

ON THE USE OF FOCUSING CONSTRUCTIONS BY BULGARIAN STUDENTS OF ENGLISH

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Abstract. This paper focusses on the use of specific information packaging constructions, based on data extracted from seven recordings of the speech and debate tournaments that the Bulgarian English Speech and Debate Tournaments Foundation organizes at a high-school level. The main aim is to describe and discuss examples of negative inversions, clefts, passives, existentials, and extrapositions by applying qualitative and quantitative methods. The analysis of the data shows that participation in debates can encourage students to make use of focussing constructions in argumentative discourse and help them showcase their mastery of the English language. Moreover, the study offers valuable insight into the communication patterns used by Bulgarian teenagers as speakers of English as a foreign language.

Keywords: focussing constructions; information packaging; information structure; debates; Bulgarian learners of English

Introduction

By gaining more popularity nowadays, debates are used in a variety of environments – from parliamentary to classroom venues, from court cases to tournament venues. Teachers of foreign languages appreciate the value of including exercises in a debate form not only to keep abreast with the newest teaching trends but also to improve students' speaking skills. The main question of why some teachers are still reluctant or even fearful to include debate as a classroom activity remains. One possible reason, as Brown (2009) points out, could be the limited or even lack of time teachers can spare for such activities (p. 546). Another explanation could be related to the fact that speaking as a classroom component is neglected, especially in countries which have adopted the Grammar Translation Method. In this vein, based on their observations of the Dutch school system, el Majidi et al. (2022) claim that "speaking skills receive the least attention in comparison to other skills in [their] teaching practice" (p. 2). One way-out is suggested by Vesselinov (2020) who argues that: "The interactivity among the participants in foreign language

training requires a rethinking and reevaluation of the roles of the individual actors and a theoretical and practical explication of their semiotic functions” (p. 7).

According to Alexander et al. (2019), students’ persuasion skills that encompass building strong arguments, solving problems, and finding evidence for strong conclusions can be mentioned among the final stages to becoming a higher-order critical thinker (p. 266). However, this 21st century demanding skill is not easy to achieve. Krieger (2005) asserts that debates are a powerful tool for “providing meaningful listening, speaking and writing practice” (online source, no pagination). He also suggests that debates are among the best means to building argumentation skills by “engaging students in a variety of cognitive and linguistic ways.” Hence, one of the unification principles of different types and styles of debates is the language used. No doubt, those equipped with the best language skills will turn the debate into a winning game. The choice of the syntactic constructions during the argument presentation/s is of huge importance, to begin with.

At the core of any debate is the good argumentation channel and presentation debaters provide. Becker (2012) claims that argumentation is considered a “social activity” in which a group of people present, rebut, support their beliefs against another group and this seems to be a subject of interest to Pragmatics (pp. 257 – 272). Indeed, Pragmatics appears to play a crucial part in the argument formation and presentation. Word stress or intonation at the sentence level can help the argument achieve a goal aimed at a specific purpose and/or corroboration. For instance:

- *I will need a couple of minutes to think the matter over.*, and
- *I will need a couple of minutes to think over the matter.*

Even though a specific construction can have the same grammatical and lexical meaning as in the examples above, the exact use, arrangement, and connotation determines why the interlocutor would choose either of the two options. The choice of sentence structures will contribute to the better management of the speech, which will also allow the winning team to achieve the desired and indisputable victory. In her seminal work, Goldberg (1995) discusses such and other cases to argue that it is not only the verb and its constituents that are responsible for bringing a variety of meanings, but the construction choice in which they appear will also be crucial to the overall strength of the utterance.

In what follows, we will ponder on the significance of constructions choice in relation to debate tournaments and the degree of usefulness of certain constructions to achieve victory at a debate. This paper seeks to explore a specific number of non-canonical English syntactic constructions that are used during debates. The main objective of the paper is to investigate the frequency and intensity of use of some information packaging constructions, such as negative inversions, clefts, passives, existentials, and extrapositions. The examples from the collected corpus of debate motions will be analyzed through Lambrecht’s categories of information packaging (1994, p.6):

- Presupposition and assertion, which have to do with the structuring of propositions into portions which a speaker assumes an addressee already knows or does not yet know;
- Identifiability and activation, which have to do with a speaker's assumptions about the statuses of the mental representations of discourse referents in the addressee's mind at the time of an utterance; and
- Topic and focus, which have to do with a speaker's assessment of the relative predictability vs. unpredictability of the relations between propositions and their elements in given discourse situations.

