Cleft sentence patterns in the opening formula of Coptic letters

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Abstract:

Cleft sentence is one of the prevalent focus strategies in the Coptic language, it could encode different focus readings depending on the context, one of which is presentational (new information) focus, one typical example of the presentational reading of Coptic clefts is the opening formula of Coptic letters. This paper intends to investigate the grammatical features of the basic cleft patterns represented in the epistolary opening formula.

Keywords: Coptic language, cleft sentence, Focus, Coptic letters, Opening formula.

ملخص:

تعد جملـة ال "Cleft" واحدة مـن أسـاليب التوكيد شـائعة الاستخدام في اللغـة القبطية، وذلك لمـا يمكن أن تقدمـه من دلالات توكيدية مختلفة بحسب السياق الذي ترد فيـه، أحدها هـو التوكيـد التقديمي (التوكيد علـى معلومـة جديدة)، وتعد الصـيغة الافتتاحية في الرسائل القبطية أحد أشهر الأمثلة على هذا النوع من التوكيد فى جملة ال "Cleft" القبطية، وجاءت هذه الورقة البحثية المعنونة "أنمـاط جملـة ال "Cleft" في الصـيغة الافتتاحيـة للرسـائل القبطيـة" لعرض ودراسـة الخصـائص النحويـة لأنمـاط ال "Cleft" الرئيسة المستخدمة في الصيغة الافتتاحية للرسائل.

الكلمات الدالة: اللغـة القبطيـة، جملـة ال "Cleft"، التوكيـد، الرسائل القبطيـة، الصـيغة الافتتاحية.

Introduction

Cleft constructions are one of the most common syntactic focalization patterns in the Coptic language, they are mainly used to mark focus on arguments,[(1)] they consist of two parts: a focal point that is always placed first in the sentence, and a topic element that is formed with a relative or a circumstantial clause,[(2)] as the following:

− Basic sentence:

ⲧⲉⲧⲛ̅ⲛⲁϫⲉ <u>ⲡⲁⲓ</u> (Mark 13:11)

You shall say this.

− Cleft sentence:

<u>ⲡⲁⲓ</u> ⲡⲉⲧⲉⲧⲛⲁϫⲟⲟϥ (Mark 13:11)

It is this that you shall say.

Both of the above sentences represent the same proposition but not the same information structure, while the basic sentence describes an action in the future with no special emphasis, the cleft sentence focuses on the object of the sentence.

From a semantic point of view, Coptic clefts are used to express exhaustive listing focus i.e., specifying an exhaustive set of discourse entities for which a given proposition holds true and excludes all other possibilities,[(3)] in other words, the focused NP specifies an exhaustive list of the values for the variable represented in the following relative clause

ⲡⲁⲉⲓⲱⲧ ⲡⲉⲛⲧⲁϥⲕⲁⲁⲧ ⲙ̅ⲙⲁⲩ

it is my father who left me there.[(4)]

In the above example, the focal point ⲡⲁⲉⲓⲱⲧ "my father" provides the appropriate value for the variable represented by the resumptive pronoun "ϥ" in the open sentence ⲛⲧⲁϥⲕⲁⲁⲧ ⲙ̄ⲙⲁⲩ "X who left me there", thus the sentence implies that my father is the only one who left me there.

In Coptic Clefts, the focused NP may express information that is not contextually construable i.e., the NP in question has no semantic antecedent in the previous discourse and has not therefore been brought to the addressee's attention.[5] In this case, the exhaustive focus is also presentational since it introduces a new referent into the discourse.[6]

ⲟⲩϩⲱⲃ ⲛ̄ⲟⲩⲱⲧ ⲡⲉⲛⲧⲁⲓⲁⲓⲧⲉⲓ ⲙ̄ⲙⲟϥ ⲛ̄ⲧⲙ̄ ⲡⲭⲟⲉⲓⲥ (Ps 26:4)[7]

It is one thing that I asked from the lord.

One famous example for the concurrent expression of exhaustive and presentational focus is the epistolary opening formula, in which the identity of the writer/sender represents the most important piece of information, while the following relative clause includes situationally given information.[8] This paper deals with the various cleft patterns introduced in the opening formula of Coptic letters.

