

Structural integration and discourse function of English WH-clefts

This talk addresses the relationship between syntactic form and discourse function of English WH-cleft (or pseudocleft) constructions. Traditionally, WH-clefts have been analyzed as information structure constructions consisting of two parts: a presupposition expressed in a WH-clause and a focus coded as copular complement (Prince 1978, Lambrecht 2001, *inter alia*); cf. (1a). In this they contrast with their canonical counterparts, which have a syntactically unmarked information structure; cf. (1b).

- (1) a. What I'd like you to do is put those cans away, please. (*Santa Barbara Corpus*)
b. I'd like you to put those cans away, please.

On the basis of an exhaustive analysis of the *Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English* and an equally large, random sample from the *Switchboard-1* corpus, we demonstrate that WH-clefts in conversation display a variety of formal and functional properties that go beyond this traditional characterization. Moreover, these properties are not independent of each other; the formal variation found in WH-clefts is associated with a range of discourse functions.

Regarding their syntactic form, our data show that the WH-clause subject is frequently repeated in the focus phrase; cf. *they* in (2). In such cases, the focus phrase takes the form of a finite main clause rather than a non-finite VP as in (1a).

- (2) What they did is they built four intake towers. (*Santa Barbara Corpus*)

Weinert and Miller (1996) suggest viewing the structural differences between sentences like (1a) and (2) in terms of a *scale of syntactic integration*. On this view, the focus phrase in (2) is less integrated into the WH-cleft construction than the focus phrase in (1a). In fact, our data include examples of even less integration, such as variation in the TAM values of WH-clause and focus phrase (e.g. past perfect ~ simple past; cf. [3]), or omission of the copula; cf. (4).

- (3) What it'd done is it caused him to be introverted. (*Santa Barbara Corpus*)
(4) What they did () they took the stubs and they cleaned em up. (*Santa Barbara Corpus*)

On the functional side, we find WH-clefts put to rhetorical purposes that are not primarily information-structuring in nature (see also Hopper 2001). They may, for instance, act as discourse-structuring devices announcing an extended stretch of talk that exceeds the bounds of a syntactically defined focus phrase; cf. the bracketed part of (5).

- (5) What you do is, [you sprinkle the fifth-graders out evenly. And you make the fourth-graders take the responsibility for teaching them. And you engrain in them that it's their responsibility to help those little kids.] That's what I did. (*Santa Barbara Corpus*)

We propose that the varying degrees of syntactic integration found in WH-clefts (measured in terms of factors such as subject repetition, copula omission, size of focus, placement of prosodic boundaries) are correlated with differences in discourse function. For example, it is precisely in the discourse-structuring use as in (5) that we find WH-clefts with extended foci in the form of independent main clauses. This conclusion provides support for a view of grammatical structure as being sensitive to, and reflecting properties of, language use.

References

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