

A NOTE ON ENGLISH SUBJECT CONTACT RELATIVES

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1 Syntax and Interpretation

Ever since the early days of generative grammar, syntacticians have been faced with the question as to the fit between syntax and interpretation. The following quotation (Chomsky 1965: 150) is as relevant today as it was in 1965:¹

It is clear from this fragmentary and inconclusive discussion that the interrelation of semantic and syntactic rules is by no means a settled issue, and that there is quite a range of possibilities that deserve serious exploration. The approach I have adopted in Chapter 2, § 3, is a conservative compromise between the attempt to incorporate the semantic rules strictly within the syntactic component and the attempt to elaborate the semantic component so that it takes over the function of the selectional rules.

Evidently, further insight into these questions will await a much more intensive study of semantic interpretive rules than it has yet been possible to undertake. The work of the last few years, I believe, has laid the groundwork for empirical investigation of this sort. There is a general theoretical framework parts of which have received empirical support. Within this framework it is possible to formulate certain reasonably clear questions, and it is also fairly clear what kind of empirical evidence would be relevant to deciding them. Alternative positions can be formulated, but for the present any one that is adopted must be extremely tentative.

In general, one should not expect to be able to delimit a large and complex domain before it has been thoroughly explored. A decision as to the boundary separating syntax and semantics (if there is one) is not a prerequisite for theoretical and descriptive study of syntactic and semantic rules.

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Over time, various positions have been held and this is not the place to provide an overview, but one trend that has come to the fore attempts to maximize the fit between syntax and semantics by “syntacticizing” the interpretive domains. An exponent of this approach is the cartographic line of work which, in the words of Cinque and Rizzi (Cinque and Rizzi 2010: 63):

The cartographic studies can be seen as an attempt to “syntacticize” as much as possible the interpretive domains, tracing back interpretive algorithms for such properties as argument structure . . . scope, and informational structure (the “criterial” approach defended in Rizzi 1997 and much related work) to the familiar ingredients uncovered and refined in half a century of formal syntax. To the extent to which these efforts are empirically supported, they may shed light not only on syntax proper, but also on the structure and functioning of the cognitive systems at the interface with the syntactic module.

In the wake of work in the cartographic tradition, specific analyses have sometimes been developed in which the syntactic formalization seems to be driven mainly or solely by interpretive properties. However, caution is required: while syntacticizing the interpretive domains the qualification ‘as much as possible’ should be taken seriously. I want to illustrate this particular point on the basis of the discussion two available analyses of so called subject contact relatives (SCR) in English, illustrated in (1), whose interpretive properties have led some researchers to postulate that what looks like a relative clause, the bracketed constituents in (1), is a root clause:

- (1) a. There was something [bothered me about the garage]. (*Guardian*, 23.3.1999, page 5, col 6)
 b. I had an auntie [lived here]. (Ian Rankin, *The Impossible Dead*, 2011, Orion, Paperback 2012, p. 199)
 c. She’d been told it was the stork [brought babies]. (Ruth Rendell, *End in Tears*, Arrow 2007, p. 169)

2 Relative clauses

One of the constants in the generative approach to syntax has been the assumption that filler gap dependencies can be modelled in terms of a movement derivation. In the first versions of the generative model, these derivations were formulated as ‘construction-specific’ transformations such as the passive transformation (Chomsky 1965: 23) and the relative transformation (Chomsky 1965:131). The original formulation of the transformations has changed over time and construction-specific transformations have given way to general instructions of the type ‘merge’ and ‘move’ in later versions of the generative enterprise, but the underlying intuition remains.

Leaving aside many differences of analyses and execution, in (2a) the relativized constituent originates as the object of *arrested* and moves to the left periphery of the clause.

- (2) a. The man whom they have arrested was not the thief.

In the simplified representations in (2b), the strikethrough represents the idea that the moved constituent originates as a complement of the lexical verb. The details of implementation are immaterial for the discussion at this point.

- (2) b. [_{DP} The man [_{CP} whom [_{TP} they have arrested ~~whom~~]]] is not the thief.

The restrictive relative clause is introduced by a relative pronoun, here *whom*; the relative clause is a subordinate clause and is taken to be part of a nominal constituent. The antecedent c-commands material within the relative clause, as shown, for instance, in (2c) which the negative antecedent *no one* licenses the NPI *anything* within the (subject) relative clause:

- (2) c. There's [_{DP} no one [_{CP} who can do anything about it]].

