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Why cleft?[1]

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1 Introduction

Although the paper addresses the basic question in the title, it is the discussion of a more specific question such as: *why do some languages prefer to cleft their questions?* that lays out the ground for resolving the more fundamental issue raised. As clefting, by all accounts, seems to be one of the typologically defining properties of at least two major language families of south Asia, namely, Tibeto-Burman and Dravidian, it is important to investigate the rationale behind adopting a cleft strategy for asking a question in these languages.

The guiding rationale behind the enquiry is the minimalist instinct to locate such queries at the interfaces. Towards this goal, we demonstrate that clefts in Meiteilon are indeed a beautiful illustration of how the designing of the Faculty of Language (FL) is a response to the requirements at the interfaces.

1.1 **Genesis of the Enquiry**

We begin with the story behind the story. The starting point was an attempt to develop an intuition about cleft questions in languages that use them productively and in the process we stumbled upon the discovery that the

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Indian English variety spoken by Meiteis[2] has no phonemic question intonation, which often led to much confusion[3]. Could it be a case of mother tongue interference? This null hypothesis in fact is the beginning and the end of the story of clefts in Meiteilon.

1.2 **The Interface Issue**

The Minimalist position demands that for any particular phenomenon in a language the most appropriate question to ask is: *Why is it there?* Chomsky's view (Chomsky 2002) is that FL is inserted into already existing "external" systems: the sensorimotor system and the system of "thought" (conception, intention etc.) both of which are somewhat independent of language. In this connection, the specific empirical case that is taken up in this paper is with regards to cleft questions in Meiteilon. In particular, in the course of the following discussion, it will emerge that in Meiteilon a specific interface requirement of *de-emphasizing* governs the functioning of the cleft question strategy. The strategy of clefting, as a part of the FL in Meiteilon, is a response to this particular requirement at the interface. This issue is taken up in detail in section 5.

2 Clefts

Cleft constructions are used to encode the discourse level phenomenon of focus syntactically. The unique template that rules clefts in general is the following:

(1) It is X that Y

Here, X represents the focused phrase and Y the presupposition. The cleft phrase (X) represents new information whereas the cleft clause (that Y) contains known information in the form of a presupposition which participants in the discourse share. The copula in the cleft construction often functions as the cleft marker, and occurs next to the focused entity

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[2] Meiteilon is the most common term used by the speakers of the language to identify their language (the affix *-lon* meaning 'language'). Other terms used by linguists are Manipuri (as the language spoken by the majority people of the Indian state of Manipur) and Meitei/ Metei. However, we make a clear distinction between the people (Meitei) and their language (Meiteilon).

[3] By question intonation we mean not yes/ no questions (which clearly have a question intonation) but Wh questions which involve intonation different from their declarative versions. For example, in Bangla (or in the English translation) as follows:

(i) Jonaki kɔkhon aʃ-b-e ?
Jonaki when come-FUT-3
'When will Jonaki come?'

cross-linguistically. As such, cleft constructions have been considered as copula sentences in many analyses. Clefts are often distinguished from pseudoclefts — whereas clefts are also called *it-clefts* and have the structure in English as given in (2a), pseudoclefts are called Wh-clefts and have the structure as given in (2b).

(2) a. It (expletive) + copula + focused constituent + relative clause
b. Free relative clause + copula + focused constituent

The head noun (which is always a neutral noun like *the one, the man, the animal, the thing,* etc. and which is modified or more closely defined by the restrictive relative clause) and the relative clause are contained in the subject of the cleft sentence. The predicate contains the focused constituent. Keeping this in view, the analysis considers cleft sentences as copular sentences.

2.1 Analyses of the Cleft Construction

There are two distinct approaches to the analysis of clefts: a monoclausal account and a bi-clausal account. Notable among the many analyses in the monoclausal account of clefts is the account by Meinunger (1998) which we discuss directly below.

