Clefts can address *wh*-questions in referential anchoring contexts[1]

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Abstract. Cleft constructions are considered infelicitous responses to *wh*-questions, compared to canonical focus declaratives. This study argues for a more fine-tuned generalization, by showing clefts are indeed a viable response to a question query when the discourse establishes an identifiable witness to the queried property. Using a judgment task, we tested the acceptability of cleft versus declarative answers across three conditions: unanchored (no identifiable witness), anchored (with an identifiable witness), and corrective (revises a misidentified antecedent in prior discourse). Results showed that clefts were rated on par with declarative focus both in an anchored condition and in a corrective condition. As predicted, lower acceptability ratings were found in an unanchored context.

Keywords: *it*-cleft, anaphoricity of *it*, referential anchoring, experimental pragmatics, English.

1. Introduction

Clefts are usually judged to be infelicitous as answers to *wh*-questions (Destruel and Velleman, 2014; Destruel, 2017; Destruel and DeVeaugh-Geiss, 2018). Consider the following contrast between (1) and (2) (Destruel and Velleman, 2014). In (1), the declarative answer that marks focus in situ (i.e. *John*) is seen as a natural way to resolve the *wh*-question. By contrast, the turn of dialogue in (2) feels off with the focused constituent clefted (the # sign indicates infelicity conditioned by pragmatics).

(1) A: Who cooked the beans?
B: John cooked the beans. [declarative focus]

(2) A: Who cooked the beans?
B: #It was John who cooked the beans. [cleft focus]

The evidence thus suggests that the *it*-cleft in English is not a natural, unmarked way of encoding canonical information focus. This has been taken to mean that the contexts where the cleft is used are constrained. Notably, it is proposed that the cleft identifies a focus referent, when doing so contrasts with (thus corrects) an antecedent within the focal alternatives that belongs in the immediate discourse (Repp, 2010). Thus, in (3), the utterance by B is intended to correct the misinformation of A with regards a wrongly identified individual.

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(3) A: I wonder why Alex cooked so much beans.
B: Actually, it was John who cooked the beans.

Subsequent research has since proposed to further refine the notion of contrast. Thus, aside from the classic treatment on semantic terms, a discourse-based approach is also argued to be relevant (Zimmermann, 2008; Destruel and Velleman, 2014): The cleft in (4) revises certain misinformation, which belongs with the part of ongoing discourse that is not expected to be open for revision.

(4) A: This bean dip is fantastic. I really want to get the recipe. I can't believe that **Shannon** made it—she's normally not a very good cook.
B: It's Tim who made it.

The information being revised is part of the presupposition, and is usually agreed to be included in the common ground. Seeking to redress some information that is to this point taken for granted thus offers an additional layer of contrast. The experiment study by Destruel and Velleman (2014) has shown that speakers readily accepted and produced the cleft in a presuppositional corrective context.

While the current study does not seek to detract from the efficacy of the above-mentioned observations, we propose a new generalization. Crucially, clefts are not always off, being excluded from addressing a prior *wh*-question inquiry. Consider the scenario in (5), provided in Pollard and Yasavul (2014). Here the cleft answer is at least as natural as a declarative in addressing the question in the context.

(5) A: Who said "It is not enough to succeed. Others must fail"?
B: It was Gore Vidal.

We believe what is special about examples like (5) is that the *wh*-question constitutes a referentially anchored context (Onea and Geist, 2011; von Heusinger, 2002, 2011), which establishes a particular suitable representative with regards the property in question. The central claim we want to put forward is thus that clefts become a viable response strategy under referential anchoring.

In view of this, the current study revisits the relationship between the *it*-cleft and context type. We believe existing understanding of the use of the cleft, such as Destruel and Velleman (2014), leaves a theoretically important contrast unaddressed. Taking such contrast into consideration crucially brings a new perspective to the theoretical debate. To this end, we designed an experiment with context manipulations controlled to enforce referential anchoring. We seek to understand whether there is a difference in the acceptability judgment of cleft responses to *wh*-questions depending on whether the context features an identifiable but as yet unspecified entity (i.e. anchored vs. unanchored), and if a difference is found, how do the judgments compare with those found in a context of contrast (serving as the baseline which we build on).

The rest of this paper is structured as follows. Section 2 presents our main claim regarding the use condition of the *it*-cleft. Section 3 reports the experiment. Section 4 discusses the findings. Section 5 compares our analysis with alternative accounts. Section 6 draws preliminary crosslinguistic comparisons. Section 7 concludes the paper.

