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*CLEFTING: A STEREOTYPICAL
 BUT RESOURCEFUL AND HANDY TRANSFORMATION
 OF THE ENGLISH SIMPLE SENTENCE*

Abstract

Starting from our experience as a teacher of the English language interested in the Syntax of the sentence and our familiarity with the EFL methodology, in the present paper we approach the concept of **Clefting** in English with of view to addressing both philologists and non-philologists. Each category of readers will find theoretical explanations and examples of **cleft sentences** that are easy to understand and follow in everyday life, whenever necessary, especially in writing. This is so as we have selected accessible definitions from the literature in the field, we have made descriptions that can be processed almost effortlessly, and we have provided simple illustrations so that the pattern of **cleft structures** that we suggest be used to produce similar sentences practically automatically.

Keywords: Clefting, Pseudo-Clefting, clause constituent, emphasis, focal item

Many EFL grammar-practice books include tasks that ask learners to rephrase sentences, beginning as suggested and/or by including some clues which are to be observed in the process. Such exercises are extensively used not only in the EFL classroom as part of grammar activities, but also in the context of a written test focusing, among other language areas and skills, on the use of English (such as the Baccalaureate and the University entrance examinations in Romania, the Cambridge, the TOEFL, and the IELTS examinations worldwide). Usually, for each given sentence there is only one possible correct rephrasing which, in the context of a test, is awarded the maximum score-points according to the marking scheme used by the examiners.

In order to get the right answers to this type of test items, those who take a test that includes them are mainly supposed to have developed the automatism involved by the transformations that are required in each case. This is generally possible by doing similar exercises over and over again following a pattern provided as a model. When it comes to re-phrasing the sentences by applying **Clefting**, this means that the learners are expected to identify correctly the *clause constituents*, so that they can bring each of them into focus by building a special type of sentence, called a **cleft sentence** or simply a **cleft**. The identification happens mostly intuitively with non-philological students and the transformation as such is basically a matter of ‘stereotypical/automatic behaviour’. Nevertheless, at a more advanced level (such as undergraduate and graduate English studies), the student is explained what constituents can be given focal prominence to by a **cleft** and how the linguistic material is organised across such a sentence, thus they are more aware of the internal resorts of this syntactic and semantic transformation. In order to understand even the simplest explanation one needs to be familiar with such terms as *phrase constituents*, *clause constituents* (*Subject*, *Objects*, *Adverbials*, etc.), *dummy Subject with an anticipatory function*, *equative clause*, *Main Clause*, *regent clause*, *subordinate Subject Clause*, etc.: these are part of the minimal metalanguage necessary for the description of the mechanisms that this transformation consists in. (It goes without saying that the concept of **Clefting** and the theoretical approaches to it can be introduced only as part of a course on the Syntax of the

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Sentence, when Morphology has already been dealt with and the distinctions between *clause constituent* and *phrase constituent* are clear.)

Ever since the emergence of the Transformational Generative Grammar in the late fifties - early sixties of the 20th century, syntactic transformations - such as, *Extraposition + "it" insertion*, *Raising*, *Tough-Movement*, *Complex-Noun Shift*, *Clefting*, *Pseudo-Clefting*, etc. - have been studied in detail and answers have been sought for as about what language tools/mechanisms can be used to produce similar correct sentences given that the resulting surface structure of each such transformation is almost like a mathematical formula that can be shaped linguistically in a wide range of sentences that are (fully) acceptable in English. The present paper focuses only on the syntactic (but also semantic) transformation/transformation-rule/T-rule called **Clefting**, which is meant to help one achieve emphasis especially in writing - where the clue of intonation is missing (Cf. Lăcătușu, 2005: 80) - by changing the structure of a simple sentence.

It is true that emphasis in writing may be achieved by other syntactic devices as well, such as:

- by *inversion* (e.g., 'I will never do that again!', which is neutral in style, may change into the emphatic '*Never* will I do this again!', stressing on the Adverbial *never* by placing it first in the sentence and going on with the auxiliary – Subject inversion);

- by *visual techniques*, such as *punctuation* (an exclamation mark, for instance, will require a certain pitch of voice when reading the sentence aloud), or *underlining*, or *boldface* type, or *italics*, or placing a fragment between inverted commas, etc., all these suggesting a certain intonation and stress to be laid on the highlighted sentence fragment when uttered;

- by *pseudo-clefting* (e.g., 'What you have built is a *toy train*.' or 'What you have done is *build* a toy train.' instead of 'You have built a toy train.')

Nevertheless, **Clefting** involves changes at the level of the whole syntax of a sentence by means of which speakers or writers show unequivocally what is the constituent given *thematic* and *focal* prominence (Cf. Lăcătușu, 2005: 77) in the message that they want to put across.

