

Why Are Wh-Cleft Sentences So Rare?: A Syntactic View*

Myong-Hi Chai

(Chosun College of Science & Technology)

Chai, Myong-Hi. 2008. Why are wh-cleft sentences so rare?: a syntactic view. *The Linguistic Association of Korea Journal*, 16(3), 193-212. The wh-cleft constructions, a typical way to emphasize in English, have been given a lot of notice in the literature. However, despite their clear purpose and the high interest in the constructions in question, the frequency of occurrences of wh-cleft sentences is fairly low in the corpus data. The purpose of this study is to examine why the wh-cleft sentences occur so rarely in the corpus. To answer the research question, we focus on the complicated properties of the construction in question, such as syntactic rearrangement, the availability of wh-words, number concord phenomena, connectivity and anti-connectivity effects, speaker variation in grammatical judgment, etc. Finally, we conclude that these complex properties and the availability of other ways to emphasize in English contribute to the low frequency of occurrences of the constructions.

Key Words: wh-cleft constructions, frequency of occurrence, syntactic adjustment, number concord, (anti-)connectivity, grammatical judgment

1. Introduction

English has two typical syntactic ways to emphasize a certain constituent of a sentence, i.e. it-cleft constructions and wh-cleft

* This paper was derived from the author's earlier works on wh-cleft constructions, which revealed the fairly complicated properties of the constructions in question. The results of the previous studies led me to question why these constructions are so rarely used, compared to the amount of interest given to the construction itself in the literature. This paper does not rely on a specific syntactic theory but it is based on general linguistics. I am grateful to the three anonymous reviewers of *The LAK Journal* for their valuable comments. Any remaining errors are mine.

constructions. Of the two, in this study, our interest is only in the wh-cleft constructions. The wh-cleft constructions put everything into the *what*-clause except the constituent to be focused on, and the focused element is placed after the main verb *be*. The elements which can be placed into the focused part are of various syntactic categories, as in (1).

- (1) a. What I bought was [_{NP} a red wool sweater].
 b. What I meant was [_{CP} that you don't have to come if you don't want to].
 c. What annoys me is [_{VP_{gerund}} having to fill in all these forms].
 d. What you must do is [_{VP_{inf}} (to) apply for special leave].
 e. What her father is, if you want my view, is [_{AP} arrogant, dogmatic, and pig-headed].

(Huddleston and Pullum, 2002, pp. 1414-1422)

Despite the efficient function of putting focus on a constituent as such, it is true that the frequency of the wh-cleft sentences in the real corpus data is fairly low. Research on the attested corpus data supports such a low occurrence of the construction in question. Kim (2007) searched for sentences with a clausal subject which is an independent relative clause in the International Corpus of English-Great Britain (hereafter ICE-GB) data, and found 544 occurrences of the wh-cleft examples out of a total of 88,357 text units. This is only 0.61%, which is rather low.¹⁾ It is generally regarded that wh-clefts are more frequently used in spoken data than in written data.²⁾ Considering that in the ICE-GB data the number of spoken text units (60,894) is over twice than that of written text units (27,463), the frequency may be

1) Kim (2007) found 422 occurrences of it-cleft examples (0.47%) and 537 of inverted wh-cleft examples (0.60%). These two constructions are also very rare ones.

2) Kim (1997) proposes that the wh-cleft sentences have the [presupposition - focus] structure, which is more appropriate to spoken discourse than the written environment. On the contrary, the it-cleft sentences have the [focus - presupposition] structure, which needs a more complex cognitive process, and thus they occur more often in written data.

lower than that rate.

Furthermore, the wh-cleft data Kim (2007) collected contained examples which should be treated as predicational wh-clefts or free-relatives, like (2a and b), or which are controversial as to whether they are clefts or not, such as (2c and d).

