What we found is (not just) a focus construction

Jenneke van der Wal & Patrick Kanampiu, CALL 2020

1. Introduction

Kîîtharaka (Gurthrie code E54), spoken in the centre of Kenya by about 180,000 people, has SVO as the canonical word order, and uses word order variation to express focus and topic. There is one construction in which the initial noun phrase is followed by (what looks like) a copula[1] and a strong pronoun, which we call the *n'we* construction. This is illustrated for differen noun classes in (1)-(3):

(1)   (You might think that it was Peter who talked, but…)
　　　nDáníérí   n'-**wé**　　á-ár-iir-i-é.
　　　1.Daniel   COP-1.PRO　1SM-talk-PFV-IC-FV
　　　'Daniel (is the one who) talked.'

(2)   (There is a dispute over what Kawîîra saw.)
　　　Múúró n'**úú** Kawîîra óóníre.
　　　muu-ro ni-u-o　　Kawîîra　a-on-ire
　　　3-river　COP-3-PRO 1.Kawîîra 1SM-see-PFV
　　　'A river is what Kawîîra saw.'

(3)   (Which books by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o would you recommend?)
　　　The River Between　i-**rî-o**　　rî-ega.
　　　The River Between   COP-5-PRO 5-good
　　　'*The River Between* is the best book.' (îbuku 'book' is in class 5)

> Our question in this talk is what the syntactic structure of this construction is.
> There are (at least) two options:
>   1.   reverse pseudocleft: 'Daniel is the one who talked.'
>   2.   left-dislocated topic + cleft: 'Daniel, it's HE who talked.'
>
> We argue that the second structure accounts better for the data.

2. It's not a copular construction

Pseudoclefts are basically copular constructions of the form [[free relative] cop [NP]] 'what you saw is a dragon', which can be reversed to [[NP] cop [free relative]] 'a dragon is what you saw'. If this were the underlying structure of the n'we construction, we make the following predictions:
   A. The two parts can be swapped and keep the same form.
   B. The focus is on the post-copular phrase, like with other copular clauses.
   C. The copula changes when changing the tense.
None of these is borne out.

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[1] The reconstructed proto-Bantu copula *ni appears in Kîîtharaka as *n-* preceding a vowel-initial word and as *i-* preceding a consonant.

We first try to invert the parts to the left and right of the copula, which results in ungrammaticality:

(4)   Rob   n'-[we   û-kû-thaambi-a   thaáni]
        1.Rob   COP-1.PRO   1RM-PRS-wash-FV   10.dishes
        'ROB is washing the dishes'

(5)   *[We   û-kû-thaambia   thaani]   i   Rob.
        1-DEM.DIST / 1.PRO   1RM-PRS-wash   10.dishes   COP   1.Rob
        int. 'The one/he who washes dishes is Rob

Instead, the free relative in a pseudocleft starts with a pronominal demonstrative in -ra, and this pseudocleft can indeed be reversed.

(6)   (Someone thinks erroneously that Joy is doing the dishes.)
        [Ûra   û-kû-thaambia   thaani]   i   Rob.
        1.DEM.DIST   1RM-PRS-wash   10.dishes   COP   1.Rob
        'The one who is washing the dishes is Rob.'

(7)   (I am looking for Rob, who is working in a kitchen full of people. I ask 'Who is Rob?')
        Rob   n'   [ûra   û-kû-thaambia   thaani]
        1.Rob   COP   1.DEM.DIST   1RM-PRS-wash   10.dishes
        'Rob is the one who is washing the dishes.'

Examples (6) and (7) also show that focus (underlined) falls on the postcopular phrase, forming the answer to a wh question. This is also true for 'simple' copular clauses:

(8)   (I've been referred to room B10 to find Aron. There are five people in the room. Who is Aron?)
        a.   Aron   n'   ûyû.
               1.Aron   COP   1.dem.prox
               'Aron is this (one).'

        b.   #Ûyû n'Aron.

In the n'we construction, the focus is on the referent that is represented by the pre-copular NP (as well as the pronoun):

(9)   (Where is a good place to go on a holiday? Interpretation: there are no other places that are good)
        Nanyukî   i-kû   kw-éégá
        9.Nanyuki   COP-17.PRO   17-good
        'Nanyuki is the place that is good'

(10) (Is Joy doing the dishes?)
    <u>Rob</u>   n'-we   [û-kû-thaambi-a thaáni]
    1.Rob   COP-1.PRO   1RM-PRS-wash-FV 10.dishes
    'Rob (is the one who) is washing the dishes'

This does not fit the tendency for post-copular focus, and a simple solution is to say that the focus is on the postcopular pronoun (the 'we' in n'we).

Finally, if the copula functions like a predicator, as it does in (reverse) pseudoclefts, we expect it to change form to express different tense/aspect. This happens in copular clauses like (11) but crucially not in the n'we construction – see (12). Instead, n'we remains and the predicator follows, illustrated in (13).

