

# Cleft & Pseudo-cleft Sentences

## (Adding emphasis using cleft structures)

**Definitions:** A sentence in which focus is given to either the subject or object using a pattern beginning “It ...” (e.g. *It was my brother who lent me the money*) or “What ...” (e.g. *What you need is a holiday*)  
*Advanced Grammar in Use*, Martin Hewings, CUP 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.

A grammatical construction with information broken into two clauses, to provide extra focus to one piece of information. It-cleft: *It was his voice that held me*. Wh-cleft: *What I want is something to eat*.  
*Longman Student Grammar of Spoken and Written English*, Douglas Biber et al.

### **Cleft Sentences**

*Cleft* means divided. When we divide a sentence into two clauses, each with its own verb, we add emphasis to what we want to say more prominently. Therefore, this requires more grammatical processing when we are dealing with information that we want to convey:

- (1) I ignored his rudeness.
- (2) It was his rudeness that I ignored.

### **Pseudo-cleft sentences**

However, when we emphasize the information (i.e. his rudeness) in the sentence with a wh-clause, it becomes a pseudo-cleft because there is actually no division:

- (3) What I ignore about him is his rudeness.

The single-underlined part is not a clause; double-underlined part, being the subject of the sentence, is a noun clause. Therefore, real cleft sentences are usually done with it-clauses.

Wh-cleft sentences are usually considered pseudo-cleft because they very often occur in the pattern:

**What John did yesterday was steal a book from the library.\***  
**What-clause + be + [highlighted word or phrase]**

\*... *was to steal* ... is also possible.

Other types of so-called cleft sentences are the ones that are made with when, where, why, and who to focus on a time, a place, a reason, and a person; however, there is a clause at the beginning to introduce the information in the sentence:

**Person** The colleague who told me about the new course book is Miguel.

**Place** The room where they keep the used course books is on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor.

**Time** The year (when) I graduated from university was the most difficult time of my life.

**Reason** The reason (why) I had an argument with her was her extreme rudeness.\*

\*This sentence can also be rewritten as “The reason (why) I had an argument with her was she was extremely rude to me.”

## Examples

Clefting enables us to focus on a different type of information in each time. Consider the following examples:

|                          |  |
|--------------------------|--|
| <b>Normal word order</b> | <b>John stole a book from the library last week</b>  |
| <b>Subject as focus</b>  | It was <u>John</u> who/that stole a book from the library last week.   |
| <b>Object as focus</b>   | It was <u>a book</u> (that) John stole from the library last week.   |
| <b>Time as focus</b>     | It was last week (that) John stole a book from the library.  |
| <b>Place as focus</b>    | It was from <u>the library</u> that John stole a book last week.<br><i>or more informally,</i><br>It was <u>the library</u> that John stole a book from last week. |

### More examples:

Ali failed the final exam last term. (normal word order)

- (1) It was Ali who failed the final exam last term. (the person is highlighted)
- (2) It was the final exam that Ali failed last term. (the object is highlighted)
- (3) It was last term that Ali failed the final exam. (the time adverbial is highlighted)

In informal English, it is also possible to say or write like this:

- (4) It was last term when Ali failed the final exam.

### More examples to study:

Identify the information emphasized and pay attention to the word order.

- (1) I did everything.  
→ It was me who/that did everything.
- (2) We need action, not words.  
→ It is action that we need, not words.  
→ What we need is action, not words.  
→ All we need is action, not words.
- (3) I want a cup of tea.  
→ It is a cup of tea that I want.  
→ What I want is a cup of tea.  
→ All I want is a cup of tea.  
→ The thing I want is a cup of tea.
- (4) John went to Turkey for some business.  
→ It is John who went to Turkey for some business.  
→ It is Turkey that John went to for some business.  
→ It is some business that John went to Turkey for.  
→ What John did was (to) go to Turkey for some business.

*Using some other introductory phrases, we can also make some more sentences:*

- The guy who went to Turkey for some business is John.
- The reason why John went to Turkey is (to do) some business.
- The place where John went for some business is Turkey.