Similarly, being part of a nominal constituent that is itself a constituent in a clause, the relative may also be in the scope of material in that containing clause: so, for instance, in (2d) the NPI *anything* in the relative clause is ultimately licensed by the c-commanding negative constituent (*not/never*) in the containing clause:

- (2) d. There was never/not [_{DP} anyone [_{CP} who could do anything about it]].

The pattern in (2a) alternates with two variants shown in (3): in (3a) the relative clause is introduced by the complementizer *that*, in (3b) there is no overt subordinating device, both relative pronoun and complementizer being absent. Examples such as (3b) are referred to as 'contact relatives'. These examples can be brought in line with derivation (2b) if it is assumed that there is a null variant of the relative pronoun, represented as \emptyset in (4). In (4b) the complementizer is also non overt, a property which is independently available in other contexts in English, as shown in (5).

- (3) a. [_{DP} The man [_{CP} that [_{TP} they have arrested]]] is not the thief.
b. [_{DP} The man [_{CP} they [_{TP} have arrested]]] is not the thief.

- (4) a. [_{DP} The man [_{CP} \emptyset that [_{TP} they have arrested]]] is not the thief.
b. [_{DP} The man [_{CP} \emptyset \emptyset [_{TP} they have arrested \emptyset]]] is not the thief.

- (5) I thought [_{CP} (that) you were going to take the garbage out].

The presentations above are obviously much simplified and the discussion does not do justice to all the work that has gone into formalizing English relativization, but it will do as a starting point for the discussion.

There is a consensus that in the unmarked case subject relatives with the null variant of the relative pronoun and no overt complementizer, or 'subject contact relatives' (SCR), a term first used by Jespersen (1961), are not acceptable:

- (6) a. I asked one of my uncles who was an engineer and he told me...
b. *?I asked one of my uncles was an engineer and he told me... (Lambrecht 1988: 321, his (13b))

Yet, as shown by (1), SCR are attested and judged acceptable by some speakers: the following are just a sample of anecdotally collected examples from written sources; the examples all typically represent spoken English. Lambrecht (1988) provides additional attested examples from spoken English. Typical contexts in which the SCR is found are (i) presentational *there* sentences (7), (ii) presentational clefts (8), (iii) complements of *have* (9), (iv) predicates (10).

- (7) a. He didn't seem to be in his flat either and there was something bothered me about the garage, which Damien normally propped open with a stick because the door was broken. (*Guardian*, 23.3.1999, page 5, col 6)
 b. But there's always something happens that's new or different. (*Guardian*, G2, 18.4.2, page 4, col 3)
 c. There was one driver stopped. (Ruth Rendell, *End in Tears*, Arrow 2007, p. 235)
 d. There was one girl said she'd take Charlie out for free. (Ruth Rendell, *The Keys to the Street*, Hutchinson 1996, Arrow 1997, p. 219)
 e. There's only one bugger in the whole city can make out what she's saying, and I've just packed him off home. (Ian Rankin, *The Hanging Garden*, Orion 1998, p. 45)
 f. I'm ever surprised when I get cut that there's not a pile of dust runs out instead of blood. (David Storey, *Pasmore*, Longman 1972, Penguin 1976, p. 85)
 g. Wherever there's drugs, there's money needs laundering. (Ian Rankin, *The Hanging Garden*, Orion 1998, p. 326)
 h. There's days go by, weeks maybe, when I never see the news. (Bernard Mac Laverty, *Grace Notes*, Vintage, 1998, p. 15)
 i. There's a lot of clubs would give a manager a 10-year contract for doing that. (*Observer* 18.5.8 page 30, col 3)
- (8) a. I had an auntie lived here. (Ian Rankin, *The Impossible Dead*, 2011, Orion 2012, p. 199)
 b. He had some woman would visit him... red hair. (Ian Rankin, *The Hanging Garden*, Orion 1998, p. 189)
 c. I have a woman comes in every day. (Bernard Mac Laverty, *Grace Notes*, Vintage, 1998, p. 113)
- (9) a. When she was a child she'd been told it was the stork brought babies. (Ruth Rendell, *End in Tears*, Arrow 2007, p. 169)
 b. It must be him overheard me talking in here. (Ruth Rendell, *The Keys to the Street*, 1996 Hutchinson, Arrow books 1997, p. 176)
 c. Maybe, but was you told me that any departure from the norm is important. (Ruth Rendell, *A Sleeping Life*, An Inspector Wexford Mystery, 1964, Arrow 1994, p. 78)
 d. What was it put Macbeth in mind? (Nicholas Freeling, *Lady Macbeth*, André Deutsch, 1988, Penguin 1989, p. 35)
 e. What is it brings you here? (*Blackadder* Season 2 Episode 1 "Bells", (time: 4.58) example thanks to Lieven Danckaert, p.c.)

