



On the interpretation and processing of exhaustivity: Evidence of variation in English and French clefts

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ABSTRACT

One outstanding issue in the analysis of the meaning of clefts concerns the source of the exhaustive inference they convey. Conventionally-coded semantic accounts predict that this inference is robust and will arise regardless of contextual variation while allowing for cross-linguistic variation. On the contrary, non-conventionally-coded pragmatic accounts predict exhaustivity to be more variable within a language, including cases where it can be cancelled, although (potentially) the inference will be more stable across languages. This article presents an original empirical perspective on the debate by looking both at the interpretative and the processing properties of English compared to French clefts. The combination of offline and online measures reported here show crucial and surprising differences within and across the two languages, findings which are unexpected under all current theories of clefts' meaning. We discuss a preliminary sketch for an analysis, which proposes that the differences between French and English are due to the way the existential presupposition derived from the cleft structure interacts with context (cf. Pollard and Yasavul, in press; De Veugh-Geiss et al., 2018).

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1. Introduction

In English, in addition to asserting the proposition (2a) and carrying an existential presupposition (2b), the focus-background *it*-cleft in (1) also triggers an exhaustive inference such that the pivot is interpreted as if under the scope of an exclusive particle (2c).

- (1) It is a baby who is shaking a rattle.
 (2) a. A baby is shaking a rattle. (prejacent proposition)
 b. Someone is shaking a rattle. (existential presupposition)
 c. Only a baby is shaking a rattle. (exhaustive inference)

One outstanding problem in the literature on the meaning of clefts concerns the source of this exhaustivity. Opinions differ mainly along a semantic-pragmatic divide, boiling down to whether the inference is encoded as part of the conventional meaning of clefts (Büring and Kriz, 2013; Velleman et al., 2012) or whether it is derived from pragmatic reasoning on the context (Horn, 1981). Cross-linguistically, similar structures (at least in surface) are also acknowledged to convey exhaustivity.

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Specific cases of this are the Hungarian pre-verbal focus position (Kiss, 1998), the German *es*-cleft (Drenhaus et al., 2011), and of core interest for this paper, the French *c'est*-cleft in (3) (Lambrecht, 1994).

- (3) C'est un bébé qui agite un hochet.
It-is a baby who shakes a rattle
'It's a baby who is shaking a rattle.'

One question is whether the exhaustive effects in these different structures are expressed with the same strength and systematicity. From a theoretical perspective, the semantic and pragmatic accounts put forward in the past literature, though mainly developed around English, should in principle be expandable to explain speakers' inferencing behavior with corresponding structures cross-linguistically. Yet to date, there have been few attempts to directly compare the inference across languages, and especially across languages that differ in their use of clefting as a strategy to mark focus (but see Destruel et al., 2015; Skopeteas and Fanselow, 2011).

Given this, the main goal of this paper is to provide additional evidence to the debate on modeling exhaustivity by adopting a cross-linguistic perspective. Our general working hypothesis is that speakers of languages with broad uses of clefts will exhibit less robust exhaustive effects, and that differences among speaker's inferential behavior are expected to arise. Two relevant languages to test this hypothesis are English and French. The reason here is that these two languages differ in the options they allow to mark narrow focus (especially on grammatical subjects) and the contexts in which clefts can appear. That is, *it*-clefts are generally marked in English, i.e., preferred in contexts that convey meanings such as contrast (Destruel and Velleman, 2014; Destruel et al., 2017) or correction (Pollard and Yasavul, in press). On the other hand, *c'est*-clefts are more flexible in terms of their function and are used more commonly in French, in which they signal informational and identificational focus, in particular in place of prosodic subject focus (see, among others, Féry, 2013; Lambrecht, 1994), as well as broad-focus. As a result, our hypothesis predicts that French *c'est*-clefts will exhibit less robust exhaustive effects than English *it*-clefts. We test this prediction by using a sentence-picture verification task that combines offline (truth-value judgments) and online (response time) measures. The current study makes a novel methodological contribution, given that online measures are quite scarce in the literature on the meaning of clefts.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 offers a brief review of the background literature on clefts, in which we further detail the differences between French and English clefts. In this section, we present the most influential theoretical perspectives on the meaning of clefts and the empirical landscape that has ensued from testing the theoretical claims, we review the major accounts on processing of other related inferences, and finally, we make explicit our research questions and hypotheses. We present our experiments and their results in Section 3. We provide a general discussion of our results in Section 4, and we discuss a way to think about the puzzle they present in Section 5. We conclude the paper in Section 6.

2. Background

2.1. Contrasting French and English clefts

There is at least some initial support for the idea that French *c'est*-clefts are similar to English *it*-clefts in meaning. Indeed, prior literature has commonly noted that *c'est*-clefts come with an existential presupposition and convey exhaustive effects (Decat, 2007; Katz, 1997; Lambrecht, 1994). Despite empirical work on French being scarce, Destruel (2013) and Destruel et al. (2015) suggest that *c'est*-clefts are indeed somehow exhaustive—though to a lesser extent than exclusives like *seulement* 'only'. Therefore, nothing precludes existing theoretical accounts on English (see Section 2.2) to extend to French. But, there are some subtle and crucial differences that set the English and the French clefts apart—thus several reasons that such accounts would not extend to French.

First, French *c'est*-clefts are used more commonly than its English counterpart (Carter-Thomas, 2009; Katz Bourns, 2014), in particular in comparison to canonical sentence forms (SVO). This is primarily due to constraints on French prosody: whereas English can shift prosodic prominence to match the location of the focus constituent, French is more rigid, placing prosodic stress only at the right edge of an intonation phrase. The *c'est*-cleft, despite adding syntactic complexity, circumvents this prosodic restriction by creating an extra intonation boundary that can align with the focus constituent (Hamlaoui, 2009). Consequently, the *c'est*-cleft constitutes the default strategy to signal the simpler focus known as *information* focus—instigated in answers to *wh*-questions—especially on grammatical subjects, as in our experimental material (see Section 3).¹

By comparison, the *it*-cleft constitutes a marked structure in English and is typically judged as a 'bad' answer to direct questions. For instance, Destruel and Velleman (2014) find that English speakers are very unlikely to produce an *it*-cleft (versus a canonical SVO sentence) and are also similarly unlikely to rate the cleft as a natural response in contexts where the preceding discourse includes an (overt) *wh*-question such as in (4). Instead, *it*-clefts are shown to be preferred in contexts that

¹ Lambrecht (1994) argues that canonical sentences with prosodic prominence, while being grammatically well-formed, are pragmatically odd in spoken French in focus-related contexts and occur very rarely. This idea is empirically substantiated; see, among others, Destruel (2013) and Féry (2013), who discuss this focus-marking asymmetry.

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