- (5) Beyaz visited the university to have a chat with students.  
→ It is Beyaz who visited the university to have a chat with students.  
→ It is the university that Beyaz visited to have a chat with students.  
→ The reason why Beyaz visited the university is (to) have a chat with students.
- (6) I met my ex-wife at the party last night.  
→ It was last night that I met ex-wife at the party.  
→ It was at the party that I met my ex-wife last night.  
→ It was my ex-wife who/that I met at the party last night.
- (7) I left the office early because I felt terribly ill.  
→ It was because I felt terribly ill that I left the office early.  
→ The only reason why/that I left the office early was that I felt terribly ill.  
→ It is the office that I left early because I felt terribly ill.
- (8) I really enjoy reading Orhan Pamuk.  
→ What I really enjoy is read Orhan Pamuk.  
→ It is Orhan Pamuk who I really enjoy reading.  
→ It is reading Orhan Pamuk that I really enjoy.
- (9) I work best in the evening.  
→ The time when I work best is the evening.
- (10) You should watch a film in the cinema.  
→ The place where you should watch a film is the cinema.  
→ It is the cinema where you should watch a film.
- (11) The documentary film “Crossing the Bridge” was made in Istanbul.  
→ It was in Istanbul that the documentary film “Crossing the Bridge” was made.

## Exercises

Rewrite the following sentences emphasizing the underlined.

1. We need quality, not quantity.
2. You learn a foreign language only by practicing.
3. He won't pass his exams because he doesn't work hard enough.
4. The trouble started when the police arrived.
5. The cigarette smoke is irritating my eyes.
6. Alper watches TV in his room instead of studying.
7. Ayşe has an unusual job for a woman; she repairs old cars.
8. I like most vegetables, but I hate onions.
9. I can't stop yawning. I need a cup of coffee.
10. I am really hungry. I need a big mac.
11. Things got much better after Richard left.
12. The book I had read changed my life.

## More Exercises

The cleft structures used to emphasize time clauses are made by using the following patterns:

- It (be) only after ... that ...
- It (be) only when ... that ...
- It (be) not until/until after ... that ...

Study the examples:

After Dr. John Doe died, he was discovered to be a woman.

→ It was only after he died that Dr. John Doe was discovered to be a woman.

When I entered the room, I noticed they were about to celebrate my birthday.

→ It was only when I entered the room that I noticed they were about to celebrate my birthday.

I didn't know how modest he was until I met John Doe.

→ It wasn't until I met John Doe that I knew how modest he was.

**Rewrite the following sentences using the patterns above.**

- 1) I didn't know what real happiness was until I met you.
- 2) When I read the e-mail she had sent I realized she didn't love any more.
- 3) The Smithers decided to buy that house on the corner after they had seen at least 10 houses.
- 4) My wife didn't like cats until I brought a kitten home eight years ago.
- 5) I was a horrible cook until I went to that cookery school in London.
- 6) Before I went to that cookery school in London, I was a horrible cook.
- 7) I didn't know how to teach properly until I started to work at TOMER.
- 8) When my wife saw a real bat for the first time last week, I realized how scared she was of bats.

## **SUGGESTED ANSWER KEY**

### **Exercises (p. 4)**

- 1) What we need is quality, not quantity. OR It is quality that we need, not quantity.
- 2) It is only by practicing that you learn a foreign language.
- 3) It is because he doesn't work hard enough that he won't pass his exams.
- 4) It was when the police arrived that the trouble started.
- 5) It is the cigarette smoke that is irritating my eyes. OR The thing that is irritating my eyes is the cigarette smoke.
- 6) What Alper does in his room is (to) watch TV instead of studying.
- 7) What Ayşe does is (to) repair old cars.
- 8) It is onions that I hate.
- 9) What/All/The thing I need is a cup of coffee. OR It is a cup of coffee that I need.
- 10) All I need is a big mac. OR What I need is a big mac. OR It is a big mac that I need.
- 11) It was after Richard left that things got much better.

12) It is/was the book I had read that changed my life. OR What changed my life is/was the book that I had read.

**Exercises (p. 5)**

- 1) It wasn't until I met you that I knew real happiness.
- 2) It was only when I read the e-mail she had sent that I realized she didn't love me any more.
- 3) It was only after the Smithers had seen at least 10 houses that they decided to buy the house on the corner.
- 4) It wasn't until I brought a kitten home eight years ago that my wife liked cats.
- 5) It wasn't until I went to that cookery school in London that I was a good cook.
- 6) It was only after I went to that cookery school in London that I was/became a good cook.
- 7) It wasn't until I started to work at TOMER that I knew how to teach properly. OR It was only after I started to work at TOMER that I knew how to teach properly.
- 8) It was only when my wife saw a real bat for the first time last week that I realized how scared she was of bats.