

# Predication and specification in the syntax of cleft sentences

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Predication and specification assert themselves in the syntax of cleft sentences on a variety of planes. The distinction between predicational and specificational cleft sentences has been commonplace in the realm of pseudoclefts at least since Higgins’s seminal work; it is less familiar perhaps but equally significant in the domain of *it*-clefts (cf. esp. Declerck’s work). The examples in (1a,b) and (2a,b) illustrate the two readings.

- (1)            what John doesn’t eat is food for the dog  
a.            PREDICATIONAL — ‘the food items John doesn’t eat are fed to the dog’  
b.            SPECIFICATIONAL — ‘John doesn’t eat the following: food for the dog’
- (2)            it was an interesting meeting that I went to last night  
a.            PREDICATIONAL — ‘the meeting I went to last night was interesting’  
b.            SPECIFICATIONAL — ‘I went to the following last night: an interesting meeting’

Predication arguably underlies the syntax of both predicational and specificational cleft sentences. In predicational (1a), *food for the dog* is straightforwardly predicated of *what John doesn’t eat*; in predicational (2a), *an interesting meeting* is predicated of *it*, which here is used as a referential pronoun. In specificational (1b), *food for the dog* serves as the subject of the underlying predicate *what John doesn’t eat*; and likewise, in specificational (2b), *an interesting meeting* is the subject of a small clause, this time with *it* being the predicate. In both (1b) and (2b), the underlying predicate inverts with its subject in the course of the derivation (*à la Moro*), forcing the presence of a form of the copula in contexts in which the copula is otherwise optional.

- (3)            I consider what John doesn’t eat (to be) food for the dog  
a.            PREDICATIONAL — *to be* is optional  
b.            SPECIFICATIONAL — *to be* is obligatory
- (4)            I consider it (to be) an interesting subject that they are discussing tonight  
a.            PREDICATIONAL — *to be* is optional  
b.            SPECIFICATIONAL — *to be* is obligatory

The gross syntax of predicational and specificational cleft sentences is taken care of by the above. But several questions remain. One is what the semantics of ‘specificationality’ emanates from. Since specificational pseudoclefts are well known to oscillate in most cases between two alternative word orders (*what John doesn’t eat is food for the dog* ~ *food for the dog is what John doesn’t eat*), it is unlikely that the semantics of ‘specificationality’ is uniquely the result of predicate raising to SpecIP. For specificational *it*-clefts, this question does not arise in the case of English — because, for reasons that remain to be properly understood, English predicate-*it* must generally raise to the structural subject position (*\*John was it who kissed Sue* contrasts sharply with *it was John who kissed Sue*). But in languages like Dutch and German, the counterpart of *it* in *it*-clefts can and sometimes must remain *in situ* (*dat zij het waren die...* ‘that they it were that...’ vs. *\*dat het zij waren die...* ‘that it they were that...’), with the semantics of ‘specificationality’ arising nonetheless.

In addition to this fundamental question about the nature of ‘specificationality’, specificational *it*-clefts also raise the question of how to integrate the *wh*-/*that*-clause into the structure. With the predicate and subject positions of the copular clause being taken by *it* and the focused constituent, respectively, I argue in detail that the *wh*-/*that*-clause is a null-headed relative clause in right-dislocated position — with the null-headed

relative clause and the material preceding it entertaining a relationship of *asyndetic specification* mediated by a zero functional head (Koster’s ‘:’). The null head of the relative clause is shown to have to be formally licensed via a strict concord relationship with the relative operator, and content-licensed via a strict concord relationship with the focused constituent. It is via this strict concord relationship that the hitherto unnoticed *specificity effect* seen in *it*-clefts with *which*-relatives such as (5)–(7) is accounted for: *which* is inherently [+specific], with the obligatory strict concord relationship in turn forcing both the null head and the focused constituent to be [+specific] as well. In specificational pseudoclefts, by contrast, the relationship between the *wh*-clause and the focused constituent is established via *predication*. Unlike asyndetic specification, predication is not subject to strict concord: as is well known, a predicate and its subject can disagree in phi-features (*the children are our biggest problem*). Because of the absence of strict concord in predication structures, a radically null-headed relative clause (of the type employed in *it*-clefts) is unlicensable in specificational pseudoclefts; instead, the relativised noun phrase in a pseudocleft must be headed by something that has feature content — specifically, by either of two semantically contentful operators:  $\forall$  or DEF(inite). This is responsible for the fact that the *wh*-clause in pseudoclefts is introduced by *what* rather than *which* or a null operator. The resulting structures for specificational *it*-clefts and specificational pseudoclefts are given in (8).

- (5) a. it is very unlikely that it is anything at all that you are doing wrong  
 b. \*it is very unlikely that it is anything at all which you are doing wrong
- (6) a. it is nothing at all that you are doing wrong  
 b. \*it is nothing at all which you are doing wrong
- (7) a. what (the hell) is it that is bothering you?  
 b. what (\*the hell) is it which is bothering you?
- (8) a. [<sub>IP</sub> [*it*'s FOCUS-XP] [: [<sub>XP</sub>  $\emptyset$  [<sub>CP</sub> {*which*<sub>i</sub>/Op<sub>i</sub>/\**what*<sub>i</sub>} [<sub>C</sub> C [<sub>IP</sub> (...) t<sub>i</sub> (...)]]]]]]]]  
 b. [<sub>RP</sub> FOCUS-XP [RELATOR [<sub>XP</sub>  $\forall$ /DEF [<sub>CP</sub> {*what*<sub>i</sub>/\*Op<sub>i</sub>/\**which*<sub>i</sub>} [<sub>C</sub> C [<sub>IP</sub> (...) t<sub>i</sub> (...)]]]]]]]]

Thus, both specificational *it*-clefts and specificational pseudoclefts feature a null-headed relative clause. In *it*-clefts, the null head is radically empty (i.e., devoid of both phonological and semantic features), hence dependent for its licensing on a concord relation with the relative operator and the FOCUS-XP. The concord relation between the  $\emptyset$  head, the relative operator, and the FOCUS-XP is responsible for the specificity effect seen in *it*-clefts featuring *which* as the relative operator ((5)–(7)). The fact that a strict concord relation is established in an *asyndetic specification* structure of the type in (8a) but not in a *predication* structure of the type in (8b) is responsible for the unavailability of the  $\emptyset$ -headed relative (the default option) in pseudoclefts.