Pseudo-clefting is a process that transforms a simple sentence by taking out a phrase, turning the rest of the sentence into a kind of relative clause and putting the two pieces back together with the verb be in between. For example, the simple sentence in (1) can be pseudo-clefted to yield the complex sentence in (2):

(1) Sally bought a teapot.

(2) [What Sally bought] was [a tea pot].

(2) is a pseudo-cleft formed on the direct object of (1), a tea pot. Note that a tea pot occurs after the past tense form of be, namely was, and before was we find something that looks like a relative clause that contains the rest of (1): What Sally bought.

By assumption, pseudo-clefting can only target constituents, specifically phrasal constituents (NP, PP, VP, S). Hence we can use pseudo-clefting to test for phrasal constituents. If, for instance, we are interested in determining the constituent structure of (3)

(3) The cat drank the milk.

we can use pseudo-clefting to do so as follows:

To test whether the milk is a constituent, we perform pseudo-clefting on the milk (just like we did on a tea pot in (2) above). The result is (4):

(4) [What the cat drank] was [the milk].

The sentence in (4) is grammatical, showing that in (3) the milk is a constituent. Likewise we can test for whether the cat is a constituent with the pseudo-cleft in (5). Notice that when the NP being pseudo-clefted refers to an animate being, we use the wh-word who rather than what (just as we would if we were asking a question) and some speakers also prefer to include the one in front of the relative clause when pseudo-clefting on an animate NP.

(5) [(The one) who drank milk] was [the cat].

Since (5) is grammatical, we have evidence that the cat is a constituent of (3). Pseudo-clefting can also be used to test for constituents that are not NPs, including a VP. When testing for a VP, the relative clause is formed with what and a finite form of the verb do shows up inside the relative clause:

(6) [What the cat did] was [drink the milk].

Also note that drink shows up in its bare form, without any tense morphology. From the grammaticality of (6) we infer that in (3) drank the milk is a constituent. Let us finally look at some examples where the test yields a negative outcome, i.e. we perform pseudo-clefting on some subpart of (3), but the resulting sentence is ungrammatical.

Suppose we want to test whether cat drink the milk is a constituent. We would then put cat drink the milk after a finite form of be and form a relative clause out of the rest of (3) and put that before was. This yields either (7), with did in the relative clause, or (8), without did in the relative clause:

(7) *[What the did] was [cat drink the milk].

(8) *[What the] was [cat drink the milk].

The fact that (7) and (8) are ungrammatical, is evidence that cat drink the milk is not a constituent. Similarly, we can test whether in (3) the cat drink is a constituent with the pseudo-cleft in (9):

(9) *[What did the milk] was [the cat drink]

The ungrammaticality of (9) indicates that the cat drink is not a phrasal constituent of (3).