

On the discourse function of clefts in German

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My overarching question is why a speaker/writer would use a cleft like in (1a) instead of the much simpler unclefted (1b) in German:

- (1) a. Es ist Peter, mit dem Lena gesprochen hat.
‘It is Peter who Lena talked to.’
b. Lena hat mit Peter gesprochen.
‘Lena talked to Peter.’

When (1a) is embedded in a context such as in (2), the cleft is even preferred over the unclefted sentence, at least if *Peter* is supposed to refer to *some guy*.

- (2) Lena hat gestern mit einem Typen₁ gesprochen. Die beiden haben viel gelacht und sich direkt für den nächsten Abend verabredet. Dann ist Lena glücklich nach Hause gefahren.
‘Yesterday, Lena talked to some guy₁. They laughed a lot and they immediately agreed to meet the next evening. Then, Lena went home happily.’
a. Es war Peter₁, mit dem sie gesprochen hat.
‘It was Peter₁, who she talked to.’
b. ?Sie hat mit Peter₁ gesprochen.
‘Peter₁ talked to her.’

Previous literature discussed exhaustivity (e.g., Horn (1981); Büring and Križ (2013)), contrast (e.g., Destruel and Velleman (2014)), and prominence or focus (e.g., De Vaughn-Geiss et al. (2015); Tönnis et al. (2016)) with respect to clefts. I argue that none of the existing approaches can explain the puzzle in (2). Hence, I take a new perspective on clefts that focuses on the discourse effect of clefts as opposed to unclefted sentences. I discuss issues such as what discourse question a cleft addresses based on Simons et al. (2017), which discourse relations a cleft tends to realize, and how exhaustivity and contrast could end up as side effects of the cleft’s discourse function.

I account for the difference in (2) by assuming that (i) the cleft is an alternative to the unclefted sentence and it is used to address the rather unexpected discourse questions and (ii) it needs an antecedent in the context. The latter explains how the cleft establishes the coreference between *Peter* and *some guy*. The former accounts for the fact that the cleft is preferred over the unclefted sentence. The question addressed by the cleft (*Which guy did Lena talk to?*) is rather unexpected in this context since it was raised a while ago and it is not an overt question but a potential question (Onea, 2016). The alternative unclefted sentence rather addresses more expected discourse questions.

References

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