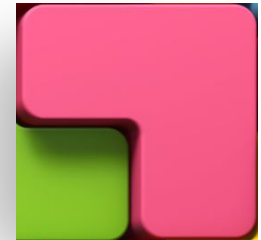
Moto from cleft



Kiyoombe

- (5) a. Múútu **u**ńtteela báana.
1.person 1SM.call.PRS 2.children
'The person calls the children.'
- b. múútú **ú**ńtteela báana
1.person 1SM.call.PRS.REL 2.children
'the person who calls (the) children'
- c. Táata múútú **ú**ńtteela báana.
father moto 1SM.call.PRS.REL 2.children
'It is father who calls the children.'

Fourth source of focus marker



- Any part of cleft can become focus marker
- but preferably overt, segmental material, which is close to the focus, and has little function
- Exaptation/reanalysis as focus marker
- (Welcome to create formal analysis and see if moto XP becomes head in clausal spine or marks DP)



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There are more sources for focus constructions and focus marking.

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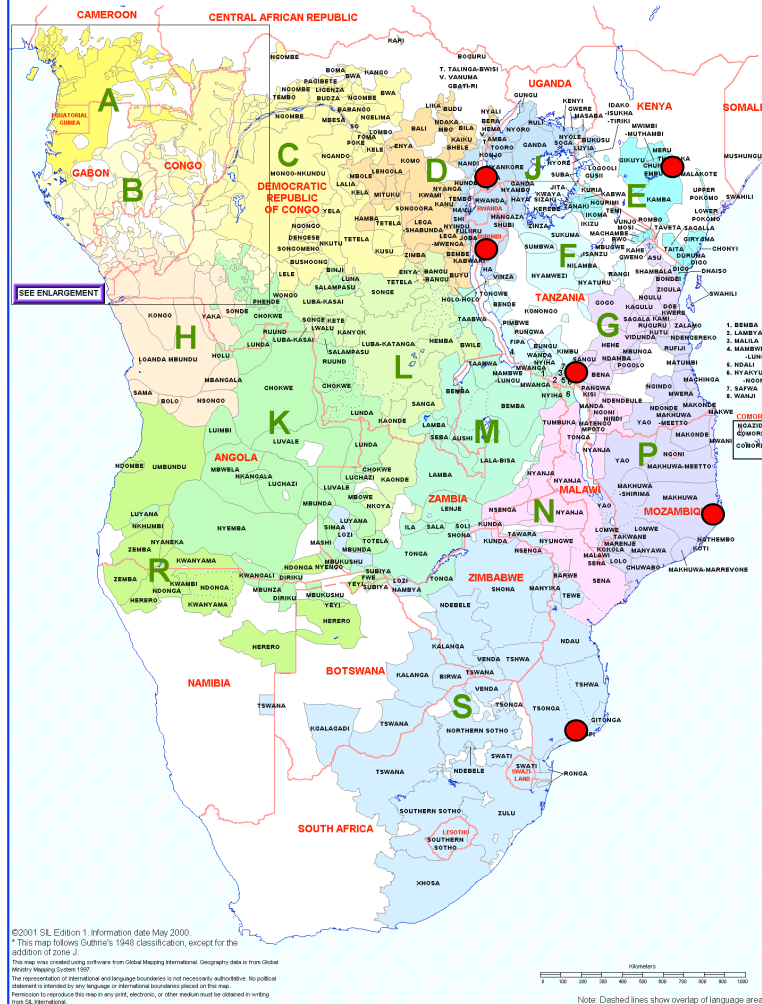
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The Bantu languages of Africa

Groupings based on Guthrie, 1948*



Rukiga (JE14)
 Kĩĩtharaka (E54)
 Kirundi (JD62)
 Kinyakyusa (M31)
 Makhuwa (P31)
 Cicopi (S61)

BaSIS
 Bantu Syntax & Information Structure

Third source of initial focus

- It-cleft

It is a fish that the cat caught.

- Reverse pseudocleft

A fish is what the cat caught.



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A fish is what the cat caught.



- (6) Kinyakyusa (Tanzania, database Lusekelo, Msovela & vdWal)

I-j-a-m-bwiga jo iji n-gu-loond-a.
AUG-9-CONN-9-ginger 9.COP 9.DEM.PROX 1SG.SM-PRS-want-FV
'With ginger is what I want.'



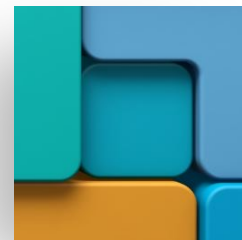
- (7) Kĩĩtharaka (Kenya, database Kanampiu & vdWal)

Mû-biira n' uu Karîmi a-riing-iré.
3-ball COP 3.PRO 1.Karimi 1SM-kick-PFV
'A ball is what Karimi kicked.'

NP COP PRO (S) V

- (8) Rukiga (Uganda, database Asiimwe & vdWal)

Muhógo ni-yó Paméla a-ryá-téeka.
9.cassava COP-9.PRO 1.Pamela 1SM-FUT-cook
'Cassava is what Pamela will cook.'



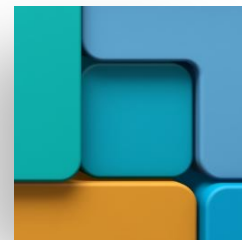
Kĩĩtharaka (Kanampiu & vdWal 2025: 233)

- (9) Context: Someone thinks erroneously that Joy is doing the dishes.

