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:

تعدد جملة "Cleft" واحدة من أساليب التوكيد شائعة الاستخدام في اللغة القبطية، وذلك لما يمكن أن تقدمه من دلالات توكيدية مختلفة حسب السياق الذي ترد فيه، أحد هذه التوكيد التقديمي (التوكيد على معلومة جديدة)، وتعتبر الصيغة الافتتاحية في الرسائل القبطية أحد أشهر الأمثلة على هذا النوع من التوكيد في جملة "Cleft" القبطية، وجاءت هذه الورقة البحثية المعنونة "أنماط جملة "Cleft" في الصيغة الافتتاحية للرسائل القبطية" لعرض ودراسة الخصائص النحوية لأنماط ال "Cleft" الرئيسي المستخدمة في الصيغة الافتتاحية للرسائل. الكلمات الدالة: اللغة القبطية، جملة "Cleft"، التوكيد، الرسائل القبطية، الصيغة 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:

\[
\text{τετηναξε \pai} \quad \text{(Mark 13:11)}
\]

You shall say this.

– Cleft sentence:

\[
\pai \ \text{πετηναξουν} \quad \text{(Mark 13:11)}
\]

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

\[
\text{παισωτ πεντακασ} \ \text{ηναυ}
\]

it is my father who left me there.\(^4\)
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In the above example, the focal point ⲡⲱ ⲓⲱ “my father” provides the appropriate value for the variable represented by the resumptive pronoun “q” in the open sentence ⲡⲧⲡⲧⲡ Ⲣⲧⲡⲧ “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.\(^6\)

\[ \text{ⲟⲩⲧⲱ ⲡⲟⲩⲣⲓⲝ ⲡⲧⲧⲡⲧⲡⲧ Ⲣⲧⲧⲡⲧ ⲡⲟⲩ ⲧⲟⲩ ⲧⲟⲩⲧⲡⲧ (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 ⲡⲧⲧⲡ ⲡⲟⲩ “to write”,\(^11\) in most cases it uses one of the cleft sentence patterns.\(^12\)
It has the following basic patterns: (13)

1. A ⲡⲥⲡⲡ ⲥ/ⲥ ⲥ Ⲧ ⲫ B

This is the commonest cleft sentence pattern in the Coptic language, (14) it consists of the focal point and the pronominal element (ⲡ/ⲥⲡ ⲥ/ⲥ) followed by the relative clause. (15)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focal Point</th>
<th>PRON</th>
<th>Relative clause</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The sender (A)</td>
<td>ⲡ ⲥ ⲫ</td>
<td>ⲡⲥⲡ ⲥ ⲥ Ⲧ ⲫ B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(It is) A</td>
<td>ⲡ SING. MASC.</td>
<td>who writes to B</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The pronominal element (ⲡ/ⲥ/ⲥⲡ) usually agrees with the focal point in gender and number, (16) and it mostly merged with the following relative pronoun, (17) as the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ⲡ ⲥ ⲫ</th>
<th>→</th>
<th>ⲡ ⲥ ⲫ</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ⲡ ⲥ ⲫ</td>
<td>→</td>
<td>ⲡ ⲥ ⲫ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ⲡ ⲥ ⲫ</td>
<td>→</td>
<td>ⲡ ⲥ ⲫ</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 p3 nty dd 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 dd “to say”, the Coptic equivalent always comes with the verb ⲡⲥⲡ ⲡ “to write”. (22)
Examples on this pattern:

omegaute petegrai ntaqam (ShIII 21-6) \(^{(23)}\)

It is Shenoute who writes to Tahom.

dorothesoc petegrai n[n] gelahestatos apa sinyoiooc

It is Dorotheos who writes to the most pious Apa Sinouthios.\(^{(24)}\)

bhsa piekaxiaston petegrai npeiherit unoia noyoiooc

It is the humblest Besa who writes to his beloved brother Matthew.\(^{(25)}\)

sinyiooc piekaxiaston petegrai npeiherit neiat
neofihelastatos awi unoia kariostatos apa tinoioooc\(^{(26)}\)

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

dioskopoc piekact [oc np] rcesvteoroc petegrai ek[aw] ne
epexoosovhc niow [t a] pa gamoi

It is the humble priest Dioscorus who writes asking for his pious father Apa Hamoi.\(^{(27)}\)

icaw a+k npfai nui ben [iahin netcs] a[ e]yecovd [ic xaipe]

It is Isaak and Psai and Benjamin who write to Meswer [is, hail!]\(^{(28)}\)
2. **A ἐτεραὶ ὦ/ε 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 (πε/ τε/ ηε) in this pattern, thus the focal point is followed directly by the relative clause.\(^{(29)}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focal Point</th>
<th>Relative clause</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The sender (A)</td>
<td>ἐτεραὶ ὦ/ε B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(It is) A</td>
<td>who writes to B</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 “ἀνοκ”\(^{(32)}\)

This pattern is frequently used in the epistolary opening formula, it particularly occurs in the literary letters.\(^{(33)}\)

- **Examples on this pattern:**

  ἀνοκ κως ἐτεραὶ ἐτοιμὴν ἐπαφηρὲν ἐκὸν ἡλίας
  (Epiph 290, 1-3)\(^{(34)}\)

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

  ἀνοκ σοφία ἐτεραὶ νακορβίνη
  (Epiph 145, 2-4)\(^{(35)}\)

  It is me, Sophia, who writes to Korbe.