Methodology and Corpus

The methodology approach involves analysis and synthesis of data, derived from our research on information packaging constructions. Two types of data have been studied: qualitative and quantitative. The mentioned focussing constructions have been analyzed through the application of Lambrecht's framework of information structuring (1994) which involves a three-fold approach to processing linguistic data. In contrast to the Functional Sentence Perspective theory, Lambrecht's framework dissects and analyzes a proposition from a speaker's point of what the hearer should or should not know prior to the act of utterance. Another significant contrast is that Lambrecht's focus need be motivated by a presupposition and need not evoke mental representations in the addressee's mind.

The sample group used for the study consists of 48 high school students who participated in the Bulgarian Speech and Debate Tournaments (BEST) at different stages (regional, and/or national) of the competition during the academic years 2020/2021 and 2021/2022. The level of language acquisition varies from B1 to C1 in accordance with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and, hence, students can compete in two types of debates: novices and varsities. The corpus of the study comprises information packaging constructions, excerpted from the tournaments held during the 2020 – 2022 competition rounds recorded on the online Discord platform. The number of videos we could obtain from the organizers are seven with a total number of 431 view time minutes. Some of the limitations of this study are related to the sound quality of the videos, i.e. specific parts in some of the recordings were distorted, which has affected the quantitative analysis. Another problem is related to language production. As subjects of this investigation are high school students, who are still in the process of completing their advanced level English language skills, they had some issues with the non-canonical focussing constructions. BEST uses the world schools' system of debating, i.e. students at the specific levels are allocated to either a proposition or opposition side on a motion provided. Debates are divided into Prepared (known prior to the tournament) and Impromptu (not known prior to the tournament). The Prepared debate motions are announced four weeks before the actual tournaments

and students will need to conduct their own research related to the motion. The debate areas for research for the Impromptu debates are provided no later than three weeks prior to the competition. Each team is comprised of three students (in some cases of five to allow for substitutes) and they decide the organization of the speaking flow – they can either cycle or assign one student to speak on the whole team’s behalf. After the first three speeches by each team, there come the reply-speeches, which summarize the presented points. According to the BEST policies, the competition begins with the proposition and then proceeds with the opposition, each member of the team having only 8 minutes to present. Students are allowed to interrupt other team’s speeches (also called Points of Information or POIs) though they are encouraged to do this after the individual’s presentation is over. The debate finishes with a reply speech by each team with the opposition starting first.

Results

The BEST debates are a very good venue for high school students to show their potential as users of English as a foreign language. The event organization is premised on the fact that students be or not be prepared in advance in order to achieve their debate goals. Despite the pandemic, the tournament did not cease its course of action, but rather moved all online to respond to the students’ willingness to perform and compete in the respective categories. The 7 videos we were granted access to have allowed us to rewind certain parts of the debates to identify better what type of construction was used. The table below shows in a quantitative manner how often the information packaging constructions have been attested during the debates.

Table 1. Data from the quantitative analysis of constructions used.

#	Type of Non-canonical Constructions	Number of Excerptions
1.	Negative Inversions	18
2.	Clefts	32
3.	Passives	54
4.	Existentials	48
5.	Extrapositions	23

Evident from the table is that the passive voice and the existential *there* constructions seem to be the most popular among high school students, and one good reason could be that students are drilled even at the A1 level (according to CEFR) and so they are familiar enough with their usage and can apply them in different contexts. Another way to explain the highest frequency of use of passive voice constructions could be the similarities in terms of both form and meaning they

share with Bulgarian passives. As for the second highest frequency of existentials, it could be additionally due to the fact that *there* has lost its semantic meaning of being a locative pronoun and so is used as a dummy subject, according to Huddleston and Pullum (2016). This automatically means that within the existential *there* constructions the pronoun cannot be realized as the focus (or the new/unfamiliar information), but rather as the topic (or the old/familiar information) in the utterance, as per Lambrecht (1994).

