The biclausal status of Shona clefts

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Overview. This paper addresses the superficially similar focus constructions in Shona ([sna], Bantu, Zimbabwe) and Kïîtharaka ([thk], Bantu, Kenya). Using a topicalization test from Abels & Muriungi (2008), I argue that Shona has a biclausal cleft construction, while the Kïîtharaka construction is monoclausal. This asymmetry has consequences for the availability of the “intermediate” strategy for wh-questions (Muriungi 2003).

The Kïîtharaka focus construction as monoclausal. Abels & Muriungi (2008) argue against Harford’s (1997) claim that the Kïîtharaka prenominal focus construction is a biclausal cleft. If the focus construction were biclausal, then the topicalization in (1) should be just as bad as in (2), contrary to fact. They propose instead that the construction involves movement of the focused element to SpecFocP in the left periphery rather than to a higher copular clause.

(1) Topicalization out of a focus construction

(Kïîtharaka)  
(Í-goro) i-Ø-mwamba, Peter a-ra-on-ir-e t₁ (i-goro).
5-yesterday FOC-1-thief 1.Peter 1.SM-REC.PST-see-PFV-FV 5-yesterday
‘It’s the thief that Peter saw yesterday.’ / ‘Yesterday it’s the thief that Peter saw.’ (Abels & Muriungi 2008:725 (99))

(2) No topicalization from a relative clause

(Kïîtharaka)  
(Í-goro) boriisi ba-ka-thaik-a mwa amba, u-ra Peter a-ra-on-ir-e t₁ (i-goro).
5-yesterday 2-police 2.SM-FUT-arrest-FV 1-thief 1-that 1.Peter 1.SM-REC.PST-see-PFV-FV 5-yesterday
‘The police will arrest the thief that Peter saw yesterday.’ / ‘Yesterday the police will arrest the thief that Peter saw.’ (Abels & Muriungi 2008:725 (98))

The Shona focus construction as biclausal. Like Kïîtharaka, Shona disallows topicalization out of a relative clause (4), but unlike Kïîtharaka, topicalization out of a focus construction is also disallowed (3). Given that Shona topicalization is obligatorily clause-bounded (5), this suggests that the focus construction is a biclausal cleft.

(3) No topicalization from a cleft clause

(Shona)  
(*Nezuro) i-Ø-mbavha, ya-aka-on-a t₁ (nezuro).
yesterday COP-9-thief 9.REL-1.SM-see-FV yesterday
‘It’s a thief that s/he saw yesterday.’ / ‘Yesterday it’s a thief that s/he saw.’

(4) No topicalization from a relative clause

(Shona)  
(*Nezuro) ma-purisa a-cha-sung-a Ø-mbavha, ya-aka-on-a t₁ (nezuro).
yesterday 6-police 6.SM-FUT-arrest-FV 9-thief 9.REL-1.SM.PST-see-FV yesterday
‘The police will arrest the thief that s/he saw yesterday.’ / ‘Yesterday the police will arrest the thief that s/he saw.’

(5) No topicalization across clauses

(Shona)  
(*Nezuro) (*va-cha-ti) aka-on-a Ø-mbavha (nezuro).
yesterday 2.SM-FUT-say 1.SM.PST-see-FV 9-thief yesterday
‘(They will say) s/he saw a thief yesterday.’ / ‘Yesterday (*they will say) s/he saw a thief.’

Implications. Kïîtharaka has a wh-question strategy that Muriungi (2003, 2011) dubs “intermediate” because the wh-phrase stands between the subject and the verb (6). He analyzes this as clause-bounded topicalization of the subject to SpecTopP above the focused wh-phrase in SpecFocP. In my analysis, Shona focused wh-phrases are in a higher copular clause, so topicalization of the subject to a position higher than that is impossible, and thus the Shona counterpart of (6) is ungrammatical.

(6) Subject may be topicalized above focused wh-phrase

(Kïîtharaka)  
Nazario i-mbi a-gur-ir-e t₁?
Nazario FOC-what 1.SM-buy-PFV-FV
‘What did Nazario buy?’ (Muriungi 2003:86 (5a))

Conclusion. This paper provides new data showing that the Kïîtharaka pattern is not universal throughout Bantu, contra Muriungi’s (2003:87) speculations.

Word Count: 500
References


