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The *what is it about X that Y*-construction and its pragmatic variant

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1. Introduction

Although the *it*-cleft and some of its sub-species, examples of which are shown as (1a-c) below, have been widely recognized and discussed in the literature, there has been scant attention to what I call the *what is it about X that Y*-construction, examples of which are shown as (1d-e) below:

- (1a) It was John that broke the window yesterday.
- (1b) It is this movie that interests him.
- (1c) What is it that you know?
- (1d) What is it about this song that makes it so popular?
- (1e) What is it in him that makes her angry?

The aim of this article is to draw attention to this complex construction, which I will call WAC for short, and provide an in-depth analysis of some of its intriguing aspects, especially its semantic and pragmatic features. The analysis is basically composed of two parts. The first part will explain why, from a structural point of view, WAC should be subsumed under the general rubric of *it*-cleft, and, based on that assumption, offer a tentative definition of its semantic aspects. The second part will examine the definition on an empirical

basis by considering whether it can explain actual examples collected from newspaper articles, and observe that at least some of them seem to fall out of the definition. It will then suggest that those exceptional WAC sentences are not just a pragmatic variant of ordinary WAC but have the potential to develop into a new construction, thereby shedding light on the interaction between pragmatic and linguistic factors.

2. What is WAC?

2.1. Is WAC a type of *it*-cleft?

As suggested above, despite its close resemblance to the *it*-cleft, WAC has not received due attention in the literature, in part because of its relative infrequency¹, but also because the status of WAC as a sub-species of *it*-cleft has not been established. Once the relationship is appreciated, however, it can reveal a variety of intriguing aspects. Since many of the discussions in this paper are premised on the assumption that WAC belongs to the family of *it*-cleft, it seems to be reasonable, prior to a detailed analysis of this construction, to offer a cogent argument for the hypothetical view.

In order to do so, it is essential, first of all, to set a definition of what constitutes the *it*-cleft. But this is not so easy as one might suppose, for there is no crucial syntactic definition of the construction in the literature. Different scholars have provided different syntactic accounts of the structure of the *it*-cleft, so that there is no unanimous criterion according to which one can reliably judge whether some construction belongs to the species. Under this circumstance, it might be expedient to look to two insightful analyses of the *it*-cleft — extrapositional and expletive — both of which were originally developed by the nineteenth century linguist Otto Jespersen and are still now influential among linguists². The extrapositional analysis proposes that the *that*-clause of an *it*-cleft is a form of relative clause and its antecedent is *it* in the subject position, which functions here as a neutral noun like *man* or

thing. According to this analysis, sentences (1a-b) above are considered to be equivalent to sentences (2a-b) below:

- (2a) The man that broke the window yesterday was John.
- (2b) The thing that interests him is this movie.

The expletive analysis, on the other hand, proposes that *it be* and *that* (or *who* or *which*) in an *it*-cleft are a mere grammatical device that just serves the function of bringing an element into focus and has no particular meaning. According to this view, sentences (1a-b) above are analyzed as follows:

- (3a) ~~It was~~ John (S) ~~that~~ broke (V) the window (O) yesterday.
- (3b) ~~It is~~ this movie (S) ~~that~~ interests (V) him (O).³

Linguists have been vacillating cyclically between these two views⁴, and it is still undecided which of them provides a better analysis of the structure of the *it*-cleft. One of the reasons why this kind of undecidability remains to date is that both of these two approaches capture some aspects of the *it*-cleft correctly and are appropriate in their own ways. So it is justifiable to consider that if WAC is amenable to both of the above two approaches, it can, albeit tentatively, be thought of as a sub-group of *it*-cleft.

Now one can assess the applicability of the extrapositional analysis to WAC by judging whether it is possible to interchange *it* in WAC with such an element as *thing* or *something* and to think of that element as the antecedent of the *that*-clause, without metamorphosing its whole meaning or doing violence to its grammaticality. When one tries this test with sentences (1d-e) above, one can derive, as the result, sentences (4a-b):

- (4a) ?What is the thing about this song that makes it so popular?

(4b) ?What is the thing in him that makes her so angry.

While sentences (4a-b) appear less felicitous than (1d-e) in the sense that they are seldom used in actual conversation, that is also true of (2a-b) above. What is important here is not whether sentences (4a-b) are often found in actual use, but whether their meanings can be understood as being the same as those of (1d-e). What sentence (1d) means is “There is something about this song that makes it very popular. Then what is that something?” This is exactly what (4a) implies, if one considers the *that*-clause to modify “the thing,” and the same is true of the pair (1e-4b). Therefore it is plausible to assume that the pronoun *it* in (1d-e) can be interpreted as a kind of neutral noun which serves as the antecedent of the *that*-clause, a conclusion that suggests that WAC is compatible with the extrapositional approach.

