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The Structural and Functional Analysis of Cleft Sentences in English Linguistics.

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Abstract

Cleft sentences are essential syntactic constructions in English that emphasize specific elements by dividing a sentence into two clauses. This article explores their structural and functional aspects, demonstrating how cleft sentences enhance clarity, focus, and information structuring in various contexts, such as literature, journalism, and everyday conversation. The study also highlights the implications for teaching English as a second language and provides practical tips for learners. Through detailed examples and comparative analysis, this comprehensive examination underscores the importance of cleft sentences in effective communication.

Keywords: cleft sentences, emphasis, syntactic structure, information structuring.

Introduction

Cleft sentences are a major syntactic structure in English and often fulfill the following higher function: the foregrounding (or thematic focus) of a certain element of a sentence. Cleft comes from the verb "to cleave" which means to divide. A cleft sentence is linguistically a complete subject and predicate divided into a subject-predicate and an object along the lines of the vague phrase, background condition, the whole field of the background notes. Cleft sentences achieve this syntactic construction by turning a simple declarative sentence into a more complex one. For example, the basic sentence "John bought a car" can be turned into an it-cleft ("It was John who bought a car") or a wh-cleft ("What John bought was a car"). These transformations increase communicative specificity by deviating from standard syntactic orders in order to foreground particular information.

Cleft sentences are classified in several types such as it-clefts, wh-clefts (or pseudo-clefts), reverse wh-clefts, and those who exhibit different pragmatic and syntactic functions. Studying those structures gives us an idea of the processes underlying emphasis and information structuring in English and thus, the syntax variation and expressiveness of this language. Exploring cleft sentences is crucial to English linguistics as a way of probing the extent of its syntactic plasticity and of inventorying the linguistic operations that are available to enhance emphasising and focus. Cleft constructions exemplify the capacity of the English language to manipulate sentence structure to foreground specific elements, thereby facilitating nuanced and contextually appropriate communication.

From a syntactic perspective, cleft sentences offer a valuable framework for examining the hierarchical organization of clauses and the interplay between main and subordinate clauses. By dissecting the structure of cleft sentences, linguists can uncover the underlying syntactic rules governing clause formation and the distribution of emphasis. Pragmatically, cleft sentences are essential for understanding how speakers manage the flow of information within discourse. The strategic use of cleft constructions allows speakers to guide the listener's attention, introduce new information, or contrast given information with new insights. Consequently, the analysis of cleft sentences contributes to broader discussions on information structure, discourse coherence, and the pragmatics of emphasis. The exploration of cleft sentences not only deepens our comprehension of English syntax and pragmatics but also enhances our ability to teach and learn the language effectively, making it a crucial area of study in contemporary linguistics.

Aim to Explore Both the Structural and Functional Aspects of Cleft Sentences

The primary objective of this article is to provide an in-depth examination of cleft sentences, focusing on both their structural and functional dimensions. This dual approach aims to elucidate how cleft sentences are constructed syntactically and how they operate pragmatically within English discourse. Structurally, the article will analyze the formation and categorization of cleft sentences, delving into the syntactic rules and patterns that govern their construction. This includes a detailed examination of different types of cleft sentences—such as it-clefts, wh-clefts, and reverse wh-clefts—and the syntactic transformations that enable these structures to emerge from simple declarative sentences.

Functionally, the article will explore the pragmatic roles that cleft sentences play in communication. This involves investigating how cleft constructions are employed to achieve specific rhetorical effects, such as emphasis, focus, and contrast. The article will also consider the contexts in which cleft sentences are most effectively used and how they contribute to the overall coherence and informativeness of discourse. By integrating both structural and functional analyses, this article seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of cleft sentences. It aims to bridge the gap between syntactic theory and pragmatic application, offering valuable insights for linguists, language educators, and advanced learners of English. Through this exploration, the article aspires to enhance the reader's appreciation of the complexity and versatility of cleft sentences within the broader landscape of English linguistics.