The epistolary opening formula:

As the term already suggests, the opening formula usually occupies the opening one or two lines at the beginning of a letter,[9] it often comprises the names (or more information) of both the sender (A) and the addressee (B),[10] plus a form of the verb ⲥϩⲁⲓ "to write",[11] in most cases it uses one of the cleft sentence patterns.[12]

It has the following basic patterns:[13]

1.   A ⲡⲉⲧⲥϩⲁⲓ ⲛ̄/ⲉ B

This is the commonest cleft sentence pattern in the Coptic language,[14] it consists of the focal point and the pronominal element (ⲡⲉ/ ⲧⲉ/ ⲛⲉ) followed by the relative clause.[15]

Focal Point	PRON	Relative clause
The sender (A) (It is) A	ⲡⲉ SING. MASC.	ⲉⲧⲥϩⲁⲓ ⲛ̄/ⲉ B who writes to B

The pronominal element (ⲡⲉ/ ⲧⲉ/ ⲛⲉ) usually agrees with the focal point in gender and number,[16] and it mostly merged with the following relative pronoun,[17] as the following:

ⲡⲉ ⲉⲧ	→	ⲡⲉⲧ
ⲧⲉ ⲉⲧ	→	ⲧⲉⲧ
ⲛⲉ ⲉⲧ	→	ⲛⲉⲧ

This pattern represents the standard epistolary opening formula used in early Coptic letters,[18] especially the literary ones,[19] it is considered the successor of the Egyptian opening formula found in Demotic letters A *pꜣ nty ḏd n* B "it is A who says to B",[20] which in turn represents the cleft sentence construction in later Egyptian,[21] the main difference between the two formulas is the verb, while Demotic followed earlier Egyptian tradition using the verb *ḏd* " to say", the Coptic equivalent always comes with the verb ⲥϩⲁⲓ "to write".[22]

– **Examples on this pattern:**

ϣⲉⲛⲟⲩⲧⲉ ⲡⲉⲧⲥϩⲁⲓ ⲛⲧⲁϩⲱⲙ (ShIII 21-6) [23]

It is Shenoute who writes to Tahom.

ⲇⲱⲣⲱⲑⲉⲟⲥ ⲡⲉⲧⲥϩⲁⲓ ⲙⲡ[ⲉ] ⲩⲗⲁⲃⲉⲥⲧⲁⲧⲟⲥ ⲁⲡⲁ ⲥⲓⲛⲟⲩⲑⲓⲟⲥ

It is Dorotheos who writes to the most pious Apa Sinouthios. [24]

ⲃⲏⲥⲁ ⲡⲓⲉⲗⲁⲭⲓⲥⲧⲟⲥ ⲡⲉⲧⲥϩⲁⲓ ⲙ̄ⲡⲉϥⲙⲉⲣⲓⲧ ⲛ̄ⲥⲟⲛ ⲙⲁⲑⲑⲁⲓⲟⲥ

It is the humblest Besa who writes to his beloved brother

Matthew. [25]

ⲥⲓⲛⲟⲩⲑⲓⲟⲥ ⲡⲓⲉⲗⲁⲭⲓⲥⲧⲟⲥ ⲡⲉⲧⲥϩⲁⲓ ⲙ̄ⲡⲉϥⲙⲉⲣⲓⲧ ⲛ̄ⲉⲓⲱⲧ

ⲛ̄ⲑⲉⲟⲫⲓⲗⲉⲥⲧⲁⲧⲟⲥ ⲁⲩⲱ ⲙ̄ⲙⲁⲕⲁⲣⲓⲱⲧⲁⲧⲟⲥ ⲁⲡⲁ ⲧⲓⲙⲟⲑⲉⲟⲥ [26]

It is the humblest Sinouthios who writes to his beloved fa-
ther the most God-loving and most blessed Apa Timotheos.

ⲇⲓⲟⲥⲕⲟⲣⲟⲥ ⲡⲉⲗⲁⲭⲓⲥⲧ [ⲟⲥ ⲙⲡ] ⲣⲉⲥⲃⲩⲧⲉⲣⲟⲥ ⲡⲉⲧⲥϩⲁⲓ ⲉϥ[ϣⲓ] ⲛⲉ

ⲉⲡⲉϥⲑⲉⲟⲥⲉⲃⲏⲥ ⲛⲓⲱ [ⲧ ⲁ] ⲡⲁ ϩⲁⲙⲟⲓ

It is the humble priest Dioscorus who writes asking for his
pious father Apa Hamoi. [27]

ⲓⲥⲁ] ⲁⲕ ⲙ[ⲛ] ⲯⲁⲓ̈ ⲙⲛ̄ ⲃⲉⲛ [ⲓⲁⲙⲓⲛ ⲛⲉⲧⲥϩ] ⲁⲓ̈ ⲙⲙⲉⲥⲟⲩⲉⲣ [ⲓⲥ ⲭⲁⲓⲣⲉ]

It is Isaak and Psai and Benjamin who write to Meswer
[is, hail!]. [28]