Let us then look at the alternative approach. As explained above, the expletive approach suggests that *it be* and *that be* regarded as a mere grammatical instrument which has no particular meaning, and its plausibility is based on the fact that removing *it be* and *that* from the cleft sentence does not affect its grammaticality and fundamental meaning. So if *it be* and *that* can be eliminated from WAC without dismantling its syntactic and semantic structure, one can reasonably conclude that this approach is also applicable to WAC. When one tries this test with sentences (1d-e), one can derive sentences (5a-b) as the result:

(5a) What about this song makes it so popular?

(5b) What in him makes him angry?

While (5a-b) may sound more colloquial than (1d-e), there is no fundamental difference, both in meaning and in grammaticality, between (1d-e) and (5a-b) — which shows that WAC is also compatible with the expletive approach.

Now, the above discussion has led to the conclusion that WAC is compatible with both of the basic approaches to the *it*-cleft, which provides justification enough to identify WAC, at least provisionally, as a sub-species of *it*-cleft. Although there is no conclusive evidence in favor of this identification, it is worth noticing that this helps to differentiate WAC from other, seemingly similar types of constructions:

(6a) What is it all about?

(6b) What is it with you?

Though these constructions are ostensibly analogous to WAC, none of them can be considered as clefts because neither of the approaches introduced above are applicable to them. Especially, if one tries to apply the expletive approach to (6a-b), completely ungrammatical structures will be derived:

(7a) *What all about?

(7b) *What with you?

This result eliminates the possibility that they belong in the same category as WAC, a step which is palpably helpful in analyzing the properties of the construction in greater detail. In the remainder of this article, I will attempt to analyze WAC on the basis of this tentative conclusion.

2.2. A semantic definition of WAC

The view I developed in the above section makes it possible to extrapolate the semantic properties of WAC from the semantic definition of the canonical *it*-cleft⁵ in the literature, for though the cleft construction has been a syntactic conundrum to many linguists, its semantic aspects have been elucidated to a considerable extent by scholars such as Prince (1978), Declerck

(1988), Collins (1991) and Lambrecht (2001), to name but a few. It is true that they disagree on several points, but their definitions about the semantic function of the canonical *it*-cleft have a lot in common and can be summarized as follows:

- (8) The canonical *it*-cleft is a construction that serves the function of selecting one from possible candidates and specifying it as the value that satisfies the variable of the open proposition represented by the *that*-clause. That one of the candidates satisfies the variable in question is contextually presupposed.⁶

This definition, together with the view developed above leads us to hypothesize about the semantic structure of WAC as follows:

- (9) WAC (*What is it about/in X that Y?*) is a type of cleft question that serves the function of requiring the hearer to specify what part of X satisfies the variable of the open proposition represented by the *that*-clause (*that Y*). That some part of X satisfies the variable in question is contextually presupposed.

One important thing about this definition is that if the utterance of WAC is premised on the assumption that some part of X satisfies the variable in question, it must also be presupposed that the rest of X, or the entire X, cannot possibly satisfy the same variable; otherwise, it would be futile to ask specifically what part of X satisfies the variable. So it seems to be more accurate to take the above definition one step further and state it as follows:

- (9)' WAC (*What is it about/in X that Y?*) is a type of cleft question that serves the function of requiring the hearer to specify

what part of X satisfies the variable of the open proposition represented by the that-clause (that Y). That some part of X, not the entire X, satisfies the variable in question is contextually presupposed.

I will use this definition (9)' as a reference point in the remainder of this paper.

3. Discussion of WAC's features on an empirical basis

3.1. Empirical examination of the definition (9)'

Now that I have reached a hypothesized semantic definition of WAC, I would like to assess its validity on an empirical basis by considering whether it can explain WAC sentences used in reality. The BNC corpus provides only a few examples of WAC (the number is 59), so instead of drawing on them, I have collected WAC examples from various newspaper articles⁷ on my own, the total number of which is 144. As it has turned out, the definition (9)' can account for most, if not all, of these examples, which include sentences like (10a-b):

(10a) What is it about 'The Cider House Rules' that other adaptations don't have? (*The Japan Times* 2000/7/1)

(10b) What is it about the history of Japan that is specifically Japanese, apart from the land and the people? (*The Daily Yomiuri* 1999/9/12)