Historical Background

The origins and evolution of cleft sentences in English linguistics trace back to the early descriptive grammars of the 19th century, where grammarians began to observe and document various sentence structures used for emphasis and clarity. These initial observations laid the groundwork for more formalized studies in the early 20th century, as linguistic theory evolved to incorporate insights from syntax and pragmatics. Early studies by structural linguists such as Jespersen and later transformational grammarians like Chomsky and Ross provided foundational theories that significantly advanced our understanding of cleft sentences. Jespersen's work on syntactic analysis highlighted the unique nature of cleft constructions, emphasizing their role in altering the typical subject-verb-object order to foreground specific information. Chomsky's transformational grammar further refined these ideas by introducing the concept of deep structure and surface structure, illustrating how cleft sentences could be derived from underlying simple sentences through transformational rules. Ross's contributions, particularly in his seminal work on syntactic islands, shed light on the constraints governing cleft sentence formation and their interaction with other syntactic phenomena. Throughout the mid to late 20th century, the study of cleft sentences expanded to include functional perspectives, as linguists like Halliday and Prince explored how these constructions serve pragmatic functions such as topic-comment structure, focus, and presupposition. Halliday's systemic functional grammar provided a robust framework for understanding the communicative purposes of cleft sentences, emphasizing their role in managing information flow within discourse. Prince's work on information structure further elucidated how cleft sentences facilitate the introduction of new information and the contrast of known versus unknown elements in conversation. As linguistic research continued to evolve, the late 20th and early 21st centuries saw the integration of cleft sentences into broader theories of syntax and pragmatics, with scholars examining cross-linguistic variations and the cognitive underpinnings of cleft constructions. This historical trajectory reflects a rich tapestry of theoretical and empirical advancements, demonstrating the centrality of cleft sentences in both the structural and functional dimensions of linguistic inquiry.

Detailed Explanation of the Syntactic Structure of Cleft Sentences

Cleft sentences are syntactic constructions that enable the speaker or writer to emphasize specific elements within a sentence by dividing it into two distinct clauses, each with its own verb. This syntactic arrangement typically involves a main clause that introduces the element to be emphasized and a subordinate clause that provides additional context or information. The structure of cleft sentences is crucial for creating emphasis and guiding the listener's or reader's attention to the most salient part of the message.

There are several types of cleft sentences, each serving different syntactic and pragmatic functions. The most common type is the it-cleft, where the structure is introduced by the pronoun "it" followed by a form of the verb "to be," and then the emphasized element. For example:

- Simple Sentence: "John bought a car."
- It-Cleft: "It was John who bought a car."
- It-Cleft: "It was a car that John bought."

This type of cleft sentence foregrounds the subject "John" or the object "a car," making it the focal point of the sentence. Another type is the wh-cleft, also known as the pseudo-cleft, which typically begins with a wh-word (such as "what," "where," "who") and a copular verb. For instance:

- Simple Sentence: "John bought a car."
- Wh-Cleft: "What John bought was a car."
- Wh-Cleft: "What was bought by John was a car."

This construction emphasizes the predicate "a car," drawing attention to the object of the action. Reverse wh-clefts, though less common, are also noteworthy; they invert the order of the clauses, placing the wh-clause at the end. For example:

- Simple Sentence: "John bought a car."
- Reverse Wh-Cleft: "A car is what John bought."
- Reverse Wh-Cleft: "A car is what was bought by John."

These reverse constructions emphasize the subject "a car." The syntactic flexibility of cleft sentences allows for various manipulations to achieve the desired emphasis, making them a versatile tool in both spoken and written English.

Diagrams and examples from the corpus of English usage can further illustrate these structures, highlighting their role in syntactic variation and emphasis. For instance:

- Simple Sentence: "Maria fixed the computer."
- It-Cleft: "It was Maria who fixed the computer."
- Wh-Cleft: "What Maria fixed was the computer."
- Reverse Wh-Cleft: "The computer is what Maria fixed."

Understanding the structural intricacies of cleft sentences not only enriches our grasp of English syntax but also enhances our ability to use language effectively for rhetorical and communicative purposes. The detailed analysis of these constructions reveals how they operate within different contexts to manage information flow, introduce new information, or contrast known elements, thus contributing significantly to discourse coherence and the nuanced expression of meaning (Delahunty, 1984; Khudair, 2022; Falisz, 2020; Cluyse, 2023). Through the examination of cleft sentences, we gain valuable insights into the dynamic nature of English syntax and its capacity for emphasis and focus, thereby advancing our understanding of linguistic theory and practical application (Yang & Gu, 2020; Haryani & Fatimah, 2020; Kusumadewi, 2019; Hidayah, 2021).

