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# Focus in English cleft sentences: a prosodic, syntactic and discourse analysis



- It-clefts (ITC): *It's John who broke the vase.*
- Wh-clefts (WHC): *What we want is peace.*
- Reversed Wh-clefts (RWC): *That's what we want.*

**Abbreviations:**

**CC** = the clefted (focused) constituent (*John, peace or that*);  
**CCI** = the cleft clause, containing the presupposition (*who broke the vase or what we want*).

**Corpus** : ICE-GB (oral component), 457 analysed examples in total (154 ITC, 152 WHC, 151 RWC).

**Method** : Separate studies of prosody and discourse.

**Prosodic analysis**: relies on four variables:

- 1) the number of tone units (TUs): coded 1 when no boundary between CC & CCI, 2 if boundary between CC & CCI;
- 2) the tone unit boundaries (marked by slashes /);
- 3) the place of the nucleus (N);
- 4) the tone: **F** = Fall, **R** = Rise, **FR** = Fall Rise, **HF** = High Fall.

**Basic assumption:**

Clefts are focusing structures. However, focus can also be marked by prosodic devices.

**Addressed questions:**

What is the role of prosody in such focusing structures?  
How do prosody and syntax interact to indicate focus?

ITC	Function/type of ITC	% age (out of 154 ITCs)	Role of CCI	Prosodic pattern		Function of prosody	Focus	Examples
				Nb of TUs	Movement on N			
1	Non-focusing ITC	19,5% (30 ex)	Uninformative/ Informative	1 TU	- F	Marking the CC as known	syntactic focus on CC but contradicted by prosody	<i>So So you mean that it's the nerves that <u>feed</u> them F</i>
2a	Double focus ITC / All-informative ITC	46,7% (72 ex)	Informative	2 TUs	F / F	Focusing the CCI	Syntactic focus on CC + prosodic focus on CCI	<i>It was in nineteen hundred and six F / that the Queen's great-grandfather King Edward</i> <i>And uh you might at first sight think that uh /it was the round church F / that was the earlier</i>
2b		11% (17 ex)			F / F			
3a	stressed-focus ITC	11% (17 ex)	Uninformative (known)	1 TU	F -	Marking contrast on CC and CCI as uninformative	syntactic + prosodic focus on CC	<i>It's the nasal <u>retina</u> that that decussates F (vs. nasal field)</i>
3b	+ implicational	11,7% (18 ex)	Uninformative/ Informative	2 TUs	FR / F or HF / F	Marking contrast on CC (FR or HF)		<i>Is it your <u>brother</u> who knew Peter FR</i> <i>It was the <u>gauge</u> HF/ that was the killer in the</i>

WHC	Function/type of WHC	% age (out of 152 WHCs)	Role of CCI	Prosodic pattern		Function of prosody	Focus	Examples
				Nb of TUs	Movement on N			
4a	Simple cleft	8% (12 ex)	Uninformative	1 TU	- F	None	Syntactic focus on CC	<i>What you have to do is maybe check F</i> <i>what we will be seeing very shortly R / on April 1st to be precise R/ is the advent of all</i>
4b		5,5% (8 ex)		2 TUs	R / F	Testing		
5	Foreshadowing discourse (new topic in CC)	37,5% (57 ex)	Uninformative	2 TUs TU boundary after be (70%)	FR / F	Reinforcing focus on CC (attracting attention on CC)	Syntactic + prosodic focus on CC	<i>So what one <u>wonders</u> is FR/ what went on in his mind HF</i> <i>what <u>happened</u> is uh FR / they caught her without a licence F</i>
6	Introducing a new topic (in CCI)	49% (75 ex)	Informative	2 TUs TU boundary before be (89 %)	F / F	Focusing the CCI Announcing new topic (in CCI)	Syntactic focus on CC + prosodic focus on CCI	<i>Yes but what I'm <u>saying</u> F / is that they're not</i> <i>What you do <u>first</u> F / is just to switch it off F</i>

RWC	Function/type of RWC	% age (out of 151 RWCs)	Role of CCI	Prosodic pattern		Function of prosody	Focus	Examples
				Nb of TUs	Movement on N			
7a	Basic (transition, recapitulation...)	80% (121 ex)	Informative / uninformative	1 TU	- F	neutral	No focus on CC (topicalisation)	<i>Mm that's what I'm talking about F</i> <i>Right so that's what nature and nurture is F</i> <i>This is what we do all the time F</i>
7b		16% (24 ex)			- HF - FR	Contrast on CCI		
8	Contrastive	4% (6 ex)	Informative / uninformative	1 TU	F - or HF - or FR -	N on CC : contrast on CC	Focus on CC	<i>That's what people said to me when I became Chief Secretary some years ago FR</i>

## CONCLUSION

Clefts are syntactically focusing structures in English but in discourse, prosody interacts with syntax to modify focus and express the subtleties of language. It can

- 1) remain neutral: syntactic focus only (4, 7a);
- 2) reinforce the focus on CC: prosodic + syntactic focus on CC (5, 3);
- 3) give prominence to CCI: syntactic focus on CC + prosodic focus on CCI (6, 2);
- 4) attenuate focus on CC (marking CC as known): non-focusing clefts (1);
- 5) mark CCI as uninformative (3a);
- 6) indicate contrast (on the CC or elsewhere) (2b, 3, 7b, 8).