The Discourse Functions of Cleft Sentences in Spoken English

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I will be reporting today on one part of my dissertation on the discourse function of cleft sentences in English. I will concentrate on examples of cleft sentences drawn from a corpus of 36 videotaped episodes of the McLaughlin Report, a political discussion program distributed nationally on public television.   I have somewhat arbitrarily limited my inquiry to the three types of identificational cleft sentence shown in (1) on the handout: it-clefts, wh-clefts, and inverted wh-clefts.

(1)

CLEFT TYPE	EXAMPLE
it-cleft	It is the contras who have cried uncle.
wh-cleft	What you have now is detente, industrial strength.
inverted wh-cleft	That's what you have.

What they have in common is the property of expressing a single semantic proposition by means of two syntactic clauses. They are thus split into two parts connected by a copula.   I will use the pragmatically neutral term 'clefted constituent' to refer to the matrix phrase immediately adjacent to the copula, and indicated by double underlining in the examples in (1), and the term 'cleft clause' to refer to the subordinate wh- or that-clause indicated by dotted underlining.

Before turning to the analysis of the cleft sentences in the McLaughlin corpus, I will briefly introduce the theoretical constructs I feel are essential to an explanatory account of their discourse function.   It is standardly assumed that the syntactic distinction between cleft constituent and cleft clause reflects the functional distinction between focus and presupposition. While it is generally recognized, correctly, that cleft sentences involve pragmatic rather than logical presupposition in that they express information somehow taken by discourse participants to be in the common ground, I would argue that the focus-presupposition analysis encourages the overly hasty identification of the presupposition with the cleft clause.   I will argue instead that the structural split between the two parts of a cleft sentence is better viewed as reflecting the functional distinction between topic and comment.

I follow Jeanette Gundel in defining topic as shown in (2). Briefly, the topic of a sentence is what the speech act it expresses is about; and the comment is what is predicated about the topic:

(2)   **Pragmatic topic** [Gundel 1985]
        An entity, E, is the pragmatic topic of a sentence, S, iff S is intended to increase the addressee's knowledge about, request information about or otherwise get the addressee to act with respect to E.

The primary advantage to Gundel's pragmatic definition of topic is that it does not incorporate any presumptions concerning the relationship between pragmatic function and syntactic form. Thus, unlike Reinhart's notion of 'sentence topic', the pragmatic topic is not required by definition to be linguistically expressed; and unlike Halliday's notion of 'theme', it is not associated a priori with sentence-initial position. Instead, determination of the cognitive and structural correlates of topic-comment structure is assumed to be a matter for empirical investigation.

The topic-comment structure of a sentence is systematically correlated with its prosodic characteristics. Because primary sentence stress necessarily falls on some proper or improper part of the comment, I will refer to the characteristic accent and falling intonation pattern as 'comment stress', and indicate it by large capital letters, as in the question-answer examples in (3):

(3)   (a)   Q: What did Mary buy?
        (a')   A: MARY bought the CHEESE.

        (b)   Q: Who bought the cheese?
        (b')   A: MARY bought the CHEESE.

I will refer to the secondary accent and rising intonation pattern optionally associated with topics as 'topic stress', and indicate it by small capital letters.

The topic-comment structure of a sentence is also systematically related to the local discourse context in which it can be appropriately uttered. The pragmatic topic of a sentence can be viewed as the implicit or explicit question eliciting the comment as its answer. Thus, the topic of (3a') is 'what Mary bought', while the topic of (3b') is 'who bought the cheese.' The choice of topical

question is constrained by relevance, and topical questions can be hierarchically embedded, resulting in higher-level discourse topics.

Chafe, Gundel, Prince and others have pointed out correlations between the linguistic form of a referring expression and the cognitive status which a cooperative speaker must assume the intended referent has for the hearer. Gundel, Hedberg and Zacharski have recently proposed that there are five such statuses and that they are implicationally related to each other as shown in the Givenness Hierarchy in (4):

(4)   **Givenness Hierarchy** [Gundel, Hedberg and Zacharski 1988]

in focus > activated > shared > identifiable > type-identifiable

it   this, that   that N   the N   a N
             this N

The two statuses relevant to this paper are 'shared' and 'activated.' Thus, Gundel has argued that a necessary condition on felicitous topics is that they express <u>shared</u> information, information that both speaker and addressee are previously familiar with; and has furthermore suggested that sentence-final topics are even more constrained in that they tend to express <u>activated</u> information, information that is not only shared but 'in awareness.'

One goal of this paper is to show how the framework I have just outlined can predict certain <u>necessary</u> conditions on the local discourse contexts in which cleft sentences can be appropriately used. Specifically, the relative order of topic and comment should correlate in predicted ways with their givenness status: Sentence-final topics in 'comment-topic clefts' should express activated information, while sentence-initial topics in 'topic-comment clefts' should be unconstrained.

