Why Can’t *It* be the Focus of an *It*-Cleft?

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1 The Problem of *It*-lessness

The puzzle I wish to address in this report is the reason why *it*-clefts cannot take *it* as focus constituent\(^1\).

In addition to a number of other constituent types, it is well known that a variety of kinds of noun phrase are acceptable as the clefted constituent of an *it*-cleft. For example, Hedberg [1990:80] gives examples of pronouns and proper names, as in (1a), definite descriptions as in (1b), specific indefinites as in (1c), generics as in (1d), and cardinal partitives as in (1e):

(1)  

a  It was *she/Jane* who found the body.

b  It was *this/that/the woman* who found the body.

c  It was a *certain/this (one) woman in my class* who found the body.

d  It is never *the victim* who finds the body.

e  It was *one/two of the students in my class* who found the body.

A strange exception to the range of permissible NPs, however, is the pronoun *it*, as has also been noted by Declerck [1988:14]. The unacceptability of the following examples will demonstrate:

(2)  

a  Her dog was in the garden. *It was *it* that found the body.

b  He threw a cricket ball. *It was *it* that broke the window.

We can state straight away that this exception cannot be accounted for by any restriction on clefted pronouns, since the acceptability of a range of other pronominal forms in *it*-clefts is attested both synchronically and diachronically. Akmajian [1970] has listed a range of pronominal clefted constituents in three dialects of American English;\(^1\)*

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\(^1\)The content of this paper was given as a paper at the Spring meeting of the Linguistics Association of Great Britain, Brighton, U.K., in April 1992.
Geluykens [1984] and Hedberg [1990] among others have also noted their appearance. The following examples are from the study reported in Delin [1989]:

(3) It was he, too, who instituted the office of High Commissioner, so that the crown could keep a good eye on the proceedings [LOB f29 174]

(4) It was they who went to the great farewell dinner in London [LOB g27 146]

Hedberg [1990:195-6;207] provides these further examples from her corpus of written and spoken texts:

(5) a Wimsey: Mr. Borne. I’m sorry to have kept you waiting. How can I help you?
   Borne: I think it’s I who can help you.

b The barrister jumped up and pulled out a chair for her. And then
   Wexford understood it was she he had seen. It was she who had been
   coming down the corridor when he turned away from the window ...

Geluykens [1984] has the following:

(6) C: And it’s much better in mathematics than in grammar I think
    A: But it’s us that’s lifted it from them, not vice versa

It is fair to note at this point that, in distributional terms, it would in general be
predicted to be the rarer form (cf. Schiffman [1984]). Even taking this restriction into
account, however, we would still expect it to appear in a number of cases.

The restriction on it alone seems to be unique to it-clefts: who-cLEFTs do not accept any
anaphoric pronouns as head due to considerations of information structure (cf. Prince
reasons a short and anaphoric clefted constituent will be placed before the cleft clause,
which would result in a strong preference for a reverse who-cleft such as (7a) over a
who-cleft such as (7b) where a clefted pronoun is in question. His example is as follows:

(7) A: Why do you like Paris so much?
   a B: Because that’s where I met my future wife.
   b B: *Because where I met my future wife is that.

Schiffman observes a general asymmetry between the appearance of pronominal it and that: it, she notes, is in general far less frequent. She attributes this asymmetry to a difference in the kinds of antecedent each pronoun prefers: if the antecedent has clausal structure (e.g. is sentential), that is far more likely to be used than it. In cases where the antecedent is lexical, however, it and that are equally likely to appear. It is therefore much more restricted in general: if the antecedent is clausal, that is vastly preferred; if it is lexical, that is equally preferred.

With the possible exception of cataphoric this: see Dekker [1988:235].

Note that deictic pronouns are possible. These are capable of carrying new information and therefore need not conform to the constraint that they be placed first in the sentence. Deictic interpretations of the examples in (8) are therefore acceptable.
Note that (7b) is not improved by the substitution of there for that. Declerck’s constraint accounts for the preferability of the (a) examples in (8), over the pronoun-clefted-constituent wh-cleft examples in the (b) cases:

(8)  a  He was the one who instituted the office of High Commissioner.
    b  ?The one who instituted the office of High Commissioner was him.
    c  I am the one who can help you.
    d  ?The one who can help you is me.
    e  That/this is what I mean.
    f  ?What I mean is this/that.