2.2 Monoclausal Analysis

Instead of treating clefts and pseudoclefts as copular sentences, Meinunger takes the stand that clefts are the "extended projections" of the full verb contained in the relative clause part of the cleft sentence. He adopts a slightly modified version of Rizzi's (1997) fine structure of the CP domain, and postulates a FocP and a TopP dominating the CP. His account takes simplex sentences as exemplified by (3a) as the base structure for the cleft (3b) and the pseudocleft (3c) versions:

(3)	a.	John hit Bill.	
	b.	It is Bill that John hit.	CLEFT
	c.	Who John hit is Bill.	PSEUDOCLEFT

The simplex sentence is contained in the IP and the cleft sentence is derived by an overt movement of the focused phrase to [Spec, FocP]. The copula is inserted in the Top^0 head. The expletive *it* is inserted in [Spec, TopP] as seen in the labelled diagram (4) below. Similarly, the pseudocleft is derived through topicalization of the cleft structure as in (5).

(4) $[_{TopP}$ It is $[_{FocP}$ $Bill_i$ F^0 $[_{CP}$ that $[_{IP}$ John hit $t_i]]]]$

(5) $[_{TopP}$ $[_{CP}$ Who $[_{IP}$ John hit $t_i]_j$ is $[_{FocP}$ $Bill_i$ F^0 $t_j]]$

2.3 Biclausal Analyses

Most early analyses on clefts are in fact biclausal. Thus for example, in Akmajian (1970) clefts are derived from pseudoclefts by a rule of extraposition of the relative clause. An updated version of the biclausal, extraposition based analysis will predict that the cleft sentence (6a) is derived from (6b) by extraposition of the relative CP as in (6c).

(6) a. It is JOHN that Mary saw.
b. $[_{IP}$ $[_{CP}$ OP_i that Mary saw $t_i]]_j$ $[_{VP}$ t_j is John]].
c. $[_{IP}$ $t_k]_j$ $[_{VP}$ t_j is John] $[_{CP}$ OP_i that Mary saw $t_i]_k$.

2.3.1 Clefts in Malayalam

Madhavan (1987) is an early account of clefts in Malayalam, and in south Asian languages in general. It is a biclausal account in the sense that the analysis assumes a bipartite structure consisting of a "sentential subject" and a VP. Whereas the sentential subject is supposed to be the cleft clause, the VP is supposed to contain the cleft phrase and the copula *aaNə* 'be'. Madhavan notes that the cleft phrase and the gap within the cleft clause must agree in terms of category, Case and Φ-features. He establishes this correspondence by moving an empty operator from the gap to the CP domain of the subject CP:

(7) raaman nuɭɭi aaʈə kuʈʈiye aaɳə
Raman pinched nzr child.acc be
'It is the child that Raman pinched.'
(8) $[_{IP}$ $[_{CP}$ OP_i $[_{IP}$ raaman $[_{VP}$ t_i nuɭɭi] aaʈə] $[_{VP}$ kuʈʈiye aaɳə] I^0]

3 Cleft Constructions in Meiteilon

Clefts in Meiteilon are formed by relativising cleft clause with the infitival marker or the nominalizer *bə* and by bringing the cleft phrase in focus by attaching the copula *ni* with it. A declarative cleft is given in (9b), and cleft wh-question is given in (10b).

(9) a. hui-nə sem cakhi
dog-NOM apple ate
'The dog ate the apple'

b. hui-nə cakhi-bə (pot) ədu sem-ni
dog-NOM ate-INF/ NZR (thing) DET apple-COP
'It is an apple that the dog ate'

(10) a. Tombi-nə kəna ukhi-ge?
Tombi-NOM who saw-Q
'Whom did Tombi see?'

b. tombi-nə ukhi-bə (mi) ədu kəna-no?
Tombi-NOM saw-INF/ NZR (person) DET who-COP/Q
'Whom was it that Tombi saw?'

