

# Transparent, free... and polarised: the (poli)tics of polarity in transparent free relatives

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‘Transparent Free Relatives’ (TFRs hereinafter) are a subspecies of free relatives that has attracted some attention in the recent literature. Their name is due to Wilder (1998, 1999), whose work sparked renewed interest in examples of the type in (1) (cf. Nakau 1971, Kajita 1977, McCawley 1988).<sup>1</sup>

- (1) a. Henk discussed <a> what he called <a> far from simple matter.  
b. Henk besprak <een> wat hij noemde <een> verre  
Henk discussed a what he called a far  
van eenvoudige kwestie.  
from simple matter

Wilder argues for an analysis of TFRs in which the relative contains a full copy of what I will call the ‘share’ (the constituent that is intuitively shared by the free relative and the matrix clause, functioning at the same time as the predicate of the free relative and as the matrix-clause element modified by the TFR<sup>2</sup>), deleted via backward deletion under identity with the nucleus, as depicted in (2a). Van Riemsdijk (1998, 2000, 2001, 2004) instead proposes an analysis in terms of what he calls ‘grafting’ — involving a three-dimensional structure (which I will not try to reproduce on paper; see Van Riemsdijk’s work for illustration) featuring the share as being merged simultaneously with the free relative and with the matrix

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<sup>1</sup> This small paper is presented to Henk van Riemsdijk on the occasion of his (forced) retirement from the department he founded and made flourish. As teacher, external thesis committee member, colleague, boss, source of inspiration, and friend, Henk has been a permanent presence in my (linguistic and extra-linguistic) life for almost two decades. *Dankjewel, Henk — ‘t ga je goed!*

<sup>2</sup> Van Riemsdijk (2001), using a botanical metaphor in his account of TFRs, calls this the ‘callus’; Grosu (2003) refers to it as the ‘transparent nucleus’. I have chosen the term ‘share’. The size and category of the share depend on the placement of the article in (1): with the article to the right of the FR, the share is the noun phrase *a far from simple matter* (as depicted in (2)); with the article preceding the FR, the share is the complex AP *far from simple*. I will by and large ignore article placement in what follows.

predicate. On both Wilder's analysis and Van Riemsdijk's alternative, the TFR functions in its external syntactic environment as a modifier of the share. Grosu (2003), by contrast, argues that TFRs are (at least in syntax) garden-variety free relatives, with the share uniquely represented inside the free relative clause (cf. (2b)).

- (2) a. Henk discussed [what<sub>i</sub> he called ~~t<sub>i</sub> a far from simple matter~~] a far from simple matter.  
 b. Henk discussed [what<sub>i</sub> he called t<sub>i</sub> a far from simple matter].

Grosu's general line of argument is that, Wilder's and Van Riemsdijk's arguments notwithstanding, there is no convincing case to be made for anything other than the simplest imaginable analysis of TFRs, as in (2b). He argues that the properties that Wilder and Van Riemsdijk inventoried as arguments against a simple approach along the lines of (2b) are either empirically spurious or else do not actually support an analytical departure from (2b). I will not have space here to review Grosu's counterpoint to Wilder's and Van Riemsdijk's arguments; but an immediate indication that all is not 'business as usual' in the realm of TFRs comes from the fact that the Dutch example in (1b) has a surface word order inside the free relative that is ungrammatical in garden-variety free relatives, due to a violation of the verb-final word-order requirement imposed on non-root clauses in the language. It is difficult to see how an analysis along the lines of (2b), applied to the Dutch case in (1b), would be able to accommodate this robust word-order property.

