Information Structure and the Use of Cleft Sentences in English and Norwegian

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1 Introduction.

English and Norwegian both allow the information in a simple proposition such as that expressed in (1) to be ‘split’ in a more complex clefted structure like that in (2).

(1) a. Nielsen won.
   b. Nielsen vant.

(2) a. It was Nielsen who won.
   b. Det var Nielsen som vant.

As seen in (3), clefts (also known as *it*-clefts) have essentially the same syntactic structure in the two languages.

(3) Det var Nielsen som vant.
    it was Nielsen that won

cleft pronoun copula clefted constituent cleft clause

Like their counterparts in other languages, clefts in both English and Norwegian enable the speaker to structurally distinguish information that is in some sense presupposed or taken for granted and to ‘single out one element—the clefted constituent—in order to focus attention on it’ (Hedberg 2000).

However, informal observations of the discourse distribution of clefts in the two languages also reveal differences in frequency of use, along with corresponding difference in

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1 Norwegian is somewhat freer than most dialects of English in constraints on the syntactic category of clefted constituents. For example, adjectives are freely clefted in Norwegian (as in Celticized English), as in the following example provided to me by Thorstein Fretheim.

(i) Det er gule de skal vaere naar de er modne, ikke groenne
    it is yellow they shall be when they are ripe not green
discourse function. It is well known, for example, that questions (especially *wh*-questions) are much more typically expressed as clefts in Norwegian than in English. In addition, clefts are often used in Norwegian when the material in the cleft clause is part of the comment or new information expressed in the utterance. For example, (2) was uttered at the beginning of a TV news broadcast immediately after the broadcaster announced that there had been a wrestling match between Nielsen and Johansen. While a cleft sentence would have been possible in English as well, I believe the corresponding non-cleft ‘Nielsen won’ would have been more natural in this context, since there had been no previous mention of someone winning.

Such differences are evidenced by English translations of Norwegian as well as Norwegian translations of English. For example, cleft constructions in Norwegian texts are often translated as non-clefts in English, as seen in the underlined sentence in (4) and its English translation in (5).

(4) Helt innerst gjørde den en brå swing som gjerne ble kalt “Kapteinsvingen.”
   Det var nesten bare på lørdager og søndager at det gikk mennesker her.
   furthest in made it an abrupt swing that was called “Captain’s Way
   it was almost only on Saturdays and Sundays that it went people here
   (Sofies Verden, p. 11)

(5) At the end of the road there was a sharp bend known as Captain’s Bend.
   People seldom went that way except on the weekend. (Sophie’s World, p. 2)

This paper will present results of a work in progress which investigates these differences in the frequency and distribution of cleft sentences in English and Norwegian, and seeks to provide an explanation for them. Specifically, I address the following questions.

1. Are English clefts more restricted in their distribution than their Norwegian counterparts and, if so, how?

2. Are the alternatives to clefts more restricted in Norwegian, thereby giving rise to relatively higher frequency of this construction? If so, what are these restrictions?

3. Do clefts have different discourse functions in English and Norwegian and, if so what are these different functions?

I report here on the first stage of this research, which investigates the use of clefts in a Norwegian novel, Jostein Gaarder’s *Sofies Verden*, and compares this with the English translation of the novel. Based on the results of this preliminary work, I will argue that Norwegian exhibits a much more consistent mapping between information structure and syntactic structure. Thus, clefts (along with other non-canonical constructions such as ‘presentational’ and ‘topicalized’ sentences) are the preferred option in Norwegian when the result would serve to make the distinction between topic and focus structurally explicit. In English, on the other hand, they are primarily a stylistic option which may be exploited for rhetorical effect, including emphasis of the
content of the clefted constituent, if necessary conditions are met. In order to avoid language specific terminology, I follow earlier tradition here in using the term 'cleft' to refer to what are sometimes called it-clefts. I will not be concerned in this paper with pseudo-clefts (wh-clefts like what I saw was a bird or inverted pseudo-clefts like that was what he said.