- (10) you were the one came in and told us that you'd taken a picture for a woman who was making a claim to criminal injuries. (Frances Fyfield, *Blind Date*, Corgi 1999, p. 65-66)

The contexts illustrated above are those usually discussed in the literature. Focusing on Hiberno English, Doherty (1993) also mentions complements of *know*:

- (11) I know a smart Greek owns maybe twenty restaurants (W19)
I know a fella can get all the tobacco he wants. Frank Dooley ...(F 102)

Doherty (1993, 1994) and Henry (1995) discuss SCR with special reference to speakers of Hiberno English, but as the sources of the attested data show, they are certainly not the only ones admitting the pattern. Quirk et al (1985: 1250) label SCRs in the contexts illustrated in (7) and (9) as 'very colloquial' and 'less acceptable' than the alternatives introduced by *that* or a relative pronoun. Similarly, Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 1055) signal similar examples and qualify them as falling 'at the boundary between very informal and non-standard'.

What is common to all the examples of SCR illustrated above is their discourse function: what superficially is a matrix clause serves to introduce a focus, a nominal constituent which I will refer to as the 'antecedent' of the SCR; the SCR itself provides information on that focus and is the more informative part of the utterance. The discourse interpretive properties of such contact relatives were first highlighted in Prince (1981:247) and are discussed extensively in Lambrecht (1988).

Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 1055, their (68iii)) cite (12a) with the SCR modifying a subject nominal as 'non-standard':

- (12) a. Anyone wants this can have it.

However, Doherty (1993) points out that while for many of the Hiberno English speakers he consulted, the SCR is restricted to the contexts in (7)-(11), more liberal speakers allow such patterns: (12b) and (12c) are attested. He concludes that some speakers have a more liberal use of SCR. The attested (12d) would probably fall under a more liberal variety.^{2 3}

- (12) b. Anyone can help afterwards is welcome. (Doherty 1993: 107, his (78a))
c. Everybody lives in the mountains has an accent. (Doherty 1993: his (79a))
d. If we were married and you helped yourself to a piece, I'd throw the first thing came to hand at you. (*Independent on Sunday*, ABC, 'Heart Shaped Box', Joe Hill, page 24, col 1)

² The precise distribution and the dialect appertenance of these patterns remains unclear but it is not relevant for the point to be made here.

³ Den Dikken (2005: 700) signals that SCRs in Appalachian English have a different discourse function. Since I don't have access to these speakers, this variety is not discussed here.

3 The Syntax of Subject Contact Relatives

Accounts for the SCR have usually focussed on sentences such as those in in (7)-(10) above. They fall into two broad categories: some treat SCR as a variant of relative clauses, others treat them as a distinct phenomenon in which what looks like a relative clause is in fact a root clause.

3.1 The Subordinate Account

The relative clause account of SCRs is represented by Jespersen (1961) and in the generative literature by Doherty (1993: 111, 1994). For Doherty '[N]oun phrases modified by subject contact clauses ... have the external syntax of noun phrases' (Doherty 1994: 58). To account for their particular properties, Doherty assumes SCRs lack the CP layer (see also Weisler 1980). One piece of evidence advanced by Doherty for the reduced structure is the fact that, unlike relatives with an overt pronoun and like object contact relatives, SCRs are incompatible with left peripheral adjuncts (the judgement is shared by Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 1055, on the different judgement in Harris and Vincent 1980, see Doherty 1993b: 62, note 4)⁴.

