

Theoretical and empirical approaches to cleft constructions

Day 3: Discourse-related approaches to cleft constructions

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Recap – Semantic/pragmatic features of clefts

(1) It is Peter who Lena met.

Output from day 1 and 2

- **Existence inference:** There is somebody who Lena met.
→ Inference is a presupposition.
- **Exhaustivity inference:** Lena met nobody but Peter.
→ **Ongoing debate**
 - Is the exhaustivity inference a semantic or a pragmatic inference?
 - Is the content of the inference at-issue or not-at-issue?

Today

- Extending the picture by looking at cleft constructions in **discourse**, i.e., in a 'realistic' linguistic context

The big questions of today (and tomorrow)

1. In which discourse contexts can a cleft be used felicitously?
2. When is it preferred over the canonical sentence?
3. How can we characterize 'cleft discourse contexts'?
4. Are there cross-linguistic differences?

Roadmap for today

1. Clefts in discourse – Some examples
2. Theoretical background
3. Experiment by Destruel and Velleman (2014)
4. Discussion

Clefts in discourse – Some examples

What is the cleft's discourse function? – Many different claims and observations in the literature.

- **Resolving antecedent**

(2) JM: I want to ask this question: Why is this agreement so bad? I ask you.

JG: Because our whole intention was to bring some form of democracy there; our intention was to make the Sandinistas cry uncle. **It is the contras who have cried uncle.**

(Hedberg, 1990, 112)

- Antecedent *x has cried* must be activated in discourse context (givenness hierarchy by Gundel et al., 1993).
- **Expressing contrast:** Clefted constituent contrasts with antecedent in the discourse. (Destruel and Velleman, 2014)

Clefts in discourse – Some examples

Many tried de-clefting in naturally occurring examples and analyzed the effect:

- **Establishing coherence**

- (3) a. Doubling the selling space to 700 square feet was not to be the greatest expense. **It was the new fixtures and fittings to fill this space that would be costly.**
(Original with cleft)
- b. ?Doubling the selling space to 700 square feet was not to be the greatest expense. **The new fixtures and fittings to fill this space would be costly.**
(Cleft replaced by canonical)
- (Delin and Oberlander, 1995, p. 471)

Clefts in discourse – Some examples

- Shifting temporal relations

- (4) a. Mr. Butler, the Home Secretary, decided to meet the challenge of the 'Ban-the-Bomb' demonstrators head-on. Police leave was canceled and secret plans were prepared. **It was Mr. Butler who authorized action which ended in 32 members of the Committee of 100 being imprisoned.** (Original with cleft)
- b. ?Mr. Butler, the Home Secretary, decided to meet the challenge of the 'Ban-the-Bomb' demonstrators head-on. Police leave was canceled and secret plans were prepared. **Mr. Butler authorized action which ended in 32 members of the Committee of 100 being imprisoned.** (Cleft replaced by canonical)
- (Delin and Oberlander, 1992, p. 282)

Clefts in discourse – Some examples

- **Creating suspense:** more suspenseful with cleft in English (5-a) than without cleft in German (5-b)

(5) *“Little tyke” chortled Mr. Dursley as he left the house. He got into his car and backed out of number four’s drive.*

a. It was at the corner of the street that he noticed the first sign of something peculiar

b. An der Straßenecke fiel ihm zum
at the corner.of.the.street occurred to.him for.the
ersten Mal etwas Merkwürdiges auf
first time something peculiar

‘At the corner of the street, he noticed the first sign of something peculiar’

(Fischer, 2009, p. 185)

Clefts in discourse – Some examples

What we will focus on today: Broader version of contrast

Conflict with expectations

Clefts are more felicitous the more they conflict with interlocutors' expressed expectations.

1. **Expectations about the world:** These expectations may involve beliefs about the world, expressed as assertions or presuppositions. More strongly expressed beliefs lead to stronger conflict.
2. **Expectations about the discourse:** These expectations may involve beliefs about the direction in which the discourse is going, expressed, among other ways, by marking content as at-issue or not-at-issue.

(Destruel and Velleman, 2014, p. 199)

Expectations about the world are not enough

- Finding an antecedent for contrast in the discourse might be necessary, but it doesn't suffice to predict acceptability of cleft.
 - How do the examples show this?
- (6) Darren sounded really excited about his vacation. I think he might be going to Canada.
- a. B: Actually, he's going to Mexico.
 - b. B: ?Actually, it's Mexico that he's going to.
- (7) We were planning Amy's surprise party for weeks. I can't believe that she found out about it. Who told her about it?
- a. B: Ken told her about it.
 - b. B: It is Ken who told her about it.

