

English Inferential Cleft Construction: A non-expletive approach

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English employs the so-called inferential cleft construction as illustrated by the attested examples in (1) from the corpus COCA (*Corpus of Contemporary American English*).

- (1) a. I'm sorry I shouted at you. I didn't mean to. **It's just that I was so mad.**
b. I know, you're upset because I haven't come next door to introduce myself. **It's just that I'm in Seattle for a very short time.**

We can infer that the final sentence in (1) tells us the reason for shouting or not coming next door (cf. Delahunty 1990, Declerck 1992). There are several research questions for such a cleft construction. One immediate question concerns the status of the subject *it*. At first glance, it appears to be devoid of a semantic content. For example, the pronoun *it* in the construction cannot be *wh*-questioned (**What is that you are so mad?*), and cannot be linked with an emphatic reflexive (**It itself is that I am so mad.*). These observations led previous literature (e.g., Delahunty 1990, 2001, Declerck 1992, Otake 2002) take *it* as an expletive pronoun. However, these non-referential properties of *it* have to do not with the pronoun *it* but with its referential meaning. We could observe that in examples like *The reason is that Reagan has changed the shape of American politics*, we could not question *the reason* or have the emphatic reflexive *itself*. In addition, considering the function of the copula *be* here, the pronoun *it* functions as an 'iota' variable linked to a previous context. For instance, (1a) means that there is a specific 'x' (reason) for my shouting at and the postcopular CP offers a value for this variable. This direction can in a simple manner answer other analytical questions: what is the status of the copula and the CP here. The copula in the inferential cleft is a subtype of specificational copula and the CP represents focus.

To support the non-expletive analysis that assigns an anaphoric meaning to the pronoun *it*, the paper investigates a total of 531 inferential clefts from COCA. The main inference relations we have identified include reasons/causes (188 tokens), explanations (170), possibilities (54), consequences (39), contrasts (35), conclusions (34), and reinterpretations (11). The inference relation of reason and explanation, often helped by a delimiter or epistemic expression, is thus predominantly preferred in the construction. In terms of the discourse property, all the identified data indicate that the construction is not used discourse initially. This implies that the interpretation of the construction hinges on the previous context, which can help evoke an inference relation (mostly a reason-relation), while the CP offers new information. The pronoun

it, referring to the discourse evoked situation, thus functions not as an expletive but as a linker to the context.

Based on these grammatical properties, we suggest a construction-based analysis: the inferential cleft construction is cross-classified as a subtype of the specificational copula construction in which the subject *it* introduces an iota variable with an inference relation while the postcopular *that*-clause represents new information. This special inference relation is not from any expression involved but is a construction-specific knowledge.

References

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