2. Claim

We argue that the use of the cleft is conditioned by referential anchoring. This means a cleft is used to provide the value to a discourse referent that is identifiable but insufficiently specified (i.e. unvalued) in the context of the question. The immediate context establishes a certain individual *x* in the common knowledge (Lewis, 1969) as a witness to an open proposition *p*, in this case the predicate of the question. The questioner seeks not to simply learn *any* entities that satisfy *p*, but rather to learn the identity of that witness *x*. That is, the questioner has that witness in mind, but does not know exactly who the individual is.[3] Under this context the answerer may opt for a cleft response to provide specification, *viz.* value *x* with the denotation of the focused expression. To do so, we assume the cleft under investigation instantiates a specificational structure. We subscribe to the view that *it* is anaphoric by nature in the structure (e.g. Hedberg, 2000). It identifies with the variable supplied from the immediate Question under Discussion (iQuD, Büring 2003; Biezma and Rawlins 2012), which is then fed to the post-copula element that values the variable.[4]

The above use relies on the questioner being able to identify a specific individual on the fly, based on a salient property or equivalently based on a choice function variable (Jin, 2019). For example, the following turn of dialogue in (6), when uttered out of the blue, is considered degraded as there is *prima facie* no salient property and hence no clear evidence for a particular witness. In contrast, the context description in (6) features a salient property. With the context added, we see much improved judgment of the cleft answer.

(6) (Context: Cats are forbidden in the building, but I see cat poop in the hallway.)
A: Who has cats?
B: It's John who has a cat.

Here the reference to a specific individual is typically accommodated by the answerer, which can be implemented in terms of an existential quantification over identifying properties that preferably takes place globally (i.e. with widest scope). Specifically, we follow with Schlenker (2004) in positing a covert *specific* in the referential anchoring context, which introduces at LF a second-order variable $D_{<et,et>}$ that modifies a predicate. D ranges over salient properties that uniquely identify an individual (Schlenker, 2004: 20):[5]

(7) $D_{<et,\,et>}$ is *identifying* iff for each $p_{<e,\,t>}$: (i) if the extension of p is non-empty, then there exists a unique d'_e such that D(p)(d')=1, and moreover this d' satisfies p(d')=1; (ii) D is undefined otherwise.

[3]In soliciting information that anchors a particular witness, the questioner also needs to assume that the hearer (from her source) possesses the kind of information that allows her to pick out a suitable representative of the open proposition, despite that it does not belong to mutual knowledge.

[4]The specificational copula is only participating in the valuing process by serving a predicativizing function (Mikkelsen, 2005, 2007; Jin, 2020; Jin and Chen, 2022; Chen, 2023).

[5]Equivalently, a unique referent anchored by an identifying property can be picked out by a choice function. See Schlenker (2004: pp.20, ex.54) for a translation procedure that allows identifying property variables to be restated in terms of choice functions via sharing the same index.

3. Experiment

We conducted a rating task to obtain English native speakers' judgments on the naturalness of the *it*-cleft across contexts. If, as we claim, the *it*-cleft is not incompatible with all *wh*-contexts across the board but rather addresses an identifiable individual, then we expect speakers to assign higher ratings in a referentially anchored context than in an unanchored context. Given we also assume general acceptability of the cleft used as corrections, we predict there is a contrast in judgment acceptability between unanchored contexts on one end and anchored/corrective contexts on the other end. Such contrast is not expected for declarative answers.

3.1. Participants

A total of 96 self-reported native speakers (average age: 33.9) were recruited from Prolific. Subjects were each compensated with $2.50 for their participation. None reported any language deficiency or bilingual competence. We removed the results of two participants from analysis due to missing data. 94 responses remained in the analysis.

3.2. Materials

Our survey consists of a 3x2 within-subject design, testing three types of contexts and two answer types. One target context is anchored, i.e. the context contains identifying property pointing to a particular witness (we make reference to the condition using the shorthand **SPEC**). This contrasts with unanchored contexts without such identifying property (abbreviated as the **UNSPEC** condition). The third context is established so that a cleft is used as correction (the **CORRECT** condition). We opted to include the corrective context as a benchmark with which we may compare the felicity of clefts under anchored as well as unanchored contexts. As justified in the above, we specifically followed Destruel and Velleman (2014)'s presuppositional context setting. What is special about this refined notion of contrast is that the cleft focus targets an individual belonging with the presupposed content, rather than part of assertion.

