

The surprising nature of cleft alternatives in French and English

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--Goal. We report on experiments examining the rhetorical role of alternatives on the naturalness of clefts in French and English, specifically the use of clefts to indicate that an utterance runs contrary to an epistemic commitment held by the hearer or another discourse participant.

--Background. French and English clefts—bi-clausal sentences of the form “It is X that Z/ *C’est X qui/que Z*”—are *focus-marking* devices: the clefted element signals a set of alternatives relevant for interpretation (Rooth, 1985; Lambrecht, 2001; Krifka, 2007). Clefts are standardly analyzed as having the following requirements (Horn, 1981; Büring & Kriz, 2013): they (i) assert that X Zed, (ii) presuppose existence of some X that Zed, and (iii) imply exhaustivity (‘no one other than X Zed’).

It has also been argued that clefts encode *contrastive* focus (see Jespersen, 1927; Declerck, 1984; Kiss, 1998; Patten, 2012 for English, see Lambrecht, 1994; Vion & Colas, 1995; Féry, 2013 for French). Contrastive focus has been characterized as imposing a requirement that there be salient alternatives to the focal element (Kiss, 1998, Rooth, 1992). However, there are distinctions that prior work does not capture (Zimmermann, 2008, 2011; Author, 2014). For instance, in (1) where an appropriate discourse-familiar alternative is available, English speakers display a statistically robust preference for the canonical version (1a) over the cleft version (1b), which was found to have an average rating of 4.9 in the study by Destruel & Velleman (2014). A similar observation was made for French in a production study by Destruel (2016).

- (1) A: Darren sounded really excited about his vacation. I think he might be going to **Canada**.
a. B: Actually, he’s going to **Mexico**.
b. B: ? Actually, it’s **Mexico** that he’s going to.

This leads to the following questions: (i) What factors other than the presence of a discourse-familiar alternative license clefts, and, specifically, does the attitude expressed towards salient alternatives affect the felicity of clefts? (ii) Given that clefts have a broader distribution in French than English, does dependency of the status of alternatives differ between these languages? We approach these questions by augmenting traditional analyses of contrast with what we term *contrariness*. In the spirit of Zimmermann (2008, 2011), we take contrariness to relate to the degree of commitment that an addressee is established to have to a contrary focal alternative. We define one clause to be *contrary* to another if they differ only with respect to focused material, and one contradicts the other. We propose that clefts incorporate a requirement that the ordinary meaning is contrary to a previously salient focal alternative.

--Methods. There were two studies per language: (i) a **norming** study (65 English participants, 48 French) to measure strength of commitment to a target proposition, and (ii) a **main** study (64 English participants, 48 French) to determine how speakers rated alternative responses from a second speaker contradicting that proposition. In the main study, participants saw written stimuli in the form of a dialogue between Speaker A, who provided the context, and Speaker B who provided the contrary comment. Items varied depending on the form of the last sentence in A’s discourse (see 2i-2vi). We tested the effects of five factors: (i) GRAMMATICAL FUNCTION (GF) of the element that B commented on as subject or object; (ii) whether B’s sentence was in direct CONTRADICTION with A’s last sentence; (iii) STRENGTH of A’s commitment to their statement based on strength ratings from the first study; (iv) whether the

target alternative in A's text was AT-ISSUE or not; (v) SENTENCE FORM of B's response (cleft (3i) or a canonical sentence (3ii)). For each language, 12 lexicalizations for each condition were created and counterbalanced with fillers across 12 experimental lists.

(2) **Contexts** (for grammatical subject condition)

A: We were planning Amy's surprise party for weeks. I can't believe she found out about it. [...]

- (i) ... I guess someone from the staff told her.
- (ii) ... I guess Alice must have told her.
- (iii) ... And Alice—who I think, probably went and told her about it—just laughed and said it was no big deal!
- (iv) ... Alice told her about it, you know.
- (v) ... And Alice—who went and told her about it—just laughed and said it was no big deal!
- (vi) ... I'm annoyed that Alice told her about it!

(3) **Sentences to rate:**

B: (Yeah/Actually,) [...]

- (i)... Ken told her about it.
- (ii)...it's Ken who told her about it.

--Results. Figure 1 illustrates naturalness ratings (collapsed for GF). Across French and English, the general trend is that clefts (red dots) become increasingly felicitous with *contrariness*, i.e.

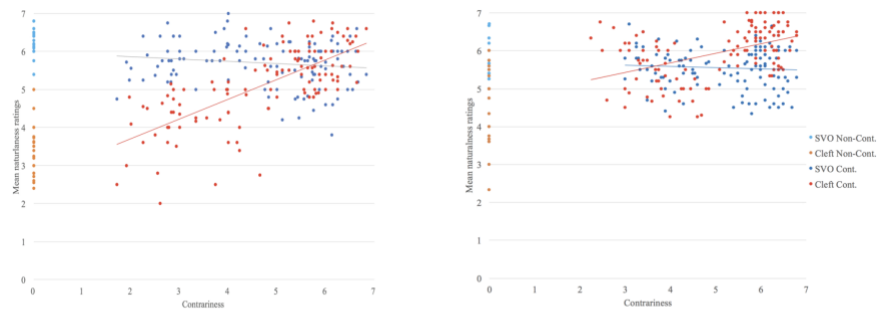


Figure 1
Naturalness ratings for English (left) and French (right)

when the strength of the speaker's belief in the target proposition increases ($\beta=0.20$, $SE=0.027$, $t=7.32$). However, for canonical sentences (dark blue dots) we see a small but significant effect in the reverse direction: they are slightly degraded as contrariness increases. In English, clefts are significantly worse in the context where there is no contradiction (orange dots) compared to the ones that do contain a conjecture ($\beta=0.69$, $SE=0.15$, $t=4.63$). This is not true in French where clefts are rated relatively felicitous in the non-contradictory context (orange dots), in line with the claim that clefts are a default strategy to signal focus in this language.

--Discussion and Conclusion. Traditional definitions of contrast do not predict an effect of strength of commitment in contexts where standard requirements are satisfied and salient focal alternatives are present. Our data shows that cleft acceptability increases as contrariness rises, and vice-versa for canonical sentences, with the effect holding across languages, although to a stronger extent in English. Thus, standard models must be supplemented with a notion of contrariness. Our data suggests that contrariness plays an important role in helping speakers choose between cleft and canonical forms: the more strongly an interlocutor appears committed to a false proposition, the better it is to repudiate them with a cleft, and this effect is visible over and above other factors that distinguish the distribution of clefts in French and English.

Selected references: Büring, D. & M. Kriz (2013) *S&P* 6 • Declerck, R. (1984) *Lingua* 64 • Destruel & Velleman (2014) *EISS* 10 • Kiss, K. (1998) *Language* 74 • Lambrecht, K. (1994) *Information structure and Sentence form: Topic, Focus, and the Mental Representations of Discourse Referents*. Cambridge University Press • Rooth, M. (1992) *NLS* 1 • Schwarzschild, R. (1999) *NLS* 7 • Vion & Colas (1995) *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research* 24 • Zimmermann, M. (2008) *Acta Linguistica Hungarica*.