As mentioned in the title of this paper, although almost a stereotypical/automatic process, **Clefting** is a very resourceful and handy transformation, in that any English sentence may be subjected to it. When mastered well, **Clefting**, as any of the other transformations mentioned above, is a mark flexibility with language, an undeniable sign of education in those who make use of it to achieve emphasis; beginner and even elementary (non-)native learners of English cannot be expected to be able to use **Clefting** since it requires some more advanced experience with complex structures of language.

Another aspect implied by the title of this study is that **Clefting** involves a base *simple sentence* which is to be re-phrased in a certain way. This is not entirely so in everyday language, since, on the one hand, the fluent speakers of English use cleft structures without necessarily thinking of a base neutral simple sentence first. (That such a base simple sentence exists or can be 'recovered' is only a matter of proving that this transformation involves a methodical organisation of the material of simple sentences, where the [+ Emphasis] seme is missing, in a more elaborate syntax.) On the other hand, **Clefting** can be applied to multi-clausal sentences of the *compound*, *complex*, or *compound-complex* type in a manner similar to the way in which it is applied to *simple sentences*, only then the resulting structure will be even more difficult to handle syntactically since the constituents of such sentences are clauses, not phrases.

The theoretical definitions of **Clefting** provided by general grammar books are simple but rather ambiguous in that this concept is usually considered together with that of **Pseudo-Clefting** and the formal distinctions between the two transformations are not acknowledged. For instance, before illustrating **Clefting** and **Pseudo-Clefting** by means of various sentences, Michael Vince only states that "different parts of the sentence can be emphasised" by *cleft* or *pseudo-cleft sentences*, which are "introduced by *it is/it was* or by a clause beginning *what*" (Vince&Sunderland, 2003: 85; italics in the original), but he actually treats them together since the examples he uses do not clarify which is an instance of which. R. A. Close only mentions that "A CLEFT SENTENCE is a device for focusing attention on a particular piece of information" (Close, 1979: 67; *capitals in the original*), and provides examples starting from a simple base sentence from which he derives "It" sentences and "wh-" sentences, which he calls the *it*-type and the *wh*-type, respectively (Cf. Ibidem). In the same vein,

Richard Nordquist states that “English has many different varieties of cleft constructions, but the two major types are *it-clefts* and *wh-clefts* and he explains that a *cleft* is “a construction in which some element in a sentence is moved from its normal position into a separate clause to give it greater emphasis” and also mentions that the function of “a sentence that is cleft (split)” is “to put the focus on one part of it” (Nordquist, 2019: np; *highlighting in the original*).

As one can easily notice, these linguists’ definitions treat **Clefting** and **Pseudo-Clefting** together; they all focus mainly on what is achieved by them (*i.e.*, *emphasis*), and on the way in which each such sentence begins, the examples provided for illustration being models of similar phrasings. This means that the theoretical explanations are kept to a minimum and, in their intention to be clear, the authors rely mainly on the power of example since they address non-specialists/common users of English, not linguists.

Nevertheless, there are linguists who elaborate on these T-rules in detail. Since the research they have carried on the two transformations addresses specialists in the field of linguistics, they seem not to have left any stone unturned when it comes to defining and describing the two concepts and those associated with them. In his corpus-based study on *Cleft and Pseudo-Cleft Constructions in English*, for instance, Peter C. Collins, too, starts out by describing these types of transformed sentences side by side. He first presents what they have in common and states that, formally, in both types of sentences the “material is divided into two distinct sections, assigned to different clauses” (Collins, 2002: 1) and that the “primary function [of *clefts* and *pseudoclefts*; my note][...] is thematic: they enable subsets of elements to be grouped into two parts in an almost unlimited number of ways” (Idem: 3). His explanations are also supported by illustrations with examples which clarify the aspects he mentions in his theoretical description. Later on in the same study, however, he focuses on each of the two transformations separately and makes the finest distinctions between them using a whole array of specialised concepts accessible only to highly specialised linguists.

The conclusion is that the definitions of each of the two T-rules are difficult to formulate in an exhaustive way without backing up the theoretical details about them with clear examples. And this, too, is what we are doing in what follows: our approach includes descriptive details about the surface structure of such a sentence and about the way in which the focus is laid on various constituents as compared to a corresponding simple sentence that is stylistically unmarked for emphasis.