A second goal of this paper is to begin identifying <u>sufficient</u> conditions for the use of cleft sentences. The aim here is to determine not only <u>how</u> clefts are used, but <u>why</u> they are used, a question which requires a more global-level examination of their contexts. For this purpose the format of the McLaughlin discussions is particulary useful: Because the moderator controls topic

choice and to some extent turn-taking, the global structural organization of the ensuing discussion is fairly transparent.

Focussing now on the analysis of cleft sentences in the McLaughlin corpus, the distribution of the three syntactic types is shown in (5):

(5)

TYPE OF CLEFT	NUMBER	PERCENT
it-clefts	12	3 %
wh-clefts	182	53 %
inverted wh-clefts	149	44 %
TOTAL	**343**	**100 %**

1. It-Clefts

There were only twelve it-clefts in the entire McLaughlin corpus. Two of these were clefted wh-questions which I won't analyze here. In all ten of the remaining statement it-clefts, primary stress falls on the clefted constituent, which thus must be analyzed as the comment. The stress pattern on the sentence-final cleft clauses is consistent with their predicted analysis as activated topics, since they are either entirely destressed or else receive secondary topic stress.

In two cases, one of which is shown in (6), the cleft clause is directly activated in the immediate linguistic context and therefore completely destressed:

(6)   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.**

In a third case, shown in (7), the cleft clause is activated but receives contrastive topic stress:

(7)   JM: Some people think that Reagan's administration is at its LOWEST ebb, it's NADIR. Do you agree,

          Eleanor?
          EC: Absolutely not. The Reagan-Baker Administration is in FINE shape. **It's the BUCHANAN administration that's having PROBLEMS**.

The other seven it-clefts, such as the one shown in (8), are used to assert the identity of the causal agent of an immediately activated event:

(8)　　　　I think they would not have done it unless they thought they had to, because the situation was in dire shape. **But it's not the CONTRAS that are making it dire shape.** It's their own REGIME. . . .

The fact that an inferred causal agent can be expressed in a destressed clause suggests that causal inferences of this sort are relatively automatic--that the direct linguistic activation of an event or state of affairs indirectly activates the assumption that it has a cause.

A striking characteristic of the ten statement it-clefts at a more global level of discourse is that they involve explicit expression of the three components of contrastiveness identified by Chafe (1976). The first component, an assumed event or state of affairs familar to speaker and hearer, is expressed in the activated cleft clause. The second component, a set of candidates to fill some role in the assumed event, is expressed in the clefted constituent and adjacent sentences. And the third component, the selection of one of the candidates, is made doubly explicit in the sense that typically the it-cleft together with an adjacent sentence express both the affirmation of one of the candidates and the denial of the other. I conclude, therefore, that the few it-clefts employed in this genre are comment-topic devices used to assert an explicit contrast.

2. Wh-clefts

In all of the wh-clefts of the McLaughlin corpus, comment stress falls on the sentence-final clefted constituent and the initial cleft clause thus functions as the topic. Because the only constraints on initial topics are those common to all topics (that they express relevant, shared information), wh-cleft topics may express currently activated topics as in (9), reactivated topics as in (10), contrastive topics as in (11), or new topics as in (12):

immediately activated topic:

(9)　　JM: What's in it for Dole?
　　　　JG: **WHAT'S in it for DOLE is getting out of a DUMB job that he's SICK of**.　　[6/17/88]

previously activated topic:

(10) JM: . . . Does this Dukakis win [Wisconsin] mean, or make him now the certain Democratic nomine? . . .
      EC: Well, **what WISCONSIN did was ANSWER the question that MY magazine asked, "Can Jesse Win?"**
           And the answer to that is probably no, and the Democratic Party establishment breathed a huge sigh of relief.
           But New York is a very dicy situation. . . . [4/8/88]

contrastive topic:

(11) RN: I have never, on this program, ever said I was opposed to the INF treaty. **What I am OPPOSED to is
           DETENTE** and all this dancing around. And what Eleanor did is a little trick that's going on here, and you
           have some out-of-control zanies like Howard Phillips making intemperate remarks, and all the opposition
           that's going on to this terrible week is put in Howard Phillips' hands. . . . [12/12/87]

new topic:

(12) JM: Well, let's get to the question of the snub, why Dukakis did not tell Jackson before. We've discussed this
           before. Do you have any insights into that?
      BB: Yes, I think it was just an oversight. I -- those things happen.
      JM: I'm talking about the Bentsen notification.
      BB: Yes, exactly. Mike Dukakis doesn't play the political game naturally. And it was not at the top of his list.
           Now, **what's REALLY interesting is the way he handled Jackson AFTER THAT.** He was biding his
           time, and Jackson finally had to come to him on Tuesday and say, "I accept -- your--[7/22/88]

The table in (13) indicates one possible global discourse function of wh-clefts: 46% are used to initiate a participant's turn, as in examples (9) and (10), while another 47% are used to open a new discourse section, either to initiate the speaker's own contribution following an initial response to the previous speaker or to signal the beginning of a new section of argument, as in examples (11) and (12).