(Destruel and Velleman, 2014, p. 198)

Information structure → expectations

Contrastive Focus Hypothesis

(Zimmermann, 2011, p. 1167)

Contrastive focus marking on a focus constituent α is required if the speaker has reason to believe that the hearer will not consider the content of α , or the **information-structural status of α as the focus of the utterance as likely to be(come) part of the Common Ground.**

- Information-structural status is determined by grammar of the language, e.g., by prosodic restrictions.
- Unexpected focus requires extra marking, e.g., clefting.

(8) How did you get to Leuven?

- English: PAUL drove me. (canonical preferred)
- German: PAUL hat mich gefahren. (canonical preferred)
- French: C'est PAUL qui m'a conduit. (cleft preferred)
#PAUL m'a conduit.

(Destruel, 2013, p. 139)

At-issueness → expectations?

- Destruel and Velleman (2014): Clefts rather address **not-at-issue** propositions.
- **At-issue content:** the part of an utterance intended to answer the (implicit) current question (Simons et al., 2010)
- Presuppositions or appositive relative clauses (9) are not-at-issue.

(9) (Where is Nina this week?)

Nina, who loves logic the most, is at ESSLLI this week.

- a. at-issue content: Nina is at ESSLLI this week.
- b. not-at-issue content: Nina loves logic the most.

- Diagnostics: At-issue content can be directly assented or dissented with (Tonhauser, 2012).

(10) A: Nina, who loves logic the most, is at ESSLLI this week.

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

↪ *'that'* can only refer to at-issue content.

Destruel and Velleman's idea

Destruel and Velleman (2014) assume:

Discourse “participants are expected to address the propositions that are currently at-issue. Thus, [...] a move which addresses a previously not-at-issue proposition is an unexpected discourse move.” (p. 202)

- They do not specify what exactly they mean by “address a proposition”.
- Their case: addressing a sentence by **correction**

- (11) A: Nina, who loves logic the most, is at ESSLLI this week.
- a. B: No, Nina is at a soccer training camp this week.
 - b. B: No, Nina loves linguistics the most.

- Which answer of B is more expected and why?

Experiment by Destruel and Velleman (2014)

Hypothesis for English clefts (repeated)

- Destruel and Velleman (2014) manipulate contexts wrt. 1. and 2.:

Conflict with expectations

Clefts are more felicitous the more they conflict with interlocutors' expressed expectations.

1. **Expectations about the world:** These expectations may involve beliefs about the world, expressed as assertions or presuppositions. More strongly expressed beliefs lead to stronger conflict.
[experiment context: **strength of belief**]
2. **Expectations about the discourse:** These expectations may involve beliefs about the direction in which the discourse is going, expressed, among other ways, by marking content as at-issue or not-at-issue.
[experiment context: **At-issueness**]

Experiment - Design

(12 participants)

- **4×2 design** (We'll ignore another 2-leveled factor they included)
- **Factors:** Context (4 types varying wrt. **at-issueness** and **strength of belief**), target sentence (**cleft/canonical**)
- **Task:** Acceptability rating
- **Example with cleft as target:**

Speaker A: This bean dip is fantastic. I really want to get the recipe. I think that maybe Shannon brought it. (context)

Speaker B: It is Tim who made it. (correcting target sentence)

On a scale from 1 to 5, how natural does Speaker B's response sound to you?

1 2 3 4 5

- **Prediction:** Cleft is rated more acceptable the stronger the conflict with the speaker's expectations is.

- 4 context types (12) followed by canonical or cleft (13).

- (12) Speaker A: This bean dip is fantastic. I really want to get the recipe ...
- a. *Informational (baseline, no belief)*
... Who made it?
 - b. *At-issue, weak belief*
... I think that maybe Shannon brought it.
 - c. *At-issue, strong belief*
... I'm sure that Shannon brought it.
 - d. *Counter-presuppositional (not-at-issue, (very) strong belief)*
... I can't believe that Shannon brought it – she's normally not a very good cook.
- (13) Tim made it. / It was Tim who made it.

Context a: Informational

Speaker A: This bean dip is fantastic. I really want to get the recipe.

Who made it?

Speaker B: Tim made it. / It was Tim who made it. (target)

- Addressed proposition is a question (*Who made it?*).
- Hence, speaker has no overt beliefs about the answer.
→ Target sentence does not conflict with expectations about the world.
- No antecedent present for *x made it*.
- Baseline: Target sentence doesn't conflict with discourse expectations.

Context b: At-issue, weak belief

Speaker A: This bean dip is fantastic. I really want to get the recipe.

I think that maybe Shannon brought it.

Speaker B: Tim made it. / It was Tim who made it. (target)

- Addressed proposition is *Shannon brought it*.
- Given that it is embedded under *think* combined with *maybe*, Speaker A expresses a weak belief.
 - Target sentence weakly conflicts with expectations about the world.
- Content of proposition *Shannon brought it* is at-issue.
 - Target sentence doesn't conflict with discourse expectations.

(14) At-issueness diagnostic:

A: I think that maybe Shannon brought it.

B: Yes, that's true.

