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SOME PROBLEMS IN THE ANALYSIS  
OF CLEFT AND PSEUDO-CLEFT SENTENCES \*

In his well known article of 1970 Adrian Akmajian showed that Cleft and Pseudo-cleft sentences (henceforth CSs and PCSs, respectively) share the following properties:

*a)* there is no person agreement between the verb *be* and the FOCUS NP, except, obviously, in the case of 3d person (note, however, that in PCSs there is number agreement between them);

*b)* the verb in the relative clause (henceforth RC) does not agree in person with the FOCUS NP, it agrees only in number; consider as examples of both *a)* and *b)*:

Cleft sentences:

- (1) *It's me who is responsible*
- (2) *It's you who is responsible*
- (3) *It's him who is responsible*
- (4) *It's { John and me } who are responsible*  
      *{ us }* ;
- (5) *It's you who are responsible*
- (6) *It's { them } who are responsible*  
      *{ those two }*

Pseudo-cleft sentences:

- (7) *The one who is responsible is me*
- (8) *The one who is responsible is you*
- (9) *The one who is responsible is him*
- (10) *The ones who are responsible are { John and me }*  
      *{ us }*

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- (11) *The ones who are responsible are you*  
(12) *The ones who are responsible are { those two / them }*

c) if the FOCUS NP is represented by a pronoun, it is marked as an object [consider again the examples (1) - (10)]. This property, however, concerns only one dialect of English (what Akmajian calls "subsystem I"), for concurrent patterns can be set up, which characterize other varieties. So consider (13) - (16) on the one hand and (17) - (18) on the other:

- (13) *It is I who is sick*  
 (14) *It is me who(m) John is after*  
 (15) *It is I who is being chased by Mary*  
 (16) *It is me who Mary is being chased by*  
 (17) *It is I who { am } responsible*  
                                   ( \*is )  
 (18) *It is me who { \*am }* responsible  
                                   ( is )

Sentences (13) - (18) belong to different subsystems of English. Subsystem II, which is illustrated by sentences (13) - (16), differs from subsystem I with regard to case marking only. Accepting a suggestion by Steve Anderson, Akmajian pointed out that the difference is brought about by the fact that in system II "when there is a surface subject in the RC of the CS the FOCUS pronoun is marked accusative, when there is no surface subject the FOCUS pronoun is marked for nominative" <sup>1</sup>.

Subsystem III, which is illustrated by sentences (17) - (18), differs from sub-system I in both case marking and agreement. Interestingly, in this case if the FOCUS pronoun is nominative case marked, the verb in the RC agrees in person with it, otherwise the verb is in the 3d person'. Akmajian's justification of this fact is not altogether convincing. According to him subsystem III would have undergone a restructuration along the lines of the agreement pattern in appositive structures:

*I, who { am } tall, was forced to squeeze into that VW. He { \*is } had the nerve to say that to me, who { has } made him { \*have }*

<sup>1</sup> A. AKMAJIAN, *On deriving cleft sentences from pseudo-cleft sentences*, "Linguistic Inquiry" 1, p. 152.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. p. 153.

*today* — *today* — A more satisfying conclusion, in my opinion, would be to consider subsystem I as a small piece of an ergative-absolutive syntax, whereas subsystems II and III would be the results of a same tendency — which is very strong towards an overall nominative-accusative system — towards the re-establishing of the status quo. Along this line, subsystem III can represent the utmost limit of the tendency, the most “conservative” status, whereas subsystem II could be an intermediate step on the way back from an ergative-absolutive syntax to a nominative-accusative one.

A fourth noteworthy property shared by CSs and PCSs is that

d) there is no person agreement between the item that carries the FOCUS and any reflexive pronoun that may occur in the RC;

- (19) *It's not me that shaves himself*  
 (20) *Was it you that saw himself in the crystal ball?*  
 (21) *It's you and me who nearly drowned themselves out in the lake*  
 (22) *The one who shaves himself with a straight razor is not me*  
 (23) *Was the one who saw himself in the crystal ball you?*  
 (24) *The ones who nearly drowned themselves out in the lake are you and me*<sup>4</sup>

The hypothesis Akmajian put forward for justifying these similarities was that CSs should be derived from PCSs by an extraposition rule moving the initial clause (S<sub>2</sub>) of the PCSs to the end of the sentence<sup>5</sup>. Thus, given a pair of sentences such as (25) - (26):

- (25) *The one who went to Rome is me*  
(26) *It is me who went to Rome*

their mutual relations could be shown by the phrase markers (1'6a), (1'6b):

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<sup>4</sup> In addition to these sentences cf.:

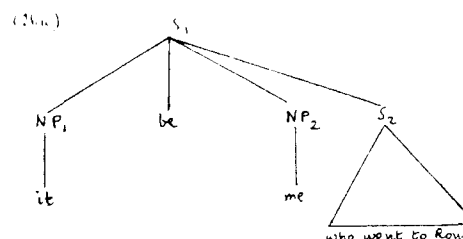
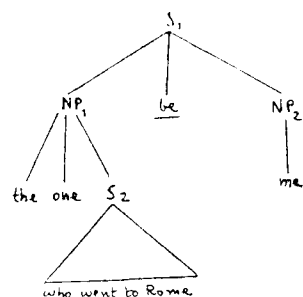
Was it you that held his breath for five minutes?

It was only me who would find his way home

Was the one who held his breath for five minutes you?

*The only one who would find his way home in the storm is me*

On p. 149. More precisely, it would be PCSs with reduced initial class that are the starting point in the derivation of CSs.



(25a) should be considered as a representation at a certain level, that is not necessarily as the deep structure representation. After  $S_2$  extraposition, *it* would be left in the subject position. This hypothesis, however, seems to be questionable for several reasons. The first reason is a semantic one. Though any CS and its corresponding PCS share the same truth conditions and perhaps the same logical form<sup>6</sup>, they are not semantically identical: they differ, in fact, in the "aboutness" parameter. So, for example, given the pair (27) - (28)

- (27) *It was Rose who invited John*  
 (28) *The one who invited John is Rose*

the CS expresses a property of 'Rose', it is "about" her, whereas the PCS is "about" 'the one who invited John'.

The second reason is a functional one. CSs and PCSs cannot be used interchangeably. As we will see in a moment, they do not occur in the same textual environments.

The third reason is that CSs and PCSs have different historical origins, which points to an independent development of the two types. The fact that they have come to converge as to their agreement patterns (though in this case the similarity is only partial, as we observed earlier) and their choice of pronouns is not an extraordinary case in the historical drift of languages<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> As regards this problem cf. J.D. ATLAS and S.C. LEVINSON, *It-Cleft, informativeness, and logical form*, in P. Cole ed. *Radical Pragmatics*, New York, Academic Press 1981, p. 51.

<sup>7</sup> This argument is discussed in more detail in R. SORNICOLA, *Origine e diffusione della frase scissa nelle lingue romanze*, in *Attes du XVIII<sup>e</sup> Congr. Int. de Linguistique et Philol. Romane*, Trier 1986 (à paraître).

Let us focus now on the functional and pragmatic aspects of these two types. The discourse conditions on PCSs have recently been investigated by Prince and Carlson. Both these scholars maintain that the subject *wh*-clause must be GIVEN, or in Prince's terms:

« A *wh*-cleft will not occur coherently in a discourse if the material inside the (subject) *wh*-clause does not represent material which the cooperative speaker can assume to be appropriately in the hearer's consciousness at the time of hearing the utterance »<sup>8</sup>.

or in Carlson's terms:

« The subject question must occur among the premises of the cleft sentence in the dialogue game »<sup>9</sup>.

Yet it seems to me that this condition, whether expressed in Prince's terms or in Carlson's<sup>10</sup>, cannot be considered as a general one (i.e. one that really covers all the possible cases). Consider for example the sequence (29):

- (29) « At this point, western liberals can begin talking with large numbers of White South Africans. What frustrates them is their impotence to carry talk into action » (The Economist, 30 March - 5 April 1985, « America and South Africa »).

Here nothing in the preceding co-text would make one think 'what frustrates them? / something frustrates them'<sup>11</sup>. The point is that the subject *wh*-clause — no matter whether it is GIVEN or NEW — seems to set up a constituent with the lowest degree of communicative dynamism (henceforth CD) in the communicative space of the whole sentence, i.e. it is "thematic" in Fairclough's conception of the term; the remaining part of the PCS, on the other hand, minus the equative *be*, is "rhematic", i.e. it carries the highest degree of CD. In saying this I assume of course the non-necessary coincidence of GIVEN and theme on

<sup>8</sup> Cf. E. PRINCE, *A comparison of Wh-clefts and It-clefts in discourse*, *Language* 54, p. 888.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. I. CARLSON, *Dialogue Games*, Reidel, Dordrecht, p. 227.

<sup>10</sup> Note, however, that Prince's formulation can be criticized: cf. CARLSON, *loc. cit.* pp. 226-227.