2 Information Structure - Two Kinds of Givenness/Newness.

Before examining the information structural properties of clefts in English and Norwegian, it is necessary to distinguish two distinct, and logically independent notions of given vs. new information that have often been conflated in the literature. I refer to these as referential givenness/newness and relational givenness/newness (see Gundel 1988, 1999)

Referential givenness/newness
The assumed status of the semantic/conceptual representation of a linguistic expression in some model of the world, the discourse, or the speaker/hearer’s mind. Some representative examples of referential givenness/newness concepts include existential presupposition (e.g. Strawson 1964), various senses of referentiality and specificity (e.g. Fodor and Sag 1982, Enc 1991), the familiarity condition on definite descriptions (e.g. Heim 1982), the activation and identifiability statuses of Chafe (1994) and Lambrecht (1994), the hearer-old/new and discourse old/new statuses of Prince (1992), and the cognitive statuses of Gundel, Hedberg and Zacharski (1993). The latter, which is the framework I assume here, is presented in (6).

(6) The Givenness Hierarchy (Gundel, Hedberg and Zacharski 1993)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>focus &gt; activated &gt; familiar &gt; identifiable &gt; referential &gt; identifiable</td>
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{it} {that, this, this N} {that N} {the N} {indefinite this N} {a N}

Relational givenness/newness  Partition of the semantic/conceptual representation of a sentence into two complementary parts, the topic (see also theme, ground, presupposition), which represents what the sentence is primarily about, and the comment (see also rheme, focus), which represents the main predication about the topic. Topic is given in relation to comment, and comment is new in relation to topic.

Relational givenness/newness includes the notion of logical/psychological subject and predicate as well as such well known information-structural pairs as presupposition-focus (e.g. Chomsky
1971, Jackendoff 1972), topic-comment (e.g. Gundel 1974/89), theme-rheme (e.g. Vallduvi 1992), and topic-predicate (Erteschik-Shir 1997).

Referential givenness/newness and relational givenness/newness are logically independent. Something can be referentially given, but relationally new, as seen in the following examples (where uppercase letters indicate position of focal accent).

(7) A. Who called? B. Pat said SHE called. (Gundel 1980).

(8) A. Did you order the chicken or the pork? B. It was the PORK that I ordered. (Gundel 1985).

If SHE in (7) refers to Pat, it is referentially given in virtually every possible sense. The intended referent is presupposed, specific, referential, familiar, activated, in focus, identifiable, hearer old, and discourse old. But the subject of the embedded sentence is at the same time relationally new, and therefore receives a focal accent here. It instantiates the variable in the relationally given, topical part of the sentence, x called, thus yielding the new information expressed in (7B). Similarly, in (8), the pork is referentially given. Its cognitive status would be at least activated, possibly even in focus, since it was mentioned in the immediately preceding sentence. But it is new in relation to the topic of (8), what B ordered.

The two kinds of givenness/newness also differ in other important respects. First, with the exception of Prince’s (1992) notion of discourse-new vs. discourse-old, referential givenness/newness is not specific to linguistic expressions. Thus, one can just as easily characterize a visual or non-linguistic auditory stimulus, for example a house or a tune, as familiar or not, in focus or not, and even specific or not. By contrast, concepts like topic-comment, presupposition-focus, psychological/logical subject and predicate can only apply to linguistic expressions, specifically sentences or utterances and their interpretations. Corresponding to this essential difference, is the fact that referential givenness statuses, e.g., familiar or in focus, are uniquely determined by the context at a given point in the discourse. The speaker has no choice in the matter. Relational givenness notions like topic, on the other hand, may be constrained by the context (as all aspects of meaning are in some sense), but they are not uniquely determined by it. As the Czech linguist Peter Sgall pointed out a number of years ago, a sentence like There was a soccer game last night could be followed by Norway beat Sweden or by Sweden beat Norway. While the latter two sentences could each have an interpretation where the whole sentence is a comment on the situation established by the preceding utterance, it is also possible in exactly the same context to interpret the first of these sentences as a comment about Norway and the second as a comment about Sweden. Which of these possible interpretations is the intended one depends on the interests and perspective of the speaker.

