Focalizing *ser* (‘to be’) in Colombian Spanish

Cleft constructions are commonly used in Spanish to focalize arguments within a sentence. A sentence such as (1) can be transformed into a cleft sentence such as (2), where the direct object is the focalized element of the sentence, is c-commanded by the copula verb *fue* ‘was’ (> *ser* ‘to be’), and seems to receive a narrow focus. As shown in (2), in cleft constructions a relative pronoun (*LO QUE*) matches the FORMAL FEATURES of the direct object, which means that it heads a different clause. In several dialects of Spanish (i.e. Venezuelan, Ecuadorian, Panamanian, Colombian, and Dominican), a sentence involving a similar focus interpretation can also be created without the REL PRON and the COMP *que* (‘that’) as in (3). The structure in (3) is called *focalizing ser* (FS), and I will show that it is part of the extended projection of the main verb.

FS has been reported and described in the literature (Albor, 1986; Sedano, 1990), but its formal properties have not been completely clarified, despite several efforts (Bosque, 1999; Toribio, 2002, Curnow and Travis, 2003; Camacho, 2006). FS has been previously examined as an incomplete form of a cleft structure (Albor, 1986; Sedano, 1990; Toribio, 2002), but later research shows that FS is syntactically unrelated to clefts (Bosque, 1999; Curnow and Travis, 2003; Camacho, 2006). As shown in (4a-b), FS allows clitic climbing, whereas the cleft construction does not (4c); this is evidence that FS is not part of a different clause. In other words, while Clefts occur in the external periphery of the clause (perhaps at the CP-level) (5a), FS (5b) is a clause-internal phenomenon. Given the focus properties of FS, this clearly shows that the interface with the informational structure cannot be confined to the highest periphery (in line with Belletti 2004).

FS also exhibits a range of syntactic properties, which have not been discussed in the literature. First, the verb *ser* (‘to be’) must agree in tense with the main verb of the sentence (6a), but not necessarily in number (6b). Secondly, FS may focus a *wh* in-situ (7a), but must not occur in cases of *wh*-extraction (7b). Third, FS may intervene between auxiliaries (8a). Finally, *ser* can intervene between a noun and a post-nominal modifier (8b), which seems to be a disruption of a DP.

I propose that FS is in a Focus Phrase, generated below TP and above vP, following Belletti’s (2004) suggestion that both focus and topic projections may be found within the internal periphery of TP. This TP-internal FocP is comprised by a [Spec, FP] and a Focus head F°, which in this case may be *ser* (‘to be’). This allows us to satisfactorily explain the properties just described. FS-focused elements must always stay within the TP-internal periphery to render a grammatical outcome. This is illustrated by the fact that FS never occurs above TP (5b). Furthermore, FS must be generated outside vP, given that it can occur between auxiliaries (8a).

Acceptability judgments for this study were collected from Colombian Spanish speakers in Bucaramanga.
Juan estudió lingüística
Juan studied linguistics

‘Juan studied linguistics’

lo que Juan estudió fue lingüística
that Juan study3SG-PAST to be3SG-PAST linguistics

‘What Juan studied was linguistics’

Juan estudió fue lingüística
Juan study3SG-PAST to be3SG-PAST linguistics

‘It was linguistics what Juan studied’

Quiero es ir de aquí
want1SG-PRES be3SG-PRES go-INF from here

‘What I want is to leave this place’

Me quiero es ir de aquí
CL want1SG-PRES to be3SG-PRES go-INF from here

‘What I want is to leave this place’

Lo que me quiero es ir de aquí
REL PRON COMP CL want1SG-PRES to be3SG-PRES go-INF from here

‘What I want is to leave this place’

Fue lingüística lo que estudió Juan
be3SG-PAST linguistics REL PRON that study3SG-PAST Juan

‘It was linguistics what Juan studied’

Juan estudia era lingüística
Juan study3SG-IMPERF be3SG-IMPERF linguistics

It was linguistics what Juan used to study

Tengo son dos gatos
have1SG-PRES be3JPL-PRES two cats

‘It is two cats what I have’

¿Juan estudió fue qué?
Juan study3SG-PAST be3SG-PAST what

What was it that Juan studied?

¿Qué Juan estudió fue?
what Juan study3SG-PAST to be3SG-PAST

What Juan studied was what

Hemos es estado estudiando lingüística
have1PL-PRES be3SG-PRES bePERF study3PROGR linguistics

What we have been doing is studying linguistics

Me gusta la música es moderna
CL like3SG-PRES the music be3SG-PRES modern

The way that I like music is modern

References