(13)

WH-CLEFTS TOTAL N	INITIAL IN TURN	INITIAL IN SUBSECTION	NON-INITIAL
182	84	86	12
	46%	**47%**	7%

These data suggest that wh-clefts are devices used by speakers to explicitly assert the higher-level discourse topic of a subsequent sequence of utterances and thus function as powerful cues to overall discourse organization.

3. Comment-Topic Inverted Wh-Clefts

Returning again to local discourse function, we have seen thus far that the sentence-final it-cleft clauses express activated topics, while sentence-intial wh-cleft clauses also express topics but are not necessarily activated. The function of inverted wh-clefts remains to be determined. The table in (14) shows that the McLaughlin corpus contains both comment-topic and topic-comment inverted wh-clefts:

(14)

INV WH-CLEFT			
CONSITUENT TYPE	N	COMMENT-TOPIC	TOPIC-COMMENT
full NP	6	5	1
personal pronoun	8	0	8
relative clause	3	0	3
demonstrative pronoun	132	45	87
TOTAL	149	50 (34%)	99 (66%)

Five of the six clefted full NPs are comment-topic clefts, like that shown in (15):

(15)   RN: Just a minute. Let me talk to you. It's a protectionist bill. There are terrible things in this bill. **The stuff that the administration has EMBRACED is what's MISERABLE.** And if -- I think what they're going to do is there's going to be a second bill passed without the plant closing provision. They are going then to have worries about plant closings, because--[4/29/88]

The cleft clause is completely destressed and therefore must be analyzed as the topic. While this class of inverted wh-clefts shares with it-clefts a basic comment + activated topic structure, there are subtle differences in the way they relate to their respective contexts at a global level. Although full-NP inverted wh-clefts are used contrastively, the explicitness of the contrast which I earlier argued to be characteristic of it-clefts seems to be lacking. Thus, although a contrast is evoked in (15) between what the administration embraced and what it rejected, and application of 'miserableness' to the former is explicitly affirmed, application to the latter is not explicitly denied.

While it-cleft clauses typically express information that is activated through mention in prior discourse, inverted wh-cleft clauses typically express information which is not only activated but

also functions as the topic of prior discourse. Thus, for example, the cleft clause in (16) reasserts the established discourse topic of the preceding sequence of utterances:

(16) JM: What must George Bush accomplish at the convention?
      EC: . . . . Michael Dukakis received the opening kickoff, and he scored a touchdown at his convention. Now what George Bush has to do, now that it's his turn with the ball, is put some points on the scoreboard. And if I can deliver that football metaphor, he can speak to the common man. He's got to emerge from Reagan's shadow and draw the differences between himself and Dukakis in the sharpest possible terms. And he's got to, you know, criticize Dukakis. **THAT'S what he's got to do.**   [8/12/88]

Comment-topic inverted wh-clefts and topic-comment non-inverted wh-clefts are thus the mirror image of each other functionally as well as structurally.   It is particularly noteworthy that speakers sometimes exploit this mirror-image relationship to produce highly emphatic sequences of a wh-cleft immediately followed by an inverted wh-cleft, like the one shown in (17):

(17)   JM: What you have now is DETENTE, industrial strength, **THAT'S what you have.** [12/12/87]

Example (18) shows another emphatic inverted wh-cleft construction, in which a cleft-clause like unit redundantly appears in right-dislocation position following a full sentence:

(18)   JM: What is he, what is he? What makes him tick?
       JG: He's an extreme right-wing ideologue who has--
       JM: You make him sound like Novak.
       MK: He's a pathetic -- **he's a pathetic NUT, is what he IS**, and he's determined--
       JM: Well, now you make him sound like Novak, too. What's going on here?   [1/22/88]

Gundel and others have argued that right-dislocated constituents function as sentence topics, and the sentence-final cleft-clause in (18) predictably echoes the activated topical question, 'what is he?'. However, the cleft clause in such sentences appear to never be completely destressed. The examples from everyday conversation shown in (19) suggest that this type of phrasal topic is dislocated precisely in order to allow it to receive emphatic stress:

(19)   **I set you on FIRE is what I DID.** [uttered by KS in the context of brushing
                             burning ashes off NH's coat]

           They should have a separate COMPUTER room is what they SHOULD have.   [uttered by BP in the
                context of complaining about the computer resources   of his academic department]

4. Topic-Comment Inverted Wh-Clefts

In the second class of inverted wh-clefts, comment stress falls on the cleft clause. The clearest cases of topic-comment inverted wh-clefts are those containing clefted unstressed pronouns, as in example (20):

20) JM: When will Dole exit the presidential race? . . . .
    MK: . . . . I said he was going to be an inactive candidate, but still in the race, and not declaring that it's over, --
      not concede to George Bush--
    JM: --- No, no, no.   -- No, no, no --
    HC: He says inactive.
    JG: We're saying -- you weren't in the real world in those days, John, but **it was what ED MUSKIE did in 1972.** He suspended his campaign; remained a candidate for awhile.
    [3/11/88]

The topic stress on the clefted pronoun in (21) signals a topic shift from Nancy Reagan's instincts to Nancy Reagan herself, but it is clearly the cleft clause that expresses the new information and consequently receives comment stress:

(21)   JM: Number two, is it not true that Nancy Reagan is always right? . . . . This is not a bash Reagan session. I just want to know whether or not her instincts are invariably correct? I ask you.
    MK: No, they're not. I mean, **SHE was the one who wanted to keep Reagan from appearing anywhere in PUBLIC.** That was--
    JM: But she also has the concern about the man's health. she -- he lived through an assassination attempt, remember that? [3/6/87-9]

Clefted relative clauses, such as example (22), provide another clear case of topic-comment inverted wh-clefts. It has frequently been argued, for example by Gundel and Kuno, and more recently by Bresnan, that a relative clause functions as a comment about its head:

(22)   RC: Yeah, but they haven't even started the process. I mean, they absolutely REJECT giving up territories, trading territories for peace. And you have to FIRST have an open mind, saying, "Let's start the PROCESS," **which is what PERES is saying.** [12/26/87-3]

Topic-comment inverted wh-clefts can also be involved in right-dislocation constructions of the type shown in (23) through (25). Because the right-dislocated phrases follow the sentence comment, they predictably express activated information:

(23) EC: the Boston Globe, when they saw the undecided --
      PB: Gallup shut down before the Bush thing swept through.
      JM: And **that's what WE'RE going to do, SHUT DOWN**. We'll be right back. [12/19/88]

(24) JG: The market reacted this week to --
      RN: Oh, it went up and it went down.
      JG: It went up and it went down. **THAT'S what the market DOES, it goes UP, it goes DOWN.**   [11/20/87]

(25) JG: Yeah, I have the same concern about whether we're getting the straight dope from these sleazeballs, these
           Iranian nuts who are--they're just fanatics who are holding him. If they're concerned about the guy, why they
           just let him go, rather than insisting on 100 hostages.
      MK: Yeah, there can't be any pressure on Reagan to trade this time. **That's what we all should have learned from
           the IRAN mess, that you DON'T trade for HOSTAGES.** And they want to trade now 100 Israelis. And Jack
           is quite right. If they're concerned at all about his health, let him go. That's the human thing to do. [3/27/87]

Lambrecht has argued for a distinction between two types of right-dislocation construction which are structurally indistinguishable except prosodically: "antitopics" are unstressed, while "afterthoughts", like those under consideration here, are stressed. While both antitopics and afterthoughts both express activated topics, the present class of afterthoughts signal topic shift instead of topic continuation. In (23) expression of the afterthought is necessary because the connection between the new topic, 'shutting down' and the activated linguistic context would be too vague to be understandable.

I showed earlier that a major global-level function of wh-clefts is to signal the opening of a new discourse segment.   An examination of the distribution of inverted wh-clefts at the global level shows that they serve an inverse function. Thus, (26) shows that 54% of the inverted wh-clefts are used to close a participant's turn, while another 27% are used to close a subsection:

(26)

INV WH-CLEFTS	FINAL	FINAL IN	NON-
TOTAL N	IN TURN	SUBSECTION	FINAL
149	80	41	27
	54%	**27%**	18%

Inverted wh-clefts appear, therefore, to be devices used by speakers to assert or reassert the discourse topic of a preceding sequence of utterances, and thus function to signal the end of a discourse segment.

I conclude that it-clefts, wh-clefts and inverted wh-clefts all serve the general function of syntactically separating the topic of the utterance from the comment. At the local level of discourse structure, they are constrained by necessary conditions on topics in general, including the activation condition on sentence-final topics. Finally, at a more global level of discourse structure they function as devices for signalling, respectively, explicit contrast, discourse segment opening, and discourse segment closure.

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