One place where the context typically determines a single topic-focus structure is in question-answer pairs, which is why these provide the most reliable contextual tests for relational/newness concepts, as in (9).

(9) a. Who did the Norway PLAY?

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2 The speaker does of course choose what she wants to refer to, or whether she wants to refer at all; but once this choice is made, the particular givenness status is predetermined by the context of utterance.
b. Norway played SWEDEN.
c. #NORWAY played SWEDEN.
d. I love soccer.

Since the question in (9a) sets up a relevant context where the topic is Norway or who Norway
played, (9b) whose intonation pattern allows an interpretation with either of these topics is a
possible answer. But (9c), whose intonation pattern requires an interpretation where Norway is
focus/comment is not an acceptable answer in this context. It is important to note, however, that
questions constrain other properties of the answer as well. Thus, (9d) is no more appropriate as an
answer to (9a) than (9c) would be. The exact source of the inappropriateness may be different,
but the point is that questions severely constrain all aspects of the semantic-conceptual content of
a relevant answer. The fact that appropriateness of a sentence as a response to a given question
varies depending on location of focal accent simply shows that position of focal accent encodes a
semantic-conceptual distinction. It does not necessarily make the distinction coded by
intonational focus any more ‘pragmatic’ or ‘discourse-dependent’ than other aspects of the
meaning of natural language sentences, which will differ in appropriateness from one context to
another.

Although referential and relational givenness/newness are logically independent notions,
they do overlap empirically in that felicitous topics are referentially given in the sense that they
must be at least familiar. This explains the often noted observation that topics are necessarily
definite or generic. Thus, for example, specific indefinites cannot be dislocated because
dislocated position is reserved for topics, as illustrated in (10) and (11).

(10) a. The window was open.
    b. The window, it was open.

(11) a. A window was open.
    b. *A window, it was open

3. Clefts and Information Structure

Following Hedberg 2000, I assume that the cleft pronoun together with the cleft clause in a
structure like (3) function as a discontinuous definite description. This makes it possible to
account straightforwardly for the fact that the cleft clause is always referentially given in the same
sense as the content of a definite description. Like definite nominals, its interpretation must
therefore be at least uniquely identifiable (and is frequently also familiar, activated and in focus).
It is in this sense that the content of the cleft clause is presupposed.

In canonical clefts, where focal sress falls on the clefted constituent, the content of the
cleft clause is also relationally given and the clefted constituent is relationally new. Thus, in
(12B) and in (13), it is both referentially and relationally given that someone won and the
relationally new information is that this was Nielsen.

(12) A. Did Johansen win?
    B. No. It was NIELSEN (who won).
(13) Everyone thought that Johansen had won, but it was NIELSEN (who won).

Similarly in the underlined sentence in the Norwegian example in (14), and its English translation in (15), it is both referentially and relationally given that someone kept introducing herself, and the relationally new information (comment/focus) is that this was someone else.

(14) Sofie prøvde å forestille seg at hun strakte fram hånden og presenterte seg
    tried to imagine that she shook hands and introduced herself

    som Lillemor Amundson, men nei, det gikk ikke. Det var hele tiden
    as but no that went not it was whole time

    en helt annen jente som presenterte seg.
    a completely other girl who introduced herself

    (Sofies Verden, p. 13)

(15) Sophie tried to imagine herself shaking hands and introducing herself as Lillemor Amundson, but it seemed all wrong. **It was someone ELSE who kept introducing herself.** (Sophie’s World, p. 3)

While the content of the cleft clause in a prototypical cleft sentence, with focal accent only on the clefted constituent, is both referentially and relationally given, the cleft clause can also be relationally new. In such constructions, which Prince (1978) refers to as informative presupposition clefts, the cleft clause is uniquely identifiable, but it is part of the comment, the new information predicated (about the topic) in the sentence. Focal accent in these constructions typically falls within the cleft clause. Examples are given in (16)-(20).