- (2) a. [What's actually happening in London at the moment] is
immensely exciting. <S1B-022 #89:1:E>
b. So [what is to come] is in this document <S1A-029 #279:1:A>
c. That's [when I read]. <S1A-016 #222:1:E>
d. That was [why she looked so nice]. <S1A-018 #91:1:B>
(Kim, 2007, p. 103-104)

Lee (2004)'s research also implies that the frequency of occurrences may be lower. She searched for examples with a *what*-clause in the subject position and found an approximately similar number of cases (505) by using the function 'subject (SU)', the category 'clause (CL)' and the edit word 'what'. However, since specificational wh-clefts are not tagged in the ICE-GB data, the resulting cases even included data which had interrogative or relative readings as well as specificational reading. Therefore, she picked up all the wh-cleft examples with plural NPs as the post-*be* element one-by-one out of the 505 examples. The number of the wh-cleft examples she collected was only 17. Even if we consider other possible examples such as ones that have as the post-*be* element singular NPs, *that*-clauses, adjective phrases, or phrases of other possible categories, rather than plural NPs, it is clear that the frequency of occurrences of specificational wh-clefts is still very low.

The findings from the attested corpus data research, such as Kim (2007) and Lee (2004), led us to question why the wh-cleft constructions occur so rarely even though they have the specific purpose of emphasizing. This study aims to attempt to discover the answers to that academic question from a syntactic viewpoint, and hopefully to suggest ways the results may be put to use in bettering English education. To answer the research question, this study examines

the complicated properties of specificational wh-cleft constructions which may obstruct the use of the construction in question.

2. Superficially Similar Constructions and the Domain of the Wh-Cleft Construction

Radford (1988, p. 493) says that the exact syntax of pseudoclefts is shrouded in mystery, and Higgins (1979, p. 1) and Gundel (1977, p. 544) point out that the domain of the term 'wh-cleft' (or pseudocleft) itself has been unclear among scholars. To see the blurred boundary of the construction, let us examine the sentences in (3). The bracketed parts in (3) look superficially similar, having the same word strings, but they exhibit different syntactic behaviors and have different readings.³⁾ Therefore, the three phrases need to be distinguished both syntactically and semantically.

- (3) a. [What John needs most] is too expensive.
'The thing that John needs most is too expensive.'
b. [What John needs most] is unclear.
'I don't know exactly what John needs most.'
c. [What John needs most] is a good rest.
'John needs A GOOD REST, most, (not anything else).'
- (Chai, 2004, p. 526)

To distinguish the bracketed parts above, scholars use variant terms, as summerized in (4).

3) For the precise comparisons of the three constructions, refer to Chai (2004). Chai (2004) distinguishes them as three different constructions, i.e. free-relatives (3a), embedded wh-interrogatives (3b), and wh-clefts (3c), based on their different behaviors in finiteness, distribution, number concord, subject-auxiliary inversion, extraposition, multiple wh-words, etc. We do not go into the differences in this present study.

(4) Various terms for the bracketed parts of the examples in (3)

	(3a)	(3c)	(3b)
H&P (2002)	fused-relative (ascriptive)	fused-relative (specifying)	interrogative
Baker (1997)	free-relative (descriptive)	free-relative (identificational)	question
Higgins (1979), Williams (1983, 1994)	predicational pseudocleft	specificational pseudocleft	no mention
Gundel (1977)	pseudocleft (attributive)	pure pseudocleft (identifying)	no mention
Zwicky (1995)	free-relative	wh-question	wh-question
Chai (2004)	free-relative	wh-cleft	embedded wh-interrogative

Among others, Huddleston and Pullum (2002, hereafter H&P (2002)) and Baker (1997) call both types of examples such as (3a) and (3c) 'fused-relatives' or 'free relatives', while distinguishing those examples based on the readings each type of examples has, i.e. 'ascriptive' vs. 'specifying' and 'descriptive' vs. 'identificational', respectively. H&P (2002) also use the classification, i.e. 'predicational' vs. 'specificational' pseudocleft, just as Higgins (1979) and Williams (1983, 1994). Gundel (1977) classifies examples like (3a) and (3c) by readings, i.e. 'attributive' vs. 'identifying', and calls the latter type 'pure' pseudoclefts without naming the first one. Zwicky (1995) rather groups examples such as (3c) and (3b) into 'wh-question' though he sometimes calls examples such as (3c) 'wh-clefts'. Roughly speaking, with the exception of Chai (2004), the above researches do not distinguish wh-clefts from free-relatives or wh-interrogatives clearly in the syntactic view.⁴⁾