<sup>11</sup> 'What frustrates them?' is the question corresponding to the subject *wh*-clause, whereas 'something frustrates them' is the semantic presupposition of such a clause.

the one hand, and NEW and rheme on the other. I will return to this point later in more detail. For the moment it seems worth noting that PCSs have some general pragmatic characteristics. It seems as if in the whole textual area where the phenomenon occurs the progression carries on more slowly; thus an otherwise thematic (or less rhematic) element becomes a maximum rhema. So cf. for example the pair of sentences *Their impotence to carry talk into action frustates them*  $\leftrightarrow$  *What frustates them is their impotence to carry talk into action*, whose theme — rheme structure is <sup>12</sup>:

- (30) *Their impotence to carry talk into action frustates them*
- |                |  |                |                |                |
|----------------|--|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| T              |  |                | R              |                |
| T <sub>0</sub> |  | T <sub>1</sub> | R <sub>1</sub> | R <sub>0</sub> |
- (31) *What frustates them is their impotence to carry talk into action*
- |                |                |                |                |                |
|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| T              |                | Tr             | R              |                |
| T <sub>1</sub> | T <sub>2</sub> | T <sub>0</sub> | R <sub>0</sub> | R <sub>1</sub> |

Thus PCSs seem to have the textual function of actualizing the final part of a *climax*, which is congruent with a peculiar way of using them especially in narrative texts:

- (32) « A moment blankness — then, what are you thinking? (Let me peep across at her opposite; she's asleep or pretending it; so what would she think about sitting at the window at three o'clock in the afternoon? Health, money, hills, her God?). Yes, sitting on the very edge of the chair looking over the roofs of Eastbourne, Minnie Marsh prays to God. That's all very well; and she may rub the pane too, as though to see God better; but what God does she see? Who's the God of Minnie Marsh, the God of the back streets of Eastbourne, the God of three o'clock in the afternoon? I, too see roofs, I see sky; but, oh dear — this seeing of Gods! More like President Kruger than Prince Albert — that's the best I can do for him; and I see him on a chair, in a black frock not so very high up either; I can manage a cloud or two for him to sit on; and then his hand trailing in the cloud holds a rod, a truncheon is it? Black, thick, thorned — a brutal old bully — Minnie's God! Did he send the itch and the patch and the witch? Is it

<sup>12</sup> T = theme, Tr = transition, R = rheme: For further notational and theoretical details cf. R. SORNICOLA, *Un metodo di analisi della struttura informativa e sue applicazioni all'italiano*, in A. FRANCHI DE BELLIS e L. SAVOIA (a cura di), *Sintassi e morfologia della lingua italiana d'uso*, Bulzoni, Roma, pp. 3-18.

did she — he peep? What she rubs on the window is the stain of sin. Oh, he committed some crime!» (Virginia Woolf, *An Unwritten Novel*, p. 10).

I cannot help feeling a little sorry for Ted Pringle. In the light of what happened, I could wish that it were possible to portray him as a hulking brute of evil appearance and worse morals — the sort of person concerning whom one could reflect comfortably that he deserved all he got. I should like to make him an unsympathetic character, over whose downfall the reader would gloat. But honesty compels me to own that Ted was a thoroughly decent young man in every way. He was a good citizen, a dutiful son, and would certainly have made an excellent husband. Furthermore, in the dispute on hand he had right on his side fully as much as Tom. The whole affair was one of those elemental clashings of man and man where the historian cannot sympathize with either side at the expense of the other, but must confine himself to a mere statement of what occurred. And briefly, *what occurred was that Tom... bringing to the fray a pent-up fury which his adversary had had no time to generate, fought Ted to a complete standstill in the space of two minutes and a half*» (Wodehouse, *Something To Worry About*, p. 35).

I would term this the “suspense-creating strategy”.

The similarity between CSs and PCSs has often been argued on the ground of the question test. As a matter of fact, PCSs answer a question of the same form. So, for example, both (34) and (35) answer a question like (36):

- (34) *What Jane wants is her bag*  
 (35) *It is her bag that Jane wants*  
 (36) *What does Jane want?*

As is well known, the question test is the current test for assigning the theme — rheme structure to the sentence. It correctly predicts in this case that both in (34) and in (35) the theme is *her bag*. Thus in the unmarked case the theme — rheme structures of (34) and (35) would be respectively:

- (34) *What Jane wants is her bag*
- |                |                |                |    |                |                |
|----------------|----------------|----------------|----|----------------|----------------|
| T              |                |                | Tr | R              |                |
| T <sub>0</sub> | T <sub>1</sub> | T <sub>2</sub> |    | R <sub>1</sub> | R <sub>0</sub> |
- (35) *It is her bag that Jane wants*
- |                |                |                |                |                |                |
|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| R              |                |                | T              |                |                |
| R <sub>0</sub> | R <sub>1</sub> | R <sub>2</sub> | T <sub>0</sub> | T <sub>1</sub> | T <sub>2</sub> |