Negative inversions

Our research reveals that students would prefer to use negative words and/or phrases especially in the rebuttal part of the debates. Most of the times, pupils would use the all-known means of expressing negative statements. In their groundbreaking research on negation in spoken and written English, Biber et al. (2002) classify negation as *not*-negation and *no*-negation. By *no*-negation the authors mean anything from negative determiners (e.g. neither), negative adverbs (e.g. nowhere), negative pronouns (e.g. nobody) to non-assertive words (e.g. any, either, etc.). Interestingly, their findings show that *no*-negation is especially rare compared to *not*-negation as the figure 1 below illustrates:

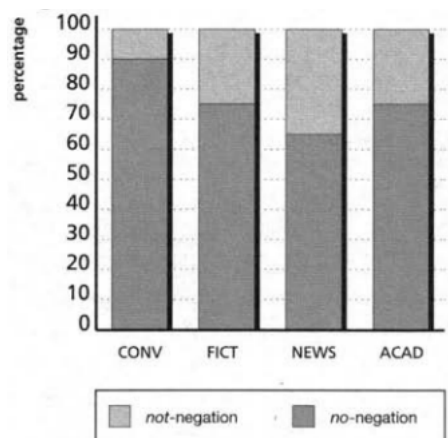


Figure 1. Proportional Use of Not-negation vs. No-negation in Written and Spoken English (borrowed from Biber et al. 2002, p. 245)

Negative inversions are not that commonly used by students in their debate argument building as compared to the other non-canonical constructions. One way to account for the lowest frequency of use of such focussing constructions could relate to the fact that the acquisition of inversion of negative adverbs usually happens at C1, as per CEFR with most of the English teaching programs in Bulgaria.

Despite this small number of usages, students managed to produce some examples during the debates to accommodate variety in their speech:

1. *Under no circumstances can a lie become something good.* [Motion Exhibit 3] – as per Lambrecht (1994), the context of this sentence suggests that “lie” has been pragmatically presupposed and it is an information unit that is not new to the discourse. However, the speaker assumes that the addressee might not activate this knowledge as something specific immediately, though the context suggests that the interlocutors were discussing “white lies” as doing things for good reasons; hence, the use of the speaker’s indefinite article. Still, the old information unit mentioned here is “good” and is expected to be activated through the semantic unit “something”. As for the focus of the utterance, it should also be noted that the negative inversion targets a prepositional phrase headed by “under” that constitutes new information and, thus, is used at the beginning of the sentence.

2. *Little do we know about the production of nuclear power yet.* [Motion Exhibit 1] – the pragmatic presupposition suggests that the speaker from the opposition in the debate does not know much about nuclear power production. Hence, the speaker tries to emphasize this by starting the utterance with the focus, i.e. the negative part, and finish the sentence with something that has previously been activated in the discourse. It is interesting to note that the non-negative inversion version of this statement will be infelicitous to the current one as it will not be able to reinforce the fact that the speaker does not know much about the subject in discussion.

Clefts

English grammar recognizes two types of cleft constructions – the *it*-clefts and the pseudo-clefts (or sometimes called *wh*-clefts). The pseudo-clefts are further subdivided into two kinds – basic and reversed constructions. Syntactically, clefts are regular S-V-O sentences divided into two separate parts, one of which can be an internal complement and the other a subject. In terms of information packaging, one of these parts acts as topic and the other as focus in the cleft. The cleft sentences can generally perspectivise either the subject or the object of the S-V-O sentence. The internal complement appears in both the *it*- and the basic *wh*-clefts. Usually, the internal complement comes after the verb *be* and brings the focus information in the cleft sentence, i.e. since it conveys the most important information, it is the perspectivised part. The subject of the reversed *wh*-cleft comes before the verb *be* and brings the topic in the cleft sentence. It is the information that comes after the verb *be* that should be considered the focus.

Figure 2 shows that the reversed type of cleft sentences are most frequently used with a total of 18 attestations in the debates. Then there come the basic pseudo-clefts with a total number of 9, while the *it*-clefts are least frequently used with a total number of 5 instances. Following Lambrecht (1994), the initial parts of clefts are considered to be the new information within the clause. This automatically