[Ūrá] ū-kū-thaambia thaáni] i Rob_{FOC}. [pseudo]
1.REL 1RM-PRS-wash 10.dishes COP 1.Rob
'The one who is washing the dishes is Rob.'

- (10) (I am looking for Rob, working in a kitchen full of people. 'Who is Rob?')

Rob n' [Ūrá] ū-kū-thaambia thaáni]_{FOC} [reverse]
1.Rob COP 1.REL 1RM-PRS-wash 10.dishes
'Rob is the one who is washing the dishes.'



Kîîtharaka

(11) Context 1: Is Joy doing the dishes?

Context 2: Who is washing the dishes?

#Context 3: I am looking for Rob, who is working in a kitchen full of people. I ask
'Who is Rob?'

Rob_{FOC} n' [we] û-kû-thaamb-i-a thaáni.]

1.Rob COP-1.PRO 1RM-PRS-clean-IC-FV 10.plate

'Rob, it's him washing the dishes.' (Kanampiu & vdWal 2025: 240)

(12) [Ûrá / *We û-kû-thaambia thaání] í Rób.

1-REL/ 1.PRO 1RM-PRS-wash 10.dishes COP 1.Rob

'(The one/he) who washes dishes is Rob.' (Kanampiu & vdWal 2025: 239)

Kirundi

(13) Context 1: We talked about your travels and you told me you're travelling with someone. A bit later in the conversation, you mention Jean. I ask 'Which Jean are you talking about?'

#Context 2: You tell me you will travel with someone. I ask 'Who will you travel with?'

Jean **ni** [**uwo** tuzóojáana]_{FOC}

Jean **ni** **u-u-o** tu-zoo-gi-an-a^H

1.Jean COP AUG-1-DEM₂ 1PL.SM-FUT-go-ASS-FV.REL

'Jean is that one (that we just talked about) that we will travel with.'

(Nshemezimana & vdWal 2025: 326)

(14) Context: Bukuru looks a lot like his father.

Oya, Butoyi_{FOC} **ni** [**wé** basa cane].

oya Butoyi **ni** **wé** ba-sa-a^H caane

no 1.Butoyi COP 1.PRO 2SM-look.like-FV.REL a.lot

'No, Butoyi, he's the one who looks a lot like him.' (Nshemezimana & vdWal 2025: 328)



Third structure: NP + basic cleft

NP COP PRO VREL
basic cleft

Sókisi ní-zó Bíiru y-aay-ózy-a.

10.socks COP-10.PRO 1.Bill 1SM-PST-wash.CAUS-FV

‘Socks, it’s them that Bill washed.’

Intervening elements



- (15) (Did the cows eat the food I left for them?)

A-mí-ízi e-n-te ni-gwó zá-á-nywa.

AUG-6-water AUG-10-cow COP-6.PRO 10SM-N.PST-drink

‘It is water that the cows have drunk.’

lit. ‘Water, the cows, it is that that they have drunk.’ [Rukiga, Asiimwe & vdWal 2025:393]

- (16) (One day, she went to a river, a very calm pool. If you listened you couldn’t hear anything talking.)

Áugá îndîí ágá nûûmba n’oó ngaatééthekeré.

a-ug-a îndî a-ga nûûmba ni o n-ka-teth-îk-îr-a

1SG.SM-say-FV now 16-DEM.PROX maybe FOC 16.PRO 1SG.SM-FUT-help-ABLE-APPL-FV

‘She said, “Probably, this is where I will get help.”’

lit. ‘Here, maybe it is here that I will get help.’ [Kîitharaka, Kanampiu & vdWal 2025:243]

Use of topic marker



- (17) (There is an argument as to whether it is sheep or cows that Juma grazed.)

Entaama zó nizó yaaríisa.

e-n-taama z-o ni-zo a-a-ri-is-a

AUG-10-sheep 10-CM COP-10.PRO 1SM-N.PST-eat-CAUS-FV

‘He has (only) grazed the sheep.’

‘As for the sheep, it’s them that he grazed.’

[Rukiga, Asiimwe & vdWal 2025: 394]

No question words



(18) *Pani tilepale va?

pani ti o-lep-ale va

1.who COP 1-write-PFV.REL 16.PRO

int. 'Who has written here?'

lit. 'Who is the one who has written here?' [Makhuwa, vdWal 2025: 490]

(19) * Nde ni we tuzoojaana?

