

Surprising Tag Questions with Fragments in English

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It is a well-known fact that there are two approaches of analyzing the clausal ellipsis. One line of research argues for a full-question for its source (Ross (1969); Merchant (2001)), as in (1), whereas the other argues that the short-cleft (Pollmann (1972); Erteschik-Shir (1973)) is the source for the clausal ellipsis, as in (2).

- (1) John saw someone, but I don't know who ~~John~~ saw. Full *wh*-question
(2) John saw someone, but I don't know who ~~it~~ was. Short-cleft

Two approaches argue whether the source for clausal ellipsis is syntactically isomorphic to its antecedent as in (1) or not as in (2).

Relating to this, dependent tag question is another phenomenon that can be accounted for by the abovementioned approaches. Dependent tag questions (DTQs) are yes/no questions that contain the content of the host clause (Barros & Craenenbroeck (2013)) as in (3).

- (3) Jack left, didn't he?

According to Sailor (2011), the elided DTQ-clause is subject to stringent identity requirements, as in (4) and (5). It means that DTQ-clause is closely related with its host clause.

- (4) a. Jack is sleeping, isn't he?
b. *Jack is sleeping, isn't it?
(5) a. *It is Jack, isn't he?
b. It is Jack, isn't it?

Barros & Craenenbroeck (henceforth, B&A) claims that the cleft-source is preferred in case of fragment answers followed by DTQ as in (6B). However, when the host clause is non-elliptical, isomorphic ellipsis site is preferred over cleft-source as in (6B'). The preference for the cleft tag in fragment answer construction is supported by an online acceptability judgement task in B&A.

- (6) A: Who can Bill talk to?
B: Ken Safir, {isn't it / ??can't he}?
B': He can talk to Ken Safir, {??isn't it / can't he}?

For the analysis, B&A proposes Default Non-Isomorphism (DNI).

- (7) Default Non-Isomorphism (DNI)
Clausal ellipsis defaults to a non-isomorphic ellipsis site containing a short cleft rather than to one that is isomorphic to the ellipsis antecedent.

However, there seem to be some problems with B&A's analysis. Based on B&A, we ran a judgement task on L1 native speakers to see whether the preference of DTQs leans toward the cleft source or not. According to the survey, non-cleft source is rated to be better in both object and subject fragment answer, which is contrary to B&A's claim.

- (8) A: Who can Bill talk to today?
 B: Ken Safir, {??isn't it / can't he}?
- (9) A: Who can talk to Bill today?
 B: Ken Safir, {??isn't it / can't he}?

Rather, when the fragment answer is preceded by the positive polarity answer particle (PAP), cleft tag answer is preferred over the non-cleft answer as in (10) and (11).

(10) Object fragment

A: Bill contacted a woman in the Linguistics Department yesterday.

B: Yes, Mary, {wasn't it / ??didn't he}?

(11) Subject fragment

A: A professor in the Linguistics Department interviewed Mary yesterday.

B: Yes, Bill, {wasn't it / ??didn't he}?

The existence of positive PAP with fragment answer carries more focus on the information, eventually leading to the preference for the cleft tag. Thus, what is important here is that the cleft tags are related to the presence of focus, rather than just being default.

However, when fragment answer is not present, cleft tag is considerably degraded.

(12) A: A professor in the Linguistics Department interviewed Mary yesterday.

B: Yes, {??wasn't it / didn't he}?

(13) A: Bill contacted a woman in the Linguistics Department yesterday.

B: Yes, {??wasn't it / didn't he}?

(14) A: A professor in the Linguistics Department interviewed Mary yesterday.

B: No, {??wasn't it / did he}?

(15) A: Bill contacted a woman in the Linguistics Department yesterday.

B: No, {*wasn't it / did he}?

As noticed, PAP-only fragments provide sufficient information for the licensing of the non-cleft tag. Thus, without typical fragments, cleft tags are not allowed. Again, the use of the cleft tag requires the presence of a fragment which inevitably carries focus itself.

The argument at issue is that the cleft tags should not be treated as defaults, but as being dependent on the presence of information focus.

Selected References

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