Take, for example, (10a). According to (9)', it is interpreted as a type of question that requires the hearer (the reader) to specify what part of "this movie adaptation of 'The Cider House Rules'" satisfies the variable (V) of the open proposition [other adaptations don't have (V)]⁸. Furthermore, the utterance of (10a) is regarded as presupposing that only some part of "The Cider House

Rules” satisfies the variable. This interpretation of (10a) is fairly cogent in the sense that the hearer can reasonably answer this question by pointing to that part of ‘The Cider House Rules’ that other adaptations don’t have. Besides, the presupposition is also reasonable, for without it, other adaptations could possibly have the entire “The Cider House Rule”, which is complete nonsense.

However, it is interesting to note that there are a small number of examples that seem to elude the definition (9)’. They amount to 11 in number, and include sentences like (11a-b):

(11a) What is it about the word “illegal” that people don’t understand? (*The New York Times* 2007/7/7)

(11b) A: What is it about this issue that you think fails to capture adequate public and political attention?—B: I think it’s mainly because scientists, and I include myself amongst them, have not really understood what was going on until very recently (*The New York Times* 2006/9/12)

Example (11b), which constitutes a question-answer pair, is a case in point. It is doubtful whether the hearer can answer the speaker A’s WAC by pointing to that part of “this issue (meaning here “the environmental issue”) that “fails to capture adequate political or public attention”. Indeed, the fact that the speaker B answers this question by stating “it’s mainly because...” seems to suggest that what s/he assumes the speaker A to intend to ask in uttering that WAC sentence is not what part of “this issue” “fails to capture adequate public and political attention”, but why the entire issue fails to capture adequate attention.

This assumption is not gratuitous, for one of the crucial factors that differentiate (11a-b) from (10a-b) is that while the former seem to be almost

interchangeable with *why*-questions:

(11a)' Why is it that people don't understand the word "illegal"?

(11b)' Why is it that this issue (you think)⁹ fails to capture adequate public or political attention?

the latter do not:

(10a)' ??Why is it that other adaptations don't have "The Cider House Rules"?

(10b)' ??Why is it that the history of Japan is specifically Japanese?

While transforming (10a-b) into *why*-questions results in meaningless sentences or sentences whose meanings are different from those of the original ones, it is fairly possible to change (11a-b) into *why*-questions without ruining the original meanings. It is important to note that the *why*-question in (11b)' clearly presupposes that the entire issue fails to capture wide attention, so if the meaning of (11b) is equivalent to that of (11b)', which is very likely, it necessarily follows that (11b) cannot be explained by (9)', according to which it should presuppose that only some part of the issue fails to capture adequate attention.

This observation seems to suggest that there are two types of WAC, those that are explainable in terms of the above definition ((10)-type WAC) and those that elude the definition and are semantically close to the *why*-question ((11)-type WAC). Now, the important question to ask is: why did these two types of WAC arise? It is to this problem that I will turn in the next section.

3.2. A pragmatic variant of WAC

The easiest way to deal with these two types of WAC is by stipulating that they are completely different things and have arisen independently. This, however, will lead to the conclusion that the striking resemblance between the two types of WAC is only contingent and that a (11)-type WAC is just an idiomatic construction that cannot be reduced to its constituent parts. Although I admit that a (11)-type WAC is a kind of special construction, it is uneconomical and inelegant to assume that the two types of WAC bear no relation to each other. In my view, the (11) type split off from the (10) type as a pragmatic variant and is now on the road to becoming another construction. The problem, then, is what kinds of pragmatic factor have motivated the appearance of the (11) type.

The greatest difference between the two types of WAC is that the (10) type seems to presuppose, in accordance with (9)', that only an aspect of X, which is the complement of the preposition (about / in), satisfies the variable of the open proposition represented by the *that*-clause, and to require the hearer/reader to specify that aspect of X, whereas the (11) type seems to presuppose that the entire X satisfies the variable of the open proposition, and to require the hearer/reader to explain why. This interpretation of the (11) type is utterly incompatible with the definition (9)'. How can one explain this disparity? The most plausible answer to this question is the possibility of the origin of the (11) type being a rhetorical question.

That sounds simple enough, but the fact that WAC is a complex construction makes this matter more complicated than it seems. If one takes this view, the explanation will be that someone who utters the (11) type of WAC accepts as a fact, or at least as a shared understanding in the situation, that the entire X satisfies the variable of the open proposition represented by the *that*-clause but, regarding that fact as abnormal or incomprehensible, acts as if s/he presupposed that only a tiny special aspect of X satisfied the variable.

