

## On Nominal Extraposition and "Empty" *It*: A Reply to Michaelis & Lambrecht (1994)

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### ABSTRACT

*Particles have always been a source of embarrassment for most linguistic theories. The reason for this embarrassment, more than anything else, has to do with the semantics of these elements. Such is the case of phrasal-verb constructions, subjects of atmospheric verbs, cleft-sentences, and various types of extraposition. Some theories have no problem with assigning particles no semantic value (e.g., most Chomskyan and post-Chomskyan theories); others, on the other hand, take pains to show that all particles must have some semantic content (e.g., cognitive grammar).*

*Here we would like to concentrate on just one of these cases, namely the nominal-extraposition construction. It has recently been claimed by Michaelis & Lambrecht (1994) that the subject of this construction has no semantic content. We will show that this is not the case, and, in fact, the problem can be easily solved if a frame-semantics approach is incorporated into the description. The purpose of our paper, then, is not to challenge their analysis, but rather to refine it.*

KEYWORDS: Frame Semantics, Empty particles, Construction Grammar, Cataphora, Nominal Extraposition Construction

### RESUMEN

*Las partículas inglesas siempre han resultado problemáticas para la mayoría de las teorías lingüísticas. La principal razón de estos problemas tiene que ver sobre todo con la semántica de estos elementos. Tal es el caso de las construcciones inglesas de verbos frasales, los sujetos de verbos atmosféricos, las oraciones escindidas y los distintos tipos de extraposición. Algunas teorías no tienen problema alguno en asignar a estas partículas un valor semántico nulo (p. ej., la mayoría de las teorías Chomskianas y post-Chomskianas). Otras, sin embargo, se esfuerzan de manera especial en mostrar que todas las partículas deben tener algún contenido semántico (e.g., la Gramática Cognitiva).*

*En este trabajo, nos gustaría concenrrarnos en uno de estos casos. a saber, la Construcción de Extraposición Nominal. Se ha afirmado recientemente (Michaelis & Lambrecht 1994) que el sujeto de esta construcción carece de contenido semántico. Mostraremos que tal afirmación no es correcta, y que en realidad, existe una salida sencilla al problema si se incorpora al análisis cienos aspectos de la Semántica de Esquemas. El propósito de este trabajo, por lo tanto, no es cuestionar el análisis de Michaelis & Lambrecht, sino más bien refinarlo.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: Semántica de Esquemas, Partículas vacías, Gramática de Construcciones, Catáfora, Construcción de Extraposición Nominal.

## INTRODUCTION

Particles **have** always **been** a source of embarrassment for most linguistic theories. The reason for this embarrassment, more than anything **else**, has to do with the semantics of these elements. Such is the case of phrasal-verb constructions, subjects of atmospheric verbs, **cleft-sentences**, and various types of extraposition. **Some** theories **have** no problem with assigning particles no semantic value (e.g., most Chomskyan and post-Chomskyan theories); others, on the other hand, take pains to show that **all** particles must **have** some semantic content (e.g., **cognitive grammar**).

**Here** we would **like** to concentrate on just one of these cases. namely the **nominal-extraposition construction**. It has recently **been** claimed by Michaelis & Lambrecht (1994) that the subject of this construction has no semantic **content**. We will show that this is not the case, and **in** fact there is an easy way out of the problem if a frame semantics approach is incorporated into the description. **The** purpose of our paper, then, is not to challenge their **analysis**, but rather to refine it.

## THE NOMINAL-EXTRAPOSITION CONSTRUCTION

Using Construction **Grammar** as their theoretical framework (Fillmore & Kay, in prog.), Michaelis & Larnbrecht (1994; henceforth, **M&L**), argue that there is a subclass of extraposition construction which must be distinguished from **right dislocation** (RD), namely, the **nominal extraposition** (NE) construction. **M&L** base their arguments on several morphosyntactic, semantic, and pragmatic **factors**. For the purposes of the present paper, we will focus on just two of the relevant morphosyntactic properties that differentiate **the** two constructions, as we **have** no major **qualms** with their other arguments:

- (i) in NE (but not **in** RD), there is a lack of agreement between the pronominal subject and the postverbal NP (**arising** from the lack of coreference between said constituents); and
- (ii) **in** NE (but not **in** RD), the **first** part of the construction cannot stand on its own (again, due to the **nonreferential** nature of the pronominal subject).

We take both arguments up in **turn**.

One of the peculiarities of the NE construction is that NE main-clause subjects do NOT agree with the head of the extraposed NP. **Take** for instance the following example:

- (1) It's terrible the things that happen to sheep. (NE)

It is clear **here** that *it* and things do not agree in number. This fact contrasts with RD, where such agreement is mandatory:

- (2) a. They're cool, those glasses you're wearing. (RD)  
b. \* It's cool, those glasses you're wearing. (RD)

According to **M&L**, the reason behind this difference is that in (2a) the pronominal subject (they) is coreferential with the dislocated NP (those glasses you're wearing), whereas in NE this is not the case. They base this claim on the fact that NE cannot have a plural subject even though the extraposed NP is plural:

- (3) \* They're terrible the things that happen to sheep. (NE)

From this, **M&L** conclude that the pronominal subject in NE constructions is devoid of all meaning. We will come back to this point later.