Reverse wh-clefs are of interest because they, alone among the clefs, can take it as clefted constituent. This is predicted by Declerck’s informational constraint, too: a short and anaphoric element should be placed prior to the long wh-clause. Declerck notes [1988:222] that reverse wh-clefs are ‘the only type of cleft in which it can be found as the destressed form of that’. He gives the example in (9a). Note that this cannot be inverted to form the wh-cleft in (9b):

(9)  a  It’s what I have always wanted.
    b  *What I have always wanted is it.

For informational reasons, then, the wh-cleft does not tolerate it or other anaphoric pronouns, since reverse wh-clefs which conform more closely to principles of considerate communication are available in their stead. Many independent studies of information processing suggest that it is preferable to place the pronominal element close to its antecedent wherever possible (see for example Clark and Clark [1977] for a summary). It seems clear, however, that no similar informational argument can be advanced to explain the constraint on it in it-clefs, for two reasons. Firstly, the structure of the it-cleft—that is the position of its clefted constituent relative to the cleft clause—seems to allow adequate conformity with the principle of placing short anaphoric constituents prior to the longer cleft clause. Secondly, even if some argument could be advanced that the it-cleft is badly formed from an informational point of view for carrying pronominal clefted constituents, the informational constraint would not single out only it from the range of pronouns and declare the rest to be acceptable. Something further is needed to differentiate it from the rest of the set of acceptable pronouns.

In addition to the data from corpus study and grammaticality judgements, diachronic evidence is available to support the generalisation that it does not appear in it-clefs. Ball [1991] and p.c., in her study of the development of the it-cleft from Old English to Late Modern English, finds no occurrences of it as clefted constituent either in the modern-day it-cleft or in any of its ancestors. This is in spite of the fact that the paradigm of personal pronouns as clefted constituents can be considered complete around the 15th century, with objective case pronouns (e.g. it was me) appearing in the 16th (Ball [1991:274]).

From its non-appearance in a range of corpora, then, and from its unacceptability
in synthesised examples, it seems clear that *it* cannot be the clefted constituent of an *it*-cleft.

2 Stressed and Unstressed Forms: *It* versus *That*

From several different points of view, *it* and *that* are often seen as variants of or alternatives to one another as pronominal forms. Pronominal *that* does indeed appear as clefted constituent in *it*-clefts, and these examples are relatively plentiful. For example:

(10) He’d rushed to the surgery and was breathing heavily. But it wasn’t that which disturbed me. [LOB f33 102]

Declerck [1988:14] explains the non-appearance of *it* in *it*-clefts by means of a distinction between *it* and *that* as the respective ‘stressless’ and ‘stressed’ version of the same item. He explains the distribution as follows:

The fact that the focus of a specificalational sentence must be intonationally prominent concurs with the fact that, when an item has both a stressed and an unstressed form, only the stressed form will occur in the focus. Thus, the pronoun *it*, which is known to be the ‘stress-reduced’ anaphoric form of *that* (Kuroda 1968: 250-251), cannot be substituted for *that* in *It is that that I don’t understand*.

[Declerck 1988:14]

This explanation is appealingly simple. Declerck’s hypothesis requires two things: that clefted constituents must be intonationally prominent, and that *it* cannot take intonational prominence. It is possible to show, however, that neither point is correct.

Taking the case of intonational prominence on clefted constituents first, we know that *it*-clefts regularly appear without such prominence. As Hedberg [1990:200] remarks, ‘it has not gone unnoticed in the literature that the prosodic center of a cleft sentence sometimes falls on the cleft clause instead of on the clefted constituent’. She cites Halliday’s [1967] example:

(11) A: What utter confusion!
    B: Yeah, but I’m not going to complain to anyone.
    A: I should hope not. It’s you who were to blame.

Unstressed clefted constituents have also been noted by Chomsky [1971], Schmerling [1971], Prince [1978], Geluykens [1984], Bolinger [1986], and Delin [1989]. Declerck [1988:221] has a class of ‘unaccented-anaphoric-focus’ clefts, which display just this property. He places the following examples (from Prince [1978]) in this category:
(12) a However, it turns out that there is independent evidence for this rule and it is to that evidence that we must now turn.
b But why is everybody so interested in uranium? — Because it is uranium that you need to produce atomic power.

While it is clear what Declerk means, it is rather strange to be applying the term ‘unaccented’ to written examples. Relevant examples from speech are available from elsewhere, however. The following is from Geluykens [1984], his example C22:

(13) a: did you meet Fuller?  
b: Yes, it was he who invited me and it a very pleasant day

As Bolinger [1986] has remarked, ‘clef ting is basically independent of accent’. It would be strange to suggest, then, that the clefted constituent is obligatorily ‘prominent’ by virtue of its position in the cleft.

The second problem for Declerk’s suggested explanation for it-lessness in it-clefts is the fact that it can be made intonationally prominent by means of stress, as the following (attested) data shows:

(14) S: Judy, is there any more soap?  
J: If you look in the basket there’s that purple one  
S: I thought you were drying some out on the window. What happened to it?  
J: That’s it  
S: Oh, so it is

Becky Passoneau (p.c.) has also pointed out to me the ordinariness of stressed it in the utterance that’s it! Stressed it, and stressless clefted constituents, show that an alternative explanation for the non-appearance of it is required.

3 Can It be Contrastive?

A potential explanation for it-cleft it-lessness is is based on the assumption that the clefted constituent obligatorily takes on a more or less contrastive role. It might be suggested that it is too ‘weak’ an element to perform such a function, and therefore must be excluded from the range of cleftable constituents.

Note that this is a different claim from that relating to stressability of it, since we are now in the position to make a clear distinction between the phenomenon of contrastiveness on the one hand, and accent, as one of its indicators, on the other. It is clear from the clefts data, and from several discussions of contrast (cf. for example Chafe [1976], Bolinger [1986]) that contrast does not depend on accent, and accent does not depend on contrast. Bolinger [1986] uses clefts as tests for contrastive status independently of their accent placement.
Extreme versions of the ‘clefts are contrastive’ view, for example that held by Rochemont [1986], suggest that a strongly contrastive reading is obligatory for all clefts. Others, however, have shown that a continuum of contrastiveness exists, and that clefts may be more or less contrastive, depending on a variety of factors. Bolinger [1986] is a recent exponent of the continuum view for clefts.

Borkin [1984] also subscribes to the continuum view of contrast for clefts. She observes:

The shape of the cleft is very good for the contrastive purpose of singling out one of a limited set of candidates to properly complete a proposition. However, the less limited the set of alternatives, and the less attention directed by the author/speaker to the uniqueness of the preferred completer or to the nature and limits of the range of alternatives, the less contrastive is the effect of cleft structure.

Borkin [1984:127]

She illustrates this continuum by means of the following examples, which show decreasing contrastiveness:

(15) Among the butterworts some enzymes ...are secreted by the stalked glands whose sticky exudate captures the insect prey, but it is the stalkless glands at the surface that furnish the main outflow of digestive fluid (Scientific American, February 1978, p112)

(16) Finally the membrane is plunged into another solvent, such as water, that rapidly precipitates all of the remaining polymer. It is this quenching that forms the pores in the membrane, as the rapid precipitation leads to the clumping or coagulation of the polymer. (Scientific American, July 1978, p112)

(17) This type of decision-making is difficult to reproduce in a computer program because it relies heavily on human judgement. It is this difficulty, however, that makes the programming of poker an attractive problem for computer scientists. (Scientific American, July 1978, p144)

Borkin notes that the phrase the stalkless glands at the surface in the first example is being contrasted with the stalked glands, giving a minimal set of alternatives. In the second example, however, the range of alternatives is not clear, a position that is even more pronounced in the third example: this third cleft ‘simply underscores the noteworthiness of the fact that the focussed element should complete the defocussed proposition’ [1984:127].

If we are to assess the contrastibility of it, we need to understand the conditions required for contrast to be established. Werth [1984] sets out the conditions for contrastiveness as follows:

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5 Although see his [1961] paper for an exposition of the continuum view in general.
On the one hand, Contrastive items cohere with an antecedent (the anaphoric property); on the other hand, they deny identity with that antecedent (the negative property).