4) The simplest way to distinguish the wh-cleft constructions from the other two is to check whether or not adding the presupposition part to the focused part results in a complete sentence, which will be discussed in subsection 3.1.

Likewise, the naming of wh-cleft constructions have never been agreed upon and neither has the designation of their domains. In this study our interest is focused on the group of examples such as (3c), which are called 'specifying', 'identificational', 'specificational', or 'identifying' wh-cleft constructions. In other words, they are 'pure' wh-cleft constructions, in which the focused part following the verb *be* identifies (or specifies) the missing element within the *what*-clause.

3. What Causes Avoidance of the Wh-Clefts?

3.1. Syntactic Rearrangement

As pointed out by Gundel (1977, p. 544), the wh-cleft clauses never have been clear in their domain designation among scholars. Nevertheless, it is generally agreed upon that the wh-cleft clauses are used to put focus on a certain constituent in a sentence.

To fulfill the function of placing focus, the wh-cleft constructions syntactically rearrange a simple sentence, as illustrated in (5).

- (5) a. [*what* + finite clause/XP] + *be* + XP
 ①presupposition ②focus
 b. ① + ② = a complete sentence

The wh-cleft constructions exploit the verb *be*, and the pre-*be* part consists of an introducing wh-word *what* and a following finite clause, which is missing one element, which is marked by a slash. The post-*be* part, XP, receives focus from the construction itself, and it has a close connection with the missing element. It is noteworthy that adding the presupposition part (① in (5)) and the focused part (② in (5)) produces a complete sentence, which differentiates the wh-clefts from free-relatives or wh-interrogatives.

Therefore, it is generally agreed upon that a wh-cleft sentence has a non-cleft counterpart, as in (6).

- (6) a. What I bought _ was a red wool sweater.
a'. I bought a red wool sweater.
b. What I want to discuss _ in this lecture is the historical context of Racine's work.
b'. I want to discuss the historical context of Racine's work in this lecture.

(H&P, 2002, pp. 1414, 1426)

However, it is not always true that wh-clefts have straightforward non-cleft counterparts, as in (7).⁵

- (7) a. What _ is unique about milk is its richness in minerals and vitamins.
a'. *Its richness in minerals and vitamins is unique about milk.
b. What I like _ about it is that it is so compact.
b'. *I like about it that it is so compact.
c. What _ went wrong was that the timer malfunctioned.
c'. *That the timer malfunctioned went wrong.
d. What I object to _ is that they won't allow a secret ballot.
d'. *I object to that they won't allow a secret ballot.

(H&P, 2002, p. 1422)

Likewise, the wh-cleft constructions exploit the special syntactic rearrangement, which is the most distinctive characteristic of the construction in question. Nevertheless, such a complicated rearrangement through clefting a given sentence does not apply to every wh-cleft example. Thus, we can assume that the complicated, sometimes erratic behavior in syntactic adjustment may lead speakers to avoid the use of the wh-cleft constructions.

3.2. Disagreement Concerning the Availability of Wh-Words

⁵ According to H&P (2002, p. 1423), the fact that wh-clefts do not often have corresponding non-clefts, while it-clefts DO have corresponding non-clefts, explains why wh-clefts are called 'pseudo'-clefts and it-clefts just 'clefts'.

The *wh*-clauses of the *wh*-cleft constructions most frequently begin with *what*, while the *wh*-clauses beginning with *which* or a *wh*-phrase with more than one word are generally ruled out, as in (8).

