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THE SPECIFICATIONAL PSEUDOCLEFT

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This note, inspired by several readings of Higgins', The Pseudo-Cleft Construction in English, is a speculation on the analysis of the specificational pseudocleft. The speculation is in the spirit of one of the research directives spelled out by Higgins, namely, that an analysis of the uses of the copula will tell most of the story on the pseudocleft construction.

1. The Predicational/Specificational Ambiguity

Higgins identifies all pseudoclefts as instances of the structure:

(1) NP be X

where NP is a free relative, and X is the focused constituent. He then identifies several different interpretations that this structure can have. We will be concerned with two, the predicational and the specificational. Higgins provides the very nice minimal pair in (2):

- (2) a. What John is is important to him. (him = John) (P)
b. What John is is important to himself. (S)

(2a) is what Higgins calls predicational; the free relative has some referent, and the predicate that follows the copula is

attributed to that referent. (2a) might be paraphrased, "John's occupation is important to him." (2b) is a specificational pseudocleft, in Higgins' terminology. It has a paraphrase, "John is important to himself." The specificational pseudocleft exhibits what Higgins' called syntactic connectedness; in this case, for example, the focus constituent contains a reflexive which is bound by the subject of the free relative -- the focus constituent is syntactically connected to the free relative. More specifically, the focus constituent acts as though it were occupying the position of the WH trace in the free relative, at least with respect to such rules as reflexive binding, disjoint reference, etc. The predicational pseudocleft, on the other hand, does not exhibit syntactic connectedness.

We will make use of the examples in (2) because they are each unambiguous. It is worth noting though that many pseudoclefts are ambiguous. For example, (3) has both a specificational and a predicational reading.

(3) What John is is important.

The reader is referred to Higgins', The Pseudo-Cleft Construction in English, for a discussion of these two types of pseudoclefts, and some others as well.

2. The specificational pseudocleft as a predicational pseudocleft.

The main properties of the predicative pseudocleft follow from regarding the clefted clause as a free relative, a relative specifying the referent of a referential NP. Ordinary NPs can appear not only in referential positions, but also nonreferential, or predicative positions; for example, the postcopular position of "John is a fool" or the last NP position of "I consider John a fool." If NPs can be used predicatively, and if free relatives are NPs, then one might suspect that there would be predicative uses of free relatives. Our speculation is that this is the appropriate view to take of the specificational pseudocleft -- that the cleft clause is a free relative which is being used predicatively, and the focus constituent is the subject of that predicate. So analyzed, (2b) has the structure:

(4) What John is is important to himself.
 PRED IS SUBJ

This is an unusual order for the subject and predicate to appear in, but of course, the other order is available as well:

(5) Important to himself is what John is.
 SUBJ PRED

It is also unusual to have APs as subjects, but with the copula, we must admit unusual categories as subjects anyway -- witness:

(6) In the closet is a nice place. (PP subject)

Also, it is worth noting that the word "subject" is being used in a non-structural sense -- we are speaking of the subject of a predicate, not the subject of a sentence; this is why we can say that the subject is precopular in (5), but postcopular (and presumably dominated by VP) in (4). We may specify the relation that holds between our non-structural, semantic notion "subject" and the structural notion of subject ("the XP dominated by S") in the following way: In S-structure, the structure:

(7) XP be YP

is always interpreted as:

(8) XP_{SUBJ} be YP_{PRED}

However, there is a stylistic "be-flip" rule which will exchange XP and YP in (7). Thus, in S-structure, the two notions of subject coincide, but in the case that be-flip applies, we will get semantic subjects in non(structural) subject position. Thus (4) is derived from (5) by this rule. Good evidence for this rule is given in the next section.

3. Evidence. The evidence for the proposals just made will consist in showing that in a number of ways the focus constituent of a specificational (but not of a predicational) pseudocleft acts like a subject. Examples will be based on the

unambiguous pair in (2).

