

## Introduction to the special issue on clefts and other related focus constructions

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## Introduction to the special issue on clefts and other related focus constructions<sup>1</sup>

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There are many types of clefts, but most generally, when one thinks of clefts, what springs to mind are instances of the so-called *it*-cleft construction in English, such as *it's our work that is important* or the *c'est*-cleft in French *c'est moi qui suis venu*. In English, there are also other types which are known by the unfortunate name of 'pseudo-clefts', such as *what is important is our work* or *our work is what is important*. Similarly, there are as many definitions of clefts as there are cleft types. We find Lambrecht's definition particularly encompassing:

"A cleft construction is a complex sentence structure consisting of a matrix clause headed by a copula and a relative or relative-like clause whose relativized argument is co-indexed with the predicative argument of the copula. Taken together, the matrix and the relative express a logically simple proposition, which can also be expressed in the form of a single clause without a change in truth conditions." (Lambrecht 2001: 457)

Put in a nutshell, what one needs to remember of clefts is that they are biclausal focus constructions. It is precisely this double nature as both specialized focus constructions and biclausal structures what makes clefts interesting for linguistic analysis; still posing challenges for current theories of syntax. In this respect, it is hardly surprising that the linguistic literature on clefts is remarkably vast, but it is mostly a literature focused on English, mainly aimed at disentangling the intricacies of the semantics and pragmatics of the copular predication (for example, Declerck, 1988; Mikkelsen, 2005; den Dikken, 2005; etc.). On the other hand, Lambrecht (1994) is foundational for the study of clefts from the viewpoint of information structure. The proposals in Drubig (2003) and Drubig and Schaffer (2001: 1079) have been important for a typology of cleft syntax.

But while monographies on the English *it*-cleft continue to be published, such as Patten's (2012), our knowledge of clefts remains uncharted territory for the vast majority of lesser-known languages. To increase the body of knowledge to build a cross-linguistically sound typology of clefts, we still need to expand the range of languages and the range of topics to study. Here we follow the pioneer efforts in Hartmann and Venstraa (2013), who include papers on minority languages for the first time in their collection of papers on clefts. This issue pursues a similar goal; that is, explore aspects of cleft structure in lesser-described languages under different theoretical approaches by using natural data. With this idea in mind, this issue contains a collection of 11 articles on cleft structures from a variety of languages whose syntax of focus we know relatively little about. The languages in question are the following:

- Two languages from East Asia: Northern Amis (Formosan) and Tagalog
- The West Asian languages Eastern Armenian, Western Armenian and Persian

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<sup>1</sup>All the articles in this Special issue are based on talks given at the workshop 'Clefts and related focus constructions' organized by us and Katharina Haude as part of the LABEX-EFL, Strand 3, GD1 operation "The typology and corpus annotation of information structure and grammatical relations", which took place on 15-16 February 2018 at the Paris-Villejuif CNRS Campus, with the financial support of the Labex EFL. We want to thank all participants of the workshop, speakers and audience alike, for the fruitful discussion, and to the participants who became authors of this collection. We are especially indebted to the many external reviewers who contributed invaluable to this Special issue with their time, knowledge and efforts.

- Three indigenous languages of the Americas: Movima (Isolate; Bolivia), Tilapa Otomi (Oto-Manguean; Mexico) and Lakhota (Sioux, USA).
- The pidgincreole Naija from Nigeria and the Berber language Kabyle from the Atlas in Northern Africa.
- Besides studies in these particular languages, this issue further includes two works on the grammaticalization of clefts which are based on data from a wide variety of African languages: Tswana, Mina, Kituba, Zarma, Mandinka, Wolof, Ivorian Jula, Jóola, and from the Chadic languages Bura, Marghi, Hausa, and Guruntum.

The 11 articles that form this collection are organized according to four general themes characterizing particular approaches to the study of clefts:

#### **Clefts and grammaticalization**

- “Remarks on the grammaticalization of identificational clefts” by Denis Creissels
- “The grammaticalization of term focus structures in Chadic languages: A case of microvariation” by Katharina Hartmann

#### **Clefts and other focus constructions**

- “The syntax and prosody of focus in Northern Amis (Formosan)” by Isabelle Bril & Stavros Skopeteas
- “Cleft constructions and other focus strategies in Modern Armenian” by Victoria Khurshudyan & Anaïd Donabedian
- “Clefting and nominal predication: two focus-marking constructions in Movima” by Katharina Haude
- “Biclausal vs. monoclausal focus constructions in Tilapa Otomi” by Enrique L. Palancar