(11) Téné   mű́nó m̀-biti   na   ka-yű́gű́ **ba-a-rí̋**   a-cooré.
    long   very   9-hyena and 12-hare 2SM-PST-be 2-friends
    'A long time ago, hyena and hare were friends.'
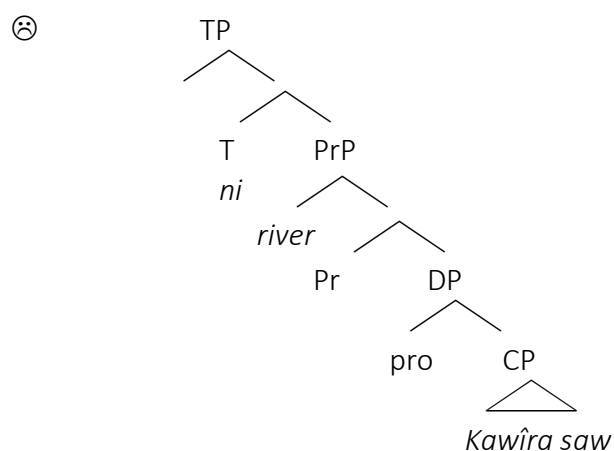
(12) a.   Ny-oombá   ni-y-ó   î-rá-bí̋-íre   (y-óónka).
          9-house   COP-9-PRO   9SM-YPST-burn-PFV 9-only
          '(Only) the house is what has burnt.'

    b.   *Ny-oombá **y-aa-rî̋-yó** î-rá-bí̋-íre   (yóónka).
          9-house   COP-9-PRO   9SM-YPST-burn-PFV 9-only
          int. '(Only) the house was what has burnt.'

(In a play, when someone asked 'Was the goat your grandmother?')
(13) Mû-tûûri   w-eetû   **n'-we**   **w-aa-rî̋**   m-bûri.
    1-neighbour   1-POSS.1PL COP-1.PRO   1RM-PST-be 9-goat
    'Our *neighbour* was the goat.'

We conclude that the underlying structure cannot be a copular clause (taking this to be represented by a PrP, following Bowers 1993).

☹   TP
          /\
        T   PrP
        ni   /\
         river /\
            Pr   DP
                /\
            pro   CP
                  /\
              Kawîra saw

3. It is a cleft

If we discount the initial NP, what is left looks exactly like a cleft as in (15):

(14)   (There is a dispute over what Kawîîra saw.)
        Múúró n'**úú** Kawîîra óóníre.
        muu-ro ni-u-o   Kawîîra   a-on-ire
        3-river   COP-3-PRO 1.Kawîîra 1SM-see-PFV
        'A river is what Kawîîra saw.'

(15) Í   mû-gaáté Áshá   a-gû-kaand-a.
      COP 3-bread   1.Asha   1SM-PRS-bake-FV
      'It's bread that Asha is baking.'

So the n'we construction could simply be a cleft that is preceded by an NP in the left periphery. If that is so, we predict the initial NP to be somehow independent, which is corroborated by a possible prosodic break after the NP as in (16) and (17), and by its optionality, as in (18):

(16)   (How did the doctor sign this, given that he doesn't have a pen?)
        (Whose pen did the doctor borrow?)
        Ka-rámú gá-akwá,   i-k-ó   n-dagitárí a-ra-roomb-íre.
        12-pen   12-1SG.POSS COP-12-PRO 9-doctor   1SM-YPST-borrow-PFV
        'My pen is what the doctor borrowed.' / 'My pen, it is *that* that the doctor borrowed.'

(17)   (There is an egg, where did it come from? Pointing at chicken.)
        N-gûkû   î-nú,   n-îy-ó   î-ra-siár-ire.
        9-chicken 9-DEM.MED FOC-9-PRO 9SM-YPST-give.birth-PFV
        'That chicken is which gave birth.' / 'That chicken, it's *her* who gave birth.'
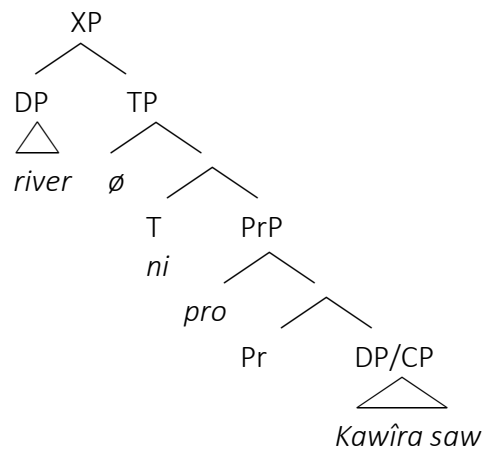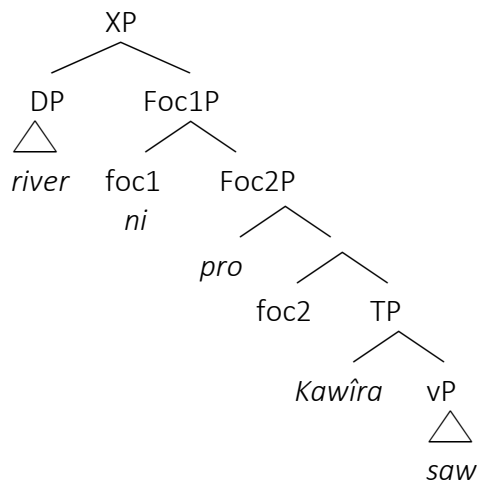
(18) I-ky-o   gî-tem-ag-a   n-gûkû   î-kurur-a.
   COP-7-PRO 7SM-make-HAB-FV   9-chicken 9SM-crow-FV
      'That's why Chicken crows.'
      'It is that that makes Chicken crow.'