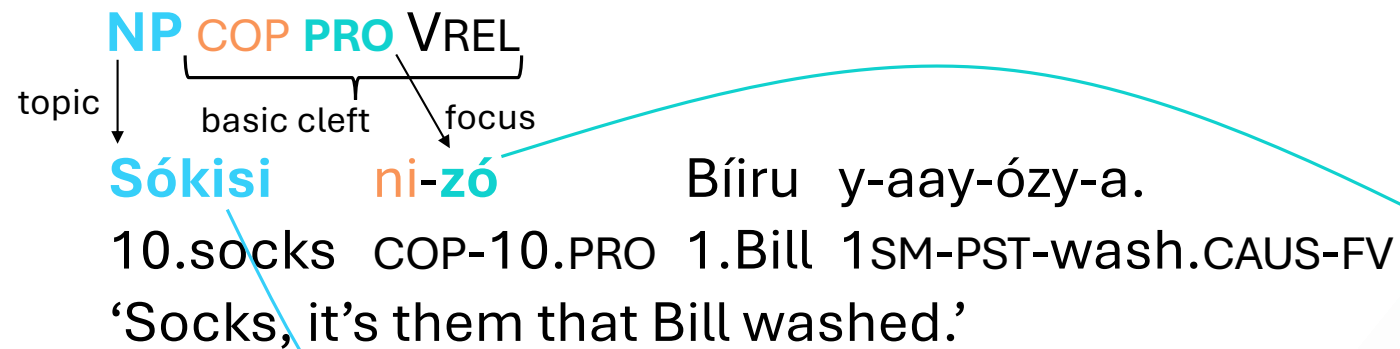
ndé ni wé tu-zoo-gi-an-a^H

who COP 1.PRO 1PL.SM-FUT-go-ASS-FV.REL

int. 'Who is the one you will travel with?'

[Kirundi, Nshemezimana & vdWal 2025: 327]

Third structure: NP + basic cleft



Fragment answer?



- (20) (We expect to receive Pedro, Paulo, Teresa and others. Did they come?)

Tereza dwé, i wu angá:ta ntí:ni.

Tereza dwe i wu a-nga-t-a n-t-ini

1.Teresa only COP 1.DEM.PROX 1SM-REL-come-FV 3-home-LOC

‘It was only Teresa who came home’

‘Only Teresa. It’s her who came home.’

[Cicopi, Nhantumbo & vdWal 2025:553]

- (21) (Which mats did Jovia weave?)

Emigúfu (niyó Jovia arukíre).

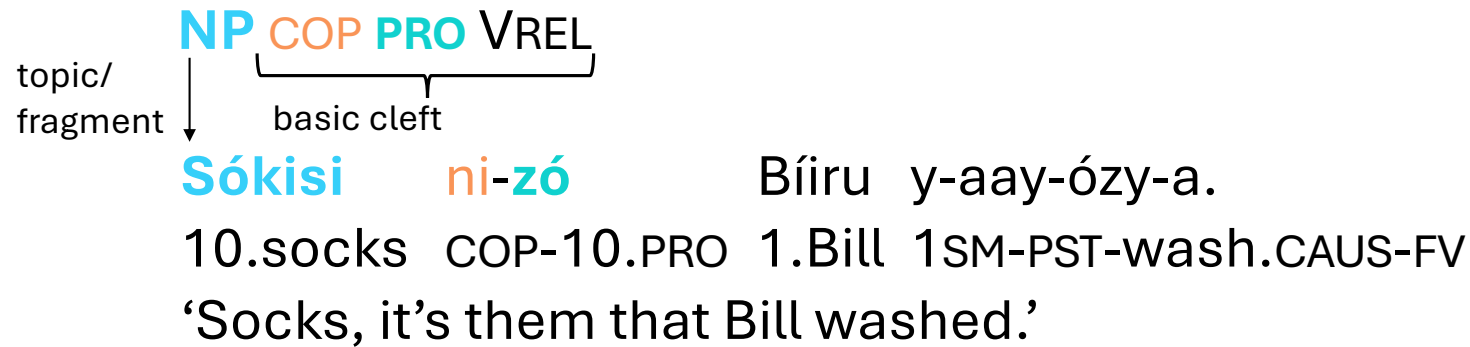
e-mi-gufu ni-yo Jovia a-ruk-ire

AUG-4-short COP-4.PRO 1.Jovia 1SM-weave-PFV

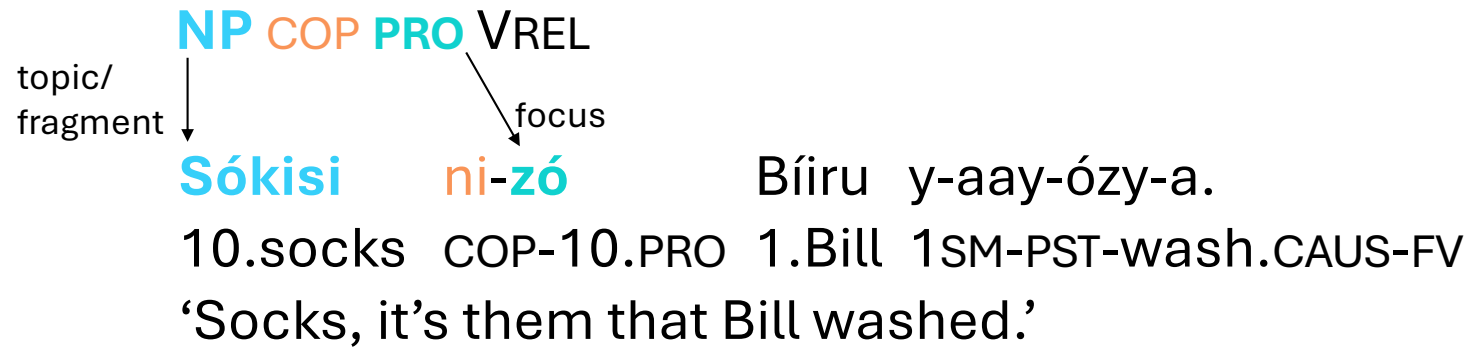
‘The short ones (it’s them that she weaved).’

[Rukiga, Asiimwe & vdWal 2025 :395]

Third structure: NP + basic cleft > monoclausal focus?



