

It is not the obvious question that a cleft addresses

Introduction—My overarching question is why a speaker/writer would choose to use a cleft like in (1a) instead of the much simpler unclefted (1b) in German:

- (1) a. Es ist Peter, der mit Lena gesprochen hat.
‘It is Peter who talked to Lena.’
- b. Peter hat mit Lena gesprochen.
‘Peter talked to Lena.’

Previous literature intensively discussed how clefts express exhaustivity (e.g., Horn (1981); Buring and Križ (2013)), contrast (e.g., Destruel and Velleman (2014)), and, more recently, prominence or focus (e.g. De Veugh-Geiss et al. (2015); Tönnis et al. (2016)). Many previous approaches, however, do not consider the cleft in contrast to the unclefted version, and they do not consider corpus data.

I take a different perspective based on several new corpus examples from novels, similar to (3), that show an interesting effect once the cleft is replaced by the unclefted version such as (1b). In the corpus, I observed that clefts structure the narrative of a text in a much better way than the unclefted sentence would. Intuitively, clefts often serve as a device to refer back to something distant, to parenthesize, or to address something unexpected. This effect occurs independently of exhaustivity and contrast. Hence, I rather focus on the discourse effect of clefts. My analysis is similar to the QUD-based approach of Velleman et al. (2012), but actually assigns a different particular function to the cleft.

Background and data—Many experimental studies (e.g., De Veugh-Geiss et al. (2018)) and a corpus study by Tönnis et al. (2016) showed that it is quite hard to empirically test exhaustivity or contrast in German clefts. In natural language use, it is often unclear what the domain for exhaustification or contrast is. Furthermore, intuitions with respect to exhaustivity of a particular occurrence of a cleft may vary a lot (De Veugh-Geiss et al., 2018), leading to a very puzzling picture.

Thus, I focus, instead, on the question what function the cleft takes in an actual discourse, i.e., referring to something distant or unexpected or parenthesizing. My observations are in line with Velleman et al. (2012), who pointed out that a cleft sounds odd as a direct answer to an explicit question (compare (2a) and (2b)).

- (2) Wer hat gestern mit Lena gesprochen?
‘Who talked to Lena yesterday?’
- a. ?Es war Peter, der gestern mit Lena gesprochen hat.
‘It was Peter who talked to Lena yesterday.’
- b. Peter hat gestern mit Lena gesprochen.
‘Peter talked to Lena yesterday.’

Velleman et al. (2012) argue that clefts are Inquiry Terminating (IT) constructions, that exhaustively answer the Current Question (CQ). According to Beaver and Clark (2008), the CQ is “a question that is proffered and mutually accepted by the interlocutors as the most immediate goal of the discourse” (p.35). Based on this definition, Velleman et al. argue that in examples such as (2), the cleft is not necessary to explicitly mark the end of the inquiry since there is simply no extended inquiry in this context. Accordingly, they argue that an example such as (2) would need an elaborate line of inquiry for the cleft to be appropriate.

I argue that once the question *Who talked to Lena?* is implicit or in a larger distance such as in (3), the cleft (3a) is even more appropriate than the unclefted version (3b). Example (3) is inspired by the corpus examples.

- (3) **Ein Typ₁ hat gestern mit Lena gesprochen.** Die beiden haben viel gelacht und sich direkt für den nächsten Abend verabredet. Dann ist Lena glücklich nach Hause gefahren.
‘Yesterday, some guy₁ talked to Lena. They laughed a lot and they immediately agreed to meet the next evening. Then, Lena went home happily.’
- a. Es war Peter₁, der mit ihr gesprochen hat.
‘It was Peter₁, who talked to her.’
- b. ?Peter₁ hat mit ihr gesprochen.
‘Peter₁ talked to her.’
- c. ?Es war ein rotes Kleid, das sie getragen hat.
‘It was a red dress that Lena wore.’

The continuation in (3b) is irritating when Peter is supposed to refer to *ein Typ* (‘some guy’). In contrast to the cleft in (3a), the unclefted version rather addresses a new question or a very obvious question instead of referring back to an issue raised earlier. Nevertheless, the context for (3a) does not really represent an extended inquiry in the sense of Velleman et al. (2012). Thus, I argue that the cleft is not an IT-construction here.

However, the cleft is not appropriate when the context does not provide any question at all as indicated by (3c).¹ Here, the unclefted sentence would be preferred.

Another example from the corpus ((4) in the appendix) shows a parenthetical use of a cleft which, by definition, is not part of a line of inquiry, hence, cannot be an IT-construction. Replacing the cleft in (4) by the unclefted sentence *Maybe I liked her humor the most about her* makes the parenthesis sound even more out-of-context (although this is just a small effect which needs empirical evidence).

Analysis—As opposed to Velleman et al. (2012), I propose that clefts do not have to terminate an inquiry, but address an unexpected question. In particular, I hypothesize (i) that the more unexpected that question is the more likely it is that the cleft is preferred over an unclefted sentence and (ii) the question that the cleft addresses must be derivable from the context. This hypothesis makes at least the following predictions:

- (a) A cleft is inappropriate directly answering an explicit question, since that question is very expected.
- (b) A cleft is appropriate as a parenthesis since parenthetical utterances do not address expected questions.
- (c) An explicit or implicit question raised some time ago in the discourse can be addressed by a cleft since it is not very expected.
- (d) Last but not least, a cleft cannot address a question that does not have an antecedent in the context.

These predictions cover all the intuitively observed functions of clefts, as well as the data from Velleman et al. (2012). In example (3), the expected CQ preceding the cleft would rather be something like *What did Lena do next?* or something similar. The cleft does not address such a

¹Thanks to reviewer comment.

question. The question that the cleft does address (*Who talked to Lena?*) is rather unexpected. Part (ii) of my hypothesis accounts for the inappropriateness of (3c).

Conclusion—My approach can account for the data in Velleman et al. (2012), and at the same time provides an explanation that also captures the other functions of clefts by summarizing all of the functions as addressing an unexpected yet derivable question. Especially parenthetical uses of clefts cannot be explained by Velleman et al. (2012), since those clefts definitely do not terminate a line of inquiry. This discourse-oriented approach provides a broader view on different kinds of clefts. In future research, the predictions need to be tested empirically in more detail and underpinned with more corpus examples.

References

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Appendix

This is an example for a parenthetical cleft taken from a novel by (Sendker, 2014, p.31) translated from German.

- (4) Context: *The protagonist talks to her dear friend Amy about her feelings.*
“What’s up?”
I shrunk helplessly.
“Let me guess: Mulligan fired you.”
I shook my head.
“Your mom died.”
I fought back my tears.
Amy sighed deeply. “Ok. It is something serious!”
Maybe it was her humor that I liked most about her.
“Come on! Tell me what happened?”
“What do I look like?” *I tried to evade her question.*