There are two flavours of cleft analysis here, one underlyingly still involving nominal predication but now between pro and the relative clause (structure here based on Hartmann 2016), and a second involving cartographic Focus heads (Abels and Muriungi 2008). The purpose today is not to decide between these two.

XP
- DP △ *river*
- Foc1P
  - foc1 *ni*
  - Foc2P
    - *pro*
    - foc2
    - TP
      - *Kawîra*
      - vP △ *saw*

XP
- DP △ *river*
- TP
  - *ø*
  - T *ni*
  - PrP
    - *pro*
    - Pr
    - DP/CP △ *Kawîra saw*

Considering the signs of grammaticalisation, and the counterintuitive focus reading of the first NP, we may wonder whether the n'we construction has developed further and is now a simple focus projection, with Foc triggering φ agreement and being spelled out as *ni*:

FocP
- DP △ *river*
- *ni-φ*
- TP
  - *Kawîra*
  - vP △ *saw*
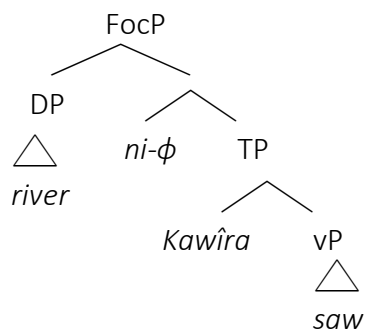
A crucial difference between the cleft analysis and the simple FocP analysis is that we expect relative marking in the former but not the latter. Apart from the demonstrative in *-ra*, illustrated in (19) and (20), there is not much relative marking in Kîîtharaka.

(19) N-thígiirí [í-rá n-da-nénké-ére û́-kî]
10-black.ants 10-DEM.DIST 1SG.SM-YPST-give-PFV 14-honey
i ci-aakén-íre mûnó.
COP 10SM-become.happy-PFV INT
'The black ants that I gave honey are very happy.'

(20) Gî-túmá [kî-rá mb-îgw-iiré], í-gî-kû-rî kî-néné mûnó.
7-noise 7-DEM.DIST 1SG.SM-hear-PFV FOC-7SM-PRS-be 7-big INT
'The noise that I heard was very loud.'

Only in class 1 can the subject marker on the verb show 'anti-agreement' *û-*, but the normal subject marker for class 1 *a-* is equally acceptable. There is variability, with speakers accepting either form.

(21) a. Pátrî́k n'-wé **á-**ga-tóóngór-í-á.
1.Patrick COP-1.PRO 1SM-FUT-lead-IC-FV
'Patrick is the one to chair us.'

b. Pátrî́k n'wé **û-**ga-tóóngór-í-á.
1.Patrick COP-1.PRO 1RM-FUT-lead-IC-FV
'Patrick is the one to chair us.'

The still-possible relative marking and the optionality and prosody of the initial DP make the simple focus projection a less likely analysis – but who knows what might happen in the future!

Conclusion

We conclude that the best fitting analysis for the n'we construction is a left-dislocated topic + cleft construction.

Further analysis of copular clauses:

- ■ NP = NP
- ■ FR = NP
- ■ NP = FR

PrP structure + inversion
- either underlying order
- subj move = predicational
- predicate move = specificational
- focus default post-copula

- ■ NP$_i$ ni-pro$_i$ REL

Cleft structure with LD NP
- exhaustive focus on NP & pro

- ■ NP ni-pro (NP)
- ■ FR ni-pro (NP)

PrP structure with RD
- pro can only be subject
- exhaustive focus on initial NP & pro

Abbreviations

Numbers refer to noun classes unless followed by sg/pl, in which case they refer to persons.
Surface high tones are (sometimes unreliably) marked; low tones remain unmarked.

APPL	applicative	LOC	locative
CAUS	causative	MED	medial
CONN	connective ('of')	OM	object marker
COP	copula	PFV	perfective
DEM	demonstrative	PRO	independent pronoun
DIST	distal	PROX	proximate
FOC	focus marker	PRS	present
FR	free relative	PST	pst
FUT	future	RD	right dislocation
FV	final vowel	RM	relative marker
IC	immediate causative	SM	subject marker
LD	left dislocation	YPST	yesterday past

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Contact

Patrick Njue Kanampiu
Tharaka University College
patrick.kanampiu33@gmail.com

Jenneke van der Wal
Leiden University
g.j.van.der.wal@hum.leidenuniv.nl

BaSIS project
https://bantusyntaxinformationstructure.com