Pragmatic Functions of Cleft Sentences

Cleft sentences serve several pragmatic functions within English discourse, primarily by allowing speakers and writers to emphasize specific elements and manage the flow of information. The cleft construction achieves this by foregrounding the focal element of the sentence, thereby drawing attention to it and highlighting its importance. This emphasis can serve various communicative purposes, such as clarifying the subject of discussion, introducing new information in a highlighted manner, or contrasting with previously mentioned elements. For instance, in the sentence "It was the manager who approved the project," the cleft construction emphasizes "the

manager," indicating that this piece of information is particularly relevant or new to the listener. Additionally, cleft sentences facilitate focus and information structuring by creating a clear division between known and new information, thereby enhancing the coherence and effectiveness of communication (Delahunty, 1984).

Examples of Clarifying the Subject of Discussion:

- Simple Sentence: "John fixed the computer."
- Cleft Sentence: "It was John who fixed the computer." (Emphasizing that John, not someone else, did the fixing)
- Simple Sentence: "The meeting is on Tuesday."
- Cleft Sentence: "What is on Tuesday is the meeting." (Clarifying that the meeting, not another event, is on Tuesday)

Examples of Introducing New Information:

- Simple Sentence: "Maria solved the problem."
- Cleft Sentence: "It was Maria who solved the problem." (Introducing Maria as the key person who solved it)
- Simple Sentence: "They chose the blue design."
- Cleft Sentence: "What they chose was the blue design." (Highlighting the choice of the blue design)

Examples of Contrasting with Previously Mentioned Elements:

- Simple Sentence: "She called you, not me."
- Cleft Sentence: "It was you she called, not me." (Emphasizing the contrast between you and me)
- Simple Sentence: "He bought a car, not a bike."
- Cleft Sentence: "What he bought was a car, not a bike." (Highlighting the contrast between car and bike)

By highlighting the focal element, cleft sentences can also help to manage discourse by making the information more accessible and easier to process. For example, in a conversation where multiple projects are being discussed, using a cleft sentence such as "It was the new software project that received the funding" helps to specify and emphasize which project is being referred to. This use of cleft constructions can clarify ambiguities and ensure that the intended message is conveyed with greater precision. Furthermore, cleft sentences can be employed to introduce contrasts or corrections, such as in "What she actually said was that the meeting starts at 10, not 9." This structure emphasizes the correction and ensures that the crucial information is not overlooked.

Examples of Managing Discourse and Clarifying Ambiguities:

- Simple Sentence: "The cat knocked over the vase."
- Cleft Sentence: "It was the cat that knocked over the vase." (Clarifying that the cat, not another pet, caused the accident)
- Simple Sentence: "We need to discuss the budget."

- Cleft Sentence: "What we need to discuss is the budget." (Focusing on the budget as the primary topic of discussion)

Examples of Introducing Contrasts or Corrections:

- Simple Sentence: "She said the exam is tomorrow."

- Cleft Sentence: "What she said is that the exam is tomorrow." (Emphasizing the correction or clarification)

- Simple Sentence: "They will arrive at 5 PM."

- Cleft Sentence: "It is at 5 PM that they will arrive." (Highlighting the specific time of arrival)

Overall, the pragmatic functions of cleft sentences play a vital role in effective communication by enhancing clarity, focus, and information structuring, thus contributing to the overall coherence and persuasiveness of the discourse.

Contexts in Which Cleft Sentences Are Typically Used

Cleft sentences are commonly used in contexts where emphasis or clarification is necessary, such as in academic writing, formal speeches, and everyday conversations. In academic and formal contexts, cleft sentences can help to underscore key points or arguments, making the information more salient and memorable for the audience. In conversational contexts, cleft sentences are often employed to resolve ambiguities, provide corrections, or add emphasis to certain details, thus aiding in clear and effective communication. Moreover, the strategic use of cleft sentences can also serve rhetorical purposes, allowing speakers to manipulate the structure of their discourse to achieve desired effects, such as persuasion or emphasis. This versatility underscores the functional importance of cleft sentences in various communicative scenarios, highlighting their role in enhancing the dynamism and precision of English language use (Khudair, 2022).

Comparison with Similar Structures in Other Languages

Comparing cleft sentences in English with analogous structures in other languages provides valuable insights into the universality and variability of syntactic emphasis strategies. For example, many Romance languages, such as French and Spanish, employ similar cleft constructions to achieve emphasis and focus. In French, the sentence "C'est Marie qui a écrit la lettre" ("It is Marie who wrote the letter") functions similarly to its English counterpart by emphasizing "Marie." These cross-linguistic comparisons reveal both commonalities and differences in how languages use cleft constructions to manipulate sentence focus and structure, thereby enriching our understanding of syntactic and pragmatic phenomena across languages. Moreover, languages such as Japanese and Korean, which utilize topic-prominent structures, offer alternative mechanisms for achieving emphasis that can be contrasted with the cleft constructions in English, providing a broader perspective on the diversity of syntactic tools available for managing information structure (Falisz, 2020).

