

An introduction to the South Swedish Apparent Cleft (SSAC)

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Abstract:

In this paper, the South Swedish Apparent Cleft (SSAC) is introduced, described and briefly discussed. The SSAC was first observed in the 1940s, and it has not yet been subject to any detailed linguistic analysis. The usage of the SSAC has been examined in a corpus study and via a questionnaire, and the results indicate, but do not confirm, that it truly is a specifically south Swedish syntactic construction. It appears in two main variants (with and without an adverbial expressing speaker attitude) and it displays a number of interesting syntactic properties (the subject must be pronominal, direct objects are disallowed, etc). From a typological perspective, there seem to be equivalent constructions in at least Japanese (*no da*) and English (*it is that*).

1. Introduction

Bergman (1942:175) noted that the construction with *som* in (1) is typical for the dialects of southern Sweden:

- (1) a. - Slåss barnen?
fight children.the
'Are the children fighting?'
- Nej, det är som dom leker.
no it is som they play
'No, they are playing.'
- b. Det är bara som han finner på.
it is only som he finds on.PL¹
'He only makes it up.'

Lombard (1946) wrote a remark on Bergman's observations, but since then the construction has not been discussed. It is mentioned in Jørgensen (1970) and Westroth and Holm (1987), but it is absent in for example SAG (the Swedish Academy Grammar) and in Stroh-Wollin (2002), the latter a comprehensive dissertation about the functions of *som*-clauses in Swedish. Accordingly, there is no acknowledged linguistic label for this construction. In this paper, I will call it the South Swedish Apparent Cleft (SSAC).²

¹ PL = verb particle

² Hiraiwa and Ishihara (2002:36ff) use the term *pseudo-cleft* for a certain Japanese construction, which marginally resembles the SSAC, and Stroh-Wollin (2002:45) notes that similar terms have been in use for another Swedish construction which SAG (IV:519) calls *falsk utbrytning* ('false cleft'). I thank Peter Svenonius for contributing in the choice of the term South Swedish Apparent Cleft.

The construction is interesting since it appears to be a south Swedish regional syntactic feature (in general, southern Swedish is syntactically identical to Standard Swedish – but see e.g. Carlsson (2003) for a description of a minor difference), and since it displays a usage of the multi-functional *som* which is not yet properly described and understood. The SSAC also resembles constructions in English (*it is that*) and in Japanese (*no da*).

First, I will describe the SSAC (section 2) and demonstrate that it is not a regular cleft construction (section 3). Then, in section 4, I present the geographical distribution of the SSAC, and in the following section (5) I briefly comment upon similar constructions in English (*it is that*) and Japanese (the *no da*-construction). Section 6 concludes the paper.

2. The South Swedish Apparent Cleft – a brief description

2.1 Some basic properties³

The SSAC seems to appear mainly in spoken language, and when the construction is found in writing, it typically occurs in direct or indirect speech. The example below is an authentic example from a Swedish novel:

- (2) – Skiljas, sa han bekymrat. Är du verkligen galen,
divorce said he worriedly are you really insane
 eller är det bara som du gör dig till?
or is it just som you make you.REFL to.PL
 ‘Divorce, he said worriedly. Are you really insane, or are you just pretending?’

There are furthermore two main variants of the SSAC, illustrated in (1). It may contain a clause adverbial expressing speaker attitude (e.g. *bara, nog, faktiskt, förmodligen* ‘only/just, probably, actually, presumably’), as in (1b) and (2). Such a constituent is however not necessary, as shown in (1a) and below ((3a) is from a Swedish novel, (3b) and (3c) are authentic examples of spoken language, from Lombard 1946:68):

- (3) a. Det är inte som han är full, det är som han är trött (Piraten)
it is not som he is drunk it is som he is tired
 ‘He isn’t drunk, he’s tired.’

³ The comments on the properties of the SSAC are mainly based on my own and some other Scanian linguists’ intuitions; I thank David Håkansson, Carl-Erik Lundbladh, and Sara Santesson for contributing with grammaticality judgements. I have also searched a corpus (in fact two) for instances of *det är bara som* in a number of Swedish novels. See section 4.

- b. Det är som han har missuppfattat.
it is som he has misunderstood
'He has misunderstood.'
- c. Det är inte som jag har varit försumlig.
it is not som I have been negligent
'I have not been negligent.'