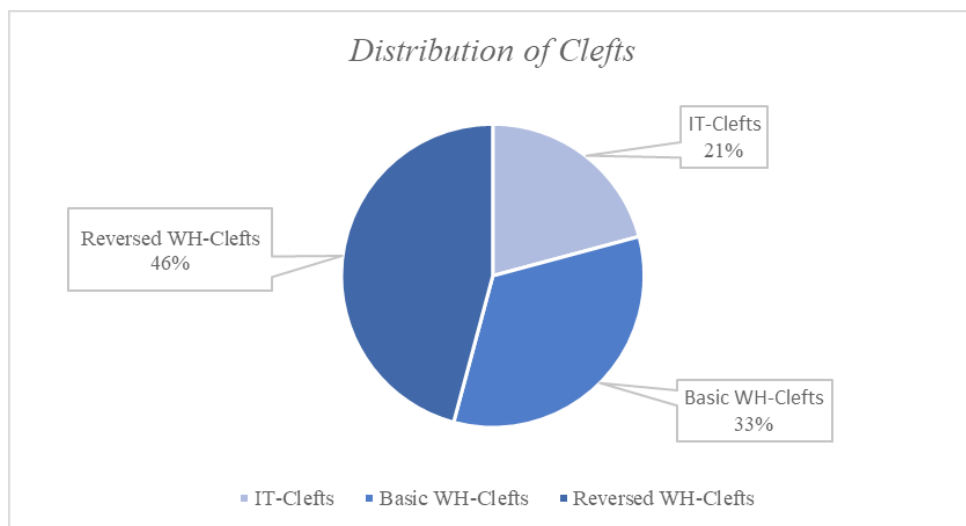


Figure 2. Distribution of clefts

makes them the focus, i.e. the information unit that needs to be activated in the hearer's mind. Hence, the topic would be considered the second part of the relative clause. The following examples discuss the use of clefts from the corpus from the information packaging perspective:

1. *It is the patient who should take the decision.* [Motion Exhibit 5] – the pragmatic presupposition suggests here that in the cases of euthanasia there is a person to take the final decision and this proposition is at least advisable (note the use of the modal verb “should”). Hence, the sentence is perspectived towards the patient as the focus of the utterance, but it is a unit that has been previously activated in the hearers' minds. Remarkably, the non-*it*-cleft sentence is also felicitous in the situation and, thus, the two versions will start with the prosodically marked focus “the patient.”

2. *That's exactly what I am talking about.* [Motion Exhibit 4] – this reverse *wh*-cleft interestingly points to the same scenario. The opposition claimed that any wrongdoing should be penalized and so the proposition took advantage of the statement and produced the utterance. Hence, the relative clause is considered to be the topic as it is discourse old compared to the first part which will be the focus of the sentence.

3. *What annoys me the most is that people accept lies no matter how small they are.* [Motion Exhibit 3] – this utterance came unexpectedly as one of the proposition members suddenly mentioned it during his speech. The previous two sentences would have as focus the very first part until the relative clause, as it contains the

new information towards which the relative clause is construed. However, if we look closely at this example, the focus could be vaguely expressed through the first part only. The relative clause consists of another focus that is construed towards the topic “lies.” Gussenhoven (1983) and Selkirk (1984) accept the existence of multiple foci, even though Lambrecht (1994) firmly disapproves this theory as according to him, even grammatically speaking, sentences cannot be clefted twice (pp. 315 – 318).

The above excerpts demonstrate that the pragmatic presupposition should be clear and the pragmatic assertion at least semi-active in the hearer’s mind. The first and second example are felicitous in both forms – the cleft and its basic S-V-O counterpart. The third will construe towards an infelicitous basic construction and, thus, only the cleft version will be acceptable. The common ground for all the three clefts is that they are divided into two parts – one pragmatically presupposing what could be activated or semi-activated in the other which is the pragmatic assertion area of the addressee.

Passive voice

Passive voice constructions were among the most frequently used information packaging constructions, as seen from Table 1 above. Generally, the regular passive voice constructions were preferred compared to the causatives and the impersonal passive voice. Figure 3 demonstrates the distribution of passive voice constructions attested in our corpus:

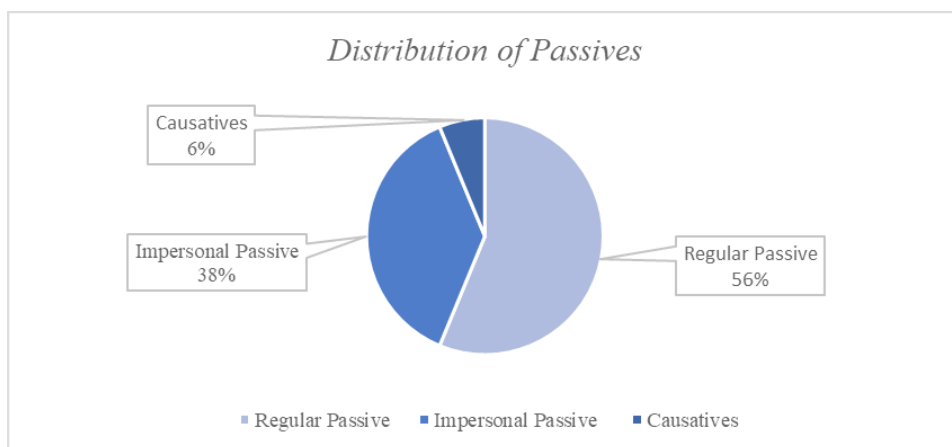


Figure 3. Distribution of Passives

1. *The students should be accepted on grounds of intelligence and competence.*
 [Motion Exhibit 2] – in information packaging terms, this sentence is considered to have two topics – “the students” and “grounds of intelligence and competence”.