Meiteilon clefts fit well into the paradigm for cleft constructions as given by Harries-Delisle (1978): the infinitival marker *bə* also functions as the complementiser/ relativiser, marking the boundary of the restrictive relative clause as evident in (9b) and (10b). Arguably, the presence of the determiner *ədu* marks the presence of the head noun (thing or person) which agrees in category, Case and Φ-features, and which can be phonologically null as evident from optionality in the b examples. This is followed by the cleft phrase and the copula. Notice that in cleft wh-questions, the wh-word occurs next to the Q-particle, by virtue of being the clefted constituent. Also note that Q is manifested as *no* (which also means 'interrogative *be*') in cleft wh-questions and *no* is thus a copula, a focus marker as well as a question particle in cleft wh-constructions.

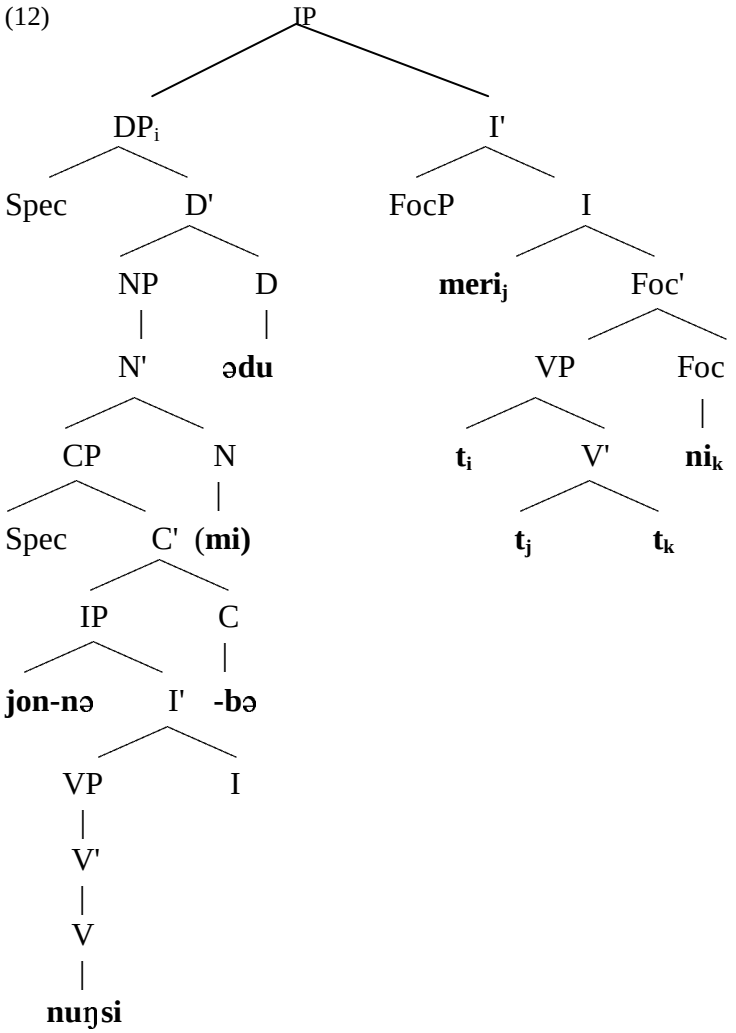
We propose a Minimalist account for cleft constructions in Meiteilon based on the copula-construction account of Harries-Delisle (1978) and Thanngjam (2003) with minor modifications. Consider the following declarative cleft in this connection:

(11) jon-nə nuŋsi-bə (mi) ədu meri-ni
John-NOM love-NZR person DET Mary-COP
'It is Mary that John loves'

This account proposes a Focus Phrase (justified on the basis of discourse emphasis that a cleft construction obtains) above the VP that is headed by the copula. The copula takes the cleft phrase (*meri* in (11)) as its complement, and has a complex DP in its specifier position. This complex DP is what is termed as the cleft clause and contains the head noun *mi* and the relative clause that modifies this head noun. The cleft phrase has a [+FOCUS] feature that needs to be checked against the Foc^0 head. The cop-

ula raises to Foc^0 as it also has a [+FOCUS] feature specification. The derivation is shown in (12) below.

