

\*Valentina Curelariu  
 Faculty of Letters and Communication Sciences,  
 Ștefan cel Mare University of Suceava,  
 13 Universității Street, 720229  
 Suceava, Romania  
 e-mail: valentinadascalu@litere.usv.ro

ACHIEVING UNEQUIVOCAL EMPHASIS IN ENGLISH  
 BY PSEUDO-CLEFTING

Abstract

This paper focuses on *pseudo-clefting*, a syntactic transformation rule (T-rule) frequently used in English to give *focal* and *thematic* prominence (cf. Lăcătușu, 2005: 77) to various structural constituents, be them phrases or clauses. As its name suggests, it is related to *clefting*, another T-rule we elaborated on in our paper “*Clefting: A Stereotypical but Resourceful and Handy Transformation of the English Simple Sentence*” issued in the *Messages, Sages and Ages Journal*, Vol. 6, No. 2 / 2019, pp. 31-37.

Although the purpose of both these transformations is quite similar semantically speaking (*i.e.* laying unequivocal emphasis on one constituent or another in a particular sentence), there are also significant differences which are to be found at the level of the syntax of the sentence so transformed, differences detailed on in the present paper.

Keywords: *clefting*, *pseudo-clefting*, extraposition, Subject (Complement) Clause, Relative Clause

The syntactic differences between *clefting* and *pseudo-clefting* as T-rules that operate in English may be illustrated more clearly if we start off with the same base sentence that we used in the 2019 article where we analysed *clefting* in some detail. This sentence includes various types of phrases, each of which can be laid emphasis on not only by *clefting*, but also by *pseudo-clefting*:

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

(Curelariu, 2019: 34)

The transformations which we produced back then are as follows:

- 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 fire bugs** 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/”  
*(Ibidem)*

where the T-rule of *clefting* generates emphatic two-clause complex sentences of a very specific pattern, illustrated in the table below, where X stands for the constituent emphasised on (in the examples a., b., c., d. above, X is either the former Subject, or Direct Object / DO, or Adverbial / A of place or of time in the base sentence):

---

\*Valentina Curelariu is a PhD Lecturer with the *Foreign Languages and Literatures Department*. Her work focuses on English language areas such as Syntax, Stylistics, Psycholinguistics, and Rhetoric, but also on ELT Methodology.

<b>Clause 1.</b> <b>Main (equative) Clause</b> <b>(regent for Clause 2.)</b>	<b>Clause 2.</b> <b>“That” extraposed Subject Clause</b> <b>(subordinated to Clause 1.)</b>
It is/was <b>X</b>	<i>that</i> (S) + V + (C) + (A).

(*Idem*: 33)

Although a “heavy” extraposed Subject, the “That” Subject Clause in a *cleft-sentence* can be moved before the regent clause (although, according to the principle of *end weight* it is better to place it after it). Most of the times (as in a`, c`, and d` below) the subordinate clause moved before the regent becomes a restrictive Relative Clause whose antecedent is the grammatical Subject in the same regent equative clause. Some other times, however, as in b`, it remains a Subject Clause, only this time it is placed in pre-verbal position.

Considering the cleft examples under a., b., c., and d. above, by “undoing” the process of extraposition, what we will get are the following phrasings, respectively:

a`. *The persons/ ones/ Those* 1a./ *that/ who* saw two firebugs in the bush three days ago 2./ were **Mary and Jane**. 1b./ (where, 1a. +1b. = Main Clause, regent for 2., which is a restrictive Relative Clause)

b`. *What* Mary and Jane saw in the bush three days ago 1/ were **two firebugs**. 2/ (1. – Subject Clause; 2. – Main Clause, also regent for 1.)