Context c: At-issue, strong belief

Speaker A: This bean dip is fantastic. I really want to get the recipe.

I'm sure that Shannon brought it.

Speaker B: Tim made it. / It was Tim who made it. (target)

- Addressed proposition is *Shannon brought it*.
- Given that it is embedded under *be sure*, Speaker A expresses a strong belief.
 - Target sentence strongly conflicts with expectations about the world.
- Content of proposition *Shannon brought it* is at-issue.
 - Target sentence doesn't conflict with discourse expectations.

(15) At-issueness diagnostic:

A: I'm sure that Shannon brought it.

B: Yes, that's true.

Context d: Counter-presuppositional

Speaker A: This bean dip is fantastic. I really want to get the recipe.
I can't believe that Shannon brought it – she's normally not a very good cook.

Speaker B: Tim made it. / It was Tim who made it. (target)

- Addressed proposition is *Shannon brought it*.
- Given that it is presupposed, Speaker A expresses a strong belief.
→ Target sentence strongly conflicts with expectations about the world.
- Content of proposition *Shannon brought it* is presupposed, thus, not-at-issue.
→ Target sentence conflicts with discourse expectations.

Expected outcome

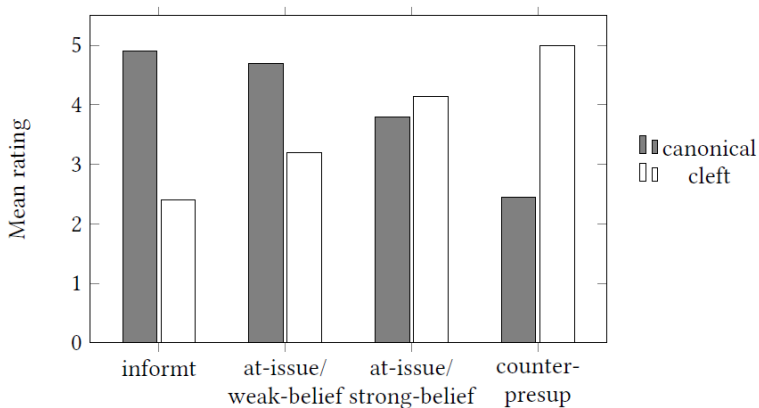
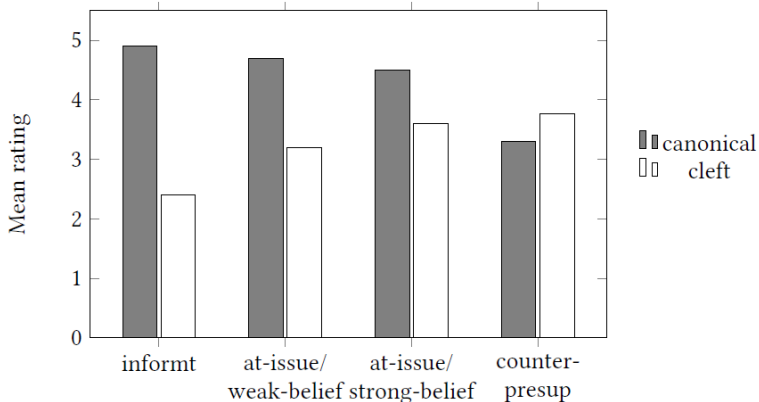


Figure: Expected mean ratings for response forms by context

Experiment – Results



- Canonical: significantly worse in counter-presup than in other contexts → At-issueness significant, but not strength of belief
- Cleft: significantly worse in informational than in other contexts
- Cleft never significantly better than canonical

- For the canonical sentence, at-issueness plays a role:
 - Canonical significantly less acceptable only in not-at-issue context
 - Conclusion: Function of canonical is to signal discourse to proceed as expected.
- Results support analysis of clefts which only relies on expectations about the world (though strength of belief is irrelevant):
 - Cleft only significantly less acceptable in informational context
 - i.e., the context without explicit alternatives / without antecedent
 - Conclusion: All the cleft needs is an antecedent, at-issueness, and thereby expectations about the discourse, doesn't play a role.
- The cleft was never rated significantly better than canonical, but:
 - Clefts compete with canonical sentences.
 - Degraded acceptability of canonical in counter-presup. context indirectly indicates higher preference for cleft in that context.
 - no significance for this hypothesis in the data though

Open issues

- Is there a better method to investigate the competition between cleft and canonical sentence?
- Potential confounds with respect to stimuli (slide 17):
 - Are we sure about the at-issueness status of the proposition in the context?
 - Does the modality (written vs. spoken) have an effect?
 - Anything else you notice about the stimuli?
- Clefts can have other functions than correcting. Does the result transfer to non-corrective uses of clefts? How about the examples from the beginning of today's class?
 - Resolving antecedent (slide 5)
 - Establishing coherence (slide 6)
 - Shifting temporal relations (slide 7)
 - Creating suspense (slide 8)

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