

Abstract:

Both cleft and existential constructions are much debated in the literature, but they are not often compared. Especially in Norwegian (and Swedish), where most dialects have *det* ('it') as the subject in both, it can be hard to tell them apart. Using material from the Nordic Dialect Corpus and NoTa Oslo, I will show that it is difficult to make *it/there*-sentences of spontaneous speech fit into the traditional, categorical boxes.

A sentence like (1) would traditionally be regarded as either a cleft or an existential depending on the context and the pronunciation:

- (1) *Det* *var* *EI JENTE* *som* *kom* *på besøk til henne.*
 (*It/there* *was* *A GIRL who* *came* *to see her.*)

The Norwegian and Danish reference grammars have clear-cut definitions of the two constructions. They both consider the *specificity* of the highlighted NP as the most important categorizing feature; the reading of 1) as an existential construction should always coincide with a reading of the highlighted NP as specific. This is despite the fact that NPs like this are often non-specific in corresponding “regular” existential sentences: *Det kom EI JENTE på besøk til henne.* (*There came A GIRL to see her.*)

I would claim, however, that the differences in *presupposition* more clearly separate the two types, especially in analyses of spontaneous speech. Prototypically, *there*-existentials are “all-new”, while *it*-clefts have presupposed relative clauses.

I will also discuss to what extent the highlighted NPs could be said to have *focus* in these constructions. This clearly depends on how the term is defined.