Technically speaking, we admit that any user of English may choose to formulate linguistically a certain idea by using more complex structures rather than simple sentences identical in referential/denotative – but not thematic (*Cf.* Leech, 1981:19) – meaning, in other words, that they can choose “between alternative grammatical constructions” (*Cf.* Leech, *Ibidem*, apud Zdravkovich, 2018:9). Taking this into account, **Clefting** may be described as a *T-rule* that helps the speaker/writer produce a complex two-clause sentence, marked for emphasis on any clause constituent **X**, of the type:

Main (equative) clause	“that” clause
It is/was X	that (S) + V + (C) + (A)

It is a complex process that involves the following steps, mentioned in a chronological order as the cleft sentence unfolds from left to right:

- It requires a syntactic re-ordering of the constituents of a simple sentence - SV(C)(A) - in such a way that the first word to be used in the re-phrased sentence is the pronoun “It”.
- “It” acts as the *dummy subject* of a *copular/equative clause* (S=Cs), which clause is also the Main clause of the whole cleft sentence, whose verb representing the equal sign (“=”) is always the copulative verb “be”. (Since the pronoun “It” is the *grammatical Subject* in this clause, the verb “be” will always agree in number with it, thus it will always have a *singular form*, in the Present or Past Indicative according to the intended meaning in terms of time reference). This *dummy Subject* also anticipates the “that” clause at the end of the cleft sentence.
- The phrase that follows the verb “be” (the **X** in the formula above) is the point of maximum emphasis - the so-called “focal item” (Akmajian, 1970: np, apud. Higgins, 1973: 21), or the “highlighted element” (Collins, 2002: 2). This phrase “always bears the nuclear tone”

(Higgins, *Ibidem*) and it is the Subject Complement/Cs/“the traditional term *predicate complement*” (Higgins, 1973: 16) in the same equative clause.

- The subordinate clause that follows the *focal item X* is an extraposed *Subject Clause*. It is usually introduced by the pronoun “that” and has all the constituents of a clause: a Subject *S*, a Predicator expressed by a verb *V*, *Complements/C*, if necessary, *Adverbials/A*, if any. Although the conceptual Subject of the matrix verb “be”, the place of this clause is felt to be more natural after the regent verb in the equative clause, and not before it, since it is a “heavy” Subject (*i.e.*, one that is expressed by a clause, not simply by a Noun Phrase), usually longer and more complex than the regent clause itself.

For example, if we apply **Clefting** directly to the following simple sentence, we will take all the steps described above and will get a whole series of cleft re-phrasings, depending on what the speaker’s or writer’s point of maximum emphasis is. Syntactically speaking, these cleft sentences copy the model provided and detailed on above; the first clause in all the re-phrasing below (1.) is the *Main equative clause*, also regent for the second clause (2.), which is an *extraposed Subject Clause*:

S	P	DO	A (place)	A (time)
<u>Mary and Jane saw two firebugs in the bush three days ago/yesterday.</u>				
a.		b.	c.	d.

Cleft-sentences/Clefts:

- a. It is/was **Mary and Jane** 1./that/who saw two firebugs in the bush three days ago. 2./
- b. It is/was **two firebugs** 1./that/what Mary and Jane saw in the bush three days ago. 2./
- c. It is/was **in the bush** 1./that/where Mary and Jane saw two firebugs three days ago. 2./
- d. It was **three days ago/yesterday** 1./that/when Mary and Jane saw two firebugs in the bush. 2./

The *focal item* in each of the clefts above, written in boldface, may be any of the *phrases* in the original simple sentence, except the verb functioning as Predicator (*Cf.* Lăcătușu, 2005: 78): the compound Subject *Mary and Jane* (in a.), the Direct Object/DO *two firebugs* (in b.), the Adverbial of place/ A (place) *in the bush* (in c.), the Adverbial of time/A (time) *three days ago/yesterday*. This is to say that **Clefting** operates at the level of *whole-phrase structures/clause constituents*, not of *phrase constituents* (noun heads, adjective heads, adverb heads, determiners, premodifiers, postmodifiers, etc.).

As already mentioned, the clause constituent (**X**) which is given focal prominence by **Clefting** functions as the *Subject Complement/Cs/Predicate Complement* in the *equative clause* that a cleft begins with. It always comes third in a cleft-sentence structure. The plural meaning or form of a nominal phrase in such a position (*e.g.*, *Mary and Jane*, *two firebugs*, *three days ago*) does not affect in any way the agreement in the singular between the verb “be” and the dummy Subject “It” in the cleft sentence (*It is.../ It was...*). The tense of the verb “be” – present or past - is one that preserves the meaning of the original sentence, many times both the present and the past forms being correct alternative options.

What follows the regent *S=C/equative clause*, structurally speaking, is an *extraposed Subject Clause* introduced by “that” (*Cf.* Lăcătușu, 2005: 78). This subordinator is a pronoun here, not a conjunction, a detail that can be proved by the possibility of replacing it, most of the times, by a relative pronoun (*who, whom, whose, which, what*) or a relative adverb (*when, where*) that has the same syntactic function in the clause it introduces as the one initially developed by **X** in the base simple sentence (*Subject, Complement, Adverbial*). Most grammarians and users of English admit the relative pronouns *who/whom/which/whose* as possible alternatives when referring to persons, and *what/which/whose* when referring to non-persons, having either concrete or abstract referents. Nevertheless, be it a person or a non-person that is emphasized on in a *cleft sentence*, one can never mistake if one uses “that” as a subordinator to introduce the *Subject Clause* following the equative regent one.