The SSAC can be used to form yes/no-questions (4a) and it is also found in embedded clauses (4b-c):

- (4) a. Är det (verkligen) som han låtsas?
is it (really) som he pretends
'Is he (really) pretending?'
- b. Jag trodde att det (bara) var som han låtsades.
I thought that it (only) was som he pretended
'I thought that he (only) was pretending.'
- c. Om/eftersom det var som han låtsades struntar vi i honom.
if/since it was som he pretended ignore we in.PL him
'If/since he was pretending we ignore him.'

However, *wh*-questions seem only to be allowed in the SSAC when they can be interpreted as concerning the circumstances in which the speaker has uttered the clause. The question in (5a) may for instance be interpreted as 'why do you assume that he is pretending?' and it is thus acceptable. The questions in (5b) are however harder to process as relating to the context for the speaker's utterance, and it is plausible that they for this reason are less acceptable than (5a).

- (5) a. Varför är det som han låtsas?
why is it som he pretends
'Why is he pretending?'
- b. ??När/hur är det som han låtsas?
when/how is it som he pretends

Another restriction of the SSAC is that it does not seem to allow for objects in the *som*-clause. The examples in Bergman (1942) contain no objects, and neither do any of the occurrences I have found in the corpus search (with one possible exception).⁴ However, there are examples with clearly

⁴ The example is:

- (i) Det är otroligt att du fortfarande håller på och ältar det. Jag gillade henne aldrig. I så fall är det bara som du inte erkänner det för dig själv. (Beattie)

The example in (i) is translated from an English novel, and it is not entirely clear that this is a SSAC – it might also be a comparative clause. As a matter of fact, it is quite

transitive verbs (like (3b), above, and (6), below). So, even when there is a transitive verb in the SSAC, there is no object present in the structure.

Another seemingly exceptionless feature of the SSAC is that the subject in the *som*-clause must be a pronoun;⁵ there are no cases with full DP-subjects, either definite or non-definite, neither in the examples from Bergman (1942) nor in the examined novels. This restriction might be caused by the pragmatic features of the SSAC (see section 2.3 below).

2.2 Syntactic structure – some preliminary remarks

Regarding the structure of the SSAC, Bergman (1942) and Lombard (1946) assume that when the verb in the *som*-clause is transitive (as in (3b)), the construction ought to be analyzed as a regular relative clause with a covert antecedent:

- (6) Det är **något** som han har missuppfattat.
it is something which he has misunderstood
 ‘That is something which he has misunderstood.’

As for the intransitive cases of the SSAC, Bergman (1942) and Lombard (1946) claim that *som* should be understood as some form of comparative subordinator, with an invisible *så* ‘as’ (as in (7b)) – the deciding factor for this analysis seems to be the possibility of a comparative interpretation:

- (7) a. Det är bara som det ser ut.
it is only som it looks out.PL
 ‘It is just as it appears.’
 b. Det är bara **så** som det ser ut. (cf. (7a))

Some examples of the SSAC can however not be analysed as relative clauses with missing antecedents, nor as comparative clauses:

- (8) -Varför springer kycklingarna omkring i garaget?
why run chickens.the around.PL in garage.the
 ‘Why are the chickens running around in the garage?’
 - Det är bara som de har kommit in dit av missstag.
it is only som they have come in.PL there by mistake
 ‘They just came in there by mistake.’

hard to understand exactly what (i) means, even in the context of a longer section of the text, and I will not comment further on this possible exception.

⁵ One (and only one) of my Scanian informants accept full DP-subjects, however. On the other hand, this informant accepted all of the given examples, even those that I and the rest of the informants considered to be distinctly ungrammatical.

Lombard (1946:69) states that *som* in these cases function as a coordinator, with an explaining or causal meaning which can be paraphrased as *because* or *so that*. Hence Lombard analyzes the SSAC in three different fashions: as a relative clause with a covert antecedent, as a kind of comparative clause, and as some form of explanatory main clause.

It is quite clear that Bergman's and Lombard's structural explanation is unsatisfactory. They assign different structures to their examples depending on the lexical content of the *som*-clause, thereby not considering the fact that they first observed the SSAC just because it appeared to be a specific syntactic construction with specific syntactic and pragmatic features. It is unlikely that the sets of syntactic and pragmatic features would be so consistent, if there were three underlying syntactic structures in the SSAC.

