

Specificational *it is* Xs and it-clefts

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In this joint research we argue about the hypothesis concerning specificational *it is* Xs developed recently by R. Declerck, namely that the italicized sentences in (1) are reduced it-clefts from full it-clefts such as (2):

- (1) a. If any one can help you, *it's Bill*.
- b. He was shot in his office. *It is that he knew too much.*
- (2) It is Bill who is the murderer.

Our concern in this research is with copular sentences, and the major differences between the predicational sentence such as (3) and the specificational one such as (4) are taken to be given.

- (3) John is {a teacher/ very tall}.
- (4) The bank robber is J. Thomas.

It is noteworthy that a specificational sentence, unlike a predicational one, can undergo it-clefting, as demonstrated below:

- (3') *It is {a teacher/ very tall} that John is.
- (4') It was J. Thomas who is the bank robber.

Considering the general understanding that the specificational sentence is an expression of the relation of value-for-variable, it is natural to regard the it-cleft as a specificational construction. In a dialogue that is based on the relation, a specificational sentence is felicitously employed as a reply, as in (5B):

- (5) A: Who is the committee's chairman?
- B: Mr. Burns is the chairman.

Notice that in this context, one can simply reply as follows:

- (6) B': It is Mr. Burns.

A prime motivation for the reduced it-cleft hypothesis is that the reply in (6) is assumed to be related transformationally to the full it-cleft in (7):

- (7) It is Mr. Burns who is the chairman.

In defense of the hypothesis, there is evidence from syntax. Both constructions are subject to the general rule that the it-clefting must not break idioms. Consider the position of the idiom 'go back on' in (8-9):

- (8) a. It was that promise that he went back on.
 b. *It was on that promise that he went back.
 (9) a. If there is one thing that he went back on, it was that one.
 b. *If there is one thing that he went back on, it was on that one.

This parallelism strongly suggests that the two sentences in question are governed by the same rule. Moreover, the hypothesis provides a natural account for the choice of *it* in preference to *(s)he* in the following environments where the specificational identification obtains:

- (10) a. The philosopher who wrote the *Tractatus* was Wittgenstein, {it/ ?he} wasn't Carnap.
 b. Bill thinks the one who had the hysterectomy was Alice, but Joe thinks {it/ *she} was Mary.

On this account, *it* in these contexts is the one that occurs in the initial position of the it-cleft, presenting a value for an understood variable.

Declerck goes on to claim that the italicized sentence in (11) is also an instance of the reduced it-cleft.

- (11) I wonder why he did it. *Perhaps it's that he needs money.*

The reason is that this sentence corresponds to a sentence superficially similar to a standard it-cleft, as in (12):

- (12) It is that he needs money to found a new hospital that he works very hard these days.

However, this sentence is not an it-cleft, structurally speaking. The sentence does not contain a gap in the second that clause, as is seen by the absence of (13):

- (13) * He works very hard these days that he needs money to found a new hospital.

Doubts are cast on the hypothesis, as far as the *it is that*-sentences are concerned. We are not justified to claim that the sentence is structurally related to an it-cleft. Of course the *it is that*-sentence is productive, under the condition that the two *that*-clauses stand in a cause-effect relation, as illustrated below:

- (14) How is it that she has such a grip on that boy? Is it that he is infatuated with her that she has so much power over him?

The nature of such a syntactically irregular sentence remains a mystery. For the hypothesis to be more descriptively adequate, much more research on the specificational sentence and its variants is necessary.