- (8) a. What we need most are some really new ideas.
(Swan, 2005, p. 532)
b. *Which we need most are some really new ideas.
c. *Which hat John found was that one.
d. *Whose book John borrowed was Jane.
e. *How many books Jennifer read was five.
(c-e: Higgins, 1979, p. 2)

For the ungrammaticality of examples (8c-e), we can put in place a restriction that, in the *wh*-cleft constructions, the *wh*-phrase should be a one-word phrase, as in Zwicky (1995). Otherwise, we can allot a 'complementizer' as the category of the *wh*-phrase (or word), as in Chai (2004, 2005). Since a complementizer always consists of one word, the ungrammaticality of (8c-e) can be easily explained.

However, in other examples, the grammatical judgment differs from speaker to speaker, as shown in (9)-(10).

- (9) a. *Who achieved the best result was Angela. (H&P, 2002, p. 1422)
b. Who should run the business is me.
(Quirk et al., 1992, p. 1061)
(10) a. ?Who told me about it was Jane.
b. ?Where he spends his summers is Chester.
c. ?How he cut his face was by trying to eat while shaving.
d. ?Why they did it was to impress Mary.
(Higgins, 1979, p. 2)

The restrictions on the *wh*-word are very strong compared with the superficially similar constructions, i.e. definite free relatives and embedded *wh*-interrogatives. Definite free relatives can freely begin with *what*, *where*, and *when*, though they can also start with *who*, *which*, *why*

and *how* very restrictively, as shown in (11). Moreover, embedded wh-interrogatives can begin with any wh-words, as in (12).

- (11) a. I spent [what he gave me].
 b. I'll go [where you go].
 c. [When it rains] they play in the garage.
 d. *[Who wrote this letter] must have been mad.
 d'. [Who steals my purse] steals trash.
 ((d') from Shakespeare's Othello)
 e. *He always ordered [which (one) was cheaper].
 f. ??I don't like [how it looks]. (free relatives)
 (H&P, 2002, pp. 1068-1078)
- (12) a. I wonder [what she wrote].
 b. I wonder [where she will go].
 c. [When she will come back] is unclear.
 d. [Who spoke last] is clear.
 e. I know [which he offered].
 f. I know [how to operate the new machine.]
 (embedded wh-interrogatives)

The strong restrictions on the use of various wh-words and the disagreement concerning their availability seem to increase the complexity of the construction, which can also be a reason speakers are reluctant to use the constructions.

3.3. Complicated Number Agreement

The wh-cleft constructions are notorious for their puzzling behaviors in number agreement. Unlike the two superficially similar constructions, the wh-cleft constructions show very complicated number concord properties.⁶⁾

⁶⁾ Example (15c) is originally from Quirk et al. (1992, p. 1059).

- (13) a. [What money_{sg} she has] is_{sg}/*are in the bank.
 b. [What books_{pl} he has written] *was/were_{pl} sold out.
 (free relative)
- (14) a. [What John needs most]_{sg} is_{sg}/*are unclear.
 b. [Which books John has written]_{sg} is_{sg}/*are unknown.
 (wh-interrogative)
- (15) a. [What I want to say _] is_{sg}/*are that I still love you.
 b. [What I ate _ at the party] was_{sg}/(?)were_{pl} just two apples.
 c. [What __{pl} were left behind] *was/were_{pl} five empty bottles.
 (wh-cleft)
- (Chai, 2007, pp. 496-497)

As observed in (13), in the free relative constructions the main verb always agrees with the wh-phrase in number. Thus, it may be singular or plural depending on the number information of the wh-phrase. In examples like (14), the main verb always agrees with the embedded wh-interrogative clause, and thus it is always singular. However, the wh-cleft constructions mostly allow a singular copula for the main verb, as in (15a), but sometimes only a plural copula is possible, as in (15c). Furthermore, both plural and singular copulas can be allowed in the same environment, as in (15b).⁷⁾