c`. *The place* 1a./ *that/ where* Mary and Jane saw two firebugs three days ago 2./ was **in the bush**. 1b./ (where, 1a. +1b. = Main Clause, regent for 2., which is a restrictive Relative Clause)

d`. *The moment* 1a./ *that/ when* Mary and Jane saw two firebugs in the bush 2./ was **three days ago**. 1b./ (where, 1a. +1b. = Main Clause, regent for 2., which is a restrictive Relative Clause)

A very schematic formal description of such sentences is provided in the table below:

Antecedent (the grammatical Subject of “be”)	Subordinate Clause (restrictive Relative Clause or “Wh-” Subject Clause)	Main and Regent equative clause
a. The one/ those/ the person(s)	<i>that/ who/ whom/ which/ whose</i> .....	the verb “be” + <b>X</b> . [“be” is <i>Present</i> or <i>Past</i> , <i>singular</i> or <i>plural</i> ]
b. -----	<i>What</i> .....	
c. The place	<i>that/ where</i> .....	
d. The day/ moment/ time	<i>that/ when</i> .....	
e. The reason	<i>why</i> .....	

All these phrasings are called *pseudo-cleft sentences*. They, too, lay emphasis on the same constituents as those focused on by *clefting*. Nevertheless, only by looking at them contrastively, it is clear that some changes of form have been made all along this process of “extraposition in the reverse order applied to *cleft-sentences*” (as *pseudo-clefting* may be called if we consider the syntactic mechanisms that it involves):

- Although in most of the cases we can still use the relative pronoun “that” to introduce the subordinate clause that *pseudo-clefts* include (as in patterns such as a., c., and d. in the table above), a *wh-* word – either a relative pronoun (*who/ whom/ which/ whose* and *what* in a` and b`, respectively) or a relative adverb (*where, when* in c` and d`, respectively, and *why* in e.) - is felt to be more natural and more specific in terms of meaning than “that” to introduce it. That is why they are also called “*Wh-*” *clefts* (Nordquist, 2019: np, Close, 1979: 67, Collins, 2002: in passim).
- The equative clause that includes the *focal item X* in the Cs position comes last in the *pseudo-cleft sentence*. Given the whole syntax of a pseudo-cleft sentence, this *focal item/* the point of *maximum emphasis* is also the item of *new information* anticipated by all the previous sentence constituents (*i.e.* by the antecedent + Relative Clause or by the Subject Clause), a

situation in full agreement with the principles of *end-focus* and of *resolution* in language philosophy according to which new information is typically the most important part of a message, which is usually placed towards the end of the sentence (Lăcătușu, 2015: 63).

According to Alexandra Cornilescu, such a transformation in the reverse order proves in fact that *cleft-sentences* are actually derived from *pseudo-cleft sentences* by applying *extraposition* to them, not directly from simple sentences (Cornilescu, 1982: 468-480, *apud* Lăcătușu, 2015:79). Strictly technically speaking, we embrace this explanation totally, although we are aware that the situation may not be that simple since Higgins himself contradicts Akmajian's identical idea - prior to Cornilescu's and Lăcătușu's - that *cleft-sentences* are derived from *pseudo-cleft sentences* (Akmajian 1970a., 1970b. Chapter 2, *apud* Higgins, 1973: 43). Therefore, if one considers only what happens at the level of the surface structure of a sentence – and not of the deep structure, as Higgins does – Cornilescu's stands as a sound conclusion.