2. A ⲉⲧⲥϩⲁⲓ ⲛ̄/ⲉ B

Similar to the first pattern, this pattern is also formed with a relative clause as its topic. the primary difference between the two patterns is the omission of the pronominal element (ⲡⲉ/ ⲧⲉ/ ⲛⲉ) in this pattern, thus the focal point is followed directly by the relative clause.[29]

Focal Point	Relative clause
The sender (A) (It is) A	ⲉⲧⲥϩⲁⲓ ⲛ̄/ⲉ B who writes to B

Coptic grammarians indicate that the focal point in this pattern is restricted to independent person pronouns only,[30] which are focus expressions by nature,[31] notice in the examples below, the name of the sender is preceded by the independent person pronoun for the first person singular "ⲁⲛⲟⲕ".[32]

This pattern is frequently used in the epistolary opening formula, it particularly occurs in the literary letters.[33]

– **Examples on this pattern:**

<p align="center">ⲁⲛⲟⲕ ⲕⲱⲥ ⲉⲧⲥϩⲁⲓ ⲉⲧϣⲓⲛⲉ ⲉⲡⲁⲙⲉⲣⲓⲧ ⲉⲥⲟⲛ ⲏⲗⲓⲁⲥ</p>

<p align="center">(Epiph 290, 1-3) [34]</p>

It is me, Kws, who writes asking for my beloved brother Hlias.

<p align="center">ⲁⲛⲟⲕ ⲥⲟⲫⲓⲁ ⲉⲧⲥϩⲁⲓ ⲛⲁⲕⲟⲣⲃⲏⲛⲉ</p>

<p align="center">It is me, Sophia, who writes to Korbe.[35]</p>

<p align="center">ⲁⲛⲟⲕ ⲇⲁⲩⲉ[ⲓ] ⲇ ⲡⲉⲉⲗⲁⲭⲓⲥⲧⲟⲥ ⲉⲧⲧⲟⲗⲙⲁ ⲉⲧⲥϩⲁⲓ̈ ⲛⲁⲡⲉϥⲙⲉⲣⲓⲧ ⲛ̄ⲉⲓⲱⲧ ⲁⲡⲁ ⲓⲥⲁⲕ ⲡⲉⲧⲟⲩⲁⲁⲃ (Epiph 145, 2-4)[36]</p>

It is me, the humblest David, who dares (and) writes to his beloved father the holy Apa Isak.

ⲁⲛⲟⲕ ⲡⲁⲧⲉⲣⲙⲟⲩⲧⲉ ⲉⲧⲥϩⲁⲓ ⲉϥϣⲓⲛⲉ ⲉⲡⲉϥⲙⲉⲣⲓⲧ ⲡⲥⲟⲛ ⲡⲁⲩⲗⲟⲥ

It is me, Patermute, who writes asking for his beloved brother Paul.[37]

3. A ⲡⲉϥⲥϩⲁⲓ ⲛ̄/ⲉ B

Cleft sentence in Coptic can be formed with a circumstantial clause as the topic element instead of the usual relative clause,[38] this pattern consists of the focal point followed by the pronominal element (ⲡⲉ/ ⲧⲉ/ ⲛⲉ) and a circumstantial clause.[39]

Focal Point	**PRON**	**circumstantial clause**
The sender (A) (It is) A	ⲡⲉ SING. MASC.	ⲉϥⲥϩⲁⲓ ⲛ̄/ⲉ B who writes to B

Like in the first pattern, the pronominal element (ⲡⲉ/ ⲧⲉ/ ⲛⲉ) here agrees with the focal point in number and gender,[40] and it usually elides with the following circumstantial converter.[41] notice that in this pattern the circumstantial clause contains a resumptive pronoun "ϥ" that agrees with the focal point in gender and number.[42]

This pattern of Coptic cleft sentence is popular in the opening formula of letters and other documentary texts as well[43], it is used as an alternative to the most common and more literary patterns A ⲡⲉⲧⲥϩⲁⲓ and A ⲉϥⲥϩⲁⲓ.[44]

– **Examples on this pattern:**

ⲍⲁⲭⲁⲣⲓⲁⲥ ⲡⲩⲥⲋⲁⲓ[45]ⲛⲡⲩⲅⲛⲏⲥⲓⲟⲥ ⲛⲫⲓⲗⲟⲥ ⲣⲁϣⲓⲇ (Ry1 285, 1)[46]

It is Zacharias who writes to his sincere friend Rashid.