Third structure: NP + basic cleft



Third structure: NP + basic cleft > monoclausal focus?

NP FOC-AGR VREL
focus ↓
Sókisi ni-zó Bíiru y-aay-ózy-a.
10.socks FOC-10 1.Bill 1SM-PST-wash.CAUS-FV
'SOCKS Bill washed.'

Third source of initial focus



1. basic/it-cleft
 2. reverse pseudocleft
 3. NP + pronoun cleft
 - NP and clefted pronoun refer to the same referent
 - potential for reanalysis NP as focus
 - interaction with and consequences for (discourse-based) configuration
- Found in other Bantu languages (Lika, De Wit 2015) – also beyond Bantu?



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Cleft generalisation I

If a language

- can create nominal predicates ('it is the cat') and
- has relative clauses ('that caught the mouse'),

then

it can form a cleft construction ('it is the cat that caught the mouse').

"every language has cleft constructions"

(Gundel 1988: 231, Creissels 2020:17, see also Harris & Campbell 1995: 56)



Cleft generalisation II

Biclausal cleft constructions develop over time into monoclausal focus constructions.

(Schachter 1973, Givón 1979, Heine & Reh 1983, 1984, Harris & Campbell 1995, Creissels 2020, among others)

[copula – NP]	+	[relative clause]	>	[NP _{FOC} verb]
(it) is		the cat that caught the mouse	>	the CAT caught the mouse



Cleft generalisation III

Focus constructions are over time used more frequently, with more discourse functions and a weaker focus.

(Creissels 2020: 25)

- Bicausal cleft:
 - Relative clause comes with maximality presupposition
 - Clefted noun is specificational
 - Cleft: 'The maximal entity for which the predicate holds is specified as the referent of the clefted NP' > exhaustive focus
- Bleaching: also used for non-exhaustive focus
- Further bleaching: also used in detopicalisation (thetics)
 - (What is the noise?) C'est le voisin qui passe l'aspirateur (Creissels 2020)

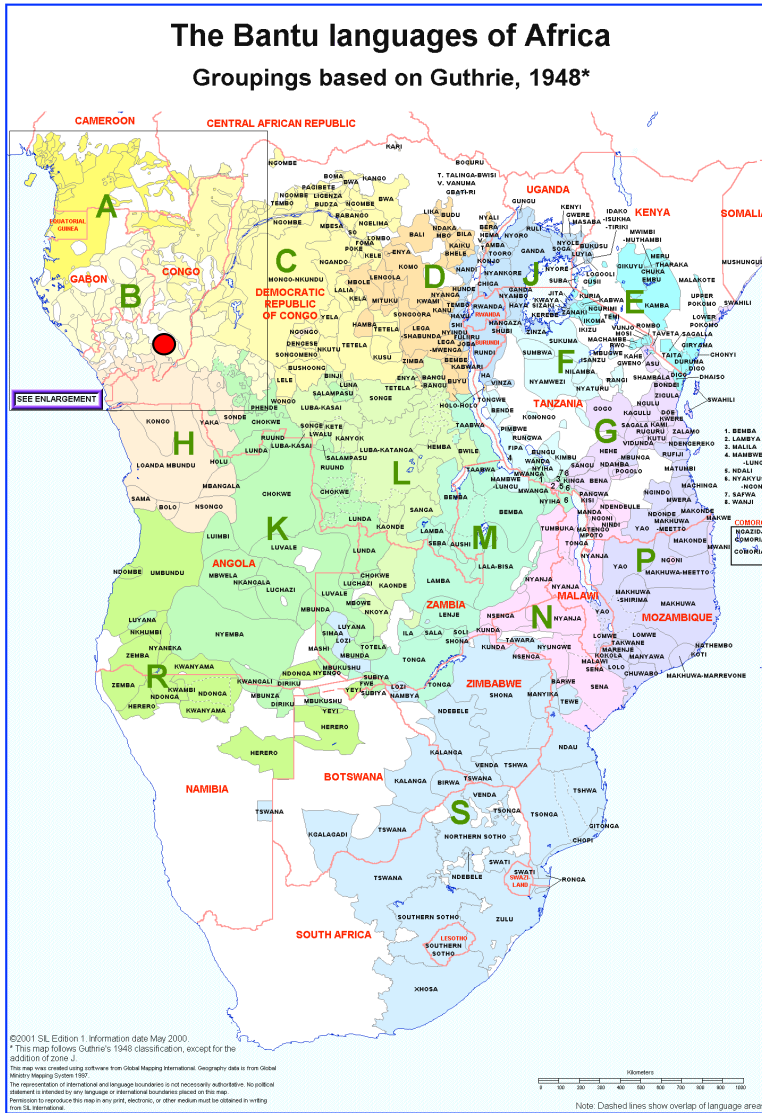
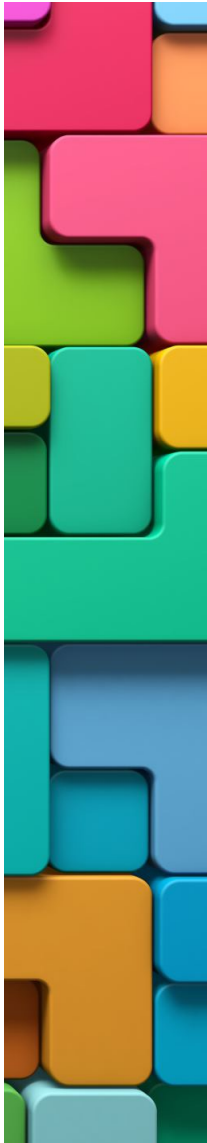


Linguistic cycles

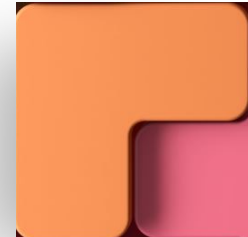
A linguistic cycle “typically describes a sequence of linguistic changes in which a word grammaticalizes [...] and is renewed by another lexical item” (Van Gelderen 2023: 1)

e.g. Jespersen’s cycle: French negation *ne* > *ne...pas* > *pas*

Given generalisations I-III,
can we observe the same cyclic mechanism in clefts?