#### **Corpus-based studies of clefts**

- “Clefts in Naija: a Nigerian pidgincreole” by Bernard Caron
- “A corpus-based description of cleft constructions in Persian” by Pegah Faghiri & Pollet Samvelian
- “From a corpus-based to a corpus-driven definition of clefts in Kabyle (Berber): Morphosyntax and prosody” by Amina Mettouchi
- “Specification predication, unexpectedness and cleft constructions in Tagalog” by Anja Latrouite

#### **New aspects of cleft constructions**

- “An unusual cleft construction in Lakhota (Siouan, North America)” by Robert D. Van Valin, Jr

These different papers tackle a series of general points that we consider are of importance for the study of clefts from a cross-linguistic perspective.

#### **—Clefts as bi-clausal structures.**

One of the most important aspects for the study of clefts is the relation that clefts hold as biclausal structures with other focus constructions that are monoclausal. This line of query can be pursued language-internally or cross-linguistically. When it is done language internally, one needs to establish the way in which clefts are different from other focus structures in the language of study. Haude’s and Palancar’s contributions address this issue.

In her article, **Haude** shows that Movima has two focus constructions that superficially look very similar. One is a simple clause with the noun in predicate position and the verb placed inside the argument phrase. The other construction is a cleft that consists of a predicative noun preceded by a free pronoun constituting an equational matrix clause. The two constructions further differ in function: the monoclausal construction is a simple predication, while the cleft implies specific or generic reference.

Similarly, **Palancar** shows that Tilapa Otomi has two focus constructions. One is a monoclausal construction with a fronted focus phrase and the other is a cleft with a copula. As zero copulas are possible in the specificational copular construction, Palancar argues that the monoclausal focus construction could be mistaken to be a cleft if the structure were believed to have a zero copula; but then he goes on to show that the copula cannot be reinstated in the fronted focus construction, showing that it cannot be a cleft. Another important test for monoclausality is the use of negation. The two constructions also have a different function in the syntax of focus: while the cleft is a default focus structure in the language, the fronted focus construction is mainly used when a pronominal is in focus.

#### —The evolution of clefts.

Alternatively, cleft structures may develop into other types of focus constructions. This process can be seen as steps in a grammaticalization cline.

In his article, **Creissels** advances a new typology of clefts by reformulating the usual distinction between ‘pseudo-clefts’ and ‘IT-clefts’ (Lambrecht, 2001) and by proposing instead a distinction between ‘plain clefts’ and ‘grammaticalized clefts’. The study is primarily illustrated by constructions from a large range of African languages. Creissels suggests that in language evolution, the routinization of equative predication as the usual way of expressing participant focalization can result in its grammaticalization as a specific type of construction, converting plain clefts into grammaticalized clefts. He further explores the emergence of focus markers from cleft constructions as well as the trends towards monoclausality in the evolution of clefts.

In turn, **Hartmann** claims that clefts are diachronically abandoned in favor of mono-clausal focus structures. She illustrates the case with four Chadic languages, where she claims that their (term) focus constructions can be seen as instances of the different stages of an assumed grammaticalization path from bi-clausal cleft structures to mono-clausal focus constructions. This development is characterized by several syntactic and semantic changes, namely the reinterpretation of the copula in the cleft as a focus marker; the loss of the exhaustive inference typically associated with clefts; as well as the loss of syntactic indicators of embeddedness.

**Khurshudyan & Donabedian** study clefts in both Eastern and Western Armenian and they do it in relation to other focus constructions that involve prosodic cues as well as word order alterations. Unlike preverbal focus marking, which displays a number of important differences between Eastern and Western Armenian, cleft constructions in the two standards do not reveal significant deviations. Clefts are documented since Classical Armenian, and the existence of clefts with the same syntactic and pragmatic characteristics in both standards suggests that cleft constructions have a diachronic continuity in Armenian. But Eastern Armenian also displays an important auxiliary movement focus strategy which is specific to Eastern Armenian. The authors propose that this construction is an innovation that results from word syntax proper of clefts, which has been reinforced by areal effects from other Caucasian languages.

#### —Clefts share syntax with relativization.

In their typology of clefts, Drubig and Schaffer (2001: 1079) acknowledge that cross-linguistically the only point that the literature seemingly agrees on clefts is the presence of a relative-like structure to encode the background; an idea that stems from Schachter (1973).