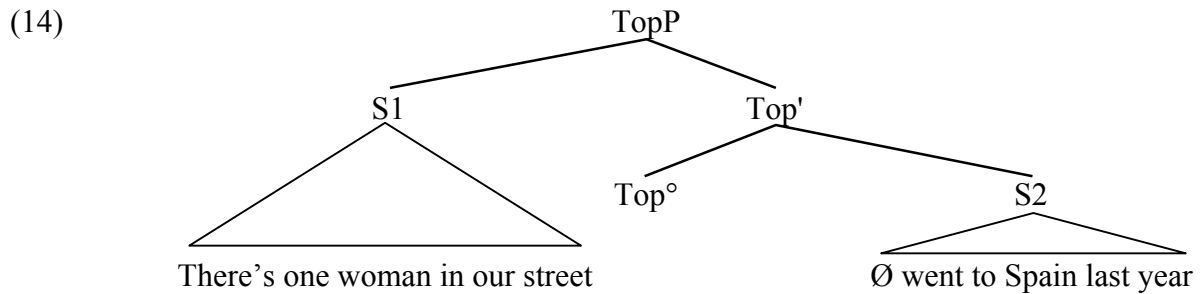
- (13) a. The man *(who) years ago Mary used to know well. (Doherty 1993: 62, his (70))
 b. That's the girl *(who) just yesterday was talking about you. (Doherty 1993: 62, his (73))

I will not go into the details of Doherty's analysis here (see Henry (1995) for an evaluation), but what is important is that for Doherty the SCR is a subordinate clause, it can constitute a unit with the nominal to its left and –depending on its precise function- it can be in the c-command domain of what would be matrix material (2c,d).

3.2 The Root Account

A radically different representation in the traditional literature (Erdmann 1980: 161), first developed in the generative literature by Henry (1995) and elaborated in Den Dikken (2005) closely matches the syntactic representation of the SCRs with their specific discourse function, with as a key property the observation that the SCR seems to carry the main assertion. Hence, it is proposed that what looks like a relative clause is in fact the matrix clause. In line with cartographic proposals in which discourse functional interpretive effects are encoded in left-peripheral functional projections (along the lines of Rizzi 1997 and much work after him), Den Dikken (2005: 698, his (14)) assigns to SCRs the representation in (14):

⁴ Andrew Radford finds the adjuncts not degraded. This is an important point that merits further study, but as it ties in with the general question as to the status of left peripheral adjuncts, it goes well beyond the scope of the present paper.



In other words, both for Henry (1995) and for Den Dikken (2005) –henceforth abbreviated as DD - the ‘matrix’ clause of the SCR (S1, *there's one woman in our street*) is the topic of an articulated Topic-comment structure and the SCR (S2, *went to Spain last year*) is the root clause expressing the comment. The discourse function of the topicalized matrix clause is that of introducing the focus, the ‘antecedent’ of the SCR, which ‘will serve as the anchor for the comment clause’ (DD 2005: 698). Syntactically, S1 is compared to the Hanging topic illustrated in (15), whose function is also to introduce a nominal, *syntax*, on which the root clause provides a comment:

- (15) a. As for syntax, many students find it too difficult a topic to pursue for their dissertation. (based on DD 2005: 703)

The interest of the Henry/DD topic–comment representation is obvious. First, the representation directly encodes or “syntacticizes” in Cinque and Rizzi’s (2010) wording, the discourse function of the SCR: in the representation in (14), the SCR supplies the main assertion. See also Lambrecht (1988) for a similar approach in a Construction Grammar framework in terms of syntactic amalgams.

In addition, if the SCR is indeed a root clause, as in (14), then, as pointed out by Henry (1995) and by DD (2005: 698), it is not unexpected that it can feature a null subject, since many varieties of spoken English allow for null subjects in root domains (see Schmerling 1973, Trasher 1977, Napoli 1982, Rizzi 1995, 1999, 2006, Haegeman 2013, Weir 2009, 2012). The restriction on left peripheral adjuncts pointed out by Doherty (1993, 1994) would also follow since, as shown in Weir 2009, 2012, in spoken English (though not in diary style writing, see Haegeman 2013) subject omission is indeed incompatible with left peripheral adjuncts. Moreover, if the topicalized S1 in (14) is an instantiation of a Hanging topic as suggested by Henry (1995: 135) and by DD (2005: 698, note 6), its compatibility with the null subject is unproblematic because Hanging topics (15b) – as opposed to regular topics Haegeman 2013) (15c) - are compatible with root null subjects.

- (15) b. As for syntax, Ø found it too difficult
 c. *Syntax, Ø found too difficult.