Now, it might be objected that if the (11) type is just a rhetorical version of the (10) type and if the number of the (11) type is very small in the actual context, it might not be so good an idea in the first place to divide WAC into two different “types.” From a quantitative perspective, this objection should not be ignored. But there is sometimes a grain of truth in what should quantitatively be dismissed as insignificant. Indeed, despite the fact that the (11) type constitutes only a minority of the total occurrences, there is not a little evidence to show that it is becoming more than just a rhetorical variant of WAC.

First, in cases where the variable occupies the subject position of the open proposition represented by the *that*-clause, there are a few examples (the number of which is 8) in which the noun corresponding to X agrees with the main verb of the *that*-clause:

(12a) What is it about the hours before 10.a.m. that make a person want nothing but news, traffic, family values and sanctimony?
(*The New York Times* 2007/2/8)

(12b) What is it about your plays that have enabled you to be successful out side Japan? (*The Japan Times* 2002/10/2)

Interestingly, there are no examples in which the noun corresponding to X is singular but the main verb of the *that*-clause shows plural agreement, a fact that suggests that the agreement of the main verb of the *that*-clause is strongly affected by the singularity or plurality of the noun occupying the slot X. If according to the definition (9)', WAC presupposes that only an aspect, or some part of, X satisfies the variable in the open proposition, it is impossible that the main verb of the *that*-clause representing that open proposition agrees with the noun representing X. So the existence of the above examples demonstrates that the (11) type of WAC is deviating structurally from the canonical

WAC.

Another factor that leads me to endorse the view that the (11) type is on the way to becoming a new construction is the existence of intriguing structures like the following examples:

- (13a) Why is it about literature that is so imbedded in our nature, and how can we get the most out of this passion? (from an online website)¹⁰
- (13b) Why is it about the sport that attracts new rowers? (*The New York Times* 1999 1/19)

Although these examples are very likely to be regarded by many as ungrammatical, and I myself cannot deny the possibility that these are just trifling mistakes, still the fact that one of them appeared even in a newspaper article of *New York Times* seems to indicate that it is too early to tell whether they are the result of just minor mistakes or something more than that. And if one supposes that the (11) type of WAC is exerting influence, it is not so surprising that these kinds of strange constructions are emerging. As discussed above, the (11) type is, though syntactically and semantically connected with the (10) type, pragmatically more close to the *why*-sentence. The existence of extraordinary sentences like (13a-b), therefore, can be explained by postulating that the pragmatic aspects of the (11) type of WAC sometimes override its syntactic and semantic aspects, resulting in syntactically ill-formed structures. Although it remains to be seen whether this amalgamated structure establishes itself as a new construction, at least it demonstrates that the (11) type of WAC is not only a rhetorical version of the canonical WAC but has the potential to metamorphose into a new form of grammatical device.

Notes

- 1 The British National Corpus provides only 59 examples of the construction.
- 2 Adrian Akmajian (1970) and Dwight Bolinger (1972) have been in favor of the extrapositional approach, whilst Chomsky (1977), and, more recently, Lambrecht (2001) have adopted the expletive approach.
- 3 In(3a-b), (S) indicates “subject”, (V) indicates “verb”, (O) indicates “Object”, respectively.
- 4 Of course, the explanations provided here of the two analyses of *it*-clefts are somewhat oversimplified, and there are a plethora of details about them that take a whole chapter to explain. In this article, however, the goal does not lie in elucidating these analyses themselves but in using them as a tentative test, so the details can be put aside.
- 5 Since Prince (1978), it has been widely recognized that there are at least two types of *it*-cleft: the canonical *it*-cleft and the informative presupposition *it*-cleft. The discussion here, however, focuses on the canonical *it*-cleft, which can be said to be the archetype of the *it*-cleft construction.
- 6 This semantic definition of the canonical *it*-cleft is built around the views of Declerck (1988) and of Collins (1991) but is also compatible with the views of other linguists like Prince (1978) and Lambrecht (2001) in important ways.
- 7 I collected these examples from the online websites of two major English newspapers in Japan — *The Japan Times* and *The Daily Yomiuri* — and of three well-known newspapers in the U. S. — *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post*. The period during which I collected them ranged from August 2007 to January 2008.
- 8 The square bracket indicates “the open proposition” and (V) indicates “variable”.
- 9 “You think” is a parenthetical clause, and can be ignored.
- 10 (<http://www.amazon.com/Open-Heart-Reading-Jeannette-Cezanne/dp/1601660111>)

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