The number agreement phenomena are naturally related to the issue of the subjecthood: i.e. What is the real subject of the wh-cleft sentence? To account for the complicated number concord properties, many scholars have offered various suggestions. Fowler (1926) proposes the copula must agree with the singular pre-*be* clausal subject, while Williams (1983) argues the post-*be* NP to be the real subject of the construction, which makes us infer that the copula must agree in number with the post-*be* element. Christensen (1955, 1958) argues for the subjecthood of the wh-word *what*, and proposes the copula may agree in number with the subject *what* or with the post-*be* NP, only

7) Though most of my informants preferred a singular copula for (15b), some pointed out that the plural copula is also possible if the speaker is expecting a plural NP as the post-*be* element. Refer to Chai (2007, fn. 4).

when it is a plural NP. Recently, Chai (2007) provides a formal syntactic analysis for the number agreement phenomena of the construction in question by proposing a disjunctive agreement with the missing element of the pre-*be* part and the post-*be* part.⁸⁾

As discussed above, the main verb *be* of the wh-cleft constructions does not simply agree with the pre-*be* part nor with the post-*be* part. Rather, it shows a puzzling, complicated behavior in number agreement. This complication also seems to make speakers hesitate to use the construction.

3.4. Connectivity and Anti-Connectivity Effects

Wh-cleft sentences show connectivity with their non-cleft counterpart sentences. The clearest and simplest connectivity concerns categorial parallelism. As in (16), categorial parallelism is generally observed between the missing element of the pre-*be* part and the focused part, i.e. post-*be* part. Thus, we can create a complete sentence by placing the focused part into the missing element position of the presupposition part and deleting *what* and the verb *be*. That is why we generally assume that the cleft sentences are made up from non-cleft counterparts through a certain syntactic adjustment.⁹⁾

- (16) a. What Jane brought $_NP$ to the party was [NP French wine].
 a'. Jane brought French wine to the party.
 b. What John did $_VP_{inf}$ was [VP_{inf} buy/*buying/*bought some bread].
 b'. John bought some bread.
 c. What I heard the news $_PP_{from}$ is [PP_{from} from/*to my uncle].
 c'. I heard the news from my uncle.

(Yoo, 2006, p. 23)

8) For the precise analyses of the number agreement phenomena, refer to Chai (2007). We do not go further into this in this study.

9) Only examples (16a, b, and c) are originally from Yoo (2006). Examples (16a', b' and c') are given for explanatory convenience. Some annotations such as brackets and labels are also added.

Wh-cleft sentences exhibit another connectivity with regard to binding theory.

- (17) a. What he_i is is proud of himself_{i/*j}.
 b. He_i is proud of himself_{i/*j}.
 (18) a. What he_i is is proud of him_{*i/j}.
 b. He_i is proud of him_{*i/j}.
 (19) a. What he_i is is proud of John_{*i/j}.
 b. He_i is proud of John_{*i/j}.

(Schlenker, 2003, p. 161)

As observed in (17)–(19), cleft sentences in (a)-examples show the same patterns with regard to binding theory as the non-cleft counterparts in (b). That is, the above examples show that even the cleft sentences should abide by the binding conditions even though the antecedents and the anaphors are not in the ‘c-command relation’ due to the syntactic adjustment.

The cleft examples also show connectivity in the licensing of negative polarity items (hereafter NPIs). In the cleft example (20a), the NPI *any*, even though *n’t* is embedded in the *what*-clause, can be licensed by the negative expression *n’t*, just as in (20b), the non-cleft counterpart of (20a).

- (20) a. What he didn’t buy was any good novels.
 b. He didn’t buy any good novels.

