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Rusudan ASATIANI

TSU, Georgia

rus_asatiani@hotmail.com

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The Information Structure of a Sentence:

Cleft Questions in Megrelian and Laz

Rusudan Asatiani

TSU, Georgia

rus_asatiani@hotmail.com

I. The information Structure of a sentence: Theoretical Background

Structuring of the information, its packaging, proceeds through formal oppositions where one part of the information stands out against a background of the other part of information. From the communicational, pragmatic point of view, this information is highlighted, important and represents the foregrounding of a certain part of the information.

The theory of information structures distinguishes two main types of foregrounded constituents called as: either **Topic** or **Focus**.

During the communicative act, in the discourse, it is usual to stop the gap, which can occur in the information flow. In the dynamic linguistic structures, especially in dialogues, such supplement of information is fulfilled by question-answer pairs: the demanded information in questions is given in the answers as the foregrounded one and is called **Focus**.

From the pragmatic point of view, sometimes it is necessary to make the information more exact, more precise, and more accurate or hypernymic in order to stress the contrast between the events, to emphasize the opposition between the new and old information, to clarify their implicational relations or bridging, to underline parallel events, etc. All these are reached by foregrounding of the contrasted parts of the information. The process is called topicalization and the foregrounded part of information is called **Topic**.

In general, foregrounding can be represented by various formal means: Phonetic-Phonological, Morphological-Syntactic and/or Lexical-Pragmatic marked structures.

The strategies of formal representations of the information structuring are cross-linguistically language specific, although, it seems possible to speak about some universal signs and models of these linguistic processes.

One of such devices is so called Cleft Constructions.

II. Cleft constructions

As Cleft are called the constructions where a simple sentence has been transformed into a complex construction to mark out any part of information; for this purpose in various languages different strategies are used, though some universal features might be singled out (Harris 1993):

- A sentence is built by two clauses;
- One clause is a main one and the second – a depended one (mostly of the relative clause type);
- Main clause includes the auxiliary verb “to be” and the foregrounded constituent of the information;
- According to a concrete language strategy, in a depended clause there could not be presented the conjunctions: relative pronouns or adverbs, subordinate conjunction, etc. Binding without conjunctions doesn’t cause disorder to qualify this depended clause to be the relative one;
- The main function of the cleft constructions is the focusing of any constituent: either a noun phrase, or a verb phrase, or a postpositional phrase, or adverbs or adjectives, or the whole clause.

Such constructions mostly are the answers to questions, e.g.: *Who has come? This is the man who came* (here "the man" is focused).

III. Some preliminary comparative observations: cleft constructions in Megrelian and Laz

While analyzing cleft constructions in Megrelian and Laz, A. Harris (Harris 1993) offers the following interpretations based on the comparative analysis of the constructions.

- She mentions that contrary to Megrelian where this model mainly serves as a syntactic model for focused constituent (resp. new information), in Laz it expresses a topic (resp. old information);
- In Megrelian (and universally in other languages) a foregrounded constituent of the information flow (resp. a focus) and the auxiliary verb “to be” are in the main clause, yet, in Laz the situation is specific and the basic feature of cleft constructions is the following: the verb “to be” and a foregrounded part are found in a depended clause:

(1) *arteyi k'ulani na ye-n, ka-gami-q'on-u amu-k*
 one.NOM girl.NOM that be.PRS-S.3.SG AFF-PR-bring-AOR.S.3.SG 3.SG-ERG
 “As for the girl, he brought her out.” (translation by A. Harris.);

- In Megrelian a focus constituent is governed not by the auxiliary verb “to be” given in a main clause, but by the main verb presented in a depended clause; on the contrary, in Laz a foregrounded constituent is governed by the auxiliary verb presented in a depended clause;
- In Megrelian the conjunction (resp. particle) *ni* follows the verb of a depended clause and hence, structurally closes the whole sentence; in Laz yet, corresponding *na* follows a topic and precedes the verb “to be”; both are in a depended clause usually preceding the main one.

A. Harris analyses cleft questions (Harris 1991, 1993) as well inasmuch as they are usual in Megrelian:

(2) *so-ša re, me-u-r(t)-ki ni?*
 where-ALL be.PRS.S.3.SG PR-S.2.CV-go.PRS-S.2.SG that
 Where is it that you are going?

(3) *mu-su re, č'ar-un-s ni?*
 what-DAT be.PRS.S.3.SG write-THM-S.3.SG that
 What it is that s/he is writing?

(4)	<i>mu-ku</i>	<i>re,</i>	<i>mo-rt-u</i>	<i>ni?</i>
	Who-ERG	be.PRS.S.3.SG	PR-go-AOR.S.3.SG	that
Who is s/he who came?				