However, assimilating the null subject in SCR to the same phenomenon that underlies subject omission in spoken English is not straightforward.⁵ The distribution of null subjects in matrix

⁵ Thanks to Andrew Weir for pointing this out.

clauses and in SCR is not the same. In particular, as shown by Napoli (1982) and Weir (2009, 2012), in spoken English cliticizable auxiliaries are unacceptable with subject omission but at least some of these are relatively acceptable in SCR. So for instance, informal spoken English would not allow null subjects for (15d) and (15f) with the cliticizable auxiliaries *will* (cf. ‘*ll*’) and *has* (cf. ‘*s*’), but the corresponding SCR with these auxiliaries is acceptable (15e, 15g). With respect to SCR with actually reduced auxiliaries there is conflicting evidence, DD (2005: 659) rules it out⁶, but Lambrecht does provide the attested (15h).

- (15) d. I’ve recruited some people. ?* Ø Will do the experiment for us.
 e. I’ve recruited some people will do the experiment for us.
 f. I met someone. ?* Ø Has been stopped by the police seven times.
 g. ?I met someone has been stopped by the police seven times.
 h. I’ve got a friend from Chicago’s gonna meet me downstairs. (Lambrecht 1988: 318, his (7))

4. A topic-comment analysis of SCR

In this section I examine the predictions by Henry’s and DD’s topic-comment representation in (14) of SCR and I will show that the representation raises problems both with respect to the internal relation between the components of the SCR pattern (section 4.1.) as well as for its distribution (section 4.2.).

4.1 Internal Syntax

4.1.1 Constituency

In Doherty’s (1993, 1994) account, SCR are relative clauses and may form a constituent with their antecedent. According to the topic-comment representation (14), however, the SCR clause does not form a constituent with the nominal expression which it provides information on (DD 2005: 702). This leads to the prediction that, not being a constituent, the ‘antecedent’ and the SCR will not be able to enter into coordination with another constituent. However, a string composed of such an antecedent and a SCR can be coordinated with a string composed of an antecedent and a regular relative clause, suggesting that the SCR does form a constituent with the antecedent. Such data favour an analysis in line with Doherty’s in which the antecedent and the SCR can constitute one unit of structure.⁷

- (16) a. I have [one colleague runs a sushi shop] and [another one who has a burger restaurant].
 b. There’s [one student lives in a hotel] and [another one who lives in a renovated railway station].

⁶ Andrew Weir finds (15h) unacceptable.

⁷ Examples such as (12b) and (12c), in which the SCR modifies a subject nominal, are also problematic for the topic-comment analysis. However, these are not accepted by all speakers and are not necessarily intended to be covered by the topic-comment representation.

4.1.2 C-command

Given representation (14), constituents internal to S1 should not be able to c-command those in S2, the SCR. As shown by (17) this prediction is incorrect.⁸ In (17), the quantificational subject of S1 binds a pronoun in S2. In the attested (7i) above, too, the ‘antecedent’ *a lot of clubs* binds the nominal *a manager*, the latter thus has a variable reading. Also, a constituent in S1 can license an NPI in S2 (18).

- (17) a. Each of them_i took a book belonged to the other_i.
 b. Every student_i is looking for a teacher speaks his_i language.
 c. Nobody_i took anything didn't belong to them_i.
- (18) a. There's no one can do anything about it.
 b. This was not something was ever considered in the discussion.
 c. She is not someone has ever been considered for a tenured position.
 d. It isn't something was ever considered in the negotiations
 e. That was the stormiest night was ever in this parish. (Doherty 1994: 58, his (40), LN12)

DD's (14) is close to a paratactic configuration (see discussion in DD 2006, and also Gärtner 2001a,b and Ebert, Endriss and Gärtner 2007 on German embedded V2). But while SCR allow for NPI licensing out of S1, this is not possible in genuine parataxis, as shown in (19). The unacceptability of the NPI *ever* in the second conjunct in (19) can be attributed to a lack of c-command in the paratactic configuration.

- (19) * They were not shortlisted and were ever considered for the position.

If lack of c-command is responsible for the ungrammaticality of (19), then the availability of bound pronouns and NPI licensing in SCR suggests that the relevant constituents in S1 c-command S2, casting doubt on the topic-comment representation (14). Note that these phenomena would be in line with Doherty's relative clause analysis of SCR since it is expected that the relative clause is within the c-command domain of the antecedent and –depending on the position of the relativized nominal– may also be in the scope of other constituents of the containing clause (cf. (2c), (2d)).