As already mentioned, *pseudo-clefting* lays emphasis on the same clause constituents focused on by *clefting*, only these constituents are mentioned last/ towards the end of such sentences. In all the examples above, these constituents are, too, part of the regent clause whose Predicator is expressed by the copulative verb “be”. In this situation, however, the regent clause (or, at least its part that includes the Predicator and its Subject Complement) comes last in the whole sentence structure, being preceded by a “Wh-” Subject clause (as in b'.) or, more often, by a restrictive Relative Clause whose nominal antecedent – *the person(s)/ the one(s)/ those, the place, the moment, etc.* – is the grammatical Subject of the matrix Predicator expressed by the verb “be” (as in a', c', d'). If in *clefts* the number of the verb “be” is always singular (Curelariu, *op. cit.*: 33), in *pseudo-clefts* it may be either singular or plural, depending on the (implicit) number of the phrase functioning as Subject, which gets clear once the Subject Complement/ X/ the constituent focused on is mentioned. In sentence a'. above (*The persons/ ones/ Those* 1a./ *that/ who* saw two firebugs in the bush three days ago 2./ **were Mary and Jane**. 1b.), for instance, the antecedent of the Relative Clause (also the grammatical Subject of the copulative “be” in the regent clause) is plural and so is the form of the verb functioning as Predicator in this clause. However, in sentence b'. (*What* Mary and Jane saw in the bush three days ago 1/ **were two firebugs**. 2/), this may be considered an instance of notional agreement combined with agreement by proximity, given that the Subject Complement (“two firebugs”) immediately following the copula is co-referential with the grammatical Subject which is a semantically indefinite clause as a whole (clause 1), singular in meaning, referring to *what* the object of visual perception was, only this Subject Complement is exact about its *plural* reference).

*Pseudo-clefting* is usually not defined separately from *clefting* (see also the definitions of *clefting/ clefts* in Vince and Sunderland, 2003: 85, Close, 1979: 67, Nordquist, 2019a.:np *apud* Curelariu, 2019: 32-33, where the *wh-clefts* are generally treated together with the *it-clefts*), except for those that lay emphasis on the verb. In this respect, Nordquist is a little clearer than the others when he details on *pseudo-clefts* by quoting Quirk *et al.* “The pseudo-cleft sentence is [a] device whereby, like the cleft sentence proper, the construction can make explicit the division between given and new parts of the communication. It is essentially an SVC sentence with a nominal relative clause as subject or complement [...]” and continues by stating that “It [*i.e.*, the *pseudo-cleft sentence*; my note] is less restricted than the cleft sentence . . . in one respect, since, through use of the substitute verb *do*, it more freely permits marked focus to fall on the predication [...]” and provides a few examples in which he stresses on the “anticipatory focus on the *do* item, the main focus coming at the normal end-focus position” (Quirk *et al.*, 1985: np, *apud* Nordquist, 2019b.: np).

To sum it up, the *verb* of a simple sentence cannot be brought into focus by means of *clefting*. This can be done only by means of *pseudo-clefting* – and, as we can see, Nordquist's details provided about *pseudo-cleft sentences* include some related to the possibility of emphasising on the *verb* functioning as Predicator by building a *pseudo-cleft sentence*. If we consider the same simple sentence:

Mary and Jane **saw** two firebugs in the bush three days ago/yesterday.

the *pseudo-cleft* insisting on the verb is:

What Mary and Jane DID 1./ was 2./ **(to) see** two firebugs in the bush three days ago/yesterday. 3./

Such a complex sentence is also an equative one. However, its constituents are of a clausal nature, and their distribution across the pseudo-cleft sentence is always as follows:

**Clause 1.** is a “*what*” *Subject clause* whose Predicator is always the *do* pro-form. Great attention must be paid here to the tense and aspect of the *do* pro-form in the Subject clause: this is entirely dependent on the tense and aspect of the original verb: here, the *do* pro-form is in the Past Tense non-progressive, non-perfect as *saw* has the same grammatical features in the simple sentence to be transformed in this way. This is to say that *do* copies the grammatical features of tense and aspect of the verb to be given focal prominence.

**Clause 2.** is the *Main Clause* that consists only of the copulative verb *be*. The tense of this verb may be present or past, depending on the context, but it will always be non-progressive, non-perfective in terms of aspect, and singular in terms of number since it agrees with the general [+Abstract] [+Singular] meaning of the “*Wh-*” *Subject Clause*). This clause is regent for both the other two ones that flank it.