[Werth 1984:137]

The basis upon which contrastive items ‘cohere with an antecedent’, Werth explains, is in terms of membership in some contrastive set with them: there must be more than one element in the set, and they must share some semantic content. This shared content may be constructed ad hoc on the basis of what is being talked about at the time (a junk-shop collection of objects), or may be seen to belong more clearly to the objects themselves (that they are all in some ‘natural class’, such as people, or dogs, or research papers).

It might therefore be supposed that an explanation of the lack of it could be constructed on the basis of the lack of contrastiveness of that element: it has very little, if any, descriptive content, which might suggest that it was unable to form contrastive relationships of even the weak kind required by some clefts. However, situations can be found in which the conditions for contrastiveness and the conditions for the use of it are both met. Consider again the example from (16) above, repeated in (18):

(18)  S: Judy, is there any more soap?
    J: If you look in the basket there’s that purple one
    S: I thought you were drying some out on the window. What happened to it?
    J: That’s it
    S: Oh, so it is

It seems clear that these conditions for contrast are met by the contrastive it in (18). In the example, S is constructing a contrastive set out of (what he assumes to be) two distinct soaps: the purple one (offered by J), and the one you were drying out on the window.

An independent condition on the felicitous use of it is that it must have a unique referent at the time of use (as must any referring expression). In the example, this condition is met on the straightforward expedient of recency: it picks the most recent appropriate expression, helped by the fact that the most recent antecedent is also the one within S’s own utterance, which is therefore more salient for him than the potential antecedent offered by J.

In order to test the undefeatability of it further, we could construct a situation in which the conditions for contrast and the conditions for felicitous it are both met, and try to cleft the result. In building our contrastive set, we can fully disambiguate the possible

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6 Note that these conditions also differ very little from the description of taxonomic antonymy in Leech [1974], where the taxonomy is built on the basis of shared semantic structure, while the differentiation between its elements is achieved by ‘incompatibility’ of semantic features leading to mutual exclusivity.
referred to by having one male, one female, and one neuter referent, as in the context sentence in (19):

(19) If I was scared when it got dark, Mary, John or the dog would always come out with me.

However, considerate pronominalisation requires that members of the group be separated out explicitly before a singular pronoun can be used to refer to them, even when no ambiguity would result:

(20)  

a  The first night, I went out with her.

b  The first night, I went out with him.

c  The first night, I went out with it.

(21)  

a  Mary seemed the best bet, so the first night, I went out with her.

b  John seemed the best bet, so the first night, I went out with him.

c  The dog seemed the best bet, so the first night, I went out with it

Having established contrast felicitously using all three pronouns, compare the following clefted versions:

(22)  

a  Mary seemed the best bet, so the first night, it was her I went out with.

b  John seemed the best bet, so the first night, it was him I went out with.

c  The dog seemed the best bet, so the first night, it was it I went out with.

On the basis of this data, I would suggest that the problem for it with it-clefts is not contrast-related.

4  Towards an Explanation

So what are we to conclude is the reason for the constraint on it? In this section, I would like to sketch an explanation which, although partial in nature and requiring further investigation, suggests an interesting perspective on the semantics of it-clefts. The explanation has main ingredients:

- on the basis of the analysis of English stative be offered by Williams [1983] and Partee [1986] following, an analysis of the clefted constituent as semantically predicative rather than referential; and
the further requirement of *it*-clefts that this predication is sufficient to identify rather than merely describe a referent, which *it*, alone among pronouns, is not capable of doing.

4.1 English Stative *Be*

Williams [1983] suggests that stative *be* takes two arguments, on referring and one predicative, and that these can appear in either order. Partee [1986] fleshes out this suggestion and argues that the ordering distinction can be made to characterise the difference between two types of pseudo-cleft sentence: the specificalional, and the predicational. It is generally agreed that the latter type is not properly a pseudo-cleft. For example, there is both a specificalional (i.e. cleft) and a predicational reading for a sentence such as the following:

(23) What John is is unusual.