This is a notable case, for passive voice seems to allow such constructions, i.e. old information in both the subject and object part of the construction.

2. *It was reported that she had been in so much pain that she preferred to die than live.* [Motion Exhibit 5] – here the reporting passive should be the assumed the focus of the sentence, because it is transferred as a semi-active component in the proposition that the speaker has in mind (i.e., a newspaper article). The pragmatic presupposition would be that there is a sick person, a female, so the topic in the sentence would be “she.” A second focus would be the relative clause construed towards the mentioned proposition.

3. *They will get their colleagues to do the job for them.* [Motion Exhibit 1] – here the new information is “colleagues.” Though the unit “colleagues” has been presupposed to an extent with the use of the possessive pronoun “their,” the whole utterance seems to be perspectived towards the “colleagues.”

To sum-up, the subject of the passive cannot be unfamiliar information as compared to the object part of the sentence, meaning that the assertion should be either active or at least semi-active in the addressee’s mind.

Existentials

Existential *there* sentences are also among the most frequent constructions occurring at debate time. This can be accounted for by the fact that such sentence structures are studied even at A1 level as per CEFR and presumably students will be well-versed using them.

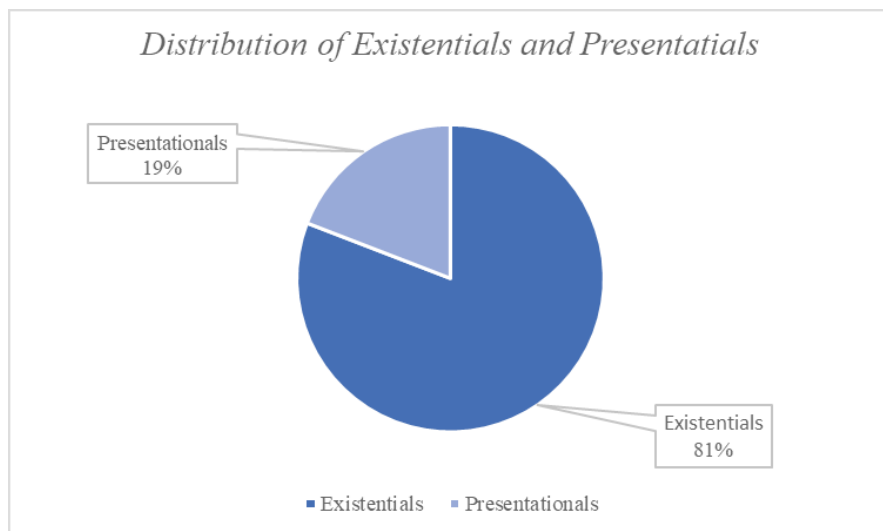


Figure 4. Distribution of Existentials and Presentatials

1. *There are some kinds of sports that are not so widespread.* [Motion Exhibit 7] – the noun “sports” could be treated as discourse old information as the whole motion is about Olympic games and, hence, the idea of sport should be activated in the addressee’s mind. However, the quantifier “some” introduces a new concept that seems to be unidentified as it leads to the focus of the utterance, i.e. “that are not so widespread.”

2. *There appear to be many lies – from innocent to very nasty ones.* [Motion Exhibit 3] – although the displaced subject “lies” should be considered old information here as pragmatic presupposition, the presentational construction introduces it as discourse new, i.e. the focussing construction marks “lies” as unidentifiable referent that needs to be redefined for the purposes of the argument.

Specifically, both examples illustrate infelicitousness towards their basic non-existential counterparts. Hence, the use of both existentials is justified within the given contexts. The verbs used to link the non-locative pronoun should be considered discourse old and at least semi-activated so as to avoid confusion.

Extrapositions

Generally, the effect of using such constructions is to shift the heaviest sentence element to final position in conformity with the end-weight rule. Though there are many cases of extrapositions syntactically, two types were used in the BEST debates – the *it*-extraposition with a declarative type of clause and the *it*-extraposition with a *to*-infinitival type of clause.

