

What is it that requires clefting? Some notes on Northern Italian wh- subject question formation

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The behaviour of the languages with respect to clefts is subject to a great degree of variation. There are languages such as Standard German (Bertollo, 2014) or Sicilian (Cruschina, 2015) where clefts are scarcely used and are limited to a restricted number of syntactic contexts (possibly only subjects), whereas there are languages also typologically very distant from each other where clefts are not only frequently used, but are even compulsory to form certain syntactic constructions.

In the present communication, I will try to show that even in the domain of mandatory clefting, the restrictions and requirements which apply follow a very specific pattern, which is also somehow related to the conversely marginal possibilities for clefting on which some languages can rely. Northern Italian dialects are an excellent case in point, since they provide a good degree of microvariation, which enables to observe different stages for clefts to be obligatory and interesting circumvention strategies, which can sometimes constitute an alternative to clefts.

Evidently, the distribution of clefts is not by chance. As has been convincingly shown by previous literature (see Belletti, 2008; Cruschina, 2015 a.o.), the scarcity of clefts generally correlates with the availability of other pragmatic devices such as focus fronting, and the marginal cases which can be clefted are the most accessible in the terms of Keenan & Comrie's Accessibility Hierarchy (1977) (see Fischer, 2002 for an account on German). It has also been assumed by the literature that the unavailability of clefting may be due to the characteristics of Verb Second, which would explain the poorness of Standard German and German dialects in this respect. However, this proves not to be the case, since Norwegian, a V2 language, triples the number of clefts of English (Gundel, 2006). The issue is very puzzling and needs therefore further investigation.

Beside languages which dislike clefts, on the opposite side of the scale, there are languages which must use clefts. Interestingly, when this requirement applies, it is always connected with partial question formations. Needless to say, the syntactic puzzle is definitely more fine-grained than this simplification may induce to think and Northern Italian dialects are a privileged observatory to describe the phenomenon of wh- question formation through clefts, which is in any case not restricted to Romance or even Indo-European languages (see Sabel & Zeller, 2006 for a discussion on Zulu clefts in *ex situ* wh- questions).

Interestingly, basically no Italian dialect requires obligatory clefts on object wh- and if it does, it surely must use them for subject wh- as well. In what follows, I will exclude all those cases in which clefts have a pragmatic value and are not purely syntactic devices. I will therefore analyse only subject questions in which either clefts must be used, or clefts directly compete with other strategies, being standard wh- question formation unavailable.

The basic patterns which can be observed in Northern Italian dialects' subject wh- question formation through clefts are the following, reported on a scale:

a) *Compulsory clefting for all subject wh- questions:*

(Arsiero - VI)

- (1) Chi sè che magna le patate?
- (2) Chi sè che pianse de là?
- (3) Chi sè che sè rivà?

b) *Compulsory clefting only for external argument wh- subjects (transitive, unergative):*

(Cesiomaggiore – BL: coexistence with overt expletive and possible inverse copular sentence),

- (4) Chi elo / Elo chi che (el) magne le patate?
- (5) Chi elo (Elo chi) che piande là?
- (6) Chi elo rivà?

(Cittadella – PD: no expletive and no possible inverse copular)

- (7) Chi zé che magna e patate?
- (8) Chi zé che cria?
- (9) Chi zé rivà?

c) *Either cleft with wh- doubling or wh- + complementiser; no need for clefts with internal arguments (unaccusative subjects)*

(Monno - BS)

- (10) Chi che maja le patape? / Ch'el chi che...
 (11) Chi che plancc de là? / Ch'el chi che...
 (12) Chi ch'è ruà?
 d) *Cleft or filled gaps (only for external arguments)*
 (Grosio – Sondrio)
 (13) Chi él che mangia i tartùfuli? / Chi màngel i tartùfuli?
 (14) Chi él che piènge de là? / Chi pièngel de là?
 (15) Chi él rivè?

This set of data clearly shows that there is an interesting asymmetry between partial questions on internal and external arguments, which outlines an implicational scale, as far as compulsory clefts are concerned, with a decrease in the obligatoriness proceeding from left to right:

Wh- subjects of transitive and unergative verbs > *Wh- subjects of unaccusative verbs* > *object wh-*

This scale suggests that the necessity for clefts is linked to the type of movement the *wh-* has to undergo and the type of features which need to be checked. The requests for clefts in subject questions may be triggered by the processing advantages of disjointness (Friedmann et al., 2009), which proves to be effective in language acquisition and in cases of aphasia. Furthermore, subject relative clauses are the easiest to process, as is shown by children who tend to produce them even in contexts where an object relative would be targeted. *Wh-* subject questions formed through clefts have the undubious advantage of combining disjointness and an easy-processable subject relative with no need for the lexical verb to rise to C°. Competing strategies such as (c) pursue the same goal, with the complementiser blocking verb-raising. The strategy described in (d) is partially different: clefts compete with the filling of parasitic gaps as often happens in acquisition. Either a cleft is formed, or the third person enclitic subject pronoun needs to be overtly realised.

After a careful analysis of the data, I will try to provide a possible explanation for the asymmetry of *wh-* internal and external arguments w.r.t. clefts. Along the same lines, I will sketch a possible correlation between the lack of clefts in some varieties – which only marginally admit subject clefts - and the obligatoriness for clefts in subject *wh-* questions. It cannot be by chance that only subjects must (in some varieties) or can (in some others) be clefted.

References

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