Theoretical and empirical approaches to cleft constructions

Day 1: Introduction to cleft constructions

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University of Stuttgart

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2. What part of linguistics are you mainly interested in? Do you study what you are interested in? What are you working on?
3. Where are you from (affiliation and originally)?

Course structure

Course website: `https://swantje-toennis.github.io/esslli/`

Days	Topics	Readings
Day 1	Introduction to cleft constructions and the exhaustive inference: theoretical options	Hartmann and Veenstra (2013); Onea (2019)
Day 2	Disagreements on the level where the exhaustive inference is located: experimental evidence	DeVeaugh-Geiss et al. (2015)
Day 3	Discourse-related approaches to cleft constructions	Destruel and Velleman (2014) Tönnis (2021, ch. 8)
Day 4	Clefts and discourse expectations	Tönnis (2021, ch. 10),Tönnis and Tonhauser (2022)
Day 5	Summary and Discussion	(We need your questions for Day 5)

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- Cross-linguistically, cleft constructions constitute a good example to demonstrate variance in linguistic meaning, since they exist in many languages, but they vary structurally and functionally.

We hope you can benefit from the broad perspective on an interesting and challenging topic, the empirical-driven, cross-linguistic approaches of the course, and interactive discussions in class. :)

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3. Components of a cleft construction, types of clefts and their exhaustive inferences
4. Disagreement on the level where the exhaustive inference is generated:
   the theoretical side of the story

Let's review some concepts together

Here is an example, could you tell me which part of the underlined sentence is focus, background and its presupposition?

(1) A: 'Who came to ESSLLI's class today?'

   B: 'Only John came to ESSLLI's class today.'   [exclusives]

   B:' JOHN came to ESSLLI's class today.   [plain focus]

(2) A: 'John came to ESSLLI's class today.'

   B: 'No, it was Mary who came to the class today.'   [*it*-clefts]

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(2) A: 'John came to ESSLLI's class today.'
   B: 'No, it was Mary who came to the class today.'   [*it*-clefts]

Do you think there is a difference in their truth conditions?

What is a cleft construction?

The term *cleft* describes "a specific syntactic pattern which serves to separate a discourse prominent constituent structurally from the rest of the clause" (Hartmann and Veenstra, 2013).

(3)	It	was	John	that/who came to ESSLLI's class today.
	Impersonal pronoun	Copula	Cleft phrase/pivot	Cleft clause

A typical cleft construction contains four parts:

- an impersonal pronoun,
- a copula verb,
- an informationally prominent part that is the *focus* (i.e. the *cleft phrase*/*cleft pivot*),
- an embedded relative clause that is the *background* (i.e. the *cleft clause*).

Components of the clefts

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- The impersonal pronoun is semantically inert. The copula connects the cleft phrase and the cleft clause (É. Kiss 1998, Hedberg 2000).

- Nothing is semantically inert. *It* is an anaphoric pronoun referring to a specific (event-type) antecedent (Akmajian 1970, Gundel 1977, Percus 1997).

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(5) exemplifies the three copular subtypes based on the taxonomy in Higgins (1979).

   (5)   a. John is a student. [predicational]
           b. The author of the paper is John. [specificational]
           c. Venus is the Morning Star. The Morning Star is Venus. [equational]

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The predicational and the specificational type differ in the referentiality of the pre-copula subject and the post-copula complement.

Clause Type	Subject	Complement
Predicational	Referential	Non-referential
Specificational	Non-referential	Referential

Table: Types of copular clauses based on referentiality

Components of the clefts

Several types of constituents can function as a cleft phrase, e.g. DP (can be either subject or object) and PP as in term clefts, and CP as in propositional assertions.

(6) A: Who has looked for you?
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(7) A: Who have you looked for?

B: It was John that I have looked for.

(8) A: Where does the professor normally have his lunch?

B: It is at the dinning hall that he has his lunch.