In this short paper, rather than revisiting the growing literature on TFRs, I will highlight what I believe is a novel empirical domain in the context of the analysis of TFRs. Though the literature on TFRs has unearthed what can truly be called a wealth of empirical material, one domain that seems to have escaped scholars' attention so far in this connection is the distribution of negative polarity items (NPIs) inside and outside TFRs. I will show that this presents what seems to me to be an insurmountable challenge to an analysis *à la* (2b), thus lending additional support for an approach along the lines suggested by Wilder or Van Riemsdijk. Along the way, I will also present some suggestive facts discriminating between the Wilder and Van Riemsdijk analyses — facts presenting what appears to be evidence favouring the latter, three-dimensional approach.

Let me start by making some initial observations concerning the distribution of NPIs inside and outside TFRs, to set the stage for the

discussion to follow. Notice first that TFRs can contain an NPI licensed by a TFR-external negation:<sup>3</sup>

- (3) a. John is not what *anyone* would call clever.  
 b. Jan is niet wat *ook maar iemand* zou noemen slim.
- (4) a. John is not what *anyone* would call a clever guy.  
 b. Jan is niet wat *ook maar iemand* zou noemen een slimme vent.

Conversely, it is also possible for TFRs to contain a negation that licenses a polarity item in the share:<sup>4</sup>

- (5) a. John is <a> what nobody would call <a> *remotely* clever guy.  
 b. Jan is <een> wat niemand zou noemen <een> *ook maar enigszins/bijster* slimme vent.

TFRs containing a quantifier of the ‘harmful intervener’ type set up an intervention effect for the licensing of a polarity item across them, as shown by the primed examples in (6) and also by the relevant versions of the Linebarger-inspired examples in (7). (The harmful intervener is in bold type.)

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<sup>3</sup> From now on (to save space), I will forgo glossing the Dutch equivalents of the English examples, highlighting the relevant portions of the examples with the aid of italicisation. To ensure that we are dealing with TFRs, not garden-variety FRs, I will use [+human] shares throughout (which, as Wilder points out, would not accept *what* as the relative pronoun in garden-variety FRs: *\*what is standing in the corner is John* is awkward), and, for Dutch, I will systematically use the verb *noemen* ‘call’ PRECEDING the predicate in the TFR: as I pointed out above, V–Pred word order resists a regular free relative parse. (The alternative Pred–V order is grammatical as well, but considerably less revealing for the purposes of the arguments to be constructed in what follows.)

<sup>4</sup> There may be a (weak) effect of article placement (or category; recall fn. 2) on NPI-licensing in these examples, but the effect does not seem to be very robust or stable across speakers. While NPI-licensing becomes iffy in (Dutch) TFRs whose share is a *predicative* adjective in the matrix clause (cf. *??Jan is wat niemand zou noemen ook maar enigszins/bijster slim* ‘Jan is what nobody would call remotely clever’), no dramatic degradation is noticeable in (5b) when the article is placed to the left of the free relative. There are questions here that remain to be looked into more fully; I lack the space and insight to address them in this paper.

- (6) a. None of these people is what you'd call a (*remotely*) dangerous terrorist.  
 a'. None of these people is what **everyone** would call a (*\*remotely*) dangerous terrorist.  
 b. Geen van deze personen is wat je zou noemen een (*ook maar enigszins*) gevaarlijke terrorist.  
 b'. Geen van deze personen is wat **iedereen** zou noemen een (*\*ook maar enigszins*) gevaarlijke terrorist.
- (7) a. Nobody gave that charity what {*anyone*/**\*everyone**} would call a *red cent*.  
 b. Niemand gaf die liefdadigheidsinstelling wat {*ook maar iemand*/**\*iedereen**} zou noemen *een rooie cent*.

All of these facts are compatible with Grosu's (2003) 'regular FR' approach to TFRs, of course: they are, in fact, exactly what one would expect on that analysis. The alternatives proposed by Wilder and Van Riemsdijk can accommodate these observations without difficulty as well: on both accounts, there is (a portion or dimension of) a structure in which the polarity item is c-commanded by its licenser and in which an intervention effect can manifest itself — *viz.*, the portion or dimension of the structure that represents the full free relative (with concrete reference to (2a): the bracketed part, with the struck-out constituent included in it in the syntactic wing of the derivation).