Teke-Kukuya B77, Congo-Brazzaville



:LOT 677

Zhen Li
Word order, information structure and agreement in Teke-Kukuya

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Word order, information structure and agreement in Teke-Kukuya

:LOT

Universiteit Leiden
Centre for Linguistics

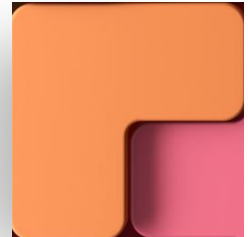


Zhen Li

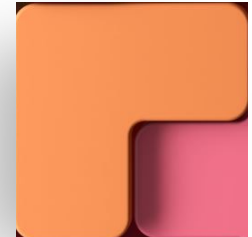
Layering of constructions

Coexistence of

- IBV focus position
- basic cleft
- reduced cleft



Immediate Before Verb (IBV) focus



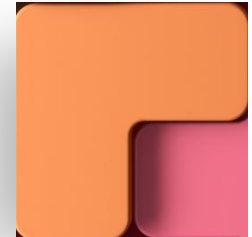
- (26)a. Mvá **kí-má** ká-siib-i?
1.dog 7-what 1SM.PST-catch-PST
'What did the dog catch?'

[SOV]

- b. (Who gave the child the oranges?)
Mwáana ma-láara **bí-búrúú** bíí-wî.
1.child 6-orange 8-parent 8SM.PST-give.PST
'The child was given the oranges by the PARENTS.'

[OOSV]

Monoclausal but still indications of cleft



- (27) a. Taará á-wí ba-a-nzulí madésu.
1.father 1SM.PST-give.PST 2-cat 6-bean
'Father gave beans to the cats.' [SVOO]
- b. Taará [má-désú]_{FOC} ká-wí bá-a-nzulí.
1.father 6-bean 1SM.PST-give.PST 2-cat
'Father gave BEANS to the cats.' [SOVO]

word order

prefix tone on the focused NP

subject marking alternation

verb-final tone

Basic cleft

- Optional copula + high tone on clefted NP
- Relative prefix + alternative SM
- Postverbal subject

mu-tí	‘a tree’
Mú-tí.	‘It is a tree.’
ma-téme ma-bvé	‘good hoes’
Ma-téme má-mbvé.	‘The hoes are good.’

- (28) (Kí-li) kí-taabí ki-ká-fúúm-í ndé ku ndándu.
7SM-COP 7-shelf 7REL-1SM.PST-buy-PST 1.PRO 17 5.market
‘It was a SHELF that s/he bought at the market.’
- (29) Ka-kí-li báa-ntaba ba-kíí-fúúm-í mú-kái ni.
NEG-7SM-COP 2-goat 2REL-7SM.PST-buy-PST 1-woman NEG
‘It was not some GOATS that the woman bought.’

Reduced cleft

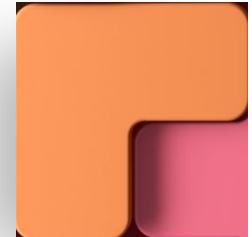
- No copula - but **high tone**
- No relative prefix – but **alternative SM**
- Preverbal subject

(30) **Bá**a-ntaba mu-kái **ká**-fúum-i.
2-goat 1-woman 1SM.PST-buy-PST
'(It was) some goats that the woman bought.'

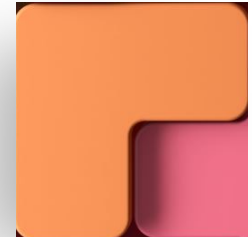
[reduced]

(31) **Bá**a-ntaba ba-**kíí**-fúúm-í mú-kái.
2-goat 2REL-7SM.PST-buy-PST 1-woman
'It was some GOATS that the woman bought.'

[cleft]



Proposed grammaticalisation



Structure	Scheme	Example
basic cleft	(COP) NP _[PRED] REL-SM-V SUBJ	(kí-li) báa-ntaba ba-kíí-fúúm-í mú-kái COP goats that.bought woman
reduced cleft	NP _[PRED] SUBJ SM-V	báa-ntaba mu-kái káá-fúum-i goats woman bought
IBV focus	SUBJ _[TOP] NP _[FOC] SM-V	mu-kái báa-ntaba káá-fúum-i woman goats bought

Given the presence of full predication, relativisation marking, and exhaustive interpretation, could the cleft instead be a more recent renewal?