(16) Bush was elected, but it was Gore who won the POPULAR vote.

(17) Bush was elected, but it was Gore who received a telegram from Queen ELIZABETH.

(18) (beginning of a newspaper article) It was just about 50 years ago that Henry Ford gave us the WEEKEND. (Philadelphia Bulletin, cited in Prince 1978).

(19) Etter hvert som Sofie tenkte over at hun var til, kom hun også til å tenke på at
    afterwards as thought that she was here come she also to think that

    hun ikke skulle være her bestandig. Jeg er I verden nå, tenkte hun. Men en dag er
    she not will be here always I am in world now thought she. But one day am

    jeg borte vekk. Var det noe liv etter døden? Også dette spørsmålet var nok katten helt
    I gone was it any life after death also this question was cat
“Was there life after death? This was another question the cat was blissfully unaware of. It wasn’t long ago that Sophie’s GRANDMOTHER died.”

(20) Women of the past were subjugated both as females and as thinking beings, which is sad because a great deal of very important experience was lost as a result. It was not until this century that women really made their MARK on the history of philosophy. (Sophie’s World, p. 30).

To sum up so far, the cleft clause is always referentially given in the sense of being at least uniquely identifiable, and often also familiar, activated or in focus. This follows from the fact that the cleft clause is part of a definite description. However, the cleft clause need not be relationally given. It is relationally given only in the prototypical case where it represents the topic of the sentence. The cleft clause may also be part of the comment/focus, in which case it will be relationally new and will normally be the locus of a prominent pitch accent.

4. The Study.

In order to compare clefts in English and Norwegian, the present study examined the first 78 pages of Jostein Gaarder’s novel Sofies Verden and the English version of that novel, Sophie’s World, translated by Paulette Møller. The purpose was to determine the frequency and discourse function of clefts in the two versions.

I found a total of 32 clefts in the first 78 pages of the original Norwegian text. Nine of these (28%) were translated as clefts in English. In all these examples, the cleft clause functions as the topic and is thus relationally given. The phrasal accent correspondingly would fall on the clefted constituent, if these examples were spoken.

The referential givenness status of the cleft clause in each case is relatively high, at least familiar, and usually at least activated. One of these examples is given in (14) above. Two others are given in (21) and (22).

(21) a. Empedokles tok også opp spørsmålet om hva som skjer når vi sanser
        took also up question of what happens when we sense
        noe. Hvordan kan jeg “se” en blomst, for eksempel. Hva er det som foregår da?
        something. how can I see a flower for example what is it that takes place
        (Sofies verden, p. 46)

        b. Empedocles also raised the question of what happens when we perceive something.
        How can I “see” a flower, for example? What is it that happens?
        (Sophie’s World, p. 37)

(22) a. Det siste spørsmålet var litt verre å ta stilling til. Sofie hadde aldri tenkt over
        the last question was little harder to take position on had always thought of
hva som styrer historiens gang. Men det måtte vel være menneskene? Hvis det
what governed history’s course but it must be people if it

var Gud eller skjebnen, da kunne ikke menneskene ha fri vilje.
was God or fate then could not people have free will (Sofies verden, p. 57)

b. The last question was harder to answer. Sofie had never given much thought to what
governed the course of history. It had to be people surely. If it was God or fate, people had no
free will. (Sophie’s World, p. 48)

In (21), the topic of the cleft sentence is the thing that happens when we see a flower, and
the comment is the question of what exactly this is. The topic has a high degree of referential
givenness, probably activated, since it was raised in the immediately preceding question. (22)
illustrates what Hedberg (2000) calls a truncated cleft, which lacks an overt cleft clause. There
are actually two truncated clefts in (21). In each case, the topic, the interpretation of the truncated
clause, is what governs the course of history. This topic is not only given in relation to the main
predication in each sentence, it also has the highest degree of referential givenness (in focus),
since it is mentioned prominently in the immediately preceding sentence in the discourse.