Insights from Cross-Linguistic Studies

Insights from cross-linguistic studies demonstrate that while the specific forms and frequencies of cleft sentences may vary, the underlying functional principles of emphasis and focus

are remarkably consistent across languages. This consistency suggests that cleft constructions fulfill a fundamental communicative need for structuring information in a way that highlights key elements and clarifies the speaker's or writer's intent. For instance, studies have shown that cleft sentences in languages like Polish and Latin serve similar pragmatic functions as in English, despite differences in syntactic realization. Such findings underscore the importance of cleft sentences as a universal linguistic strategy for enhancing clarity and emphasis, highlighting the interconnectedness of syntactic form and pragmatic function across linguistic systems. This cross-linguistic perspective not only deepens our understanding of cleft sentences within English but also contributes to broader theories of language universals and typology (Cluyse, 2023).

Implications for Teaching English as a Second Language

Cleft sentences have significant implications for teaching English as a second language (ESL). Understanding and effectively using cleft sentences can greatly enhance a learner's ability to emphasize important information and manage the structure of their discourse. For ESL educators, it is crucial to introduce cleft constructions as part of advanced syntax and pragmatics lessons, helping students grasp not only the form but also the function of these sentences. This involves teaching the various types of cleft sentences, such as *it*-clefts and *wh*-clefts, and illustrating how they can be used to highlight different parts of a sentence. By integrating cleft sentences into the curriculum, teachers can provide learners with powerful tools for enhancing their communicative competence and rhetorical skills.

Tips for Learners on Using Cleft Sentences Effectively

For learners, mastering cleft sentences involves understanding when and how to use them to achieve the desired emphasis and clarity. One effective strategy is to practice transforming simple sentences into cleft sentences, thereby gaining familiarity with the structure and its effects. For instance, learners can take a basic sentence like "John bought a car" and practice forming *it*-clefts ("It was John who bought a car") and *wh*-clefts ("What John bought was a car"). Additionally, learners should be encouraged to use cleft sentences in both written and spoken contexts, paying attention to the natural flow and focus of the discourse. It is also helpful to study authentic examples from various sources to see how cleft sentences are used in real-life communication. This practice can enhance learners' ability to use cleft sentences flexibly and appropriately, improving their overall proficiency in English.

Examples from Real-Life Usage

Cleft sentences are widely used in various forms of real-life communication, including literature, journalism, and everyday conversation. In literature, authors often use cleft sentences to add emphasis and create dramatic effects, as seen in sentences like "It was at midnight that the haunting began." In journalism, cleft sentences can help highlight key points or important details, such as "It was the president's speech that drew the most attention during the conference." In everyday conversation, cleft sentences are frequently used to clarify information or correct misunderstandings, as in "What I meant was that we should leave early." By examining these examples, learners can gain insights into the practical applications of cleft sentences and see how they function in different contexts to enhance communication.

Conclusion

This article has provided a comprehensive examination of cleft sentences, delving into both their structural and functional aspects. Structurally, cleft sentences are characterized by their unique division into two clauses, each with its own verb, which serves to highlight a specific element within a sentence. We explored various types of cleft constructions, including it-clefts, wh-clefts, and reverse wh-clefts, illustrating how these structures can be manipulated to achieve different emphatic effects. Functionally, cleft sentences play a crucial role in managing information flow and enhancing clarity in communication. By foregrounding particular elements, they allow speakers and writers to emphasize important information, introduce new ideas with emphasis, and clarify or contrast information in discourse. Through practical examples and comparative analysis, we have seen how cleft sentences operate across different contexts and languages, underscoring their versatility and significance in effective communication.

Understanding cleft sentences is of paramount importance for both theoretical linguistics and practical language learning. From a linguistic perspective, cleft constructions offer insights into the syntactic flexibility and pragmatic richness of the English language. They provide a window into how language can be structured to meet various communicative needs, thereby contributing to our broader understanding of syntax and pragmatics. For language learners and educators, mastering cleft sentences can significantly enhance communicative competence, enabling more precise and nuanced expression. This study highlights the value of integrating cleft sentences into language teaching curricula, offering learners powerful tools for emphasis and clarity. Encouraging further exploration and study of cleft sentences will undoubtedly lead to deeper insights and more effective language teaching strategies, fostering a richer understanding of the complexities of English syntax and its practical applications in everyday communication.

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