(Li 2024, see also de Kind 2014)

Proposed grammaticalisation



Structure	Scheme	Example
reduced cleft	NP _[PRED] SUBJ SM-V	báa-ntaba mu-kái káá-fúum-i goats woman bought
IBV focus	SUBJ _[TOP] NP _[FOC] SM-V	mu-kái báa-ntaba káá-fúum-i woman goats bought
basic cleft	(COP) NP _[PRED] REL-SM-V SUBJ	(kí-li) báa-ntaba ba-kíí-fúúm-í mú-kái COP goats that.bought woman

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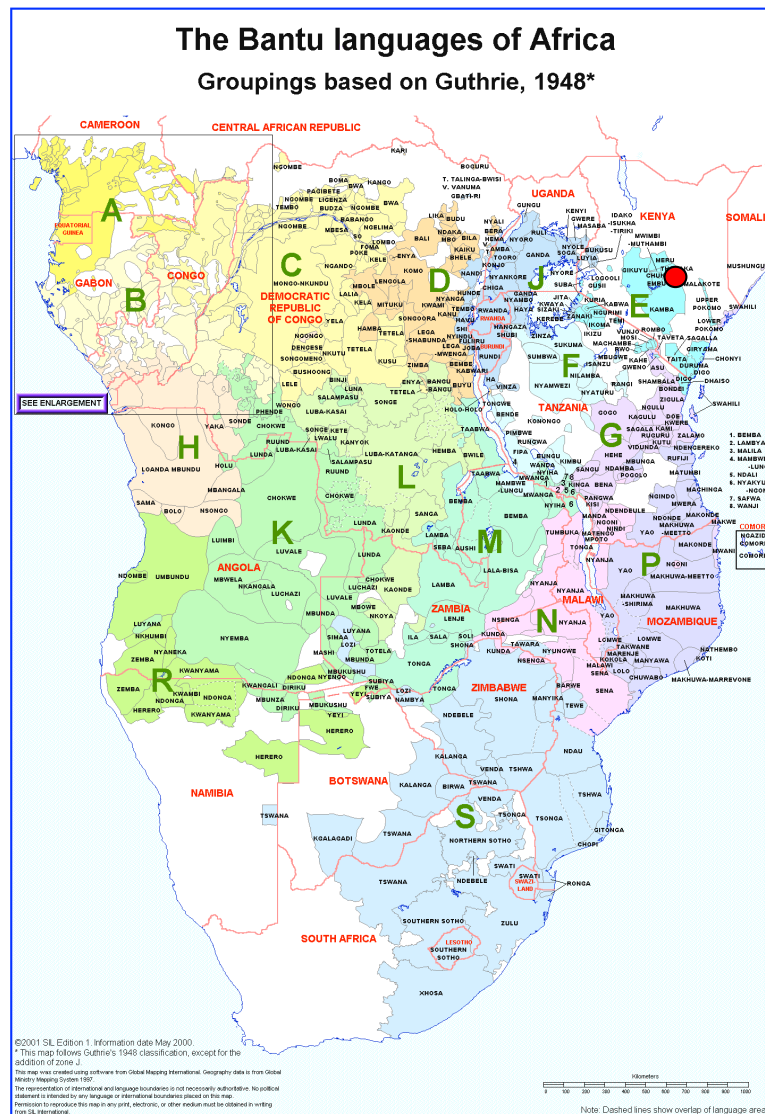
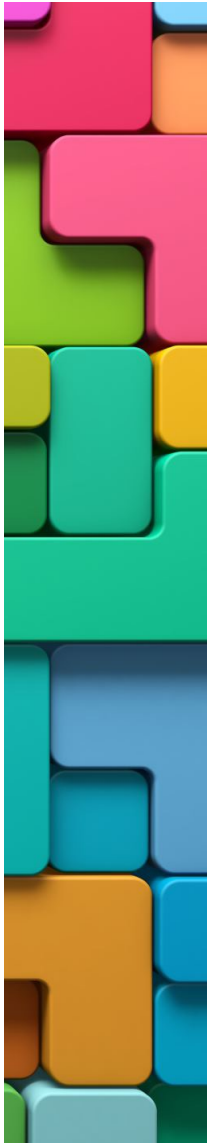
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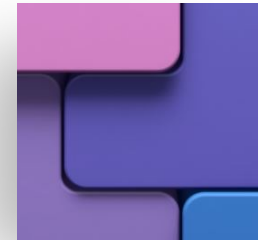
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3. Teke-Kukuya layering of immediate-before-verb (IBV) focus position, reduced cleft and a full basic cleft construction – which came first?
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Kîitharaka
E54, Kenya



Patrick Kanampiu

Cleft ingredients

- Nominal predication by means of *ni*

(33) (Who is the chef?)

Chébu í mw-ékúrú úyû.

chebu **ni** mw-ekûrû úyû.

chef COP 1-woman 1.DEM.PROX

'The chef is this woman.'

Relative marker (based on proximal demonstrative)

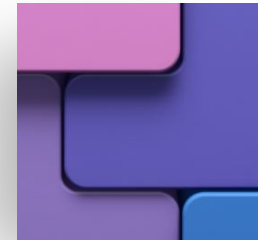
(34) Gî-tú má [**kîrá** mbîgwîiré] í gîkûrî kîné né mûnó.

kî-tuma **kî-ra** m-îgw-ire ni gî-kû-rî kî-nene mûno

7-noise 7-REL 1SG.SM-hear-PFV FOC 7SM-PRS-be 7-big INT

'The noise [that I heard] was very loud.'