The remaining twenty three Norwegian-clefts were not translated as clefts in English.
Three of these, in (23)-(25) below, were questions, which are frequently rendered as clefts in
Norwegian, more so than in English.

(23) a. Hva var det som gjorde at kilo på kilo av det grønne plantesstoffet kunne velte
what was it that made kilo for kilo of the green vegetation be able to well

opp av den livløse jorda straks det ble værm I været
up from the lifeless earth when it was warm in the weather (Sofies verden, p. 11)

b. What made this great mass of green vegetation come welling up from the dead earth as
soon as it got warm? (Sophie’s World, p. 1)

(24) a. Hva er det som gjør at “blandingen”, for eksempel en blomst, oppløses igjen?
what is it that makes the mixture for example a flower dissolve again
(Sofies verden, p. 46)

b. What makes the mixture of, say, a flower, dissolve again. (Sophie’s World, p. 37)

(25) a. Var det joker du sa
was it joker you said

b. Did you say joker? (Sophie’s World, p. 70)

In the remaining Norwegian-clefts that were not translated as English clefts, the cleft clause was
relationally new (part of the comment) as in examples (19) and (20) above: and the focal accent,
as expected, would fall within the clause. The referential givenness status of the clause content is relatively low, at most uniquely identifiable, in all but three of these. Some examples are given in (26)-(29) below.

(26) a. Helt innerst gjorde den en brå sving som gjerne ble kalt “Kapteinsvingen”. Det innermost made it a sharp turn which was called Captain’s Way it

var nesten bare på lørdager og søndager at det gikk mennesker her

was almost only Saturdays and Sundays that it went people here (Sofiesverden, p. 11)

b. At the end of the road there was a sharp bend known as Captain’s bend. People seldom went that way except on the weekend. (Sophie’s World, p. 1)

(27) a. Her hører vi at Tor lå og sov, og da han våknet, var hammeren hans borte. Da ble Tor så sint at hendene skalv og skjegget hans ristet.

here hear we that Thor lay and slept and when he woke was hammer his
gone then was so angry that hands tremble and beard his shakes

Sammen med følgesvennen Loke gikk han til Frøya og spurte henne om å få låne vingene hennes så Loke kunne fly til Jotunheimen for å finne ut om det var trollene der som hadde stjålet Tors hammer.

together with henchman went he to and asked her to borrow wings hers so can fly to to find out if it was trolls there who had stolen Thor’s hammer, (Sofies verden, p. 32)

b. It tells how Thor, rising from his sleep, finds out that his hammer is gone. This makes him so angry that his hands tremble and his beard shakes. Accompanied by his henchman Loki, he goes to Freyja to ask if Loki may borrow her wings so that he can fly to Jotunheim, the land of the giants, and find out if they are the ones who have stolen Thor’s hammer. (Sophie’s World, p. 24)

(28) a. (Beginning of a new paragraph) Nå er det at guden Heimdal får en lys ide

now is it that the god has a bright idea

b. Then the god Heimdal has an idea. (Sophie’s World, p. 24)

(29) a. Det fortelles at Sokrates’ mor var jordmor, og Sokrates sammenlignet sin

it is told that Socrates’ mother was midwife and compared his
egen virksomhet med jordmorens “forløsningskunst.” Det er jo ikke jordmoren own art with midwife’s it is not midwife

som føder barnet. (Sofies verden, p. 73)

who births child

b. Socrates, whose mother was a midwife, used to say that his art was like the art of the midwife. She does not herself give birth to the child (Sophie’s World, p. 65)

Finally, there were two clefts in the English translation of the examined pages which did not translate a corresponding cleft in Norwegian. These are presented in (30) and (31) below.