  ἀνοκ ἄγη[ε] Ἀ νεκλακτος ἐτοιλῆ ἐτεραὶ ἐπαφηρὴν ἑιῶτ ἄπα ἰκακ πετογαλβ (Epiph 145, 2-4)\(^{(36)}\)
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It is me, the humblest David, who dares (and) writes to his beloved father the holy Apa Isak.

ἈΝΩΚ ΠΑΤΕΡΜΟΥΤΕ ΕΤϹΡΑΙ ΕΨΩΙΝΗ ΕΠΕΧΜΗΡΙΤ ΠϹΟΝ ΠΑΥΛΟϹ

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

3. Α ΨΕΨΡΑΙ Ψ/Ε Β

Cleft sentence in Coptic can be formed with a circumstantial clause as the topic element instead of the usual relative clause, this pattern consists of the focal point followed by the pronominal element (πε/ τε/ ηε) and a circumstantial clause.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focal Point</th>
<th>PRON</th>
<th>circumstantial clause</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The sender (A)</td>
<td>πε</td>
<td>εψξραϊ ψ/ε Β</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(It is) A</td>
<td>SING. MASC.</td>
<td>who writes to B</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Like in the first pattern, the pronominal element (πε/ τε/ ηε) here agrees with the focal point in number and gender, and it usually elides with the following circumstantial converter. notice that in this pattern the circumstantial clause contains a resumptive pronoun “ς” that agrees with the focal point in gender and number.

This pattern of Coptic cleft sentence is popular in the opening formula of letters and other documentary texts as well, it is used as an alternative to the most common and more literary patterns Α ΨΕΨΡΑΙ and Α ΕΨΞΡΑΙ.
Examples on this pattern:

It is Zacharias who writes to his sincere friend Rashid.

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

4. Ἀ ἐςεαὶ ἢ/ἐ 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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focal Point</th>
<th>circumstantial clause</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The sender (A)</td>
<td>ἐςεαὶ ἢ/ἐ B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(It is) A</td>
<td>who writes to B</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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.

Examples on this pattern:

Ἰούςας πρῆγαλ ἢ/ἐ πεξῆ πεον ἀἐ ἦνακωβος ἐςεαὶ ἢνεράτε ἐτρῆ πῃογτε πεοστ (Jd. 1:1)
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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.

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

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

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.
References:


5- Reintges, syntax and semantics, p.7.

6- Reintges, Coptic Egyptian, p.445.

7- Budge, E. A. W., The earliest known Coptic psalter.

8- Reintges, Coptic Egyptian, p.445.


13- For more detailed information about the various patterns of the epistolary opening formula. see, Biedenkopf-Ziehner, koptischen Briefformular, p.39-53 & 225-232.
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18- EISSA, the Title Apa, p.121.


20- Biedenkopf-Ziehner, koptischen Briefformular, p. 44.


30- In dialects other than Sahidic, this pattern shows a considerable amount of variation concerning the elements that can occur as the focal point, in the Theban dialect, for instance, this pattern is associated with indefinite NP focus as well. See, Shisha-Halevy, A., 2007. Topics in Coptic Syntax: Structural Studies in the Bohairic Dialect. (Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 160). Leuven: Peeters p. 295.

31- Reintges, Coptic Egyptian, p.441.

32- In the epistolary opening formula, this is not always the case, the use of the independent person pronoun is not obligatory in this pattern, it is also commonly used in the other patterns as well.


36- Crum and Evelyn-White, The monastery of Epiphanius.


38- Shisha-Halevy, Coptic grammatical chrestomathy, p.119.


40- Layton, A Coptic grammar, p.375.

41- Biedenkopf-Ziehner, koptischen Briefformular, p.45.


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45- ρηψεϊ is another spelling for ρηψεϊ which occurs very often, for more explanation about this phenomena see, Richter, The pattern ρηψεϊ, p.319.


49- Kahle, Bala'izah, p.183.

50- ST. SHENOUDA ED.

51- Horner, G., ed.

52- Reintges, Coptic Egyptian, p.443.

53- Crum and Evelyn-White, The monastery of Epiphanius.
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3- Budge, E. A. W., 1898. The earliest known Coptic psalter: the text, in the dialect of upper Egypt, edited from the unique papyrus Codex Oriental 5000 in the British Museum. London.


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