Likewise, in the unmarked case, (39) would have the sequence of CD values (40):

(39) *It is their impotence to carry talk into action that frustates them*

(40) *It is their impotence to carry talk into action that frustates them*

R		T
R <sub>0</sub>	R <sub>1</sub>	R <sub>2</sub>

It will be clear at this point that the sequence of CD values is quite different in the two types under discussion, though in both cases the so called rheme proper (i.e. the maximum rhematic value) is placed on exactly the same constituent. This would lead one to think — as in fact it did — that the two structures are pragmatically equivalent and can be used interchangeably. I will try to show briefly that this is not always the case and that the difference in their textual distribution can be predicted.

Let us replace the PCS by its corresponding CS in the text (29):

(41) At this point, Western liberals can begin talking with large numbers of White South Africans. It is their impotence to carry talk into action that frustates them.

The communicative progression here seems to be even less continuous than the one in (29) (recall that the presupposition 'something frustates them' does not occur in the preceding co-text). In a sense it is as if too much information were condensed in the sentence. Note, however, that (41) would be improved by inserting *but* immediately before the CS.

We could tentatively put forward the hypothesis that in the cases where the subject *wh*- clause of the PCS is NEW (i.e. where it does not occur as a "premise" in the preceding co-text) the PCS cannot be substituted by the corresponding CS. This rightly predicts that such a substitution is possible in the following environments, where the subject *wh*- clause of the PCS is GIVEN:

(42) By comparison, the army's share of defence spending has declined slightly, though it has more money in absolute terms than before 1981. With this, it has made some striking improvements... Where the army has done less well is in the programme

for preparing the equipment in Europe... (The Economist, 13 April 1985, "Feathering America", p. 4D, cf. ...). It is in the programme for preparation equipment in Europe that the army has done less well.

(43) ...miners are making it clear that they have not the heart for much more fighting... what miners want now is cash in hand and a secure future" (The Economist, 30 march - 5 April 1985, "America and South Africa", p. 19): cf. ... It is cash in hand and a secure future that miners want now.

Moreover, note that if we substitute the PCS with the corresponding CS in (32) the suspense-creating effect would be lost. On the other hand, the substitution of a CS by a PCS does not always give as a result an acceptable text:

(44) "The talk by 1960s and 1970s was of a postwar 'consensus', a political 'centre' variously called mixed-economy, Butskellite, social market, etcetera... It was this consensus which the past six years of Ronald Thatcher are rightly said to have 'broken'. In its place a new middle ground of politics emerged" (The Economist, 41 The talk by 1960s and 1970s was of a postwar "consensus", a political "centre" variously called mixed-economy, Butskellite, social market, etcetera... What the past six years of Ronald Thatcher are rightly said to have broken is this consensus).

The occurrence of the PCS in the alternative text is rather clumsy because of the fact that the subject *wh*- clause carries too "heavy" a load. Generally speaking, one of the characteristics of CSs seems to be that in their use "heavy constituents" can be avoided. There is, however, another reason for the lower acceptability of the alternative text. The point is that "consensus" is GIVEN, and so its occurrence in the final part of the PC seems to be "abnormal"; it would be better perhaps if *consensus* were preceded by such a lexical item as *just*, for in this case *just* would realize a "mise en relief". As a matter of fact it seems that in the rhematic position of PCSs only NEW or emphatically contrasted elements can occur.

Thus the difference in the order of the information peaks, i.e. a linear property of the structures under discussion, would seem to differentiate not only their textual function but their textual distribution as well. That it is so is further confirmed by another piece of evidence. Consider the following ideal dialogue:

(45) *Who came?*  
*John/It is John*

(46) *Who came?*  
*?Who came was John*

The fact that the rheme precedes the theme in CSs and viceversa that it follows the theme in PCSs makes (45) a more usual dialogue than (46).

I will add two further considerations before trying to reach a few conclusions. They concern two other differences between PCSs and CSs. The first is that CSs are “marked”, i.e. “emphatic”, whereas PCSs are unmarked, i.e. non-emphatic. The second involves what Halliday defines the “identifier-identified” relation: in PCSs the identified precedes the identifier, on the contrary in CSs the identifier precedes the identified. So in PCSs the progression goes from [— Definite] to [+ Definite], whereas in CSs the starting point is [+ Definite] (this point, however, deserves a deeper investigation).

In the light of the arguments discussed so far we can set up the diagrams (47), (48) as a representation of CSs and PCSs, respectively:

