

## Cleft sentences

It is possible to give special prominence to one element of a sentence by dividing it into two clauses, each with its own verb. The basic pattern of a *cleft sentence* is the following: *It + verb "to be" + subject, object etc. + that relative clause*. Cleft sentences are common in speech as well as writing, since they guide readers' interpretation by helping them assign the correct prosody to a sentence:

*It is her professionalism that I want to praise*  
*It isn't my interest I am defending*  
*It was the grassroots militants who were pushing for a change of line*

Subject pronouns other than "it" may occur:

*Those are my notes you're tearing up!*

*That* can be substituted by *who* when emphasis is put on a personal subject:

*It wasn't the miners who started the fight*

When emphasis is put on a pronoun two options are available, one formal and the other informal; pronouns are used in the nominative or accusative case respectively. Notice the use of different relative pronouns and verb forms:

*It is he who has taken the initiative* (formal)  
*It is him that has taken the initiative* (informal)  
*It is I who want to move* (formal)  
*It is me that wants to move* (informal)

Modal verbs can also be used in cleft-sentences:

*It could be your career you have to sacrifice*  
*It must have been the manager that convinced him to withdraw his resignation*

The emphasized element is usually found early in the sentence, yet the peculiar structure of clefts ensures that they assign *double focus* to a sentence. Which of the two focussed items conveys new information, and thus constitutes the heart of the sentence, depends on context:

*It is her money he is after*  
*A: I think he is just interested in her money. B: I would say it is her money he craves!*

Clefting is employed to highlight different parts of a sentence, typically the subject, direct object, and adverbial expressions of time and place; verbs, adjectives and adverbs of manner cannot be given prominence. From a sentence like *The French representative vetoed the new resolution on Iraq at the United Nations last week* it is possible to obtain the following four cleft sentences:

*It was the French representative that vetoed the new resolution on Iraq at the United Nations last week* (subject as focus)

*It was the new resolution on Iraq that the French representative vetoed at the United Nations last week* (object as focus)

*It was last week that the French representative vetoed the new resolution on Iraq at the United Nations* (time adverbial as focus)

*It was at the United Nations that the French representative vetoed the new resolution on Iraq last week* (place adverbial as focus)

The focus of a cleft sentence is occasionally constituted by a prepositional phrase:

*It is for you that I did all this*

*It is on him that our success depends*

Cleft-sentences are also found in questions and exclamations:

*Is it on this field that we are supposed to play?*

*What a great article it was you wrote!*

### **Pseudo-cleft sentences**

Another common way to give prominence to one part of a sentence is to use the structure *What .....is/was ...*, often called a *pseudo-cleft sentence*. Like cleft sentences, pseudo-clefts make explicit the separation between the new and the given part of the message. The emphasized element is usually found at the end of the sentence, though some emphasis is also put on the initial clause. Typically, pseudo-clefts have the *wh*-element as subject, though this is not necessarily so:

*What I need now is a glass of wine*

*A glass of wine is what you need now*

This structure is used to emphasize the subject or object of a sentence:

*My left leg hurts → What hurts is my left leg*

*I like her style → What I like is her style*

In order to make a verb stand out the construction *what ... do* must be used; different verb forms will be found, according to context. Infinitives with or without *to* are possible. If the *wh*-clause contains a verb in the progressive aspect the complement also has a verb in the *-ing* form:

*What they do is dump their products*

*What I did was (to) call the police*

*What he was trying to do was just earning your trust*

*Where* and *when* clauses can be used in a similar way to *what* clauses, especially in informal English. This occurs much less frequently than for the pseudo-cleft sentence “proper”, and mainly when the wh-clause is used as subject complement:

*Greece is where the Olympic Games took place in 2004*  
*February is when most students get the flu*

Other wh-words are rarely employed in pseudo-cleft constructions (once again, they are informal and tend to be avoided at the beginning of a sentence). Different expressions are used in their stead, for example *the person who* and *the reason why* in lieu of *who* and *why* respectively:

*Lack of money is the reason why I decided to postpone my research trip to the States*  
*The person who accused him has now been arrested*

Structures beginning with *all (that)* and expressions containing the word “thing” can be used in a similar way to pseudo-cleft sentences:

*All (that) I'm asking for is group solidarity*  
*The best thing you can do is apologize*