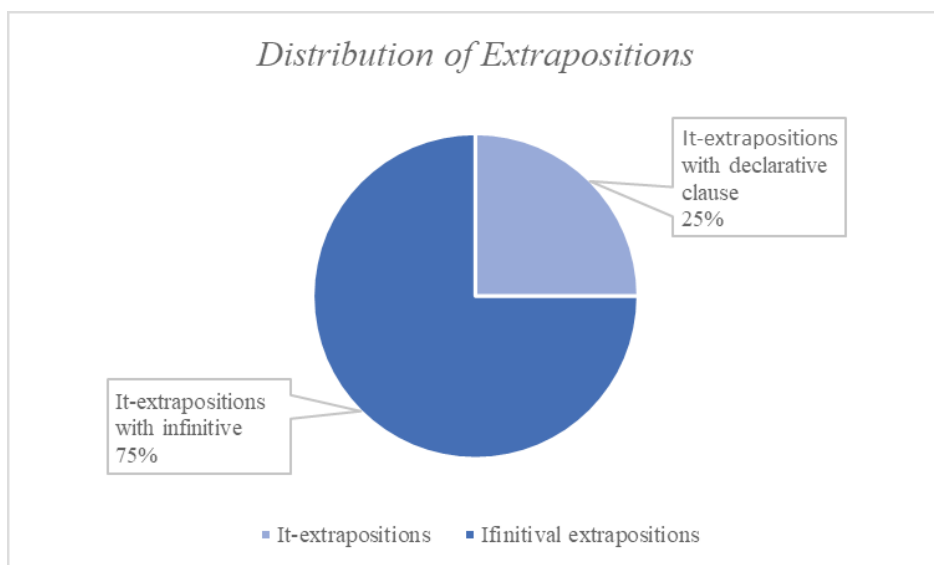


Figure 5. Distribution of Extrapositions

1. *It is not difficult to build such [nuclear] plants.* [Exhibit Motion 6] – the discourse perspective in this statement is oriented towards the act of building nuclear plants as the future of electricity production. The opposition's statement reveals the many dangers this act poses as well as the lack in professionals and advanced technology in building such plants. Hence, the *to*-infinitival part of the utterance should be treated as discourse old, i.e. topic, because it has been activated in the addressees' minds. The pragmatic presupposition even suggests that the speakers have a general idea of how these plants are built and that this act is "not [so] difficult." Consequently, the focus of the utterance will be the first part of the sentence.

2. *It really worries me that you seek friends' help instead of reading and doing what you are supposed to.* [Exhibit Motion 1] – the context of this statement comes from a previous mention of the opposition that it is really hard to deal with Bulgarian administration and, hence, their reliance on inside help. The declarative statement made by the proposition team through a relative clause comes as something familiar and should be treated as the topic of the utterance, as it has been previously activated. The non-extraposed version of this sentence could also be felicitous, but the current choice of starting with the focus seems to be motivated by emotiveness – the feeling that this act of seeking inside help should be treated as unacceptable since, semantically speaking, the verb "worry" expresses "a feeling of anxiety."

Conclusions

It has been confirmed that the BEST foundation debates serve as a pertinent and inspirational venue for high school students to showcase their English language speaking, writing, research, and presentation skills. Some of the non-canonical constructions used by the students appeared sporadically, while others more often; nevertheless, these debates can be a great opportunity for such focussing constructions to be included in the argumentative discourse. In view of the above analysis, the following specific features of the studied information packaging constructions have been highlighted:

The negative inversion structures seem to postulate that the main verb used should not be discourse new as this will make the utterance confusing. The pragmatic presupposition should also be discourse old so it can activate the new information unit initiated by the negative word or phrase.

The pragmatic presupposition in clefts is backgrounded, i.e. it is located at the end of the sentence, and is usually placed in a relative clause construction. By marking a sentence element prosodically as focus, cleft sentences, especially *it*-clefts, give prominence to the first part of the whole utterance.

In contrast, the passive voice constructions, especially the long passives, should usually contain discourse old subjects to make the statement felicitous. Long

passives could start with new information, only if they continue introducing new units to the discourse.

The existentials and presentationals tend to favor the use of definite relative clauses although existentials will need to evoke new information in the relative clause construction.

Similar to the *it*- and *wh*-clefts, extrapositions seem to be more felicitous as compared to their basic S-V-O counterparts.

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