The second syntactic difference to be considered **here** has to do with the claim that:

In RD, the sentence minus the dislocated constituent is always syntactically and semantically well-formed and a POTENTIALLY COMPLETE SENTENCE. In NE this is not the case, although this is not *always obvious from* a merely structural point of view. (**M&L**: 363; italics added)

Therefore, according to **M&L**, we can say They're cool (from They're cool, those glasses you're wearing), but not \*It's terrible (from It's terrible *the* things that happen to sheep). This is apparently a logical consequence of the fact that they is coreferential with glasses, while *it* is not coreferential with things. That *It's* terrible happens to look grammatical is taken by **M&L** to be merely "a coincidence of English morphology" (**M&L**: 363). They provide supplementary evidence from French as proof for this claim (*ibid.*):

- (4) a. C'est ÉVIDENT, qu'elle a tort. 'It's obvious, that she's wrong.' (RD)  
b. C'est ÉVIDENT. 'It's obvious.'  
c. Il est ÉVIDENT, qu'elle a TORT. 'It's obvious that she's wrong.' (EXTRAP)  
d. \*Il est ÉVIDENT. 'It's obvious.'

Example (4d) is ungrammatical because *il*, being in a NE construction, is nonreferential, and, accordingly, cannot fulfill the valence requirement of evident. However, we believe that it is risky to describe English on the basis of French grammar, especially since in Spanish this line of argument does not work. In Spanish, both constructions share basically the same surface form and are equally replaceable by the "reduced" version.

- (5) a. Son increíbles las cosas que echan por la **tele**. (RD)  
 'They're incredible, the things they show on TV.'  
 b. Son increíbles.  
 'They're incredible.'  
 c. Es increíble las cosas que echan por la **tele**. (NE)  
 'It's incredible the things they show on TV.'  
 d. Es increíble.  
 'It's incredible.'

To disregard (5d), we would again **have** to appeal to nonreferentiality and explain its apparent acceptability as another "morphological coincidence." Thus, we believe that whether or not M&L are right about this particular French NE construction, that should not affect their argument about the subject **pronoun** of English NE.

#### REFILLING "EMPTY" *IT*

In our opinion, a new perspective on the problem can be achieved by adopting a frame semantic approach (Fillmore 1975, 1985). We believe that it is a mistake to equate coreferentiality with agreement. The lack of agreement between *it* and the extraposed nominal head in example (1) *It's terrible the things that happen to sheep* does **NOT** necessarily **entail** that the pronominal subject is nonreferential and, hence, meaningless. Such an analysis is based on the **mistaken** assumption that both constituents should be coreferential: instead, we contend that the true referent of *it* is the whole **scene** (i.e., a **state** of affairs). In other words, the referent of the pronominal subject is the scene evoked by the nominal *the things that happen to sheep*, and not merely its head *things*. This, we **argue**, is the meaning of NE *it*.

Perhaps our argument can be seen more clearly by considering the following examples:

- (6) a. **Harry** insulted Mary. It was terrible.  
 b. **Harry** insulted Mary and she slapped him. It was terrible.

As is well **known**, *it* can refer back to a whole sentence. This is the case of (6a). Example (6b) is slightly more complex; though there are two actions (insulting and slapping), *it* still refers back **holistically** to just one scene. This is obvious from the fact that it is impossible to say (7) if we are **referring** to each of the individual actions:

- (7) **Harry** insulted Mary and she slapped **him**. \* They were terrible.

These facts show that *it* **does** not **have** to agree with any nominal head, since the **particle** in these cases refers to a whole scene.

Our intuition about the coreferentiality of the pronominal subject in the NE construction can be informally represented as follows:

- (8) **It** 's astonishing what people do for money these days.  
 Ref=scene#1                      qualifier of subject                      scene#1

What our notation tries to capture is that the pronominal subject refers cataphorically to the scene **implied** in the extraposed NP; the postcopular **adjective** modifies the **subject** and, consequently, the scene it stands for as well. This analysis accounts for the following exchange:

- (9) A: It's astonishing!  
 B: What's astonishing?  
 A: What people do for money these days.

Speaker B asks for the referent of A's **initial** utterance, inquiring what *it* refers to exactly. Speaker A **replies simply** by supplying a scene. **This proves** conclusively that the **subject pronoun** does in fact **have reference** and, therefore, is not semantically empty.

## CONCLUSION

In concluding we would like to emphasize that our **proposal** does not invalidate M&L's findings about the **existence** of the NE construction. In fact, we endorse the bulk of their analysis. We disagree, however, in their treatment of the **subject pronoun**. Instead of analyzing NE *it* as a meaningless syntactic place holder, we offer an alternative account that accords more with the tenets of cognitive **linguistics**. Syntactic dummies should always be used as a last resort, since the most desirable analysis would be the one that **assigns** meaning to **all** elements of a sentence at **some level** of organization.

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