(12)



For the interrogative cleft in (13), the wh-phrase is the cleft phrase, and so it moves to [Spec, FocP] to check the [+FOCUS] feature. The copula is present in its interrogative form *no*, and also functions as the question particle Q. The postulation that Q is generated as a sister of the lowest wh-word in Thangjam (2003) is maintained here since the copula has the triple

role of a verb, a question particle and a focus marker. As such, *no* moves to Foc^0 to check for the [+FOCUS] feature and then further raises to C^0 to give the wh-phrase a wide scope reading.

(13) jon-nə nuŋsi-bə (mi) ədu kəna-no?
John-NOM love-NZR person DET who-Q/ COP
'Who is it that John loves?'

The empty null head analysis that the analysis assumes is supported by the presuppositional requirement of cleft constructions which is identical to that of a definite description.

4 Pitch Analysis of Cleft Questions in Meiteilon

Finally, we come to the point where empirical evidence in the form of pitch data of cleft question constructions in this language provide convincing evidence in favour of the null hypothesis that the cleft question strategy in Meiteilon is a reflex of an interface condition.

A vital difference between Meiteilon and Malayalam cleft questions is that in the former, embedded wh-phrases need not be clefted to get a wide scope reading. This is accounted for by the fact that Meiteilon has a question particle, which can assign scope to the wh-phrase, while Malayalam does not have this option. However, this is not enough, since, as we have seen before, Meiteilon often clefts its wh-questions, if not obligatorily.

As per the proposals of this paper, a more likely explanation is to be found in the prosody of Meiteilon. Since questions have focus semantics and clefting is a form of emphasizing, plus the fact that wh-words in interrogatives normally attract phonological focus, it seemed rather strange that the element which attracts phonological focus (the wh-word[4]) be again marked for focus syntactically by clefting. Such a reiteration of information seems uneconomical with respect to the Minimalist notion of optimal design. But is it really a case of doubling of information? This question led to the experiments discussed below and the discovery that the language lacks phonological focus entirely.

The conclusion that the language lacks phonological focus marking, led to the logical hypothesis that the language therefore compensates for this lack by marking it morphosyntactically via the cleft strategy.

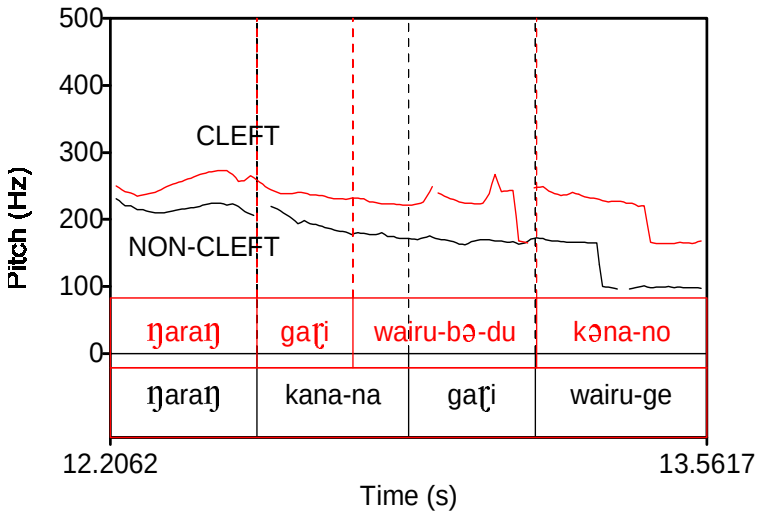
The experimental results showed a lack of any noticeable "question intonation" in all the questions -- clefted/ nonclefted -- even when the

[4] Thus the Wh word *kɔkhon* in the Bangla example in footnote 3 obligatorily attracts focus in the unmarked case.