(Heycock & Kroch, 1999, p. 366)

However, even such complicated, but seemingly systematic connectivities are not always true of wh-cleft examples. We can also find some anti-connectivity examples. As noted in subsection 3.1., not every wh-cleft sentence has its corresponding non-cleft counterpart. Thus, it is not difficult to find counter examples to ‘categorical parallelism’.¹⁰⁾

- (21) a. What he doesn't like $_$ about the R.O.T.C. is [VP_{gerund} having to conduct himself at all times like an officer and a gentleman].
 b. *He doesn't like [having to conduct himself at all times like an officer and a gentleman] about the R.O.T.C.
 (Higgins, 1979, p. 49)
- (22) a. What I did $_VP_{inf}$ then was [S I called the grocer]. (Ross, 1972)
 b. *I did I called the grocer then.
- (23) a. What John did $_VP_{inf}$ was [S he bought some wine].
 (Den Dikken, Meinunger & Wilder, 2000, p. 43)
 b. *John did he bought some wine.

In (21a), the *what*-clause is missing an object, and the post-*be* part is a VP_{gerund} , which can be an object of the verb *like*. However, the non-cleft counterpart (21b) does not exist, and thus it is hard to assume the connectedness between the two examples. In (22) and (23), the missing element is a VP_{inf} while the focused part is an S . The two examples show categorial mismatch between the two parts.

We can also find examples which show an 'anti-connectivity' effect to binding theory, as in (24). A wh-cleft sentence (24a) is grammatical even though it contains a 'free' reflexive pronoun *himself*, which does not have any co-indexing c-commander in the lower clause. Nevertheless, the corresponding non-cleft counterpart (24b) is ungrammatical.

- (24) a. What John_i thinks that Mary_j likes is himself_i.

10) Example (22a) is directly from Yoo (2006, p. 34), who refers to Ross (1972). Examples (22a) and (23a) are so marginal that some speakers do not like them. Swan (2005, p. 130) points out such examples are often used in an informal style with a comma between the verb *be* and the full clause in the post-*be* position.

(i) a. What she does is, she writes science fiction.
 b. What I'll do is, I'll phone John and ask his advice.

Whether or not we should include these types of examples in the wh-clefts is another issue.

- b. *John_i thinks that Mary_j likes himself_i.

(Schlenker, 2003, p. 203)

The connectivity effects and the anti-connectivity effects discussed in this subsection are so complicated that a number of analyses have been provided in the literature. However, they have some problems, as pointed out each other. Though we do not go further into specific syntactic or semantic analysis in the present research, it seems more than possible that such complexity also plays a role in avoidance of the construction in question.

3.5. Disagreement over Grammatical Judgment

Compared to other constructions, the wh-cleft examples are often controversial in their grammaticality among speakers. Speakers make especially different grammatical judgments on examples where wh-words other than *who* or *which* are used, as already discussed in subsection 3.2.

Furthermore, speakers disagree in their grammatical judgment on examples with respect to subject-auxiliary inversion. Williams (1983) claims that only a real subject can be inverted with the auxiliary verb in an interrogative sentence, and that since the *what*-clause is not a real subject, the inverted example (25a) is ungrammatical. However, Iatridou and Varlokosta (1998, hereafter I&V (1998)) judge the very similar examples (25b and c) as grammatical.

- (25) a. *Is [what John is] [important to himself]?

(Williams, 1983, p. 428)

- b. Is [what John believes] [that the earth is flat]?

(I&V, 1998, p. 21)

- c. Is [what you don't like about John] his sense of humor?

(I&V, 1998, p. 25)

Again, speakers manifest disagreement over the grammaticality of

examples with regard to raising. Williams (1983) continues to claim that only a real subject can be raised, and that the example (26a) should be ungrammatical because the *what*-clause, which is not the real subject, is raised. On the contrary, I&V (1998) again offer different grammatical judgment for similar examples like (26b and c).

- (26) a. *[What John is] seems to be [important to himself].
(Williams, 1983, p. 428)
- b. [What John believes] seems to be [that the earth is flat].
(I&V, 1998, p. 21)
- c. [What she doesn't like about John] seems to be his sense of humor.
(I&V, 1998, p. 25)

The disagreement over grammatical judgment for various wh-cleft constructions may also be another reason for the low frequency of the wh-cleft constructions in the corpus data.