**Clause 3.** is a *non-finite Predicative clause* whose verb is the element given focal prominence to. In this very example, the verb is in the long or short Infinitive, non-progressive since its aspect is identical to that of the original verb (*saw*) and to that of the *do* pro-form in the Subject clause.

Nevertheless, the form of the verb in the Predicative clause in such a pseudo-cleft sentence may vary only in terms of it being *progressive* or *non-progressive* in aspect. In other words, the *perfective aspect* of the original verb - and consequently of the *do* pro-form in the Subject clause - is never copied by this verb:

a. They **have watched** TV all day long. (the verb is perfective, non-progressive in aspect)  
 a`. What they **have done** 1./ is 2./ **(to) watch** TV all day long. 3./ (The *do* pro-form copies the *perfective* and *non-progressive* aspects of the verb it replaces, but only the *non-progressive* aspect is rendered by the infinitive.)

b. They **have been watching** TV for three hours now. (the verb is *perfective, progressive* in aspect)

b`. What they **have been doing** 1./ is 2./ **watching** TV for three hours now. 3./ (The *do* pro-form copies the *perfective* and *progressive* aspects of the verb it stands for, but only the *progressive* aspect is rendered by the *gerund/ -ing* form of the lexical verb.)

The logical question as to why the *perfective aspect* is never copied by the lexical verb emphasised on in the Predicative Clause of a *pseudo-cleft* sentence may be answered very easily by remembering first the meaning associated with the *perfective aspect* of the *infinitive* and of the *gerund*: whenever it is used with either of these two non-finite forms of the verb, it expresses *anteriority* to another verb in the sentence. Or, the temporal relationship in point is realized here between the non-finite verb in the Predicative Clause and the verb *do* in the “*Wh-*” *Subject Clause*. In our example, this relationship is one of *simultaneousness*, not of anteriority. Thus, the *non-perfective* aspect is selected to express it.

One more aspect to be noted as far as the possibility of emphasizing on the verb by means of *pseudo-clefting* is concerned is that not all lexical verbs can be highlighted in this way; the meaning expressed by such a verb is crucial in this respect since only the verbs describing *physical actions* (such as: *check, talk, leave, run, drive, eat, applaud, move* etc.) and some *mental processes* (*think, dream, see* etc.) may be subjected to it. *Verbs of emotion* (such as: *like, love, hate, feel, abhor, loathe, need* etc.) can never be replaced by the *do* verb, which verb, as illustrated above, is necessary for this transformation to be possible (see examples f. and g. below). The explanation of this fact rests with the semantics of the verb *do*, which incorporates semes such as [(Physical) Action], or [(Mental Process)], never the [(Emotion)] one.

As with *clefting*, many EFL grammar practice books usually include rephrasing tasks for which the learners are required to apply the T-rule of *pseudo-clefting*, even though this specialised item of metalanguage may be completely foreign to them. The teacher’s and the learners’ familiarity

with patterns of *pseudo-cleft* constructions is necessary in the examples below, all of which have been taken from Vince and Sunderland (2003: in passim). Sometimes the constituent to be emphasized on is highlighted in the base sentence by underlining (as in a, b, c), other times this constituent is suggested only by the beginning and/ or a part of the rephrased sentence, whenever they are given, and it rests with the learner that the right constituent in the base sentence be selected and given focal prominence by fitting it into the correct syntax:

- a. We sold everything except *the couch*.  
The only ..... was the couch. (Here the learner has to fill in the remaining part of the antecedent [The only] *thing*+ the Relative clause *that we didn't sell* + the verb *be* to match the syntax that expresses the intended meaning: The only *thing (that) we didn't sell is/was* the couch.)
- b. I would never ask Peter out.  
The last ..... is Peter. (This is technically similar to the preceding example: The last *person (that) I would ask out is* Peter.)
- c. We checked all the windows.  
..... check all the windows. (*What we did was (to) check all the windows.*)
- d. She always talks about her job.  
What ..... (Two possibilities are open here, depending on what focal item is chosen, the NP *her job* or the V *talks*: a. What *she always talks about is her job*. and b. What *she always does is (to) talk about her job*.)
- e. Peter left the windows unlocked.  
What..... (Two possibilities are open here, too: a. What *Peter left unlocked were the windows*. and b. What *Peter did was (to) leave the windows unlocked*.)
- f. I hate rainy weather.  
What ..... (What *I hate is rainy weather*.)
- g. You need a holiday.  
What..... (What *you need is a holiday*.)