ⲛⲉⲉⲣⲉⲱⲥ ⲙⲛ ⲙⲁⲣⲧⲏⲥ ⲛⲉⲩⲥⲋ[ⲁ]ⲓ ⲛⲡⲉ [ⲩϫⲟⲉⲓⲥ ⲛⲕ] ⲩⲣⲓⲥ ⲁⲡⲁ ⲓⲁⲛⲉ

ⲛⲇⲓⲟⲓⲕ

(Cat. 1180, 1-2)[47]

It is Neereus and Martes who write to their lord, the (village) administrator, Apa Iane.

4.   A ⲉⲩⲥⲋⲁⲓ ⲛ̄/ⲉ B

This is another pattern of Coptic cleft sentence that is formed with a circumstantial clause, it differs from the previous one in that it is formed with the focal point followed directly by a circumstantial clause.[48]

Focal Point	circumstantial clause
The sender (A) (It is) A	ⲉⲩⲥⲋⲁⲓ ⲛ̄/ⲉ B who writes to B

This pattern is typically used in the opening formula of the literary letters, the most known instances of it are those of the letters in the New testament.[49]

– **Examples on this pattern:**

ⲓ̈ⲟⲩⲇⲁⲥ ⲡⲋ̄ⲙ̄ⲋⲁⲗ ⲛ̄ⲓⲥ̄ ⲡⲉⲭⲥ̄ ⲡⲥⲟⲛ ⲇⲉ ⲛ̄ⲓⲁⲕⲱⲃⲟⲥ ⲉⲩⲥⲋⲁⲓ̈ ⲙ̄ⲙⲉⲣⲁⲧⲉ ⲉⲧⲋⲙ̄ ⲡⲛⲟⲩⲧⲉ ⲡⲉⲓⲱⲧ (Jd. 1:1)[50]

It is Jude, the servant of Jesus the Christ, and the brother of James, who is writing to the beloved ones who are in God the father.

ⲡⲁⲩⲗⲟⲥ ⲙⲛ̄ ⲧⲓⲙⲟⲑⲉⲟⲥ ⲛ̄ⲅ̄ⲙⲅⲁⲗ ⲙ̄ⲡⲉⲭ̄ⲥ̄ ⲓ̄ⲥ̄ ⲉⲩⲥⲅⲁⲓ ⲛ̄ⲛⲉⲧⲟⲩⲁⲁⲃ ⲧⲏⲣⲟⲩ ⲅⲙ̄ ⲡⲉⲭ̄ⲥ̄ ⲓ̄ⲥ̄ ⲛⲁⲓ ⲉⲧϣⲟⲟⲡ ⲅⲛ̄ ⲛⲉⲫⲓⲗⲓⲡⲡⲟⲥ ⲙⲛ̄ ⲛ̄ⲉⲡⲓⲥⲕⲟⲡⲟⲥ ⲁⲩⲱ ⲛ̄ⲇⲓⲁⲕⲟⲛⲟⲥ (Phil. 1:1)[51]

It is Paul and Timotheos, the servants of the Christ Jesus, who are writing to all those who are holy in the Christ Jesus, these who are being in the Philippi with the bishops and the deacons.

ⲡⲁⲩⲅⲟⲩⲥⲧⲟⲥ ⲛⲣⲉϥϫⲣⲟ ⲍⲏⲛⲱⲛ ⲉⲩⲥⲅⲁⲓ ⲉⲣⲁⲧⲟⲩ ⲛⲛⲉⲛⲛⲉⲓⲟⲧⲉ ⲉⲧⲟⲩⲁⲁⲃ ⲛⲉⲩⲥⲉⲃⲏⲥ ⲉⲧⲟⲩⲏⲅ ⲅⲛ ϣⲓⲏⲧ

It is the victorious Augustus Zenon who is writing to our holy and pious fathers that reside in Shiet.[52]

ⲁⲛⲟⲕ ⲡⲉⲥⲛ̄ⲧⲉ ⲉⲓⲥⲅⲁⲓ ⲓ̈ⲱⲅⲁⲛⲛⲏⲥ

(Epiph 308, 1-2)[53]

It is me, Pesente, who is writing to John.

Conclusion:

We have seen that Coptic cleft sentence is an argument-focus construction which often signals an exhaustive focus interpretation, the exhaustive focus may be presentational when it introduces new discourse referents, a typical example of this type of focus is the epistolary opening formula that usually occupies the first lines at the beginning of a letter and includes one or all of the names of sender and addressee plus a verb indicating the writing process.

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43- See, Richter, T.S., 2017. The pattern ⲡⲉϥⲥⲱⲧⲙ "the one who hears" in Coptic documentary texts. In Bosson, Nathalie, Anne Boud'hors, and Sydney H. Aufrère (eds), Labor omnia uicit improbus: miscellanea in honorem Ariel Shisha-Halevy, OLA 256, pp. 315-329.

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