Now that the stage has been properly set, let me proceed to a discussion of the key polarity data, which have to do with the precise point in the derivation at which NPIs are licensed. One customarily comes across statements in the literature to the effect that *any*-NPIs must be licensed *at S-structure* — put differently, *any*-NPIs must be c-commanded by their licensers in the overt syntax. And indeed, NP-movement or topicalisation of an *any*-NPI across its licensing negation typically fails: while (8a) is grammatical, (8b) and (8c) are not. (The observation can be reproduced for Dutch; I will not illustrate this.)

- (8) a. They have not sold (*any*) linguistics books in weeks.  
 b. (*\*Any*) linguistics books have not been sold in weeks.  
 c. (*\*Any*) linguistics books, they have not sold in weeks.

But as Linebarger (1980) and Uribe-Etxebarria (1994) have pointed out (see already Ross 1986[1967]:282), there are a few contexts in which post-

S-structure licensing of *any*-NPIs does succeed. The one illustrated in (9) is a case in point.

- (9) a. That *anyone* would be laid off was {not mentioned in the meeting/unlikely}.  
b. Dat er *ook maar iemand* zou worden ontslagen was {tijdens de vergadering niet besproken/onwaarschijnlijk}.

The *any*-NPIs contained in the subject-sentences in (9a,b) are successfully licensed after Reconstruction of the subject-sentences into their base position, where they are c-commanded by the matrix sentential negation. It is sentences such as the ones in (9) that show that not all *any*-NPI licensing is a matter of S-structure c-command.

With this in mind, consider the examples in (10), which contrast with their counterparts in (11), in which the subject-sentence is in ‘extraposed’ position.

- (10) a. \*That they would get what *anyone* would call a fair judge was unlikely from the start.  
b. \*Dat ze een wat *ook maar iemand* zou noemen eerlijk proces zouden krijgen was van meet af aan onwaarschijnlijk.
- (11) a. It was unlikely from the start that they would get what *anyone* would call a fair judge.  
b. Het was van meet af aan onwaarschijnlijk dat ze een wat *ook maar iemand* zou noemen eerlijk proces zouden krijgen.

The sentences in (10) show that in the very context in which we have just found NPI-licensing under reconstruction to be successful, a TFR inside the subject-sentence cannot contain an NPI. The contrast between (9) and (10) is striking; so also is that between (10) and (11).<sup>5</sup> Perhaps particularly interesting, from the perspective of the question of whether there is anything out of the ordinary about TFRs, is the minimal pair in (12).

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<sup>5</sup> (10a) is grammatical on what is called the ‘free choice’ reading of *anyone*, which is not the reading that interests me here. For the Dutch example in (10b), a ‘free choice’ reading is unavailable: *ook maar*-NPs are unambiguously NPIs.

- (12) a. \*That what *anyone* would call a fair and balanced reporter will be assigned to this story is unlikely.  
 b. ?That what *anyone* would call a fair and balanced report will be published is unlikely.

This pair juxtaposes an unambiguous TFR with a case that is amenable to a ‘regular’ free relative parse: while the use of *what* as the *wh*-operator for a clearly [+human] FR-head forces (by Wilder’s criterion) a TFR analysis upon (12a), nothing about (12b) prevents one from construing *what anyone would call a fair and balanced report* as a garden-variety free relative. What is interesting is that the licensing of an *any*-NPI inside the free relative is keenly sensitive to this fact: whereas (12a) fails, (12b) is well-formed (albeit heavy-handed). The distinction between regular free relatives and TFRs thus seems to be an empirically real one.

What further enhances the interest of examples of the type in (10) and (12a) is that they can be rescued almost up to the point of full acceptability by inserting an additional NPI (underscored in (13)) in a position c-commanding the TFR-contained one:

- (13) a. ?That any of the prisoners would get what *anyone* would call a fair judge was unlikely from the start.  
 b. ?Dat ook maar één van de gevangenen een wat *ook maar iemand* zou noemen eerlijk proces zou krijgen was van meet af aan onwaarschijnlijk.