(Kanampiu & vdWal 2025)



“Cleft”

Initial focus: *ni* (COP/FOC) present but no relative pronoun*

(35) I mwaana ndaróóníre.

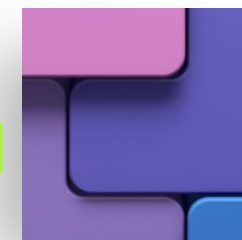
ni mw-aana nda-ra-on-ire

FOC 1-child 1SG.SM-YPST-see-PFV

'It's a/the child that I saw.'



		FocP	cleft	Kîitharaka
copula	used in predication	not necessarily	yes	yes
	change for tense	no	yes	no
	change for negation	no	yes	yes
	marker used in fragment	yes	only when elided cleft	only oblig as answer to cleft question
	marker used for any focus in any position	not necessarily	no	no
relative	relative SM	no	yes	optional
	relative pronoun	no	yes/as in relative	yes/optional
	relative tone	no	yes	yes
meaning	reconstruction in negation	yes	no	no
	reconstruction in binding	yes	no	no
	exhaustive meaning	not necessarily	yes	yes
	use in thetics	possible	no	yes?
move	island sensitivity	yes	no	yes
	cyclicity	yes	no (but)	yes



Recreating the cleft (?)

- Copula not sensitive to tense%

(36) (Did John wash the trousers?)

- a. *Ci-a-rí cáátí a-a-búúr-íré.
10SM-PST-be 10.shirt 1SM-PST-wash-PFV
int. 'It was the shirts he washed.'
- b. Í cáátí a-a-búúr-íré.
FOC 10.shirts 1SM-PST-wash-PFV
'It's the shirts he washed.'
- c. Ci-a-rí cáátí.
10SM-PST-be 10.shirt
'It was the shirts.'
- c. Ci-a-rí cáátí **i-rá** a-a-búúr-íré.
10SM-PST-be 10.shirt 10-REL 1SM-PST-wash-PFV
'It was the shirts that he washed.'

% There is variation between speakers and between subject and object clefts



Optional relative pronoun



(37) Í Kîmááthí (úrá) ákúire.

ni Kîmaathi û-ra a-ku-ire

FOC Kîmathi 1-REL 1SM-die-PFV

'It's Kîmathi who died.'

1. Cleft: answer to 'who died', or when you don't know whether it was Jane or Kîmathi
2. Nonverbal predication: when there are multiple Kimathis

“more emphasis”

Optional relative pronoun

(38) (I hear the way they way played was bad.)

Í bwéega **bûrá** bacééthíre.

ni bû-ega bû-ra ba-ceeth-ire

FOC 14-good 14-RM 2SM-play-PFV

'It's well that/how they played.'

(39)(It's the teacher who has spoken.)

Í mûrigitání (**ûrá**) áaríá.

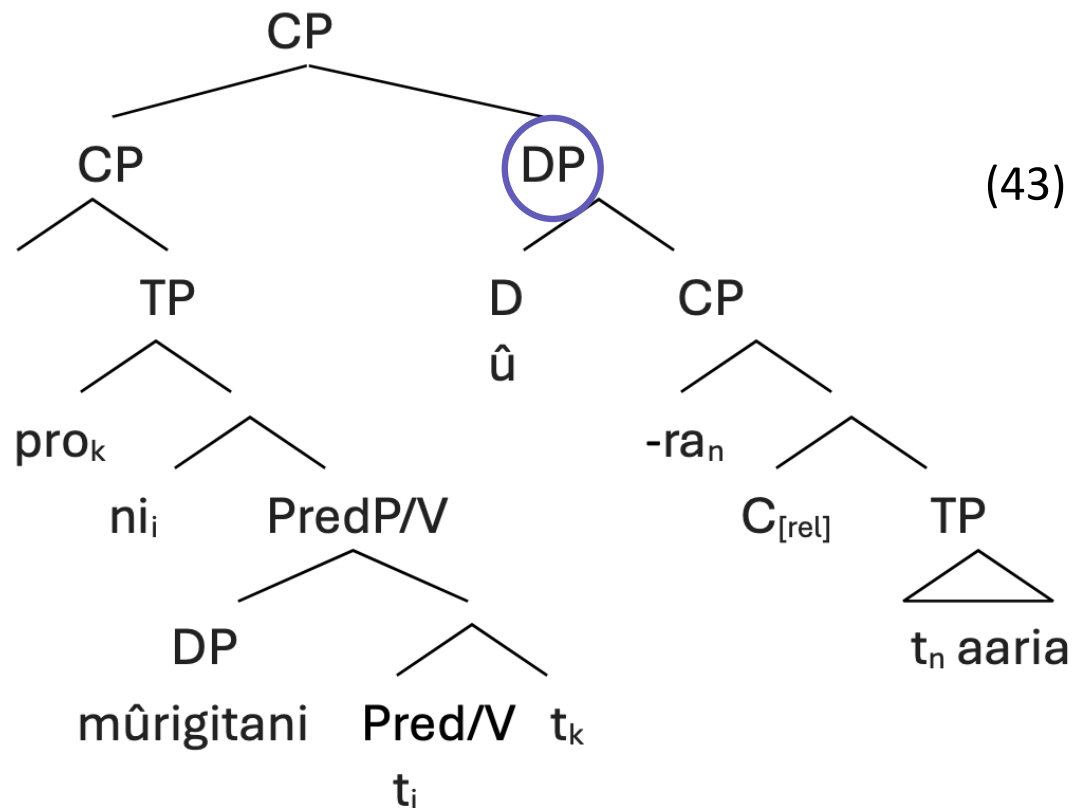
ni mû-rigitani (û-ra) a-ari-a

FOC 1-nurse (1-REL) 1SM-talk-FV

'It's the nurse who has spoken.'