The SSAC is rather, I think, a construction that should be analysed on a par with other syntactic constructions, such as clefts, existential constructions and so forth – the existence of similar (or identical?) constructions in other languages is an indication that this view of the SSAC is correct. A detailed analysis of the SSAC thus would require considerably more research than it has so far been possible for me to undertake. Suffice it to say that such an analysis must probably also take clefts, comparative clauses, and a number of other types of clauses involving *som* into account; Stroh-Wollin (2002) may serve as the starting point of such a task.

So, I will not endeavour into a detailed syntactic analysis of the SSAC in this paper. However, there is a curious fact that lends some support to the idea that there is a covert direct object in the SSACs with transitive verbs in the *som*-clause. This is supported by the fact that such SSACs seem to be acceptable with an indirect object in the *som*-clause – the example sentence in (9) was considered grammatical by the Scanian linguist informants:

- (9) - Hur fick Lisa tag i ett så fint piano?
how got Lisa hold in.PL a so fine piano
 Köpte hon det av sin farfar?
bought she it from her grandfather
 'How did Lisa get hold such a fine piano? Did she buy it from her grandfather?'
 - Nej, det var som han gav henne i julklapp.
no it was som he gave her in christmas-present
 'No, he gave it to her for Christmas.'

The presence of the indirect object *hennes* is a clear indication that there is also a direct object in the structure, although covert. A possible solution is to assume, like Bergman (1942) and Lombard (1946), that there is a covert

antecedent and that the *som*-clause hence should be seen as a regular relative clause. But the problem then remains: how should the other types of SSACs be analyzed? I leave this unsolved dilemma to future research.

2.3 Discourse function

The SSAC can be used with both linguistic and non-linguistic antecedents:

- (10) a. context: Calvin walks limping along the street.
 speaker A: – Titta, Calvin haltar!
look Calvin limps
 ‘Look, Calvin is limping.’
 speaker B: – Äsch, det är som han låtsas!
bah it is som he pretends
 ‘Bah, he is only pretending.’
- b. context: Calvin walks limping along the street. B knows that he is pretending and tells A:
 – Det är som han låtsas.

The SSAC thus requires some type of antecedent. It cannot, according to my intuitions, be uttered out of the blue. This might explain why the subject of the *som*-clause must be a pronoun; the SSAC is always uttered in a context with known participants, and thus only personal pronouns may be used when referring to these participants.

The discourse function of the SSAC is to express information that is known to the speaker but not to the listener, especially in cases when the outer appearance is misleading. It is thus mainly explanatory. In (10a-b), speaker B signals that he/she knows that what can be seen (the limping) is not the actual state of affairs by uttering the SSAC, and, implicitly, that he/she also knows that there are good reasons for speaker A to come to the wrong conclusions. The SSAC may therefore sound ‘assured, didactic and preachy’ (Otake 2001), just as the Japanese *no da*-construction or the English *it is that*-construction (see below). It is possible that adverbials such as *bara* (‘only/just’) occurs frequently in the SSAC (and *just* in the *it is that*-construction) because the speaker wants to avoid the impression that he/she is forcing information on the hearer.

3. The SSAC is not a cleft

The SSAC is in many ways similar to a Swedish cleft construction:

- (11) Det var igår som han kom. = cleft construction
it was yesterday som he came
 ‘It was yesterday he arrived.’

The similarities are however superficial – the SSAC displays a number of features that separate it from regular cleft constructions, clearly demonstrated in the previous section.⁶ In this short section, I point out two additional, quite obvious, differences.

3.1 *No stress, no focus*

Unlike clefts, the “clefted” constituent is not marked by phonological stress in a SSAC. Neither is it focused.

3.2 *No obligatory clefted constituent*

A cleft construction needs a clefted constituent, while the SSAC does not (as has been exemplified above). Furthermore, in a regular cleft construction, the clefted constituent is in general an argument or a VP-adverb – adverbials expressing speaker attitude are quite strange in the cleft position:

(12) ?? It was actually/only/probably that he came yesterday.

In the SSAC, however, only such adverbials may appear in the “cleft” position, a circumstance that makes it possible to separate SSACs from clefts even when there is a possibly clefted adverbial constituent in the matrix clause.

4. Geographical distribution

Both Bergman (1942) and Lombard (1946) point out that the SSAC is a south Swedish phenomenon, but no exact geographic limitations are suggested. I have tried to pinpoint the diffusion of the SSAC by searching for it in written material, i.e. novels (since authors can be located geographically), and by sending out a questionnaire.

