

SQUIB

Are clefts contagious in conversation?¹

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It is well known that conversationalists often imitate their own body language as a sign of closeness and empathy. This study shows that in spontaneous, unplanned conversation, speakers go as far as emulating each other's grammar. The use of a family of focusing constructions (namely, the cleft), such as *it was my mother who rang the other day*, or *what I meant to say was that he should go Thursday*, was investigated in a corpus of conversation excerpts in New Zealand English. Findings show that clefting is contagious. In other words, if one speaker uses a cleft, others will be likely to do so too.

Language has two primary functions: first, to communicate information from one person/group to another, and secondly, to form interpersonal relationships between individuals/groups, not necessarily in that order of importance. Spoken interaction may be 'the fabric of friendship' (Miller and Weinert 1998, Chafe 1994), but how far do speakers go to show closeness and solidarity to fellow conversationalists?

An investigation of approximately 200,000 words of conversational data from the *Wellington Corpus of Spoken New Zealand English* (Holmes, Vine & Johnson 1998) shows that speakers may go as far as emulating each other's grammar. The usage patterns of cleft constructions were analysed in 80 informal conversations. The conversations are relatively similar in terms of participants, topic and environment, in that they are conducted in the participants' own homes, without an interviewer present, or a given topic. In most excerpts, participants discuss day-to-day issues, such as gossip or plans for the day, and it is clear that they know each other well (they are typically living together).

Clefts such as *it is just one day that I might be away for*, and *what he wants to do is to sell the house as soon as possible* constitute a grammatical means for highlighting or advancing the most important element of a sentence. In spoken language, they often have a discourse management role (see Calude 2008). Example (1) below illustrates a typical occurrence of clefts throughout one of the conversation excerpts analysed.²

¹ We are grateful for the comments and suggestions made by the editor, Bas Aarts, and the two anonymous referees. Additionally, the article has been greatly improved by comments received from the audience of the Language, Communication and Cognition Conference held in Brighton, UK, 4–6 August 2008. Any remaining errors are, of course, our own.

² Due to space constraints, it is impractical to include the entire conversation, so only the relevant portions containing clefts are given here. Also the various discourse annotations included in the original corpus transcripts were (mostly) eliminated in order to increase clarity and readability of the excerpt.

(1) WSC#DPC066: (Four speakers: DN, BT, CH, AL)

- BT: well they're about forty or fifty bucks a day to hire
 CH: oh are they is that all i thought they were about that for a morning
 BT: oh maybe they are **that's what i saw** (DEMONSTRATIVE CLEFT)
 [8 minutes of conversation]
 DN: thomas was crying away and she just went up and she kept going in her scottish
 accent and talking to him just like this and then going like this over his face and
it's actually things i thought would feel terrible (IT-CLEFT)
 BT: yeah i hate it
 DN: and he loved it
 BT: yeah
 DN: she just silenced him really fast none of the rest of us could
 BT: mm
 DN: and i think **it was partly her scottish accent** (IT-CLEFT) and it was
 BT: yeah sounding different
 DN: yeah yeah
 [9 minutes and 20 seconds of conversation]
 AL: what nesting
 DN: **this is what you're meant to do is nest** (DEMONSTRATIVE CLEFT) cleaning
 out your cupboard i never
 [5 minutes and 15 seconds of conversation]
 CH: i haven't paid them a cent and they're meant to come back <pause> well they came
 back when i was on holiday i left this really clear message saying do not come back
 till i get back from holiday <pause> **it's about six weeks ago they did the job**
 (IT-CLEFT)
 [2 minutes and 10 seconds of conversation]
 CH: yeah to stop it yeah **that's what i think it is** (DEMONSTRATIVE CLEFT) yeah
 but if it's not that then the drains are blocked and we'll have to get down there with
 a bit of wire
 AL: between the <unclear word > to bring it down between <13 second pause>
 DN: oh look i just can't stand chaps coming to my place to do jobs <pause> i
 inevitably get that <pause> sort of crap **that's why** (DEMONSTRATIVE CLEFT)

Each conversation was tagged for the total number of clefts³ uttered by each speaker. The data show significant tendencies of contagious behaviour. That is, either (almost) everyone uses clefts, or no one uses them, so that independently of personal style, conversationalists tend to mimic each other's behaviour with respect to this construction.

A correlation analysis (shown in figure 1) looking at the proportion of words that were clefts used by one speaker versus the proportion of clefts used by the other speakers in that conversation shows that one speaker's production of a cleft is positively correlated (0.229) with other speakers doing this as well, whether using the same cleft type or not. (For X = the total number of words, and Y = the total number of clefts used, the proportion is Y/X .)

³ We were conservative in the types of clefts included, counting only *it*-clefts, *wh*-clefts and demonstrative clefts (and not other types, such as *all*-clefts, *there*-clefts, *have*-clefts, inferential clefts and so on).