The answers in the design take the form of either a cleft (**CLEFT**) or a canonical focus declarative (**DECL**). Declaratives provide a baseline against which the acceptability of cleft answers across context conditions can be measured, under the assumption that they are the standard, default strategy in resolving a prior *wh*-question.[6]

One set of example stimulus, including both the context description and the focus answer, is provided in (8)-(10).

(8) Context condition: [SPEC]
Cats are forbidden in the building, but I see cat poop in the hallway. I ask the neighborhood snitch, 'Who has cats?'
The snitch answers:
a. 'It's John who has a cat.' [CLEFT]

[6]We provided answers in the form of full sentences. That is, the sentence includes a backgrounded part alongside the part expressing focus. Doing so allows us to engage with results from the study on corrective clefts by Destruel and Velleman (2014), which enforced full sentences. A potential issue concerns whether full clefts/declaratives are actually produced in real conversations. It is possible that short, truncated answers (including the focused information while leaving out the backgrounded information) are preferred. We leave this to a separate study.

b. 'John has a cat.' [DECL]

(9) Context condition: [UNSPEC]
I work for the local health agency, and I want to make sure all cats owned by tenants in a 6-floor apartment in my community are fully vaccinated. I ask the building manager: 'Who has cats?'
The building manager answers:

a. 'It's John who has a cat.' [CLEFT]

b. 'John has a cat.' [DECL]

(10) Context condition: [CORRECT]
I saw cat food in the classroom, on the desk where Shannon usually sits. 'I can't believe that Shannon owns a cat now—she's just been so fussy about hygiene and stuff.'
Lisa continues:

a. 'It's John who has a cat.' [CLEFT]

b. 'John has a cat.' [DECL]

Both anchored and unanchored contexts feature a *wh*-question query, consistently formed with a *who*-subject.[7] As mentioned above, the corrective context differs in featuring a declarative sentence projecting a presupposition that is the target of subsequent contrast. Underneath each context, participants saw either the cleft, as in the (a)-form, or the declarative, as in the (b)-form, and a 1–7 scale to provide the naturalness rating.

3.3. Procedures

The experiment was hosted on PCIbex (Zehr and Schwarz, 2018), which participants accessed over their internet browsers. Following the completion of a preliminary language background survey and familiarization with the instructions, the task commenced. Each task featured a set of four practice stimuli prior to the introduction of the main trials.

Participants first read through a context description. They then read one response situated in said context, and were instructed to rate how natural the response sounds given the context on a scale from 1 to 7. A score of 1 indicated 'very unnatural' and a score of 7 indicated 'very natural'. Sentences were presented individually on a screen, with the corresponding 7-point scale below. Participants indicated their choice by clicking on the corresponding checkbox, then proceeded to the next sentence on the following page. The task averaged 290 seconds.

Given that we had 6 conditions, we created 6 lexically matched sets of items. The items were then distributed among 6 experimental lists using a Latin square procedure so that participants saw a unique lexical item in each condition. Target stimuli were interspersed with three times as many filler items.

[7]Previous studies have found that non-subjects are less favored to be clefted than subjects (Skopeteas and Fanselow, 2010; Destruel and Velleman, 2014). Destruel and Velleman (2014) hypothesize that this might reflect the structural complexity of extraction of non-subjects (from a lower structural position), at least in some languages. For the moment, we settled with using subject focus to avoid introducing a position-related confound.

3.4. Results

Figure 1 shows acceptability ratings by context and answer type.

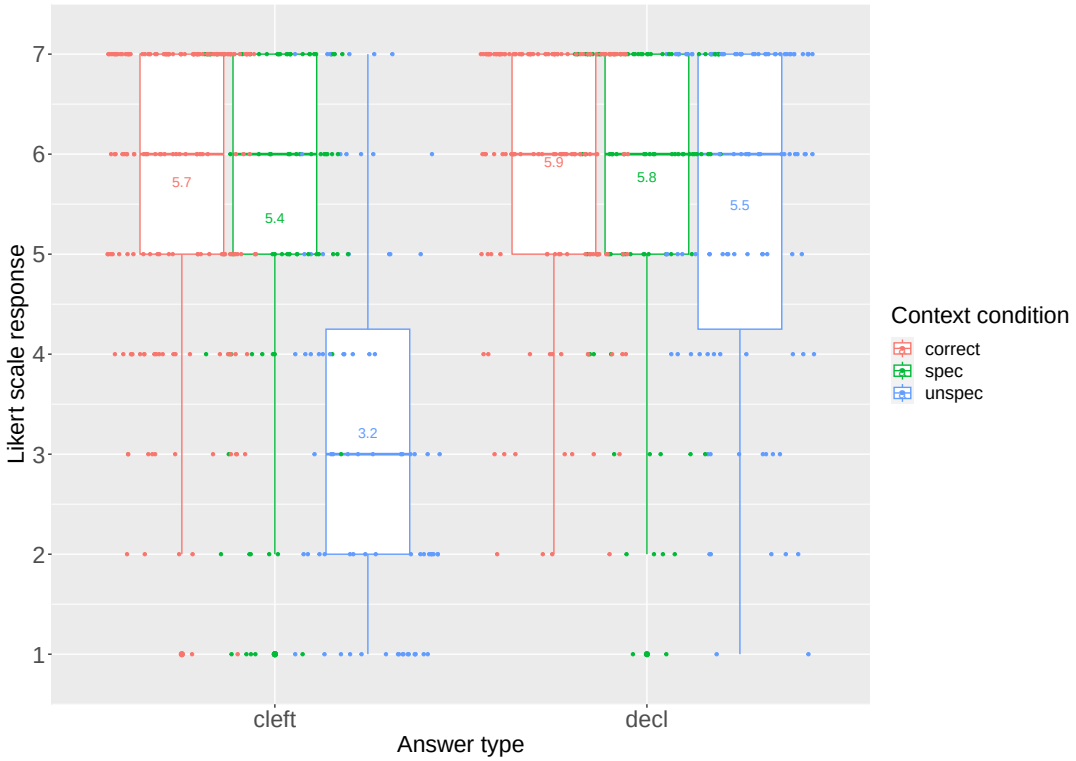

Figure 1: Acceptability judgment scores across answer types (left half: CLEFT; right half: DECL) and context conditions (left to right: CORRECT, SPEC and UNSPEC) with 1-7 Likert rating, represented in a combined boxplot and scatterplot. Numbers on the plot represent condition means, horizontal solid lines indicate medians, and dots stand for individual ratings.

Overall, we see from Figure 1 that declarative answers were consistently rated high across conditions, yielding a condition mean of 5.9/7 in CORRECT, 5.8/7 in SPEC and 5.5/7 in UNSPEC context. The general acceptability of declarative answers accords with the general claim that declarative focus serves as the default strategy in addressing a question inquiry. Within cleft sentences, those under the UNSPEC context were rated the lowest (3.2/7), staying below the midrange of the scale of acceptability judgment. This contrasted with the cleft sentences under SPEC (5.4/7) and CORRECT (5.7/7) contexts, both tending towards being acceptable.

In total, 576 data points entered the statistical analysis. We fitted an ordinal mixed model (Christensen, 2019) that predicted Likert scores from a fixed effect of context condition, answer type, and their interaction (contrast coded with the CORRECT condition), as well as by-participant and by-item random effects. The complete statistical analysis of the experiment, including the list of stimulus items, is stored on the online repository Open Science Framework (https://osf.io/d8xjn/).

Our model revealed that the UNSPEC condition receives a lower score ($\hat{\beta}$: -3.26, p <0.001), but undergoes a significant and correspondingly positive influence ($\hat{\beta}$: 3.01, p <0.001) when the

answer type is DECL. This results in a high score for UNSPEC+DECL stimuli not significantly different from those under the CORRECT condition.

Results from post-hoc comparisons using Tukey's HSD test (with α-adjustments) were in line with the above findings. As Table 1 shows, all pairwise comparisons involving the UNSPEC cleft against one of the other conditions yield a statistically significant result. Clefts in the SPEC and CORRECT contexts receive significantly higher ratings compared to those in the UNSPEC condition (see rows a) and b) in Table 1). Additionally, clefts in the UNSPEC context are rated significantly lower than declarative sentences in all context conditions (see rows c), d), and e) in Table 1).

Aside from those involving UNSPEC clefts, no significant differences were observed in other pairs of comparison. Specifically, SPEC clefts did not differ from CORRECT clefts, with both receiving ratings comparable to those of declarative answers.

