Questioning Clefts: The Story (and Struggle) of Revising Content Questions in Skerre

Doug Ball

Creator of Skerre; Truman State University

Language Creation Conference
March 6, 2021
Some Introductory Syntactic Properties of Skerre

- This talk → a deep dive into the syntax of my primary constructed language, Skerre

- Strongly head-initial
  - For clauses: Verb-initial word order (default order is V-S-O-Obl, but the order after the verb is flexible)
  
  ```
  Yasin pftv tsa Karak (name) a abs ihosi nmlz. eat ye all.pn Tsotar. (name)
  'Karak gave the food to Tsotar.'
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- Syntactic role of full NPs is signaled by a word initial to the expression of the participant – I call these words prenominals
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Some basic morphosyntactic properties of Skerre:

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  - Ex. Yasin give. pftv tsa erg Karak (name) a abs ihosi nmlz. eat ye all.pn Tsotar. (name)
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Ex.

\[ \text{Yasin tsa Karak a ihosi ye Tsotar.} \]
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Ex. Verb

Yasin  tsa Karak a ihosi  ye  Tsotar.
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Ex. Verb Subject Object
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Ex.  Verb  Subject  Object  Oblique
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Introduction to Content Questions

What are Content Questions?

Questions with the "5 Ws" (and How and Which) – questions about a subpart of the sentence aka Supplemental Questions aka Wh-questions

Content questions have interesting syntactic properties in a bunch of languages, including English and Skerre.
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Roadmap

1. The Expression of Content Questions
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2 Cleft Constructions, in general and for Skerre
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2. Cleft Constructions, in general and for Skerre
3. Problems and Solutions for Skerre
There are several different ways to make content questions, including...

1. **In-Situ**
   Stick the interrogative expression where it would otherwise go, given its syntactic role.
   As in: You're talking about what?!

2. **Use "Dislocation"**
   Stick the interrogative expression first; then, have a normal sentence after.
   (Essentially) English's ("normal") strategy → What are you talking about?

3. **Use a Cleft Construction**
   Questioning Clefts

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Strategies for Making Content Questions in Cross-Linguistic Perspective

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3. Use a Cleft Construction → least well-known
A cleft construction:
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  - **It-Clefts**: e.g. *It was cleft constructions that they were talking about.*
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English, in fact, has several subtypes of cleft constructions, including:

- **It-Clefts:** e.g. *It was cleft constructions that they were talking about.*

- **Wh-Clefts:** e.g. *What they were talking about was cleft constructions.*
Why Go with Clefts in Skerre?

Peer Pressure (aka The Behavior of Other Languages with a Similar Typological Profile)

Clefts for content questions seem to be quite common in verb-initial languages; they appear in Austronesian languages (all/nearly all), Many languages of the Pacific Coast of North America Tsimshianic languages, Salishan languages (most/all), Wakashan languages (at least some) and Chumashan languages (at least some). Mayan languages (at least some) some Celtic languages (maybe more historically than currently)

And even in some other languages that aren't strongly verb-initial Algonquian languages (some) Bantu languages (some)

Why not have Skerre join them?
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The Information Structure–Syntax Interface

Languages often use cleft constructions for "contrastive emphasis" (Harries, 1973). Contrastive This kind of construction takes a set of items under consideration and definitively picks one out. Emphasis Strongly highlights this one item. In content questions, a large set of items are under consideration (= the possible answers). Furthermore, the question-asker would like to ultimately know exactly which item to actually consider – that might be worth highlighting. Bottom line: The information structure properties of cleft constructions fit well with information structure requirements of content questions.

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Questioning Clefts

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**Bottom line:** The information structure properties of cleft constructions fit well with information structure requirements of content questions
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Interrogative Phrase Location in the Sentence, part 1

Verb-initial languages overwhelmingly have the interrogative expression first in content questions (Potsdam, 2009). This tendency is also confirmed by the surveys from WALS Crossing WALS Feature 82A (on Subject–Verb order) (Dryer, 2013a) with WALS Feature 93A (on Interrogative Phrase location) (Dryer, 2013b)...

∼70% of VS languages surveyed (89/127) have their interrogative phrases obligatorily initial.

My aim for Skerre: to be a fairly run-of-the-mill verb-initial language → interrogative-first content questions

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Interrogative Phrase Location in the Sentence, part 2

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  Ex.

  Tsirahan a Tsotar.

  AGT.NMLZ.hunt ABS (name)

  'Tsotar is a hunter.'
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  Ex. Predicate Nominal Subject
  
  Tsirahan a Tsotar.
  
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- Thus, a cleft version of “What did Karak give to Tsotar” would be ordered in Skerre like:
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- In content question clefts, the interrogative expression is most commonly realized as a predicate nominal → an absolute requirement in Skerre.
- In Skerre, predicate nominals are clause-initial (without a copular verb), as in:

  Ex. Predicate Nominal       Subject
  Tsirahan       a       Tsotar.
  AGT.NMLZ.hunt   ABS (name)
  'Tsotar is a hunter.'

- Thus, a cleft version of “What did Karak give to Tsotar” would be ordered in Skerre like:

  (Is) what that gave by Karak to Tsotar?
Why Go with Clefts in Skerre?
Interrogative Phrase Location in the Sentence, part 2

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- Interrogative-initial content questions: ✓
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The Problems With Clefts

Basics

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The Problems With Clefts
Free Relative Problems 1

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- French uses a demonstrative determiner + relativizer to start its free relative clauses:

  Ex. Ce dem.det qu'ils rel'3pl.subj disaient say. pst.ipfv

  'What they were saying' (≈ 'that which they were saying')

- Makassar uses a generic noun (and an otherwise normal relative clause) for its free relative clauses:

  Ex. anu thing ku-kanre-a 1sg.erg -eat- det ...

  'That which I ate ... ' (Jukes, 2005: 670)

But still: What are the other possibilities? How common are the various types? This typological research remains to be done.
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The Problems of Clefts

Skerre-internal Problems

- There are also questions about how certain Skerre-specific things should work, too
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Recall that there are prenominals like *a*, as in

**Ex.**

\[
\text{Tsirahan agt.nmlz hunt a abs Tsotar (name)}
\]

'Tsotar is a hunter.'

Should prenominals like *a* appear or not in the Skerre clefts?

In Skerre relative clauses, there can be a relativizer, *an*, as in:

**Ex.**

\[
\text{a abs tsikwe deer an rel yetin find. pftv a abs ihosi nmlz eat}
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'the deer that found the food.'

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Towards a Solution

- What to do?

I continued to look for examples from some of my 'favorite' natural languages. I continued to search for and read relevant literature: both older (Harries, 1973; Citko, 2004; Andrews, 2007; Dryer, 2007) and newer (Kaufman, 2018; Caponigro, 2021). I sketched some ideas out.
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- I sketched some ideas out
The Current Solution

So, I have adopted for Skerre ...

The structure for all (relevant) clefts:

[Predicate Nominal + Free Relative Clause]

Free Relative Clauses are then made up of:

aan'frel' + Remainder of the Clause

aan = a fused from of a'absolutive' + an'relativizer'

So, the actual Skerre rendition of "What did Karak give to Tsotar?"

would be:

Ex Tseyi what aanfrel yasin give. pftv tsa erg Karak (name) ye all.pn Tsotar? (name)'

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What I Learned

There is a lot more cross-linguistic diversity than one might expect (even for just content questions). There's a bunch that linguists still don't know about the nature of languages. I still find clefts interesting. Sometimes, one needs to do a LCC talk to truly make a decision about something in their own conlang.
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