

Author-anchored clauses in English

Independent anchoring of a clause to the utterance context (*c*), the hallmark of finiteness ([1]), is assumed to come about via time in well-studied European languages. Recent research, however, explores cross-linguistic variation in anchoring, including spatial and participant anchoring ([4]), since *c* makes available a set of indexical elements, not merely time (*c*: ⟨author, hearer, time, world... ⟩) ([5]). This paper presents experimental evidence comparing an under-studied clause type in colloquial English, the “amalgam” pseudocleft (1), with the canonical pseudocleft (2), which shows that different clause types even in the same language can anchor to different indexicals: author and time, respectively.

Amalgam pseudoclefts are distinct from canonical specificational pseudoclefts, in that a sentence, rather than a referential expression serves as their logical subject.

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| (1) | What you need is [_{SUBJ} you need a vacation]. | <i>amalgam pseudocleft</i> |
| (2) | What you need is [_{SUBJ} a vacation]. | <i>canonical pseudocleft</i> |

The canonical copula contributes a context variable *c* encoding the salient interval (Topic Time—TT; [3]) at which the focus (e.g., *a vacation*) provides the value for the *wh*-expression. In a past-under-past embedded context, the copula’s TT is anchored to the superordinate TT and interpreted as either simultaneous or anterior to it ([2]). In an amalgam pseudocleft, however, *c* is anchored to the author, not to time, so it has no anterior, past-shifted reading. (3) illustrates the contrast, where capitals indicate focal stress to make the past-shifted reading (and a salient, but irrelevant *verum focus* reading) prominent, when available.

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| (3) | I said last week that... | |
| | a. what you liked was coffee. | [#past-shifted, ✓ simultaneous] |
| | b. what you liked WAS coffee. | [✓ past-shifted, ✓ verum focus] |
| | c. what you liked was you liked coffee. | [#past-shifted, ✓ simultaneous] |
| | d. what you liked WAS you liked coffee. | [#past-shifted, ✓ verum focus] |

A web-based felicity judgment experiment was conducted to verify the pattern in (3). 40 naïve speakers, recruited via Amazon Mechanical Turk, read pairs of sentences:

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| (4) | a. Bob says: S1 (some sentence instantiating one of the conditions in (3), crossing pseudocleft type with stress on <i>was</i>) |
| | b. Bob knows: S2 (some sentence compatible with an inference arising under a past-shifted reading of S1, e.g., <i>You stopped liking coffee before last week</i>) |

Subjects used a 7-point Likert scale to rate how surprising they found S2 in light of S1. If S1 had a past-shifted reading, S2 should not be surprising; if S1 lacked a past-shifted reading, S2 should be surprising. Subjects were trained on practice items to interpret capital letters as focal stress. Control items using well-studied implicature types, some triggered by stress, were used to identify and exclude 6 subjects who failed to perform the task reliably.

Normalized results were analyzed using a linear mixed effects model. A strong tendency in the data supports the hypothesis. While the interaction between stress and sentence type was not significant, a post-hoc test showed that stress had a highly significant effect on the surprise rating in the canonical pseudocleft condition ($p < 0.0001$), while it had a much weaker effect in the amalgam condition ($p > 0.01$).

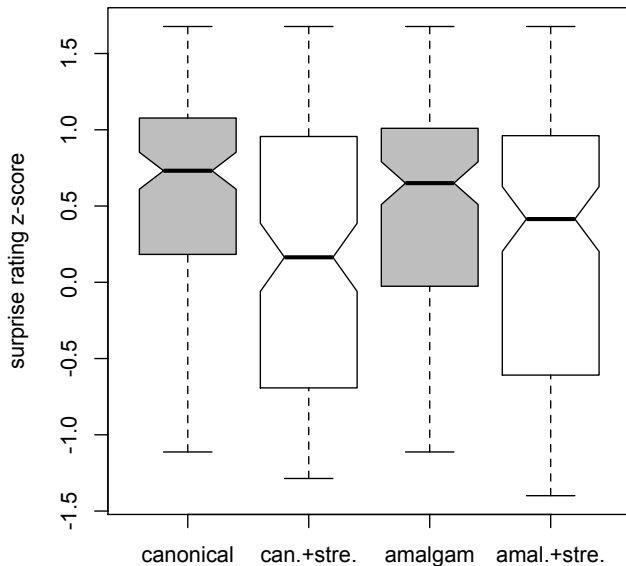


Figure 1: Surprise rating for past-shifted reading by sentence type and copular stress

These findings are bolstered by syntactic evidence that the author-anchored c is introduced in a higher structural domain than its temporally anchored counterpart: the copula in amalgams cannot combine with functional material from the Tense domain (e.g., negation, auxiliaries). It can, however, combine with epistemic modals and evidentials, which are structurally higher than T. In addition, the author-anchored c can license a first-person experiencer dative (for speakers who accept raising) in the absence of a fully fleshed out A-domain; a third-person experiencer, by contrast, cannot be licensed.

(5) %Lou_j has the flu c_i seems {to me_i / *to him_j} to be what he has.

This study demonstrates that experimentally obtained data can be brought to bear on even subtle semantic predictions. It also provides novel empirical support for the idea that anchoring to the utterance context can obtain by non-temporal means, even in English.

References

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