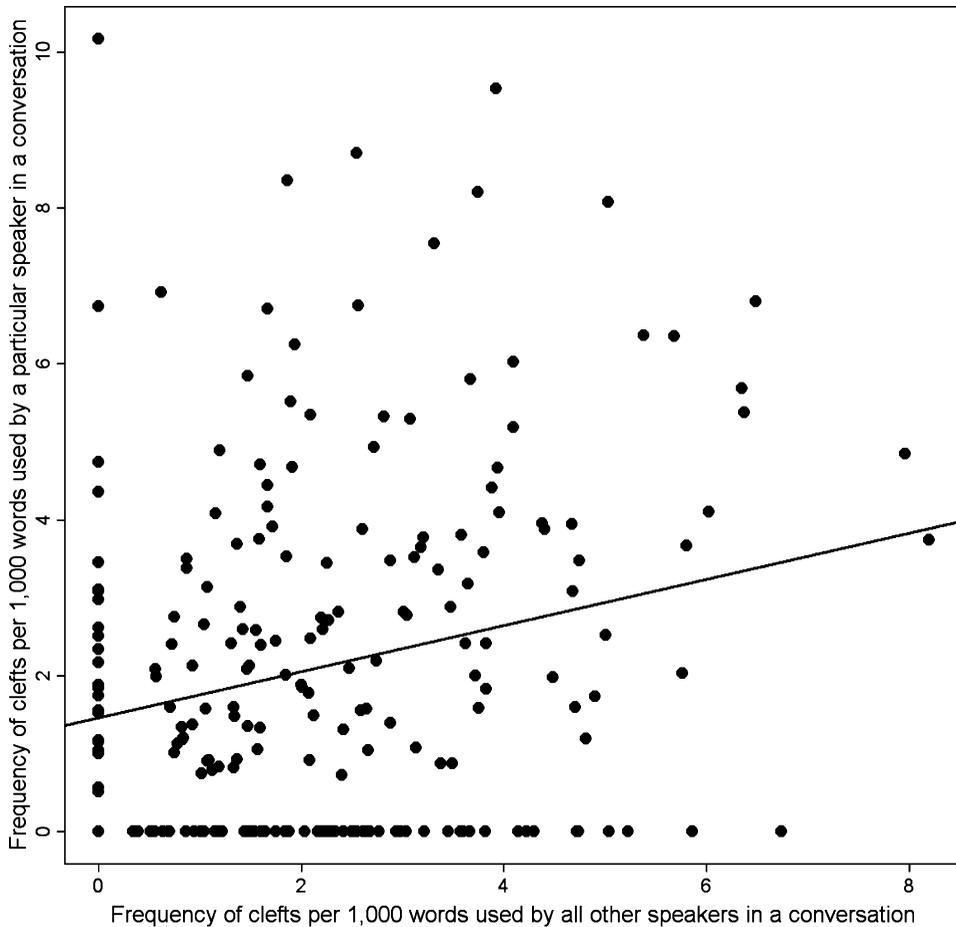


Figure 1. Plot of the frequency of cleft usage per 1,000 words by a single speaker in a conversation (vertical axis) versus the average frequency of cleft usage per 1,000 words by other participants in the same conversation (horizontal axis). The linear trend is indicated.

The smoothed trend of the plot is indicated in figure 1. Pearson's correlation is 0.229, suggesting a positive association between an individual's behaviour and that of the rest of the group. A permutation test, performed by mixing up the speakers across conversations 1,000 times, shows that only 6 times was the correlation factor (i.e. 0.229) higher than that found for the original data. The results suggest that the observed pattern of cleft usage would be unlikely to occur by chance. This provides very strong evidence against the hypothesis that individuals' cleft usage is independent of the usage of clefts by others in that conversation ($p = 0.006$). There are symmetries within the plot due to conversations involving only two speakers. These will not adversely affect the analysis presented.

Put another way, there is very strong evidence that there is a correlation between the proportion of clefts used in a conversation by everybody, and the proportion of clefts used by a particular speaker in that conversation. That is, the more clefts are uttered in a conversation, the more clefts a particular speaker taking part in it is likely to use.

In addition, the cleft constructions appear to be sprinkled throughout the conversation excerpts (as shown in the example included in (1)), rather than occurring sequentially in the interaction. However, a more detailed analysis (also perhaps of longer conversations) is called for in order to validate this trend.⁴

The idea of contagious behaviour in conversation is a well-documented phenomenon. As observed in studies of nonlinguistic behaviour (Lakin & Chartrand 2003), humans mimic the movements, gestures and body language of others as a way of establishing rapport with them. Similarly, linguistically, there is a large body of work on Accommodation Theory (Coupland 1995, Giles 1973, Meyerhoff 1998, Trudgill 1986 *inter alia*) and Audience Design (Bell 1984, 2001) investigating how, when and why speakers emulate each other's behaviour in terms of phonological and lexical choices.

Claims have also been made about convergence at the syntactic level. However, convergence at this level is not all that simple to ascertain. For instance, a study by Schenkin (1980) claims syntactic convergence, while the data can in fact be explained by simple repetition, that is, speakers using the exact same wording, for example, A: *Do you know what we are having for dinner tonight?* B: *I don't know what we are having for dinner tonight.* Hence, this is not a case of true syntactic convergence. Priming experiments have, however, indeed shown evidence of syntactic convergence (Bock 1986, Potter & Lombardi 1998, Branigan, Pickering & Cleland 2000).

Garrod and colleagues assert that participants 'align' each other's semantic, syntactic and phonological usage, mimicking the same referring expressions, syntax, tone, intonation and stress (Garrod & Doherty 1994, Garrod & Pickering 2004). Thus, the process of 'interactive alignment' works across all different linguistic levels (Garrod & Pickering 2004). It is this phenomenon of participants operating on common representations and reusing each other's material that makes conversation 'easy', according to Garrod & Doherty (1994).

Significantly, the corpus data analysed indicate that syntactic convergence appears also to be present in naturally occurring language (as opposed to elicited, experimental data). In other words, conversationalists go as far as mimicking individual constructions used by others. That is, not only do they use the same sound patterns, referring expressions and lexical items, but in fact, they use similar patterns of speech and schemas (i.e. constructions).

The contagious role of clefts in spontaneous, unplanned spoken conversation might be better understood within a larger study, where more variables can be taken into account (such as the position of the cleft within topic structure, the specific function of the cleft within the topic frame, the gender of the person uttering the cleft, and so on).

⁴ We are grateful to one of the anonymous referees for making this suggestion.

However, the present analysis is indicative of the fact that, like words and body language, grammar also presents speakers with choices which reflect the communicative purposes that drive interaction.

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