	Contrast	Estimate	SE	p.value
a)	spec cleft - unspec cleft	2.82	0.33	$<$.0001
b)	correct cleft - unspec cleft	3.261	4.931	$<$.0001
c)	unspec cleft - correct decl	-3.213	0.341	$<$0.001
d)	unspec cleft - spec decl	-3.283	0.332	$<$.0001
e)	unspec cleft - unspec decl	-2.963	0.282	$<$.0001

Table 1: Results of post-hoc comparisons using Tukey's HSD test with α-adjustments. Only the significantly different pairs are reported.

4. Discussion

This study presented an acceptability judgment experiment to examine how speakers of English assess the naturalness of *it*-cleft answers. We compared three context types (anchored, unanchored, corrective), with two answer types (*it*-cleft answer, declarative focus answer) investigated for each context condition. We offer several findings. First, we found a degraded judgment for the cleft answer situated in the unanchored context. We take this result to indicate that the clefting strategy is not in general a particularly good candidate for addressing *wh*-contexts, confirming a longstanding observation. Second, a high level of acceptability was observed for the cleft under the anchored condition, indicating that the cleft is not entirely ruled out from *wh*-contexts. Third, the finding regarding the overall acceptability of corrective clefts replicates the results from past experiment studies (e.g. Destruel and Velleman, 2014), in which it is found that clefts are particularly natural at revising certain misinformation. Note further that the anchored context received ratings on par with those within the corrective context. In fact, in both context types, cleft answers were rated similarly with baseline canonical declarative answers. Finally, declaratives demonstrated consistently high acceptability across contexts. We thereby conclude that in English, the canonical way of marking focus in situ is broadly compatible with different discourse conditions and serves as the default mechanism, unlike the marked status of canonicals reported in some other languages.

The evidence is thus consistent with the hypothesis that the use of the cleft is conditioned by referential anchoring. This means a cleft is used to provide the value to a discourse referent that is identifiable but insufficiently specified in the context of the question. The crux lies in

the assumption that the cleft instantiates a specificational structure. The anaphoric *it* identifies with a discourse referent from the immediate context, which is then specified with a value by the post-copula cleft focus.

A non-cleft answer does not specify, but rather provides an instantiation that satisfies the property of the question, thus compatible with all context types. Given the absence of an underlying specificational structure, a canonical focus answer does not feature a pronominal element that anaphorically refers back to a particular discourse referent. It resolves the *wh*-question, if the focus referent corresponds to *any* element(s) within the open alternative set generated by said *wh*-question.

The current proposal further extends to corrective clefts. While, under referential anchoring, a cleft answer fulfills a questioner's request for the identity of a particular individual, the corrective case has a cleft response employed to correct a false belief about the identity of a mentioned entity. In both cases, the existence of a specific individual is not in doubt, satisfying referential anchoring.

5. Comparisons with other claims

A referential anchoring account enjoys advantages over previous proposals in accommodating the findings. Consider first an exhaustivity-based account. The cleft is known to give rise to an exhaustivity inference. Thus, in example (11), the utterance carries the inference that nobody other than Donald lied at the debate (taken from Onea 2019).[8]

(11) It was Donald who lied at the debate.

This extra layer of meaning has lied at the core of past characterizations that distinguish a cleft answer against a canonical declarative (e.g. Horn, 1981; Velleman et al., 2012; Büring and Križ, 2013).[9]It is thus natural to consider the possibility that exhaustivity underlies the infelicity of the cleft in question contexts. This could be the case, because a cleft answer provides

[8]Note that the exhaustivity inference arises in conjunction with two other, run-of-the-mill inferences, namely the canonical inference that Donald lied at the debate and the existential inference that someone lied at the debate.

[9]A canonical declarative also gives rise to a mild exhaustivity inference when it functions as an answer to a *wh*-question. However, the exhaustive focus reading in canonical declaratives is more readily canceled. For example, a declarative response as in (1b) can be followed up with a *who else*-question (1c), or a *too*-continuation as in (1d), both incompatible with exhaustive focus.

(1) a. Who lied at the debate?
b. [Donald]$_F$ lied at the debate.
c. Fine, and who else lied at the debate?
d. Bill too, lied at the debate.

Compare now (1) with (2). The exhaustivity inference of the cleft is stronger, evidenced by the fact that the continuations in (2c) and (2d) both feel degraded given the context (Destruel et al., 2015; Onea, 2019).