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     B: "It doesn't mean anything. It's just that they can't bear anybody to have an advantage…"

(10) A: Why are you cleaning up your house?
     B: Shi [Zhangsan yao lai]$_F$.
        COP Zhangsan will come
        '(It is that) Zhangsan will come.'   [Mandarin Chinese]

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(12) Continuous-topic *it*-cleft
- A: "Do you know Brian's book? "
- B: "Yes, in fact it was Brian's book that got me interested in clefts. "

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(13) "After the GOP national convention, he chose to continue attacking Republican rivals. He chose to attack the Gold Star family of a fallen soldier; and he chose to hire as campaign CEO Steven Bannon, the former head of Breitbart News whose controversial support of the 'alt-right' will keep Trump on the defensive on the issue of racism; and *it was Trump who recently chose to divide his own force –as Custer divided his force–by'softening', 'hardening', retreating, denying and delaying on his main line of attack: the issue of immigration and deportation*."

Relatives of the cleft construction?

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(14)   a. The person who came to ESSLLI's class today was John.

        b. Who Swantje likes the most is Arne.

        c. That is the man who stole the money.

        d. There is Arne who is smiling.

        e. All I ate for dinner was a salad.

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What is cleft's closest relative here?

Cleft construction in other languages?

Cross-linguistically, various structures have been suggested to be similar and compared with *it*-clefts. Let's take a look at some examples from French, German, Hungarian and Mandarin.

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We will discuss more on the *wh-else* continuation in the following.

(15) French *C'est* clefts (Destruel et al., 2019)

    a. Qui a ri?
       who has laughed
       'Who laughed?'

    b. C'est Marie qui a ri.
       it.is Mary who has laughed
       'It's Mary who laughed.'

    c. ^{??} Qui d'autre a ri?
       who else has laughed
       'Who else laughed?'

Cleft construction in other languages?

(16) German *es*-cleft (Tönnis, 2021)

   a. Wer hat gelacht?
      who has laughed
      'Who laughed?'

   b. Es war Arne, der gelacht hat.
      it was Arne who laughed has
      'It was Arne who laughed.'

   c. ?? Und wer hat noch gelacht?
       and who has also laughed
       'And who else laughed?'

Cleft construction in other languages?

(17) Hungarian Pre-verbal focus construction (Onea and Beaver, 2011)

    a. Ki   mosolygott?
       who laughed
       'Who laughed?'

    b. MARI mosolygott.
       Mary laughed
       'Mary laughed.'

    c. $^{??}$ Es ki màs mosolygott?
         and who else laughed
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(18) Mandarin *shi (...de)* clefts

    a. Shui xiaole?
       who laugh.ASP
       'Who laughed?'

    b. Shi Zhangsan xiaole   (de).
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- One obvious example is that there are two types of clefts in Mandarin and they are structurally alike.

- Another example is that it is felicitous to attach *too*-continuation to German *es*-clefts, but it is not acceptable with Hungarian pre-verbal focus constructions.

What inferences have you drawn?

Coming back to different types of focus constructions...

(19) a. Only John came to ESSLLI's class today.
      b. JOHN came to ESSLLI's class today.
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- John came to ESSLLI's class.   [canonical inference]
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- Nobody other than John came to ESSLLI's class.   [exhaustive inference]

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The *who-else* test can distinguish them. (What observation can you draw from these examples?)

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    B: Only John came to the class.
    A: ??Fine, and who else came?

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(23)   a. I disagree.
       b. No, that's not true.

Given a negation test, combined with the three inferences that we have drawn just now, do you see any difference among these constructions?

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(24) A: 'Only John came to ESSLLI's class today.'
    B: 'No, that's not true.'

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- 'that person is John' (canonical inference) survived.

How does the exhaustive inference come about?

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↛ Nobody came to ESSLLI's class today.

When a canonical focus is negated,

- the exhaustive inference is **not** negated.