(30)a. fordi filosofene levde I en annen tid - og kanskje I en helt annen kultur since the philosophers lived in an other time and maybe in a whole other culture

enn vår egen - er det ofte lurt å leve seg fram til hva som er den enkelte filosofen than our own is it often good to determine what that is each philosopher

prosjekt. Med det mener jeg at vi må prøve å gripe fatt i hva akkurat denne project with this mean I that we must try to grasp what that

filosofen er spesielt opptatt av å fine ut av .. philosopher is especially concerned with finding out (Sofies verden, p. 38)

b. Since some philosophers lied in a different age - and perhaps in a completely different culture from ours - it is a good idea to try and see what each philosopher’s project is. By this I mean that we must try to grasp precisely what it is precisely that each particular philosopher is concerned with finding out.

(Sophie’s World, p. 30)

(31)a. Nå sa jeg “tankegangen hans” - altså om filosofen. For også filosofens now saw I line of thought his so about the philosopher for also philosophy’s

historie er preget av menn. Det er fordi kvinnen har vært undertrykket både history is stamped by men this is because women have been subjugated both

som kjønn og som tenkende vesen. Det er synd, for på denne måten har mange as sex and as thinking beings this is sad for in that way have many

viktige erfaringer gått tapt. Først i vårt århundre kommer kvinnene ordentlig important experiences gone lost first in our century come women really

in i filosofens historie.
into philosophy’s history. (Sofies verden, p. 39).

b. I said his line of thought - referring to the philosopher because this is also a story of men. Women of the past were subjugated both as females and as thinking beings, which is sad because a great deal of very important experience was lost as a result. It was not until this century that women really made their mark on the history of philosophy. (Sophie’s World, p 30).

4. Discussion.

To sum up, I found 32-cleft sentences in the first 78 pages of the novel Sofies verden. The English translation of these pages contains only 28 clefts, including two that do not translate a Norwegian cleft. Thus, only 28% of the Norwegian clefts were translated as clefts in English. In almost all the English-clefts that translate corresponding clefts in Norwegian, the content of the cleft clause is relationally given, i.e. arguably the topic of the sentence, and its referential givenness status is relatively high, usually at least activated. By contrast, the majority of Norwegian clefts, including all those that were not translated as clefts in English, have cleft clauses that are relationally new, i.e. part of the comment. Some of these are found in paragraph (or section) initial position. The referential givenness status of the cleft clause is relatively low, often at most uniquely identifiable. It is not activated by the immediately preceding discourse. Correspondingly, most of the English clefts have prototypical cleft intonation, with focal accent on the clefted constituent. The majority of Norwegian clefts, by contrast, have focal stress inside the cleft clause.

The sample for this study is relatively small, and restricted to translation from Norwegian to English of a single work by a single translator. More research is obviously necessary in order to confirm that the results are not accidental or the result of individual stylistic preferences of the author and translator. Nevertheless, there is reason to believe that the findings are representative of real differences in the two languages and that there is a pattern here that calls for an explanation. First, the results confirm informal observations that clefts are more frequently used in Norwegian than in English, and that Norwegian clefts are sometimes used in contexts where the English counterpart would be awkward, or at least not the most natural choice. Second, the findings of the present study are very similar to results of a much more comprehensive study of clefts in Swedish and English conducted by Johansson (2001). Johansson examined clefts, pseudo-clefts and inverted pseudo-clefts in Swedish and English, comparing translations from English to Swedish, translations from Swedish to English, and original texts in both languages. In all three types of data, he found that English clefts were less frequent than their Swedish counterpart. Moreover, the percentage of Swedish-clefts that were translated as English clefts was very similar to my findings for Norwegian, even though Johansson’s study was based on a much larger corpus. In 500 tokens of Swedish clefts, he found that only 33% were translated as clefts in English. There is reason then to believe that the findings of the present study, though based on a small and very limited sample, are in fact representative of real differences in the distribution of English and Norwegian clefts. In the remainder of this section, I will attempt a

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3 This is consistent with a general function of placing highly recoverable topics to the right of the major clause boundary or omitting them altogether, as in truncated clefts (see Gundel 1988 for further discussion).
preliminary explanation of such differences.

