

Focus Constructions in ASL: Evidence from Pseudoclefting and Doubling

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This study investigates two types of clausal structures in American Sign Language (ASL), “rhetorical” *wh*-questions and doubling (see examples 1 and 2). Following work by Petronio (1993), I assume the stance that rhetorical *wh*-questions are pseudoclefts (*wh*-clefts). Unlike languages that use focus particles or relative clause-like structures, here ASL achieves the semantic properties of a cleft by moving the counterweight ‘answer’ of the rhetorical question structure to spec-FP, and topicalizing the ‘question’ *wh*-XP. This is similar to Abner's analysis of the clefting semantics of the rightward *wh*-R construction in ASL (2011). Both pseudoclefts and doubles have been identified as potential sites for focus; doubles are commonly assumed to have emphatic (also known as prosodic) focus (Wilbur 1994, Nunes and Quadros 2006). However, as it stands current work under-specifies the exact nature of the differences in information structure, particularly in terms of the nature of the predication pseudocleft (Sandler and Lillo-Martin 2006). From this viewpoint I analyze the differences in information structure between the two clausal types as based on the diagnostics of Kiss (1998). I argue that the pseudoclefting construction constitutes identificational focus (ID), and the doubling emphatic information focus (info).

The evidence for pseudoclefting as ID focus is as follows. (a) First, pseudoclefting is necessarily exhaustive, whereas doubles are not (cf. examples 3 and 4). (b) Second, ‘also’-phrases are impermissible as the focus (example 5). (c) Third, the focus takes scope: I analyze the focused NP in figure (1), ALLERGIC CAT, as moving leftward to spec-FP, following Wilbur (1996). Thus the focus takes scope over the the remainder of the utterance, DOG NO. Hence this provides a contrastive identificational focus: What John is allergic to is cats, not dogs. (d) Fourth, the focus must involve movement: both my own and Wilbur's analysis of the pseudocleft show that the focused XP must move leftward, as shown previously in figure 1. In contrast, the doubling construction is analyzed as arising *in-situ*. (e) Finally, the focus must be maximally projected; the analysis of the focus as moving to spec-FP confirms this.

Given the evidence for pseudoclefting as ID focus, I then turn to doubling as info focus. Here, the evidence *for* info focus constitutes demonstrating that the focus *fails* the ID focus diagnostics and must therefore be info focus instead. (a) Exhaustivity: It has previously been shown that doubles are not exhaustive. (b) Second, universal quantifiers should not be permissible, but they are felicitous in doubles (example 6). (c) Scope: Unlike ID focus, the scope of an info focused element is independent of its focus status. (d) Movement: I argue the rightward double is the primary focused element, as supported by Wilbur's analysis that utterance-final elements receive primary focus (1994). The rightward double is analyzed as base-generated in C; its leftward twin in spec-TP (figure 2). Hence, the focused element (and its twin) undergo no movement and fail the ID focus movement test. (e) Maximal projection: Petronio (1993) and I both analyze the the rightward double as base-generated in C⁰, hence it is not in an XP.

As demonstrated by the above evidence, I thus conclude that ASL pseudoclefts receive ID focus and doubled constructions info focus. This clarifies an important distinction heretofore under-specified in the ASL *wh*-construction literature and also provides an argument for the existence of FP in ASL.

References

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Data

- (1) “Rhetorical” *wh*-question/pseudocleft

br
SUE KNOW WHAT, BILL THIEF NOT
'What Sue knows is that Bill is not a thief.'
(Wilbur 1996, pp. 233)

- ## (2) Doubled construction

WHO CANT READ WHO
'Who can't read?' (Petronio 1993, pg 159)

- ### (3) Exhaustivity of pseudocleft

a. _____ br
MARY BUY WHAT, JACKET
'What Mary bought is a jacket.'

Here, “a jacket” answers the open proposition, “What did Mary buy?” It is felicitous to follow (3a) with (3b):

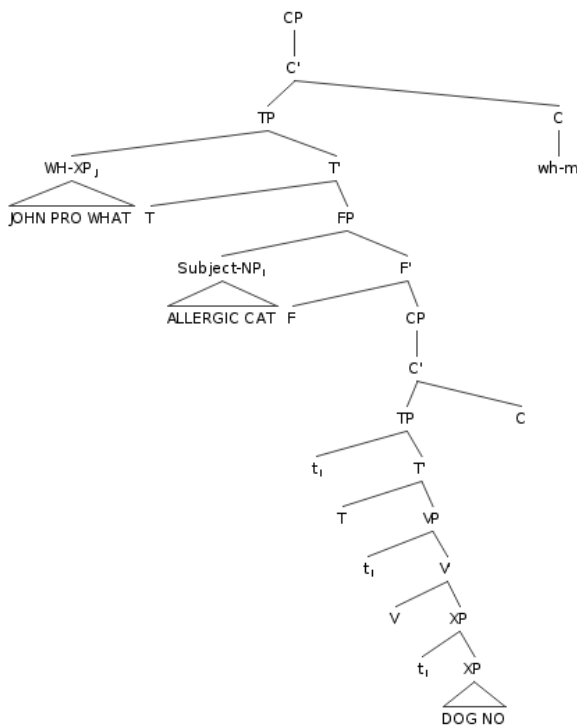


Figure 1.

WRONG YOU! ALL FINISH KNOW

JOHN PRO3 WHAT, ALLERGIC CAT, DOG NO
'You must be mistaken! Everybody knows that
what John's allergic to is cats, not dogs.'
(Wilbur 1996, pg. 228)

- b. n
NO, MARY BUY BACKPACK TOO
'No, Mary also bought a backpack.'

In contrast, this exchange is infelicitous:

- #### (4) Non-exhaustivity of double

a. MARY BUY JACKET
'Mary bought a backpack.'

- b. % n
NO, MARY BUY BACKPACK TOO
'No, Mary also bought a backpack.'

- ### (5) Ungrammaticality of 'also'-phrase in pseudocleft

* br
MARY BUY WHAT, ALSO JACKET
Intended: ‘What Mary bought was also jacket.’

- ### (6) Grammaticality of universal quantifier in double

PRO₁ ATE EVERY COOKIE EVERY hn
'I ate every cookie.'

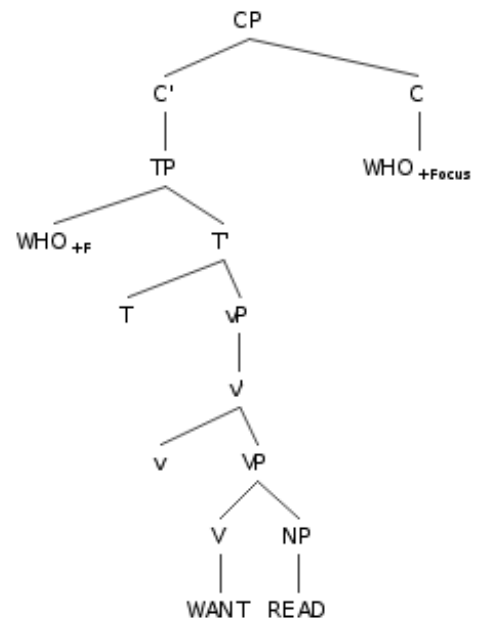


Figure 2.

Analysis of
example (2) above.