The examples in (13) remain somewhat marked because of their sheer complexity; but they are far better than the relatively simpler examples in (10), of which they are minimal variants.

I would like to approach this cluster of facts by looking first of all at the ungrammatical examples in (10) and (12a), which contrast sharply with those in (9). For (9), Uribe-Etxebarria (1994) argues that we get the *any*-NPI licensed by reconstructing the subject-sentence into its base position, where, at LF, it will be c-commanded by the sentential negation in the matrix clause. On a *copy-theory* approach to movement and reconstruction, this amounts to saying that there is a full copy of the subject-sentence available in the c-command domain of the matrix negation, and that it is the silent instance of the *any*-NPI inside the lower copy of the subject-sentence that helps meet the licensing requirements imposed on this NPI.

- (14) [that *anyone* would be laid off] was not mentioned [~~that *anyone* would be laid off~~]

Why, then, does NPI-licensing fail in (10) and (12a)? Here as in the examples in (9), the *any*-NPI is contained in a subject-sentence that binds a copy of itself in the c-command domain of the matrix negation; but unlike in the examples in (9), this time around the lower copy of the subject-sentence arguably does not contain the *any*-NPI. The idea here (going back ultimately to Van Riemsdijk and Williams' 1981 classic observations concerning the binding-theoretic difference between noun-complement clauses and relative clauses, picked up later by Lebeaux and Chomsky; cf. *which claim* {*that John<sub>\*i</sub> was asleep/that John<sub>i</sub> made*} *was he<sub>i</sub> willing to discuss?*) is that TFRs function as *modifiers* of the share, and that, being modifiers, they are merged *late* — after all, no principle of the grammar forces them to be merged early, and procrastination is generally preferred to proactiveness. The result is (15).

- (15) [that they would get what *anyone* would call a fair judge] was most unlikely [~~that they would get a fair judge~~]

The TFR is merged exclusively with the *top* copy of the subject-sentence; its late merger is responsible for the fact that it is completely missing from the syntactic representation of the lower copy. Since the TFR as a whole is absent from the lower copy of the subject-sentence, the *any*-NPI is absent from that copy as well; and since it is precisely the lower copy of the subject-sentence that is c-commanded by the negation, the prospective licenser of the *any*-NPI, the absence of the *any*-NPI from this lower copy spells doom for the examples in (10) and (12a). By contrast, late merger has no adverse consequences for the licensing of the *any*-NPI in the examples in (11), which are hence correctly ruled in by the analysis. And with (12b) analysed in terms of a regular free relative (not a modifier of a share), its grammaticality is straightforwardly ensured as well.

Before I move on to (13), one thing remains to be said about the examples in (10)–(12). The fact that the TFR-contained NPIs crash tells us that, apparently, the TFRs containing them *must* be merged late (i.e., do not have the option of merging early). Garden-variety modifiers, by contrast, are merely *allowed* (but not *forced*) to merge late: the modifier-NPIs in (16) are grammatical.

- (16) a. That they would get a *remotely* fair judge was unlikely.  
 b. Dat ze een *ook maar bij benadering* eerlijk proces zouden krijgen was onwaarschijnlijk.

It is from this difference between TFRs and other modifiers that I believe we can distill a suggestive argument in favour of Van Riemsdijk's three-dimensional ('grafting') approach. Suppose (as seems reasonable) that a three-dimensional structure resulting from 'grafting' cannot be input to movement — put differently, the output of 'grafting' is essentially frozen in place. If so, it immediately follows that in the examples in (10) and (12a) the TFR *must* be merged *late*: 'grafting' it into the subject-sentence prior to the latter's movement would violate the general restrictions on permissible grafts. Thus, though details remain to be worked out, it seems that Van Riemsdijk's analysis can capture the similarities between TFRs and modifiers while at the same time explaining their differences, too.