The specificalional reading results if the clefted constituent—in this case unusual—serves to predicate some property of John, i.e. that he is unusual. The predicational reading, however, is different: in this case, the cleft clause is interpreted as referring to what John is—for example a rhesus negative, an astronaut, or a father of eleven—and predicating unusualness of that thing. In the former case, the *wh*-clause of the cleft simply specifies that John has some property, and the cleft head identifies it; in the latter case, the same clause refers independently to some known property of John’s, and the clefted constituent predicates something of that. In the first, specificalional case, then, the *wh*-clause is predicative and the clefted constituent referring, while the reverse is true for the predicational case.

On the analogy with *wh*-clefts, it has been suggested (e.g. Ball [1977], Decker [1988], Hedberg [1990] that a similar distinction is available for *it*-clefts, on the basis that, as copular constructions, they should display the same ambiguities. So, for example, we can suggest a specificalional and a predicational reading for the following sentence:

(24) It’s a long road that has no turning.

On the specificalional reading, this sentence might be able to answer a question such as (25a) or (25b):

(25) a What is it that has no turning?

b What kind of road has no turning?

In the specificalional case, according to an analysis such as Hedberg’s [1990], the clefted constituent is the referential argument to the copula, while the predicative content is formed out of a discontinuous constituent consisting of the cleft pronoun plus the cleft clause. These two constituents are treated as being co-specificalional, and ‘viewing the cleft pronoun *it* as a pronominal allomorph of the definite determiner
the" [1990:101]. The predicational reading of (23) can be captured by paraphrase such as those in (26):

(26) a The road that has no turning is a long road.
b If a road has no turning, it’s a long road.

In this case, the cleft pronoun is treated as referential\textsuperscript{7}, with the clefted constituent acting as the predicative argument.

4.2 Cleft Pronoun as Referential Expression

I wish to argue that, despite the alternative semantic descriptions that have been offered for the two readings (specification and predicational) of the \textit{it}-cleft, there is some merit in an analysis that accords the same structure to both. My argument hinges on the role of the cleft pronoun in introducing a discourse referent, which is the position advanced in the literature for predicational \textit{it}-clefs alone. I would wish to extend this analysis to suggest that the introduction of a discourse referent happens in every case, whether the ultimate interpretation of the sentence accords it a predicational or a specification reading.

There are two main reasons why a referential assumption seems to be in order. Firstly, at the point of processing the \textit{it} of any \textit{it}-cleft, either predicational or specification, the reader/hearer has no means of deciding whether to accord \textit{it} referential or non-referential status, if indeed there is a choice between them. Empirical study would be required to decide whether they choose a uniformly referring, uniformly predicating, or alternating strategy, and what factors this depends on. I would suggest that an all-predicative assignment strategy is unlikely, however, based on the premise that \textit{it} is usually an ordinary referring pronoun, and a predicative analysis would require the introduction of a predication that is, at the time of processing, devoid of content and unrelated to any discourse element.

Secondly, while \textit{it} as a referring pronoun is uninformative, there is a group of constructions, known as \textit{th}-clefs (cf. Ball [1977]), which have a more contentful element as cleft pronoun. The assumption of a referential cleft pronoun allows us to cater for uniformly not only for \textit{it}-clefs, then, but also for examples such as (27) (cf. Ball [1977]):

(27) a Those are nice shoes you’re wearing.
b That’s a fast car he drives.
c These are my students you’re talking about.

As Hedberg [1990] has shown, the choice of whether the less informative \textit{it} or the more informative deictic pronouns of the \textit{th}-clefs is chosen as cleft pronoun depends on how

\textsuperscript{7}Bolinger [1972] and Borkin [1984] have also advanced arguments for a referential analysis of the cleft pronoun in specification sentences. They do not address predicational cases, however.
much is already known about the intended referent. This would support the view that the cleft pronoun is referential: if a continuum exists between the choice of it or the choice of another pronoun on the basis of shared knowledge, it does not seem appropriate to reflect this distinction in terms of a qualitative semantic distinction such as predicative/referential.