3.6. Alternative Ways to Emphasize

In English there are various alternative ways to place focus on a constituent in a sentence other than utilizing the wh-cleft structure. One way is to use another cleft form, i.e. it-cleft constructions. Though the two constructions have somewhat different usages, basically they are two typical ways of emphasizing in English. Note that, for example, *economics* receives the focus in both (27a) and (27b).¹¹⁾

- (27) a. What I teach is economics.
b. It is economics that I teach. (H&P, 2002, p. 1426)

11) Wh-clefts require that the presupposition information should always be discourse-old, while *it*-clefts do not. Wh-clefts are generally preferred over *it*-cleft when the focused part is a clause, while there is no difference when it is an NP. *It*-clefts allow the *that*-clause to be truncated, while wh-clefts do not, as in (i).

(i) a. It was the wind (that broke the vase in the living room).

b. What *(broke the vase in the living room) was the wind.

For precise comparison between the two, see H&P (2002, pp. 1425-1427).

To emphasize a constituent, we can use structures other than *it*-clefts, some of which are very similar in meaning with *wh*-clefts.

- (28) a. What impressed me was her wit.
b. The thing that impressed me was her wit.
- (29) a. What I need is a little peace.
b. All I need is a little peace. (H&P, 2002, p. 1423)

If we want to emphasize *here* and *there* at the beginning of a sentence, we can replace the words with *this* and *that*, respectively. Compare (c)-examples with (a)- and (b)-examples in (30) and (31).

- (30) a. You pay here.
b. Here is where you pay.
c. This is where you pay.
- (31) a. We live there.
b. There's where we live.
c. That's where we live. (Swan, 2005, p. 107)

Furthermore, in speech, we can emphasize words merely by saying them louder and with higher intonation or by speaking more firmly and slowly,¹²⁾ while in writing we can do this by employing italics, bold type, and capital letters, or through underlining, as indicated in (32).

- (32) a. This is the *last* opportunity.
b. He lived in **France**, not Spain.
c. Mary, I'm **IN LOVE**! Please don't tell anybody!
(Swan, 2005, p. 184)

The ways to emphasize enumerated above are much simpler to use than *wh*-clefts. The simplicity and availability of these methods could also be factors which influence speakers to use *wh*-clefts less

¹²⁾ Adding emphasis through speaking more firmly and slowly was pointed out by Mark Murdaugh. I appreciate his suggestions and proofreading.

frequently.

4. Conclusion

The wh-cleft constructions in English, together with the it-cleft constructions, are typical ways to emphasize a constituent in a sentence. To fulfill the function, the construction basically uses syntactic adjustment. That is, by adopting *what* as the introducing word and *be* as the main verb, the wh-cleft construction puts everything of a given sentence between *what* and the verb *be*, except the element to be emphasized, which is placed after *be*, i.e. in the focus position.

Despite the clear purpose or function of the construction, it is true that the frequency of occurrences of wh-cleft sentences is very low in the corpus data. The rarity of the construction begged the question why, and thus became the *raison d'être* for this study.

To answer that research question, we have examined the properties of the wh-cleft constructions and found that they are very complicated and show wide speaker variation in a number of linguistic aspects. First, the special, syntactic rearrangement can generally return a simple, non-cleft sentence. However, this is not always true. Second, speakers do not agree on the employment of various wh-choices as the introducing word. *What* is favored most, and *which* is ruled out by the vast majority of speakers. However, *who*, *where*, *when*, *why*, and *how* depend on the speakers, though they are generally regarded as ungrammatical. Third, the complicated number concord phenomena seems puzzling and is quite exceptional compared to other constructions in English. Fourth, the connectivity effects occurring in the structurally unconditioned environments make the construction very complicated, but the anti-connectivity effects raise more difficulties and add confusion. Fifth, the wh-cleft examples show a great deal of speaker variation vis-a-vis grammatical judgment about syntactic phenomena, such as subject-auxiliary inversion or raising. Finally, there are several simpler ways to emphasize that are available in English, such as the use of higher prosodic intonations, slower, firmer speaking, italics, capital

letters, etc.