When we find differences in frequency of a particular construction type in two languages, one possibility is that the construction in question is more constrained in the language with lower frequency. In this particular case, that would mean that there are discourse constraints on the distribution of English clefts that do not exist in Norwegian. This does not seem to be the case however. All the Norwegian clefts could have been translated as clefts in English, without resulting in ungrammaticality or unacceptability in the given context. For example, the Norwegian clefts in (23)-(29) could have been translated as in (32)-(38) respectively.

(32) What was it that made this great mass of green vegetation come welling up from the dead earth as soon as it got warm?

(33) What is it that makes the ‘mixture’ of, say, a flower, dissolve again?

(34) Was that joker you said?

(35) At the end of the road there was a sharp bend known as Captain’s bend. It was only on Saturdays and Sundays that people went that way.

(36) It tells how Thor, rising from his sleep, finds out that his hammer is gone. This makes him so angry that his hands tremble and his beard shakes. Accompanied by his henchman Loki, he goes to Freyja to ask if Loki may borrow her wings so that he can fly to Jotunheim, the land of the giants, and find out if it was they who had stolen Thor’s hammer.

(37) Then it happened that the god Heimdal had a good idea.

(38) Socrates, whose mother was a midwife, used to say that his art was like the art of the midwife. After all, it’s not the midwife herself who gives birth to the child.

It does not appear to be the case then that the higher frequency of clefts in Norwegian as compared to English is due to differences in absolute constraints on the use of this construction in the two languages. Both languages allow clefts in contexts where the content of the cleft clause is topical and the clefted constituent is focus/comment and receives focal stress. Both languages also allow clefts where the cleft clause is part of the comment and focal stress falls inside the clause.

Another possible explanation for the observed differences would be that clefts are used more frequently in Norwegian because they are the only grammatical option in certain discourse environments where English would allow either a cleft or a non-cleft. But this doesn’t seem to be the case either. All the Norwegian clefts, including the ones that were not translated as clefts in English, could have been expressed as non-clefts. For example, the content of the clefts in (23)-(29) could have been expressed as in (39)-(46) respectively.

I am grateful to Thorstein Fretheim and Kaja Borthen for their judgements and very helpful comments on these examples.
(39) Hva gjorde at kilo på kilo av det grønne plantesstoffet kunne velte what made that kilo for kilo of the green vegetation can well opp av den livløse jorda straks det ble værmt I været? up from the lifeless earth as soon as it became warm in weather

(40) Hva gjør at “blandingen”, for eksempel en blomst, oppløses igjen? what makes that mixture for example a flower dissolve again

(41) Sa du joker? said you joker

(42) Helt innerst gjorde den en brå sving som gjerne ble kalt “Kapteinsvingen”. Det innermost made it a sharp turn that was called Captain’s Way it gikk mennesker her bare på lørdager og søndager went people here only on Saturdays and Sundays

(43) ... og da han våknet, var hammeren hans borte. Da ble Tor så sint ... and when he woke was hammer his gone then became so angry at hendene skalv og skjegget hans ristet. Sammen med følgesvennen that hands trembled and beard his shook together with henchman Loke gikk han til Frøya og spurte henne om å få låne vingene hennes went he to and asked her to borrow wings her ....for å finne ut om trollene der hadde stjålet Tors hammer for to find out if trolls there had stole Thor’s hammer

(44) (Beginning of a new paragraph) Nå fikk guden Heimdal en lys ide now got god a bright idea

(45) ...Sokrates’ mor var jordmor, og Sokrates sammenlignet sin egen virksomhet ...Socrates’ mother was midwife and Socrates compared his own activity med jordmorens “forløsningskunst.” Jordmoren føder jo ikke barnet with midwife’s art a midwife births not child

The facts in (32)-(45) suggest that the difference in frequency of clefts in Norwegian, as compared to English, is due to differences in importance of information structural functions performed by clefts rather than differences in absolute restrictions or constraints on corresponding structures in the two languages. Specifically, I would like to propose that there are two such
functions that clefts perform in Norwegian, both of which are related to a stronger general preference for mapping information structure directly onto syntactic structure.