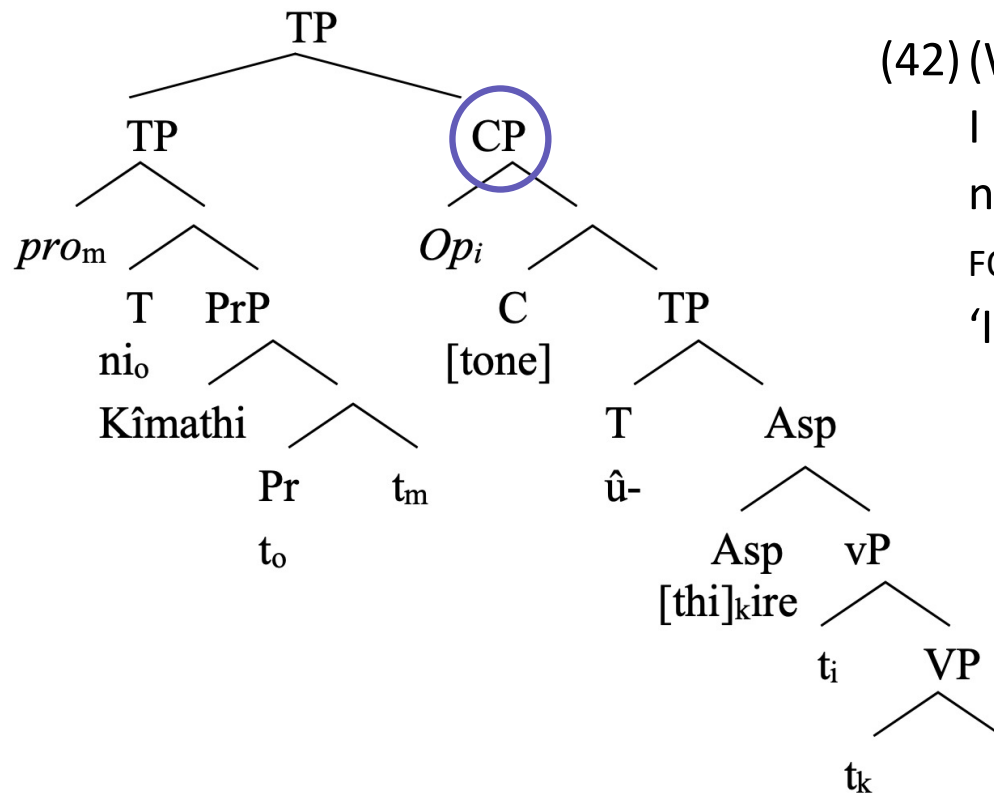


Re-created cleft (?)



(43) Í mûrigitaní **ûrá** áaríá.
 ni mû-rigitani û-ra a-ari-a
 FOC 1-nurse 1-REL 1SM-talk-FV
 'It's the nurse who has spoken.'

Reduced cleft



(42) (Who went to the farm?)

I Kîmathi ûthííre mûndaaní.

ni Kîmathi û-thi-ire mû-nda-ni
FOC Kîmathi 1RM-go-PFV 3-farm-LOC

'It is Kîmathi who went to the farm.'



Cleft cycle

cycle 1	morph:	full marking cop/rel	> reduced marking	> no marking
	sem:	exhaustive	> broader scope	> thetics
	synt:	biclausal	> reduced	> monoclausal

cycle 2			full marking	>
			exhaustive	>
			biclausal	>

Cleft cycle/circle

- Two-stage vs three-stage (Traugott & Trousdale 2013)

- Idiatov (2009, 2022): copula in question words

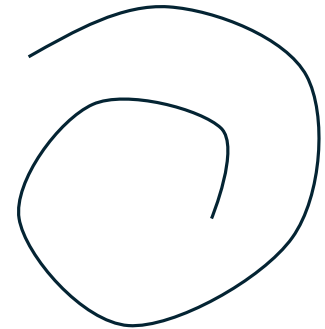
- Swahili

ni 'COP' + ni 'what' > nini 'it is what' > nini 'what'

(44) Ni nini John a-li-nunu-a?

COP what 1.John 1SM-PST-buy-FV?

'It's what that John bought?' (Augustin 2007)



Further questions

- How does this relate to the seemingly complementary distribution of initial focus and clefts in Romance ? (Bonan & Ledgeway)
- Do we see output of cycle 1 being used in cycle 2?
- Which diagnostics can be used to tell us whether we are dealing with a previous stage cleft, or a renewed cleft?
(Possibly: interpretation and use, negation)
- What about pseudoclefts diachronically?
- Is there a subject-nonsubject distinction in the diachronic path?
- What are the syntactic consequences of reanalysis as a Foc head?
- How much leftover marking and interpretation is sufficient for an acquirer to still postulate a biclausal cleft? When is the tipping point for syntactic reanalysis?
- Do you have further examples of cleft layering and possible renewal?



Insights from Bantu

There are more sources for focus constructions and focus marking.

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Thank you!

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