(5)	<i>mušeni</i>	<i>re,</i>	<i>me-u-r(t)-ki</i>	<i>ni?</i>
	Why is it that	you are going?	PR-S.2.CV-go.PRS-S.2.SG	that

Structurally, this type of constructions seems to be in confirmation with the universal description of clefts (Harris 1993); e.g., in (5):

- There are two clauses – one clause is *mušeni re* and the second clause is *meurki=ni*;
- The first clause contains the focused constituent – the question word *mušeni*;
- The copula *re* is presented in the first, main clause as well;
- The first clause is the superordinate clause;
- The second clause is subordinate one and has the structure of a relative clause with the clause final conjunction *ni*;
- It is not expected to find a pronominal place holder comparable to English *it*, since Megrelian does not use one otherwise (Chikobava 1936).

But, there are some problematic peculiarities as well; e.g. in (3), the question word *mušu* is in the dative case, which suggests that it cannot be the subject of *re*. The dative is the case required for the object of *čaruns* ‘writes’ in this form. Similarly, in (4), *muku* is in the ergative case, not the form needed for the subject of *re*, but the subject of *mortu* ‘came’. Thus, the given examples of cleft questions confirm that the verb of the second clause governs the case of the question word.

IV. Specific cleft questions in Laz

A. Harris has not given any examples of such cleft questions in Laz (Harris 1993), while according to our data collected during the field sessions, they are usual in Laz as well, at least in its Khopa dialect; e.g.:

(6)	<i>mi</i>	<i>(r)en,</i>	<i>na</i>	<i>mu-lu-n?</i>
	who.NOM	be.PRS.S.3.SG	that	PR-go.PRS-S.3.SG
Who is s/he who is coming?				

(7)	<i>mu</i>	<i>(r)en,</i>	<i>na</i>	<i>č'ar-um-s?</i>
	what.NOM	be.PRS.S.3.SG	that	write-THM-S.3.SG
What it is that s/he is writing?				

(8)	<i>so</i>	<i>(r)en,</i>	<i>na</i>	<i>mu-lu-n?</i>
	where	be.PRS.S.3.SG	that	PR-go.PRS-S.3.SG
Where it is that s/he is coming?				

(9)	<i>mundes</i>	<i>(r)t'u,</i>	<i>na</i>	<i>mo-xt'-u?</i>
	when	be.PST.S.3.SG	that	PR-go.PST-AOR.S.3.SG
When it was that s/he came?				

These constructions as in Laz so in Megrelian are used to represent a focus and the only difference is in some morphosyntactic feature – in Laz a focused constituent is governed by the auxiliary verb “to be” situated in the main clause in contrast to Megrelian where it is governed by the main verb presented in the depended clause.

So, there can be distinguished two types of cleft constructions in Laz: The first (given in the work by A. Harris) contributing to the topic and the second (discovered during our field sessions in Khopa) contributing to the focus. Such discursive functional difference supposedly provides the mophosyntactic differences observed between them.

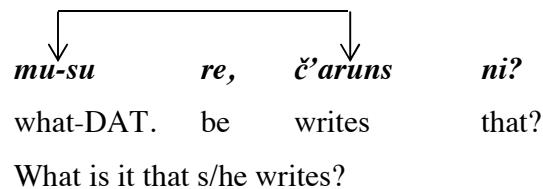
- The focus is in a main clause, whereas its background (resp. old information) is in a depended clause;
- The situation is contrary with topicalization: the topic is in a depended clause and the information collected about it – in the main one.

The last construction formally mirrors the fact that regarding the information structures not only the topicalization of an old information is valuable (resp. narrative topic) but particularly the information showing what happens to a topic; that's why, supposedly, the latter is expressed by the clause structuralized as the main one.

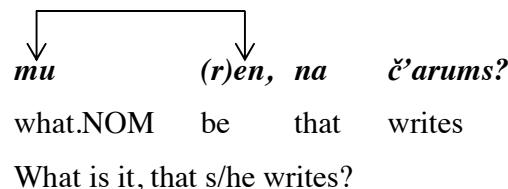
V. Conclusions

Comparative analysis of Laz and Megrelian cleft constructions has shown that the Laz cleft questions demonstrate higher level of structural splitting than the Megrelian ones. In Laz the main clause is “closed” through morphosyntactic relations inasmuch as a foregrounded constituent is governed by the auxiliary verb ‘to be’ situated in a main clause. Consequently, it is always in Nominative (as it has to be being the argument of the verb ‘to be’). In Megrelian the morphosyntactic relations are more problematic inasmuch as a main clause is structurally “open” and its focus is governed by the verb presented in a depended clause.

Megrelian:



Laz:



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