(2) a. Who lied at the debate?
b. It was [Donald]$_F$ who lied at the debate.
c. ? Fine, and who else lied at the debate?
d. ? Bill too, lied at the debate.

more information than is necessary, with the additional message where contextually determined alternatives to the focus value are excluded. Note incidentally that a response containing the exclusive *only* also comes off as odd, presumably for the aforementioned Gricean reason.

(12) A: Who cooked the beans?
B: #Only John cooked the beans.

However, the exhaustivity-based account is challenged by the fact that there is more to the empirical picture than a Gricean violation. The account becomes insufficient in cases such as (9a), repeated below.

(13) I work for the local health agency, and I want to make sure all cats owned by tenants in a 6-floor apartment in my community are fully vaccinated. I ask the building manager: 'Who has cats?'
The building manager answers:
'It's John (who has a cat).'

Here the answer exhaustively addresses a prior *wh*-context. The problem is that the exhaustive message that comes with the answer is not seen as quite problematic in this particular scenario, given what the two sides know about the goal of the dialogue. For a comparison, an exclusive *only*-answer reads fine in the context of (13). This way, an exhaustivity-based account should predict that (13) be rated as natural in our task, contrary to fact.

Furthermore, deriving the infelicity of the cleft in *wh*-contexts fails to render an account of the observation that clefts form a good continuation with indefinites. Consider the following conversation, modified from an example in Pollard and Yasavul (2014).

(14) A: **A gas station** was robbed by **a man**!
B_1: Yeah, it was the BP station near the Bethel intersection (that was robbed).
B_2: Yeah, it was my halfwit brother (who robbed it).

Here the indefinites introduce a particular witness, similar to the anchored *wh*-contexts, which does not find a ready explanation in terms of maximality with respect to some property.

Second, accounts based on the notion of contrast–including *linguistic* contrast, i.e. with an alternative first introduced and subsequently excluded, as well as contrast with some *metalinguistic* expectations in the common ground (Zimmermann, 2008; Destruel and Velleman, 2014)–still fall short. First, it is less clear how a contrast-based account extends to anchored contexts, where the discourse referent is not entailed to be contrastive with respect to some property. A further difficulty concerns the above pattern where clefts form a good continuation with indefinites, again with no notion of contrast invoked.

Finally, in a precursor of the current account, Pollard and Yasavul (2014) also propose that a cleft addresses an insufficiently specified discourse referent in the context. Unlike our approach, in the context of a question, such discourse referent is assumed to be the maximal plurality coming out of the disjunction of all true answers (the complete answer to the question

in the Hamblin sense).[10] Pollard and Yasavul cite as example the *wh*-question *Who went to CLS?*. It is argued that the maximal plural individual with the property of going to CLS is being supplied to the discourse, to be subsequently picked up by the anaphoric *it* of the cleft. The *it*-cleft identifies this plurality with the denotation of the focused expression. Assuming Greg and Dan are the individuals who went, the discourse referent in question is the plural individual Greg+Dan, as all the other atomic individuals are part of it. This way, an underlying assumption is that all *wh*-questions that presuppose the existence of an individual with the property under discussion are open for subsequent anaphora. As such, Pollard and Yasavul's account overgeneralizes, falsely predicting clefts to felicitously address *wh*-questions in general.[11]

A referential anchoring account captures the contrast in acceptability judgment observed between anchored and unanchored contexts, without resorting to the notion of exhaustivity and contrast. It additionally allows the corrective function of the cleft to be subsumed under anchoring. Besides, the present account is capable of explaining the compatibility of the cleft with a prior indefinite referent. This is because in some situations, an indefinite is used to seek to identify the individual the speaker intends to refer to when she does not know exactly who that individual is (Fodor and Sag, 1982; Kamp and Bende-Farkas, 2001; Schwarzschild, 2002; Schlenker, 2004). In the context of (14), the speaker A has a certain individual in mind, and uses the indefinite as a way to talk about the identity of that witness to the predicate. The cleft is then used to pick up said discourse referent and then specify its value. In other words, given the parallel use of indefinites and *wh*-questions in soliciting the identity of a specific individual, our account built upon referential anchoring captures the indefinite data without postulating additional mechanisms.