question words are at the end of the sentence (and especially when the question words are at the end of the sentence as in the cleft questions). The question word itself lacks any noticeable focus pitch contour, instead showing a steady fall in pitch. Some of the pitch data[5] are discussed below:

(14) a. ŋaraŋ kana-na gaɽi-du wairu-ge ?
yesterday who-NOM car-DET borrow-Q
'Who borrowed the car yesterday?'

b. ŋaraŋ gaɽi wairu-bə-du kəna-na-no?
yesterday car borrow-NZR-DET who-NOM-Q
'Who was it that borrowed the car yesterday?'



The most striking thing to notice in the pitch diagram for (14) is that the pitch contours of the clefted and nonclefted versions look quite similar. In addition, the question word *kana-na* cannot be said to carry any sort of emphatic intonation in either the nonclefted or the clefted version (duration being 0.40 sec and 0.43 sec; mean intensity being 74 dB and 69 dB; and mean pitch being 187 Hz and 153 Hz, respectively) and is marked by a typical falling pitch contour. Cleft questions thus are unmarked altogether and are indistinguishable from the typical end-of-sentence fall.

[5] The pitch data was analysed using Praat version 3.9.22.

From the experimental results it was concluded that absence of focus contour (phonological focus) is the reason that the language uses clefting to assign focus syntactically to the question word in cleft wh- questions.

5 Interface Revisited

Recall the discussion earlier about clefting as a response to a particular requirement at the interface in Meiteilon, namely that of *de-emphasizing*. In this section, we wish to discuss the role of interfaces in clefting in Meiteilon further. Our view is as follows. Questioning, or something akin to it (querying), is a part of a cognitive interface that interfaces with the FL but is somewhat *independent of language or FL itself*.

The situation may be comparable to the suggestion in Bhattacharya (2003) that Coherence or Centering (of Grosz, Joshi and Weinstein 1995) is a cognitive phenomenon *independent of language*, perhaps part of the module responsible for general cognitive abilities like concept formation, intention and the like. The requirement that such a concept as Coherence may impose on the FL (perhaps in collaboration with the C-I) is manifested in ways the notion of Centering surfaces in discourse segments through a choice of referring expressions. That is, the structuring of the discourse is a response to the global/ local interface requirement of Coherence.

Similarly, by the claims of the present paper, Questioning can be thought of as a part of the C-I interface that imposes certain restrictions on the FL as to how a question is to be formed and uttered. Of importance is the latter point about utterance. C-I, by these terms, seems to impose a requirement on the A-P interface as well, namely, to apply a special question intonation onto the expression to be uttered to ask a question. To elaborate further, question semantics seems to be coming from C-I and question intonation is a diktat of the A-P interface that is involved in crucial ways to the requirement at the C-I interface.

What happens in FL, especially in the narrow syntax, is first a response to the question semantics requirement of the C-I interface (by moving the *Wh* at some level) and then the layering of a proposition thus formed by question intonation. We do not debate the syntactic response of moving the *Wh* universally in the narrow syntax here (but see Simpson and Bhattacharya 2003) as a response to the requirement imposed at the C-I interface in the form of the question semantics. However, with respect to Meiteilon, we suggest that the requirement at the A-P interface, namely, *De-emphasize* is the raison d'être for the clefting strategy of question formation. That is, because the obligatory requirement of layering a proposition by question intonation in order to turn it into an interrogative is met with a sudden block in Meiteilon at the A-P interface in the form of a lar-

ger global requirement to de-emphasize every proposition, the narrow syntax of Meiteilon reacts by devising the cleft strategy to convey emphasis. This, we propose, is how the requirement that a proposition be marked for emphasis to turn it into an interrogative is met with in Meiteilon. In short, because Meiteilon imposes the A-P restriction that no proposition be marked phonologically for emphasis, it nevertheless maintains the C-I restriction to mark a question by emphasis *syntactically* by clefting.

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