In this respect, **Bril & Skopeteas** compare the cleft construction in Northern Amis with other two focus constructions that involve focus markers and emphatic lengthening. They show that clefting is subject to the nominative-only constraint on relativization that is known in Formosan and Philippine type languages so that the clefted constituent must be the syntactic pivot of the verb in the relative clause containing the background (while its semantic role is co-indexed by the appropriate voice marker on the verb). In contrast, the other two focus constructions do not involve syntactic restructuring.

**Caron** shows that in Naija there are four types of clefts: clefts based on the relative clause marker *wey*; bare clefts, where the relative clause is asyndetic (*i.e.*, not introduced by an overt relativizer); and two other more specific cleft types: double clefts and zero-copula clefts. The relative-like construction in clefts has a life of its own and its syntax is rapidly splitting from relative clause syntax. This can be seen in various facts from corpus-based usage: bare clefts are the most common type by far; speakers use the relative pronoun *nāĩ* only in clefts; and default relative clause operator *wey* is becoming obsolete in clefts.

#### —Interaction between different types of clefts.

**Caron's** study is a reminder that different types of clefts may coexist in a given same system, and that speakers may privilege one type of cleft over another in the expression of focus.

In this respect, **Faghiri & Samvelian** show that exploring corpora reveals that cleft constructions in Persian display more diversity and complexity than the data generally mentioned in theoretical studies. They claim that this is unsurprising given that previous studies have generally used Persian data in parallel to their English counterparts to contribute to ongoing debates on the organization of the information structure in various types of cleft constructions. But previous studies have overlooked specific types of Persian clefts, such as lexically headed pseudoclefts, which the authors claim that they constitute one of the main strategies for clefting direct objects in Persian.

#### —The prosodic properties of clefts.

It seems that the prosody of focus plays an important part in the making of the cleft construction, so that the prosodic features of clefts should be taken into account both for their description and analysis.

**Mettouchi's** article is an in-depth incursion into the study of the prosody of clefts in Kabyle. She challenges the view that prosody is a secondary device in the making of clefts that serves as a disambiguating or highlighting device. Instead, Mettouchi claims that prosody is a fundamental formal feature of a focus construction to mark narrow focus.

Similarly, **Bril & Skopeteas** show that clefts in Northern Amis have similar prosodic properties with other focus constructions in that narrow focus is signaled by a sharp rise, which is aligned with the onset of the stressed syllable of the focus and is optionally accompanied by postfocal de-accenting.

—**New aspects for the structure of clefts.**

As we improve our knowledge of clefts in lesser-known languages, we also discover new aspects in the structure of clefts that we had not known before.

**Van Valin** studies the properties of a focus construction in Lakota that bears the element *čha* and has many of the properties of a cleft, but the distribution of the focused and presupposed material is the opposite of that in the usual cleft constructions. This suggests that the construction is an instance of a new type of cleft that Van Valin characterizes as an ‘inverted cleft construction’.

Similarly, **Palancar** shows that in Otomi clefts there is a special pronominal element that occurs in the relative clause encoding the background that stands for the focus phrase when the referent is human. In clefts, the function of this element resembles that of a resumptive relative pronoun, but it is only found in focus constructions (i.e., in both clefts and in the monoclausal focus constructions), so clefts in Otomi display a focus element that is not common typologically.

—**Comparability of clefts across different languages.**

Another topic of interest in the cross-linguistic study of clefts and focus constructions in general is their interchangeability across languages. This line of query is oriented towards finding possible answers to a question such as: Can clefts be translatable from language to another?

Inspired by this possibility, **Latrouite** studies the functional overlap of it-clefts in English with the *ang*-inversion construction in Tagalog. Both constructions have similar morphosyntactic make-ups, but the latter is vastly more frequent in Latrouite’s Tagalog corpus than the *it*-cleft in her English corpus. While both constructions encode a very specific form of narrow focus, Latrouite claims that the *ang*-construction is generally used whenever there is some ‘violation of expectations’. The *ang*-construction is also overwhelmingly used when the focus is an actor. In general, Latrouite argues that it may be the case that the differences between the use of focus constructions in these two languages reflects differences in narrative strategies, where English is characterized as an event-oriented language and Tagalog as a participant-oriented language.

This collection of papers on clefts was edited with the belief that a special issue of *Linguistic Discovery* could be beneficial for our field, because it would not only help create and distribute more knowledge about these structures, which we judge are still poorly understood, but it could serve as an incentive, and possibly as a seminal work, for future research by other researchers working on minority languages who develop an interest in the topic.

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