As stated at the very beginning of this paper, many EFL grammar practice books include exercises that ask learners to transform sentences in various ways. However, any teacher who is familiar with the form of *cleft sentences* and with the formal and semantic relationships between such

sentences and the simple base sentences they can be related with may develop their own similar practice tasks. Here is a series of the most frequent base sentence forms and the beginnings and clues provided for the learners to use when they transform them by applying *clefting*. All of them have been taken from Vince and Sunderland (2003), and Pârlog et al. (2004). A short explanation is provided between brackets for each example, an explanation in line with the theoretical aspects described above.

- a. John bought the drinks, not Peter.

It was (Here, the clue *not Peter* in the base sentence helps the learner understand what clause constituent has to be brought into focus by means of a cleft sentence, *i.e.*, the Subject *John*, since it is the Subject that can approve of an alternative such phrase. Key: 'It was **John** that bought the drinks, not Peter.')

- b. I've talked to his uncle, not his father.

It (Here, the clue *not his father* in the base sentence is meant to help the learner understand what clause constituent has to be brought into focus by means of a cleft sentence: the Prepositional Object *to his uncle*. However, one may argue that the phrase 'not his father' may be an alternative to the Subject 'I'. Therefore, the answer may be: 'It was **his uncle** that I've talked to, not his father.' or 'It was **I** that/who talked to his uncle, not his father.' Mind that in the first possible answer here the preposition is delayed/postponed, as this is what usually happens with Prepositional Objects emphasized on by *cleft* structures: their preposition sticks to the verb that asks for it.)

- c. I came across him at the railway station, not at the theatre.

It (Here, the clue *not at the theatre* clearly suggests that the focal item in the cleft sentence will be the Adverbial of place *at the railway station*. The cleft sentence is: 'It was **at the railway station** that I came across him, not at the theatre.')

- d. Sue borrowed my bike last night.

It was (Here, there is no clue as about what clause constituent should be given focal prominence by *clefting*, therefore the learner has three correct possibilities, emphasising on the Subject *Sue*, on the Direct Object *my bike*, or on the Adverbial of time *last night*, respectively: 'It was **Sue** that borrowed my bike last night./ It was **my bike** that Sue borrowed last night./ It was **last night** that Sue borrowed my bike.')

- e. Mr. Turnbull gave George this ticket on Saturday.

It was (Here it is the same situation as in the preceding example, only there are four correct possible clefts focusing either on the Subject noun phrase *Mr. Turnbull*, on the Indirect Object noun phrase *George*, on the Direct Object noun phrase *this ticket*, or on the Adverbial of time prepositional phrase *on Saturday*.)

- f. We are not questioning your hard work.

It isn't (The clue here is in the form of underlining, which limits the possibilities for rephrasing by clefting to the one whose focal item is the underlined Direct Object: 'It isn't **your hard work** we're questioning.')

- g. We arrived in Madrid in the evening.

It was (Here, it is the same situation as above, only emphasis is to be laid on the underlined prepositional phrase that functions as an Adverbial of time: 'It was **in the evening** that we arrived in Madrid.')

The exercises that make use of *dialogues* that provide the learners with the contextual clues they need in order to complete cleft structures are closest to natural everyday oral-communication situations, where, as we have already said, this T-rule is applied automatically by the speaker in order to stress upon a certain piece of information to be transmitted to the interlocutor. In such practice or test items the T-rule is already applied by the item maker, most of the sentence being given. What the learner is supposed to do is to understand the context so that s/he can find the exact missing word(s) - usually the (pro)noun at the beginning of a cleft sentence, but also other parts of such a structure. The examples of this type below have been taken from the online source *Cleft Sentences - Adding Emphasis* or conceived personally according to the same model:

- a. Didn't you arrive late yesterday?

No, was John who arrived late. (key: 'It was John who arrived late.')

- b. You did this to me!

No, I didn't. It was Sean did this to you. (key: 'It was Sean that/who did this to you.')

- c. You have lent *Great Expectations* to Mark, haven't you?

No, I haven't. Jane and Mary that I have lent it to. (key: 'It was Jane and Mary that I have lent it to.')

- d. Sean is always asking silly questions, isn't he?

No, he isn't. It is Andrew(key: 'It is Andrew that/who is always asking silly questions, (not Sean).')

Only by understanding the meaning of the base sentence, by handling the 'It is/was **X** that (S)+V+(C)+(A)' pattern and having internalised all the other aspects explained above (by consistent practice and/or by being aware of them as such) can one produce correct *cleft sentences* and, therefore, vary their style when it comes to achieving emphasis in English with the help of a complex sentence, rather than by intonation, stress, undelining, boldface, or italics in a simple one.

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