Dialogues, too, may be a good starting point not only for *clefting* (Curelariu, 2019: 36) but also for *pseudo-clefting*. All the examples below have been selected from the online source *Cleft Sentences – Adding Emphasis*: (<https://www.test-english.com/grammar-points/b2/cleft-sentences/3/>):

- a. You don't understand me.  
No, ..... I don't understand is why you do this to yourself.
- b. You hurt him!  
..... I did is tell him the truth. I think he deserved it.
- c. Didn't we meet at this bar?  
No, the ..... where we met for the first time was the karaoke bar in Brooklyn. Don't you remember?
- d. You did it for the money.  
No, the ..... why I did it was to save the company.  
Of course, knowing that *pseudo-clefting* may be applied to any sentence in English for the reasons and in the ways mentioned in this paper, the number of possibilities for such a transformation is practically infinite, both in the classroom and outside, in everyday communication, whenever the speaker's or writer's aim is to be unambiguously clear about any specific detail represented by a structural constituent of a sentence.

#### Works Cited

- Akmajian, A. 1970a. *Aspects of the Grammar of Focus in English*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, M.I.T., cited by Higgins F.R., 1973.
- Akmajian, A. 1970b. "On Deriving Cleft Sentences from Pseudo-cleft Sentences" in *Linguistic Inquiry* 1. 149-168, cited by Higgins F.R., 1973.

- \*\*\* *Cleft Sentences - Adding Emphasis*: (<https://www.test-english.com/grammar-points/b2/cleft-sentences/3/>)
- Close, R. A. 1979. *A Reference Grammar for Students of English*. Longman Group Limited.
- Collins, P. C. 2002. *Cleft and Pseudo-cleft Constructions in English* (<https://epdf.pub/cleft-and-pseudo-cleft-constructions-in-english-theoretical-linguistics.html>, retrieved on November 20<sup>th</sup> 2019).
- Cornilescu, A. 1982. *English Syntax*, vol. II. București: Tipografia Universității București.
- Curelariu, V. 2019. “*Clefting: A Stereotypical but Resourceful and Handy Transformation of the English Simple Sentence*”. In: *Messages, Sages, and Ages*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (2019), pp.31-37.
- Higgins, F.R. 1973. *The Pseudo-cleft Construction in English*. (Submitted to the department of Foreign Literatures and Linguistics on June 22, 1973, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology) <https://dspace.mit.edu/handle/1721.1/12988> (visited on March 10<sup>th</sup>, 2019)
- Lăcătușu, T. 2005. *Essentials of English Syntax. Complex Structures*. Iași: Casa Editorială Demiurg
- Nordquist, R. 2019a. “Understanding the Meaning of a Cleft Sentence”. In: *Thought.Co* <https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-cleft-sentence-1689851> (visited on November 18<sup>th</sup>, 2019)
- Nordquist, D. 2019b. “Understanding the *Wh*-clause in English Grammar” in *Thought.Co* (<https://www.thoughtco.com/wh-clause-grammar-1692498>) (visited on November 18<sup>th</sup>, 2019)
- Quirk, R. *et al.* 1985. *A Grammar of Contemporary English*. London: Longman.
- Vince, M.; Sunderland, P. 2003. *Advanced Language Practice with Key. English Grammar and Vocabulary*. Oxford: MacMillan.