4.2 External syntax

4.2.1 Main clause phenomena

For Doherty (1993, 1994), SCR have the distribution of relative clauses and are part of nominal constituents (1994: 58). Thus SCR are subordinate clauses. Henry (1995) and DD (2005) treat

⁸ Thanks to Andrew Weir for generous help with the data. Needless to say he is not responsible for the way I have used his comments.

SCR as topic-comment structures with root status. In particular, they compare the position of S1 in (14) to that of a Hanging topic and DD (2005:703) explicitly qualifies the pattern as unembeddable, appealing to the analogy with unembeddable Hanging topics in (20).

- (20) *It's unfortunate that, as for syntax, many students find it too difficult a topic to pursue for their dissertation. (Den Dikken 2005: 703)⁹

SCR are thus expected to be a root phenomenon in the sense of Emonds (1970), Hooper and Thompson (1973). However, this prediction is not borne out. SCR is compatible with domains that resist root phenomena, such as temporal clauses (21a), conditional clauses (21b) and complement clauses of factive verbs (21c). These are known to be incompatible with root phenomena (Emonds 1970, Hooper and Thompson 1973, Haegeman 2012).

- (21) a. My head of department is reluctant to intervene for his male students but [whenever there's a woman wants to see him], he immediately will act.
 b. I'm not available but [if there's a blonde girl with glasses wants to see me], give me a call.
 c. I resent [that there are always so many students want to see me].

Observe that the fact that SCR may be embedded in adverbial clauses also means that the null subject postulated for S2 in the topic-comment account is unaccounted for, since English does not allow null subjects in these embedded domains: (22) is from Henry 1995: 128, her (43).

- (22) a. *He ate his dinner after ___ got home.
 b. *When ___ arrived it was raining.

4.2.2 Stacking

Though there are restrictions (see Doherty 1993, 1994), some types of stacking of relatives involving SCR are acceptable. In (23), the SCR is followed by a regular subject relative (bracketed in the examples). See also (7h).

- (23) a. I'm looking for someone speaks Irish well [who can do the translations].
 b. There's a woman lives in Ghent [who knows all about this stuff].
 c. I have a friend lives in Ghent [who knows all about this stuff].
 d. But there's always something happens [that's new or different]. (*Guardian*, G2, 18.4.2, page 4, col 3)

Prima facie it is hard to see how these would be derived in the topic-comment representation: the extraposed bracketed relative clauses in (23) should originate within S1, but would have to be extracted from S1 and end up somewhere to the right of the root domain S2. An analogous configuration involving a Hanging topic is ungrammatical, regardless of whether the relevant clause is restrictive (24a,b) or non-restrictive (24c,d):

⁹ There is speaker variation. For instance, Andrew Radford (p.c.) accepts this example.

- (24) a. As for the course [which is taught in the second year], many students find it too hard.
 b. *As for the course, many students find it too hard, [which is taught in the second year].
 c. As for John's syntax course, [which is taught in the second year], many students find it too hard,
 d. *As for John's syntax course, many students find it too hard, [which is taught in the second year].

5 Conclusion

The background for this paper is the question to what extent syntactic structure can be taken to directly reflect interpretation, or, put differently, the degree to which information structure can drive syntactic representations. I have discussed and evaluated a topic-comment representation of SCR which closely reflects its discourse properties: a clause introducing a nominal constituent as its focus is topicalized and what looks like a relative clause is analysed as a non-embedded (and unembeddable) root clause providing a comment on the focussed nominal constituent. On closer inspection, though, such a representation has been shown to be problematic for both the internal and the external syntax of English SCR.

In a different context, the situation described here arises with respect to the analysis of English *it* clefts, where the interpretive similarity with focus fronting in English has also led some researchers (Meinunger 1997, 1998, Frascarelli and Ramaglia 2013, and Sleeman 2011) to propose an analysis in which what looks like a relative clause, i.e. the cleft relative, is syntactically analysed as a matrix clause. Again, the root analysis of *it* clefts fails to predict specific properties of the internal and external syntax of clefts, a point made extensively in Haegeman, Meinunger and Vercauteren (2014).

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