6. Crosslinguistic implications

Extrapolating from this, we suggest languages exhibit an underlying tendency for clefts to ameliorate in anchored contexts compared to unanchored ones. Our consultation indeed revealed initial evidence for this amelioration effect in languages that otherwise vary in the way that the equivalent to English *it*-cleft addresses *wh*-contexts (we consulted 4 speakers apiece).

Consider German, which severely constrains clefts in *wh*-contexts. Within an unanchored context, the *es*-cleft answer (15a) triggers a strong degradation given the question (15b), with the corresponding canonical declarative answer heavily favored. Under referential anchoring, nevertheless, we observe a clearly improved judgment.

(15) Context condition: [SPEC as in (8) vs. UNSPEC as in (9)]

a. Wer hat Katzen?
who has cats
'Who has cats?'

[10] Here the plurality in Pollard and Yasavul's term may be a null individual (zero atoms) or contain only one atom.

[11] In the paper, Pollard and Yasavul claim that the *it*-cleft carries with it an existence implication, postulated as a constraint on the common ground requiring that there be an individual with the property under discussion. It seems that *wh*-questions that project a canonical existential presupposition would satisfy such constraint. Pollard and Yasavul suggest later that the context of a felicitous cleft answer should have an individual that is 'inferable or mutually known'. The phrasing hints at a stronger constraint, potentially involving a salient or accessible property on the fly. However, no detail is provided in the account.

b. Es ist Hans.
it is Hans
'It is Hans.' [CLEFT]

Consider also Hindi, where clefts are otherwise a mildly marked strategy to address *wh*-contexts. Still, an improved judgment is elicited under a SPEC condition vis-à-vis an UNSPEC one.[12]

(16) Context condition: [SPEC as in (8) vs. UNSPEC as in (9)]
a. Billiyaan kiske paas hain?
cats who has be.PRS.PL
'Who has cats?'
b. Vah/vo john hai.
it/that john be.PRS.SG
'It's John. ' [CLEFT]

The observation suggests a fundamental unity between languages as diverse as English, German and Hindi in the semantics and pragmatics of clefts. In all three, clefts 'normally' address an anchored context. Meanwhile, following Destruel and Velleman (2014), we hypothesize that the full range of contexts that allow clefting can be predicted based on the unavailability of in-situ focus marking in that same context. If canonical focus is a default strategy in the context of a question, clefting should be highly constrained, occurring only in the most anchored scenarios. On the other hand, if canonicals themselves are somehow penalized for language-specific reasons, more liberty would be afforded to clefts.

Under this hypothesis, what varies across languages are the felicity conditions for the canonical form, the options being determined by the grammar of the language. German and Hindi illustrate two opposite ends of this continuum: while canonical information focus is entirely natural in German, it is marked in Hindi. This could reveal a division of labor of sorts between clefts and canonical focus in terms of the question-addressing function: Whereas the less marked status of cleft answers in Hindi comes in as a trade-off in view of canonical focus being penalized in *wh*-contexts (Destruel et al., 2015), no such constraint applies in German. Of course, we must leave it to future work to test this hypothesis.

7. Conclusion

In this study, we presented experimental evidence that the *it*-cleft construction in English can address *wh*-questions when the discourse context is referentially anchored, namely, it establishes an identifiable but underspecified witness to the predicate in question. Our findings confirm the longstanding observation that clefts are generally infelicitous in unanchored contexts, where no such discourse referent is accessible. However, we demonstrate that clefts achieve high acceptability ratings in anchored contexts, comparable to the independently documented felicity of corrective clefts. We argue for a new interpretation of the data, in which the purpose of clefts lies in the specifying of an identifiable individual, with the corrective use subsumed under this function. The notion of referential anchoring extends to indefinites, another environment where the cleft is found to appear naturally. Our analysis yields a simpler theory than

[12]See Chen (2023) for a pilot study showing a similar pattern of improved judgment under referential anchoring in Mandarin Chinese *shi*-clefts.

alternative analyses such as a contrast-based account, an exhaustivity-based account, or the anaphoric *it*-cleft account by Pollard and Yasavul (2014) which postulates an anaphora relation to a maximal individual antecedent. It is not immediately clear how these analyses achieve the same empirical coverage without introducing *ad hoc* mechanisms.

The current study is limited to the rating paradigm. A next step would be to further examine if referential anchoring plays a similar role in production. Additionally, future research should use rigid methodology to obtain a clear pattern of whether and to what extent these results can be replicated across languages, in order to gauge the typological validity of our claim.

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