One important information-structural function that clefts perform is that they make it possible to separate out referentially given/presupposed material by encoding it in the cleft clause. This allows the material in the cleft clause to be treated on a par with other uniquely identifiable material, such as the content of a definite description (see Hedberg 2000), even when it is not the topic of the sentence. Norwegian, unlike English, seems to exhibit a strong tendency to map referentially given, including at most uniquely identifiable (i.e. not activated or familiar) material onto a cleft clause rather than as part of the main clause. This is illustrated by the strong preference in Norwegian, for clefting questions, especially wh-questions. As noted in the previous section, three of the Norwegian clefts that were not translated as clefts in English were questions. The preference for expressing uniquely identifiable/presupposed material inside a cleft clause is also seen in examples in (26) and (29), where the material in the cleft clause is referentially given, even though it is part of the relationally new information expressed in the sentence. As Hedberg (2000) points out, the cleft clause in such examples is analogous to definite descriptions whose content is uniquely identifiable, but not necessarily familiar. Thus, the comment in (26) is the whole proposition that people seldom went that way except on the weekend. The fact that people would travel on a road sometime is not the topic of the sentence, but it is nevertheless taken for granted, and in that sense uniquely identifiable and at least weakly presupposed. Similarly, the comment in (29) is the whole proposition that midwives don’t give birth to the child themselves. The fact that someone gives birth to the child is not the topic of (29), but it is presupposed and therefore expressed in the cleft clause.

Another information structural function that clefts perform is that they make it possible to express relationally new (i.e. focal/comment) material inside the VP/IP, thus keeping it out of subject position and resulting in a closer mapping between the psychological subject and predicate (topic-focus structure) and the surface syntactic subject and predicate. In the prototypical cleft, exemplified by (12)-(15) above, the position for focus/comment is the clefted constituent, while topical material is expressed inside the cleft clause. In such constructions, the focal accent falls inside the clefted constituent. However, as noted in section 3, the focal material in a cleft can also be distributed across the clefted constituent and the cleft clause, with focal accent falling inside the clause. Such constructions, which Prince (1978) refers to as ‘informative presupposition’ clefts, are exemplified in (16)-(19). While both English and Norwegian allow clefts with focal material inside the cleft clause, such constructions appear to be much more common in Norwegian, and 20 of the 23 Norwegian clefts that were not translated as clefts in English were of this type. One reason for this may be a stronger preference in Norwegian to keep focal material out of surface subject position. This tendency can be observed also by a strong preference against indefinite subjects in Norwegian and the corresponding high frequency of existential and presentational constructions (see Lodrup 1999). It is interesting to note in support of this that the non-cleft alternatives to the majority of Norwegian clefts that weren’t translated as English clefts would have subjects that are part of the focus/comment and, in some cases, would also receive focal stress.

5 According to Ball (1991), ‘informative presupposition’ clefts are a relatively recent development in the history of English.
Absolute restrictions and constraints on clefts or their alternatives do not differ in the two languages and the information structural properties are the same as well. In both languages, the cleft clause encodes information that has a referential givenness status of at least uniquely identifiable, so that the material in the clause is presupposed or ‘taken for granted’ in some sense. With respect to relational givenness/newness, both languages allow clefts where the cleft clause encodes topic and the clefted constituent is focal/comment. And both languages allow clefts where focal material is contained within the cleft clause, with focal stress falling within the clause as well. However, the latter type of cleft is more frequently used in Norwegian than in English. We have hypothesized that this is due to a stronger tendency to map information structure directly onto syntactic structure in Norwegian. Specifically, it was proposed that there is a strong preference for encoding presupposed material in the cleft clause and for keeping focal material out of subject position. Because of the very limited nature of the data, these conclusions obviously remain very tentative. Further research is needed which examines Norwegian translations of original English texts as well as the frequency and distribution of clefts in comparable original texts in the two languages.

References


