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The Information Structure of a Sentence: Cleft Questions in Megrelian and Laz

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I. Introduction: theoretical background

- Structuring of the information, its packaging, proceeds through 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.
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- The theory of information structures distinguishes two main types of foregrounded constituents called as: either **Topic** or **Focus**.
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- 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 (mostly new) one and defined as **Focus**.
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- From the pragmatic point of view, sometimes it is necessary to make the information more exact, more precise, 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 topical part of information (mostly old) defined as **Topic**.
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- 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, yet, it seems possible to speak about the universal signs of these linguistic processes.
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II. Cleft constructions: universal characteristics

- One of such devices is, so called, Cleft Construction that is found in many languages around the world.
 - As Cleft are defined the constructions where a simple sentence transforms into a complex construction to mark out the foregrounded information.
 - Some universal features of clefts might be singled out (Harris 1993):
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- A construction must consist two clauses;
 - One clause is a main (resp. superordinate) and the second is a dependent one (resp. subordinate) using a relative clause strategy;
 - The main clause contains copula or a copula substitute and a foregrounded constituent of the information;
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- According to a concrete language strategy, in a dependent 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 dependent clause as a relative one;
 - The main function of such cleft constructions is the foregrounding of any constituent: either a noun phrase, or a verb phrase, or a postpositional phrase, or adverbs, or adjectives, or the whole clause.
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III. Cleft constructions in Megrelian and Laz

- A. Harris (1991) while analyzing the cleft constructions in Megrelian and Laz underlines some functional and formal specificities and differences between Megrelian and Laz clefts.
 - Contrary to Megrelian where this model mainly serves as a syntactic device for a **focusing** of constituents, in Laz it expresses a **topic**;
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- In Megrelian a focus constituent is governed not by the auxiliary verb “to be” given in a main clause, but by a verb presented in a dependent clause; on the contrary, in Laz a foregrounded constituent is governed by an auxiliary verb presented in a dependent clause.
 - In Megrelian the conjunction (resp. particle) ***ni*** follows a verb of a dependent clause and closes a whole sentence; in Laz corresponding ***na*** follows a topic and precedes the verb “to be”; both are in a dependent clause that usually precedes a main one.
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IV. Cleft questions

- In her works A. Harris (1991, 1993) analyzes cleft questions that are very usual in Megrelian:
 - ***so-ša***(All.) ***re, meurki ni?***
Where is it that you are going?
 - ***mu-su***(Dat.) ***re, č'aruns ni?***
What it is that s/he is writing?
 - ***mi-ki***(Erg.) ***re, mortu ni?***
Who is s/he who came?
 - ***mušene*** ***re, meurki ni?***
Why is it that you are going?
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- Structurally, this type of constructions seems to be in confirmation with the universal description of clefts (Harris 1993):
 - There are two clauses – (a) *mušeni re* and (b) *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).
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- She has not given any examples of corresponding cleft questions existing in Laz (at least according to our informants in Khopa):
 - ***mi (r)en, na mulun?***
Who is s/he who is coming?
 - ***mu (r)en, na č'arums?***
What it is that s/he is writing?
 - ***so (r)en, na mulun?***
Where it is that s/he is coming?
 - ***mundes (r)t'u, na moxt'u?***
When it was that s/he came?
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- These constructions in Laz like in Megrelian are used to represent a focus and the only difference is certain morphosyntactic feature: in Laz a focused constituent is governed by the auxiliary verb “to be” in contrast to Megrelian where it is governed by the main verb of a sentence.
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- Thus, there can be distinguished two types of cleft constructions in Laz: The first (given in the work by Harris) contributing to the topic and the second – to the focus.
 - Such functional difference supposedly provides the differences between them:
 - The focus is in a main clause, whereas its background (resp. old information) is in a dependent clause. The situation is contrary with topicalization: the topic is in a dependent clause and the information collected about it – in the main one.
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- Comparative analysis of Laz and Megrelian cleft constructions has shown that Laz cleft questions demonstrate higher level of splitting than the Megrelian ones:
 - In Laz a main clause is closed through morphosyntactic relations: a foregrounded constituent is governed by a main clause auxiliary verb and, thus, is always in Nominative, whereas in Megrelian a main clause is structurally open and focus is governed by a verb presented in a dependent clause - consequently, it is presented either by the Nominative, or Ergative, or Dative, or Allative.
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Megrelian:

mu-su *re,* *č'aruns* *ni?*
what-DAT. be writes that?
"What is it that s/he writes?"

Laz:

mu *(r)en,* *na* *č'arums?*
what.NOM be that writes
"What is it that s/he writes?"

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- The cleft constructions universally serve the purpose of focusing a constituent in a content question; in Megrelian and Laz they can represent broadened pragmatic functions and semantic nuances such are: repeated questioning, surprise and astonishment, anger and irritation, sadness and worry, etc.
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