While this takes care of the contrast between (9) and (10), it leaves the ameliorating effect of the insertion of an additional polarity item, as in (13), as yet unresolved. What we are dealing here, it seems to me, is an instance of *secondary triggering* — a phenomenon, named by Horn (1996),<sup>6</sup> whereby a polarity item in an otherwise illegitimate context is helped out by an additional, legitimately licensed polarity item. Such secondary triggering is at work in the example in (17) (from Horn 1996; see also Postal 2000, who discusses this and similar examples in detail):

- (17) I'm surprised { \*John/✓ anybody } has been here *in weeks*.

Here, *in weeks*, which is not normally licensed by predicates such as *surprised*, is legitimate thanks to the presence of an additional polarity item that *is* grammatically licensed this way. Postal (2000) presents an insightful analysis of such secondary triggering phenomena based on the idea that the additional polarity item that is 'helping out' in examples such as (17) is itself specified for negation — it is lexically equipped with a [NEG] feature that locally (i.e., clause-internally) c-commands *in weeks*, thereby making the latter's presence grammatical.

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<sup>6</sup> Horn (1996) points out that the discovery of 'secondary triggering' dates back at least to unpublished work by himself, John Lawler and Paul Neubauer from the early nineteen-seventies. For recent discussion, see Postal (2000) and Den Dikken (2005).

Picking up on Postal's lead affords us a straightforward perspective on the grammaticality of the examples in (13). I pointed out above that (10) and (12a) arguably fail because the TFR containing the *any*-NPI is merged only in the top copy of the subject-sentence, which neither contains nor is c-commanded by a licensing negation for the *any*-NPI. But in (13), the inclusion of the additional *any*-NPI, which on Postal's assumptions is itself endowed with a [NEG] feature, brings in a licenser for the TFR-contained *any*-NPI — and as a result, licensing of the latter succeeds in much the same way as in the simple examples in (3) and (4).

- (18) [that any<sup>[NEG]</sup> of the prisoners would get what *anyone* would call a fair judge]

The facts in (9)–(13), analysed this way, thus provide interesting support for a specific outlook on TFRs — an analysis that treats them on a par with MODIFIERS, merged late (probably in a dimension of their own, as in Van Riemsdijk's approach) and hence incapable of hosting an NPI in reconstruction contexts of the type discussed *unless* NPI-licensing succeeds locally.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Now that we know that NPIs contained inside TFRs can be helped out (via 'secondary triggering') by an additional polarity item in certain contexts, it will be interesting to ask whether, conversely, NPIs contained in TFRs can help out more restrictive TFR-external NPIs. One context in which we might test this is similar to the one I used to introduce secondary triggering with: (ia) is a variant of (17), once again featuring the restrictive NPI *in weeks* (which we know cannot be licensed by *surprised*) but this time having the additional *any*-NPI contained in a TFR. If *in weeks* is a constituent of the past participle's projection, Grosu's approach to TFRs has *anyone* c-commanding *in weeks*, and secondary triggering should succeed. On the alternative approaches due to Wilder and Van Riemsdijk, on the other hand, only the portion of the sentence interpretively shared by the free relative and the matrix clause is present inside the TFR, and since this portion (i.e., '*touched*' or '*touched* her') excludes *in weeks*, secondary triggering is expected to fail. The latter expectation appears to be borne out. Note that secondary triggering succeeds in (ib), which replaces the TFR with the polar modifier *so much as*. (The strength of the argument based on in (ia) is diminished to some extent by the fact that TFRs modifying verb phrases (see Grosu 2003:248, ex. (2d), for another example) seem to have a distinctly metalinguistic ring to them.)

- (i) a. \*I'm surprised that John has what anyone would define as '*touched*' her *in weeks*.  
 b. I'm surprised that John has so much as touched her *in weeks*.

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