4.1 *The corpus investigation*

I have searched two collections of Swedish novels for the SSAC, two of the corpora available at Språkbanken (<http://spraakbanken.gu.se/>). These corpora (Bonniers svenska romaner I+II) contain 129 novels and approximately 9.6 million words.

⁶ The SSAC also resembles a Swedish expressive clause (cf SAG IV:561ff):

- (i) Det är fantastiskt som han arbetar!
it is fantastic som he works
 ‘It is fantastic how he works!’

Again, the similarities are superficial – an expressive clause must contain some form of expressive predicate in the matrix clause, and the set of such predicates is rather narrow (cf SAG IV:563). Such predicates do not appear in SSACs.

Novels were chosen since it is easier to place known authors on a map than journalists and other writers who are not mentioned in works of reference. Some of the novels had been translated, however, and then it became a problem to find the birth places of the translators, of course – here I have failed completely, not having been able to locate a single translator (so far). Thus, only the examples that could be linked to a geographical location, through an author, are discussed in this section.

Unfortunately, the search routines at Språkbanken cannot handle searches that contain too many very frequent words. So, I could not search for a “bare” SSAC (*det är som*), but had to search for SSACs containing an adverbial. I chose *bara* ‘just’ since this is the adverbial which seems to be most commonly used in the SSAC.

The result of this little investigation is that the SSAC with *bara* occurs in Svealand and in Götaland, i.e. in the middle and in the south of Sweden, but not in the northern parts of Sweden (Norrland). I have only found one single author, P-G Evander, from Norrland, who makes use of the SSAC. Evander was born in Gästrikland, the southernmost part of Norrland which is adjacent to Uppland; from a dialectal viewpoint, it is however traditionally assumed that the dialect of Gästrikland belongs to the dialectal area of Svealand (Wessén 1958:30, 38). Therefore Evander’s SSACs do not contradict the hypothesis that the SSAC is not used in the northern parts of Sweden – in this case the administrative borders and the dialectal borders do not coincide. Other Norrlandic authors provide no examples of the SSAC, as far as I can tell.

4.2 *The questionnaire*

Since I could not search for “bare” SSACs in Språkbanken, I found it necessary also to investigate the spread of SSACs with only *det är som*. I chose to do so by letting students at the departments for Swedish at the universities in Stockholm, Gothenburg, Lund, and Umeå fill in a questionnaire.⁷ In total, I received 61 questionnaires that were properly answered. The questionnaire was designed to test the use of both bare and non-bare SSACs, and it contained two parts. In part one, the informant was asked to reformulate a SSAC in his/her own words, and in part two the task was to decide whether the given examples were ok, dubious, or ungrammatical in a certain context. In one of these tasks (task 2), all of the alternatives were distinctly ungrammatical. The purpose was to identify possible informants with clearly atypical intuitions, and one of the informants actually accepted

⁷ I thank Peter Andersson, David Håkansson, Halldor Sigurdsson, Ulla Stroh-Wollin, and the staff at the office at the department in Umeå for their help with distributing and collecting questionnaires. I also thank all of the 61 anonymous informants!

all of these examples, which were considered ungrammatical by everyone else. I have categorized this particular informant as not trustworthy and the informant's answers are not included in the present discussion.

There were three alternatives to be judged in every given context – they followed the pattern below:

- (13) a. Han är bara trött.
he is just tired
 'He's just tired.'
- b. Det är bara som han är trött.
it is just som he is tired
 'He's just tired/it is just that he's tired.'
- c. Det är som han är trött.
it is som he is tired
 'He's tired/it is that he's tired.'

(13a) is of course standard Swedish, and, as expected, all informants accepted these alternatives. It was more surprising to find that examples such as (13b) were accepted by some Norrlandic speakers – even a speaker from Kiruna (in the far north of Sweden) considered one of the examples with *bara som* to be grammatical. However, even though a few northern informants accepted some *bara som*-constructions, only informants from Småland (one out of 4), Halland (one out of 3) and Skåne (5 out of 10) considered all of the *bara som*-examples to be fully grammatical. The general picture therefore is that the tendency to accept *bara som*-clauses is stronger the further south in Sweden you go.