How does the exhaustive inference come about?

(25) A: 'JOHN came to ESSLLI's class today.'

B: 'No, that's not true.'

$\not\leadsto$ John is not the sole person who came. Mary came too.

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When a cleft construction is negated,

- the exhaustive inference might be negated;
- the canonical inference is negated;
- the existential presupposition is structurally presupposed and it is not compatible with 'nobody.'

How does the exhaustive inference come about?

From this simple negation test, we can summarize that

	Exhaustive inference	Existential presupposition	Canonical inference
Only-exclusives	at-issue	non-at-issue	non-at-issue
Canonical focus	non-at-issue	non-at-issue	at-issue
It-clefts	(??-)at-issue	non-at-issue	at-issue

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For an expression E,

- *E* entails the inference *P* as an at-issue content;
- *E* may also presuppose *P* as a non-at-issue content.
- *E* may conversationally implicate *P*, which makes it not part of E's <u>semantic</u> content.

Exhaustive inference is a part of at-issue content?

Here is another observation that motivates the distinction between two layers of meaning where the exhaustive inferences of clefts differs from *only*-exclusives'.

(27) a. # I know Mary ate a pizza, but it wasn't a pizza that she ate.

  b. I know Mary ate a pizza, but she didn't only eat a pizza.

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This have led most scholars to abandon the view that *it*-clefts encode exhaustivity as their at-issue content.

Exhaustive inference as a conversational implicature

Horn (1981) argues that the exhaustivity of *it*-clefts is generated through a conversational implicature, rather than hard-wired in the structure of *it*-clefts.

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- The speaker could have mentioned other individuals, and by not doing so, the assertion invites the inference that the individual involved is the only individual that satisfies the property denoted by the sentence predicate.

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- This view of scalar implicature (SI) is based on a neo-Gricean mechanism (articulated in Horn 2005), in which implicature arises globally and operates on speech acts.

Exhaustive inference as a conversational implicature

The option articulated by Horn is widely rejected in the literature due to the fact that the exhaustive inference is not as easy to cancel when compared to other recognized conversational implicatures.

(29)   a. #It was Mary who ate a pizza; John ate a pizza too.
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However, the idea that constructions such as *it*-clefts conversationally implicate exhaustivity is not unpopular in experimental literature. We will discuss this tomorrow.

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Could you tell my why the account fails to do so?

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By contrast, Büring and Križ's (2013) parthood-based conditional presupposition account gets us the correct prediction.

Exhaustive inference as presupposed content

For the example of *it is [Mary]$_F$ who ate a pizza*,

- the presupposition that is being projected states that the referent of the cleft phrase is not a proper **subpart** of the referent of the cleft clause (Büring and Križ, 2013).

  Can you name some other (set of) individuals that Mary could be a subpart of?

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The current account predicts the exhaustive inference as in 'the only person who attended was John's eldest daughter,' instead of 'the only daughter of John.'

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With respect to a *wh*-question, clefts semantically encode as part of their at-issue meaning that the canonical inference is a true answer, whereas they encode as a presupposition that the canonical inference is the strongest true answer to that question.

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Presuppositions and conventional implicatures, like all non-at-issue content, are expected to project from entailment-cancelling environments, as we discussed earlier.

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Presuppositions and conventional implicatures, like all non-at-issue content, are expected to project from entailment-cancelling environments, as we discussed earlier.
One potential issue that all presuppositional accounts face is that the intuitions of the projection in regard the exhaustive inference are not very clear, especially on the conditional presupposition.

Summary of Day 1

- Introduction to a cleft construction
  - components
  - different types of clefts
  - their relatives
- Cleft construction in other languages
- The meaning of a cleft construction and comparison to other focus constructions
- Debates on the level where the exhaustive inference is located
  - as a part of at-issue content
  - as a part of non-at-issue (e.g. presupposed) content
  - as a conversational implicature

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