We conclude that the complexity in syntax and the speaker variations discussed above probably exert a certain amount of influence on speakers, making them avoid using the construction in question. The complicated structures and the factors disagreed upon by both scholars and speakers examined in this study are all analyzed from a syntactic view. In future research, other factors from various fields of linguistics, such as semantics, discourse theory, or information packaging theory, may also be interesting directions for inquiry. It is hoped that the results of this study will be able to contribute to bettering English education in the classroom environment.

References

- Baker, C. L. (1997). *English syntax*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Chai, M.-H. (2004). A comparative study on definite free relatives, embedded wh-interrogatives, and wh-clefts. *Korean Journal of English Language and Linguistics*, 4(4), 525-547.
- Chai, M.-H. (2005). a lexicalist, constraint-based analysis of wh-cleft constructions. *Studies in Modern Grammar*, 40, 91-109.
- Chai, M.-H. (2007). Number concord in wh-cleft constructions: A lexicalist approach. *The Journal of Studies in Language*, 23(3), 495-519.
- Christensen, F. (1955). Number concord with 'what'-clauses. *American Speech*, 30, 30-37.
- Christensen, F. (1958). Number concord with 'what'-clauses again. *American Speech*, 33, 226-229.
- Den Dikken, M., Meinunger, A., & Wilder, C. (2000). Pseudoclefts and ellipsis. *Studia Linguistica*, 52, 41-89.
- Fowler, H. W. (1926). *A dictionary of modern English usage (1st ed.)*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Gundel, J. K. (1977). Where do cleft sentences come from?. *Language*, 53, 543-559.

- Heycock, C. & Kroch, A. (1999). Pseudocleft connectedness: Implications for the LF interface level. *Linguistic Inquiry*, 30(3), 365-397.
- Higgins, R. (1979). *The pseudo-cleft construction in English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Huddleston, R. & Pullum, G. K. (2002). *The Cambridge grammar of the English language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Iatridou, S. & Varlokosta, S. (1998). Pseudoclefts crosslinguistically. *Natural Language Semantics*, 6, 3-28.
- Kim, J.-B. (2007). English Cleft and Pseudo-Cleft Constructions: Corpus Findings and Theoretical Implications. *Studies in Generative Grammar*, 17(2), 99-122.
- Kim, K.-H. (1997). A contextual analysis of it-clefts and wh-clefts in English Discourse. *Korean Journal of Linguistics*, 22(2), 277-305.
- Lee, S.-A. (2004). Pseudocleft Constructions in English. *Korean Journal of Linguistics*, 29(2), 237-260.
- Quirk, R. S., Greenbaum, S., Leech, G., & Svartvik, J. (1992). *A comprehensive grammar of the English language*. New York: Longman.
- Radford, A. (1988). *Transformational grammar: A first course*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ross, J. R. (1972). Act. In Davison et al. (Eds.), *Semantics of natural language*. (pp. 70-126). Reidel.
- Schlenker, P. (2003). Clausal equations (A note on the connectivity problem). *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory*, 21, 157-214.
- Swan, M. (2005). *Practical English usage (3rd. ed.)*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Williams, E. (1983). Semantic vs. syntactic categories. *Linguistics and Philosophy*, 6, 423-446.
- Williams, E. (1994). *Thematic structure in syntax*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Yoo, E.-J. (2006). Connectivity effects and questions as specificational subjects. *Language and Information*, 10(2), 21-45.
- Zwicky, A. (1995). Dealing out meaning. *BLS* 20, 611-625.

212 Myong-Hi Chai

Myong-Hi Chai
Dept. of Liberal Arts.
Chosun College of Science & Technology
290 Seoseok-dong Dong-gu
Gwangju 501-744, Korea
Phone: 82-62-230-8867
Email: mhchai@chosun-c.ac.kr

Received: 30 June, 2008
Revised: 26 August, 2008
Accepted: 7 September, 2008