

# (Non-)Exhaustivity in Focus Partitiniog:

## A cross-linguistic experimental investigation of exhaustivity in cleft structures



**Prof. Dr. Malte Zimmermann**

(Unniversität Potsdam)

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10:00 - 12:00

Gebäude C 5.3, Raum 1.20

Chair of English Linguistics (Prof. Dr. Remus Gergel)

### Abstract:

In this talk, I will present the results of a series of cross-linguistic experiments on the interpretation of cleft constructions. The experimental results show a robust inter-speaker variability in the interpretation of clefts structures across German, English and French: Whereas some speakers tend to interpret it-clefts ('It is Max that mixed a cocktail') on a par with at-issue exhaustive sentences with the exclusive particle 'only', others treat them as non-exhaustive on a par with plain accent focus. Moreover, speakers show the same interpretive behavior with regard to structurally related pseudoclefts, i.e. 'The one who mixed a cocktail is Max'. Thereby, our results closely mirror the controversial debate in the literature on the interpretive status of clefts as +/- exhaustive. Both sides are correct to a certain extent! I will show that the observable variability in interpretation is best captured in the discourse-based analysis of Pollard & Yasavul (in press), which capitalizes on the discourse-anaphoric potential of cleft structures. The bottom-line of the talk is that it is not the focusing function, but the anaphoric backgrounding function of clefts that is mainly responsible for their interpretive behavior, as already argued in Delin (1992).