As for examples such as (13c), i.e. the bare SSAC, no informant accepted them as fully grammatical. As a matter of fact, only two informants, one from Västergötland and one from Skåne, considered all of the bare SSAC-examples to be grammatical. This I had not expected, given the examples provided by Bergman (1942) and Lombard (1946). I believe there are three possible explanations for this.

First, it is possible that the bare SSAC is a construction that is typical for spoken language and that it hence is banned from written language. Virtually all of the examples from Bergman (1942) and Lombard (1946) are gathered either directly from spoken language or from written direct or indirect speech.

Second, it might be the case that the SSAC is not as common as it used to be. If the SSAC is (or was) a construction that was typical for dialects in southern Sweden, then it might be rarer now, more than half a century after it was described by Bergman (1942), due to the gradual disappearance of south Swedish dialectal phenomena in general. The majority of my infor-

informants were younger than 30 years of age, and accordingly Bergman's informants could have been their grandparents (or even great-grandparents).

The third conceivable explanation is that there are flaws in the questionnaire which prevent the informants from expressing their true intuitions about the SSAC. If so, an improved elicitation technique would yield a more accurate picture of the actual status of the SSAC in Swedish today.

One may conclude that the results from the questionnaire support the hypothesis that the SSAC mainly is a southern Swedish construction, especially when it concerns the *bara som*-variant. As for the bare SSAC (*det är som*), the results do not provide any firm evidence that it is still in use in southern Sweden.

5. Two similar constructions: English *it is that* and Japanese *no da*

The SSAC displays some similarities with other constructions in Swedish (clefts, comparative clauses, etc.), but also from an inter-language perspective, the SSAC seems to belong to a cluster of similar constructions. There are some functional/pragmatic features that are common for the English *it is that*-construction, the Japanese *no da*-construction and the SSAC – they appear to occur in similar contexts and they appear to have similar discourse functions. As a reply to the statement in (14), all of these constructions are viable (the English and Japanese examples are quoted from Otake 2001):

(14) Nobody has invited me to the dance...

it is that: It is that I'm not pretty enough.

SSAC: Det är som jag inte är tillräckligt snygg.
it is som I not am enough pretty

no da: Watashi wa amari kawaiku nai no da wa.

I TOP enough pretty not C COP PL.FEM

There are several structural similarities both across these three constructions (cf. Declerck 1992, Otake 2001, Hiraiwa and Ishihara 2002) and when compared to cleft sentences. In all of these constructions, one finds a copula verb (Sw. *är*, Eng. *is*, Jap. *da*) and a highly grammaticalized element that occupies C (Swe. *som*, Eng. *that*, Jap. *no*). The examples below illustrate the structural similarities (the Japanese and English examples are quoted from Hiraiwa and Ishihara 2002:36ff):

- (15) Japanese
 cleft: Taro-ga tabeta **no**-wa kono-ringo-o **da**
Taro.NOM ate C.TOP this-apple.ACC COP
 ‘It is this apple that Taro ate.’
 ‘pseudo-cleft’: Taro-ga tabeta **no**-wa kono-ringo **da**
Taro.NOM ate C.TOP this-apple COP
 ‘It is this apple that Taro ate.’
no da: Taro-ga kono-ringo-o tabeta **no da**
Taro.NOM this apple.ACC ate C COP
 ‘It is that Taro ate this apple.’
- (16) English
 cleft: It is this apple that Taro ate.
it is that: It is that Taro ate this apple.
- (17) Swedish
 cleft: Det var han som låtsades.
it was he som pretended
 ‘It was he who pretended.’
 SSAC: Det var som han låtsades.
it was som he pretended
 ‘He pretended/it was that he pretended.’

An interesting question is whether the SSAC has exactly the same pragmatic properties as the *no da*-construction or the *it is that*-construction, or whether they are dissimilar. Also the structural similarities are of course compelling.

6. Conclusions

The SSAC is a syntactic construction that appears to be specific for southern Sweden. It has so far only received marginal attention, and although the data in this work contribute to the knowledge about the use of the construction in Modern Swedish, the exact pragmatic and syntactic qualities of the SSAC remain to be investigated. The SSAC furthermore seems to share properties with similar constructions, both within Swedish as well as in cross-linguistic perspective. From the typological perspective, the SSAC furthermore offers an opportunity to study a possible cluster of syntactic constructions which seem to occupy a relatively narrow pragmatic domain, and it raises the question whether cognate constructions are present in more languages than Japanese and English.

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