The function of the it-cleft pronoun, then, is to introduce a discourse marker, about which no other information is known. In the case of the it-clefts, with more informative pronouns such as this, these, those, more information can already be predicated of the pronoun's referent: at least singular/plural and proximal/distal are encoded by the pronoun alone, but they may be able to pick out a unique referent with no further information required. Importantly, however, the distinction in degree of informativeness of the initial pronoun leads to differing constraints being imposed on the role of the clefted constituent. In cases where the pronoun is minimally informative, the clefted constituent must provide an identifying predication which allows the hearer to identify a referent to attach to the discourse marker introduced by the pronoun. In the case of the it-cleft, the referent can almost certainly be identified on the basis of the cleft pronoun alone. This has the result of rendering the identificational aspect clefted constituent redundant, and directing attention to the part of that constituent that predicates something further of the referent (for example, that the already-identified shoes in (27a) are nice).

This analysis allows us to capture the intuition that sentences are processed left to right, and that cleft constructions of all three types mentioned above begin with an element that is usually used for a referential function. In each case, we analyse the cleft pronoun as introducing a referent, which is subsequently identified by the predicative cleft head. Once this referent is introduced and identified, further properties can be predicated of it—this is the job of the cleft clause. We therefore have no need to analyse the cleft pronoun and the cleft clause as a single discontinuous predicative constituent, as suggested by Hedberg [1990], and can treat cleft pronouns as a continuum of more or less informative referring expressions.

4.3 Identifying Predicates and It

The un informativeness of the cleft pronoun on it-clefts, as I described above, places a constraint on the informativeness of the clefted constituent. As a pair, the cleft pronoun and the clefted constituent must enable the hearer or reader to identify a unique referent, and in it-clefts, the predicative clefted constituent must supply the complement of necessary information. I wish to suggest that this explains the constraint on the appearance of it: on its own, it contains no further distinguishing semantic information that would further the identification of the discourse referent already postulated by the appearance of the initial cleft pronoun. As a cue to picking out a referent, then, it merely duplicates the function of the cleft pronoun. More information is therefore required in order to identify the referent of initial it. All other pronouns do supply more information: even the minimally-informative he and she contain number and gender information, which renders them more informative than the cleft pronoun of the it-cleft.
The constraint that the predicative argument borne by the clefted constituent must be identifying captures a further constraint on clefted constituents: in general, straight adjectives and quantified expressions are unacceptable in *it*-clefts:

(28)  a  It’s nice that John is.
     b  It was all the boys that came.

Hedberg [1990] has pointed out that not all quantified expressions are unacceptable, and it seems that both these and straight adjectives are possible *in contexts where they can act as identifying predicates*, as in the following:

(29)  a  A: Did you ask for hot or cold?
     B: It was hot I asked for, thanks.
     b  A: Did they all come, or just some?
     B: It was all of them that came.

That is, in more constrained contexts in which the predicate is sufficient to pick out a referent, adjectives and quantified expressions are possible. The constraint on *it* remains, however: unlike *he* and *she*, it has no paradigm of opposites it is capable of entering into (cf. Werth [1984:137]).

On the analysis I suggest, then, the predicational/specification distinction in *it*-clefts, is not denied, but reduced to informational factors. If it is possible for the hearer to identify the intended referent on the basis of the cleft pronoun alone, the information in the clefted constituent will simply be predicated of that element. If this is not the case, the predicate borne by the clefted constituent will be used to identify the intended referent. In both cases, a more or less fully specified discourse referent will be introduced by the cleft pronoun.

Apart from its homogeneity across sentence types, this analysis provides a potential explanation for a preference that exists for reverse *wh*-clefts like (30a) over -clefts like (30b):

(30)  a  This is what I mean.
     b  It is this that I mean.

The reverse *wh*-cleft is simply a referring expression followed by a predication, while the *it*-cleft is considerably more indirect: refer to abstract discourse entity, identify it, then predicate further properties of it. The reference-predication analysis of the reverse *wh*-cleft, finally, allows it to feature ordinary referring *it* as clefted constituent, as in (31):

(31)  So I chose the red one, because it was what I wanted.

As I noted above, this analysis of *it*-clefts is initial and schematic, and many more avenues remain to be explored before its value can be fully assessed. It is interesting,
however, to note that the introduction of a discourse referent on encountering pleonastic *it* provides us with a potential avenue for a treatment of a related class of phenomena, namely sentences like *it’s raining*.

References


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Kuroda, S-Y [1968] English relativization and certain related problems. Language 44, 244-266.