For example, Subject-Aux Inversion (SAI) moves an auxiliary verb to the left of a subject. Consider the following:

- (9) a. Important to himself_S is what John is_P
 b. Is important to himself_S what John is_P
 c. Important to him_P is what John is_S
 d. *Is important to him_P what John is_S

(9d) is bad presumably because SAI has moved an auxiliary past a nonsubject. We can get this result in the system outlined in section 2 by positing SAI as a rule that precedes be-flip (perhaps it can be shown to be required in the derivation of S-structure). Be-flip can still derive (9c), but SAI cannot apply to (9c), the output of be-flip, to derive (9d), if SAI must always precede be-flip. This arrangement of things makes a further prediction, namely, that SAI will apply to (2a), but not to (2b), since, in our analysis, (2b) is be-flipped, but (2a) is not. This is the complement of the paradigm in (9):

- (10) a. What John is_S is important to him_P (2a)
 b. Is what John is_S important to him_P
 c. What John is_P is important to himself_S
 d. *Is what John is_P important to himself_S

There are many predication environments in which be is not present. In those environments, be-flip will not take place. We should then find the order of subject and

predicate invariant. We will now examine some of those environments.

One environment in which *be*-flip cannot apply is in gapped clauses in which *be* is deleted. It is therefore predicted that in gapped clauses, only the order SUBJ-PRED will occur.

- (11) (unflipped pred)
- a. What John is is important to him, and
What Mary is_S important to her_P
- (be-flipped spec)
- b. *What John is is important to himself, and
What Mary is_P afraid of herself_S
- (unflipped spec)
- c. Important to himself is what John is, and
Afraid of herself_S what Mary is_P

Another environment in which predication is found, but *be* is not, is in the complement of such verbs as *consider*: "I consider John a fool." If *be*-flip is really contingent on the presence of *be*, then we expect to find the unflipped, but not the flipped specificational pseudoclefts: (the following (a and b) examples are specificational, as they exhibit the property of syntactic connectedness):

- (12) a. I consider that fear of himself_S what John
needs to get rid of_P
- b. *I consider what John needs to get rid of_P
that fear of himself_S

- (12) c. I consider what John suggested_S a red herring_P
 (unflipped pred)
- d. I consider a red herring_P what John suggested_S

The (d) example is grammatical, despite the fact that it is flipped. Actually, though, the flipping in this case was done by Heavy NP Shift, a rule that does not depend on the presence of be. Heavy NP Shift does not apply to (a) to derive (b) because the relative heaviness of the two post-verbal constituents is in the wrong direction, if NPs containing clauses are heavier than NPs that don't.

Finally, if raising is a cyclic rule, and if be-flip is a stylistic rule, as we have been suggesting, then raising cannot apply to the output of be-flip. This prediction is borne out by the following examples:

- (13) a. Afraid of himself_S seems to be what John is_P (unflipped and raised spec)
- b. *What John is_P seems to be afraid of himself_S (flipped and raised spec)
- c. What John is_S seems to be important to him_P (unflipped and raised pred)
- d. *Important to him_P seems to be what John is_S (flipped and raised pred)
- e. Afraid of himself_S is believed to be what John is_P

In all of these cases, it seems that the "basic" order of the specificational pseudocleft is "clefted constituent, be, clefted clause," even where the clefted constituent is not an NP, but an AP. In this sense, the clefted constituent is the subject of the specificational pseudocleft. We may then regard the clefted clause as simply a free relative NP used predicatively.

4. Syntactic connectedness.

The view of the specificational pseudocleft just outlined will not solve the problem of syntactic connectedness, but it will help somewhat, in the following way. We have just said that the focus constituent of the pseudocleft was the subject of, in a semantic sense, the clefted clause. Another way to say this is, the clefted clause modifies the focus constituent. Suppose we then said: syntactic connectedness obtains when the modifiee contains a bound anaphoric item, and the modifier contains its binder. This view of syntactic connectedness will then extend to those relatives which contain the binder of some bound anaphoric item in the head of the relative:

- (15) a. Important to himself is what John is
 b. The picture of himself that John saw
 modifiee modifier

This view does not extend to all of the cases of syntactic connectedness, unfortunately. It will not include the

syntactic connectedness that obtains in a question-answer pair (What did John see? A picture of himself), since in no intelligible sense of the word does a question modify its answer; nor does it extend to the syntactic connectedness that holds between a fronted WH phrase and the S that follows (What picture of himself did John see), since, again, the notion of "modification" does not seem relevant to the construction.

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