

The *That's X is Y* Construction as an Information-Structure Amalgam

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0. Introduction

This paper is concerned with the non-standard syntactic construction instantiated by the utterances in (1) through (5). I have collected 230 such utterances, of which half were casually observed across a variety of different speech events and half were gathered from the Switchboard Corpus (SWB) of phone conversations (Godfrey et al. 1992).¹

- (1) Well that's the reason why I like both of those programs is because they're kind of based on books. (SWB)
- (2) That's my dream I guess is to have my own darkroom. (SWB)
- (3) And that's my big area of interest in linguistics is discourse.
- (4) That's what I was about to say is that everyone needs to be tested. (SWB)
- (5) That's what I'm trying to do is go back to blonde.

The non-standard character of these sentences stems from the fact that the speaker seems to change syntactic direction halfway through the utterance. As a consequence, each of the sentences contains a constituent that is simultaneously part of two sentential structures. In (3), for instance, the NP *my big area of interest in linguistics* relates both to the preceding *that's* to yield a complete sentence, as well as to the following *is discourse*, which renders another complete sentence. With traditional rhetoric, such structures can be categorized as *apo koinou* constructions.

Instead of characterizing these utterances as the result of a speaker's mid-sentence change of mind, however, I do not regard them as performance errors. Rather, I view them as instantiations of a syntactic construction in its own right,

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which I call the *that's X is Y* construction. The construction label is derived from actual utterance tokens as follows.

- (6) And *that's*_{be-1} [my big area of interest in linguistics]_X *is*_{be-2} [discourse]_Y.
 (7) *That's*_{be-1} [what I'm trying to do]_X *is*_{be-2} [go back to blonde]_Y.

This construction has been noted in the literature, if only in passing, as a phenomenon of some sort related to the primary point of interest of a given work. Examples can be found in work on the presentational amalgam construction (Lambrecht 1988:337), the double *be* construction (McConvell 1988:302, Tuggy 1996:733, Massam 1999:345), and in studies of *wh*-cleft and reverse *wh*-cleft constructions (Hopper 2000:8, Oberlander and Delin 1996:193). Beyond such occasional mentions, the *that's X is Y* construction has until now not received a detailed analysis.

The structure of this paper is as follows. Section 1 contains a brief overview of how the X- and Y-slots of the construction are syntactically realized. In addition, it is shown that neither the initial demonstrative, nor the forms of the two copulas are completely lexically specified as the construction label might suggest. In Section 2, an analysis of the *that's X is Y* construction in terms of an amalgam of two independently existing construction types of English is presented. Section 3 describes the more salient discourse functions of the construction.

1. Syntactic realizations of the X- and Y-slots

The X-slot of the *that's X is Y* construction is instantiated in one of two ways: either as an NP or as a headless relative clause (RC). In more than half of the example tokens, X takes the form of an NP. This NP is either headed lexically as in (1), (2) and (3), or headed by a quantifier followed by an *of*-PP as in (8). In the other examples, the X-slot is filled with a headless RC that contains either a *wh*-relative pronoun as in (4) and (5), or the quantifier *all* as in (9). This explains why the construction was noticed previously in works on (reverse) *wh*-clefts.

- (8) That's one of the symptoms of sunstroke is you stop sweating.
 (9) And in Arizona that's all they have too is man-made lakes. (SWB)

The range of syntactic categories instantiating the Y-slot is somewhat more diverse. In a little over two fifths of the examples, Y takes the form of a finite clause (see (4) and (8)), including subordinate clauses (see (1)). This finite structure can itself be complex, as can be seen in (34) below.

- (10) That's about the most unglamorous job you can have is being a student DJ at a local radio station.
 (11) That's where I started looking is on the 2006 World Cup website.

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Realizations of the Y-slot as NPs are shown in (3) and (9); they make up about a quarter of the example tokens. In another quarter, Y takes the form of a non-finite clause, headed either by an infinitive (see (2) and (5)), or by a gerund as in (10). In relatively few cases, a PP occurs in the Y-slot as in (11). Occasionally, other elements such as numerals or adverbs fill this slot. The distributional patterns are summarized in Table 1.

	NP		RC		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Finite clause	67	29.1	30	13.1	97	42.2
Non-finite clause	34	14.8	24	10.4	58	25.2
NP	26	11.3	35	15.2	61	26.5
PP	2	0.9	9	3.9	11	4.8
Other	1	0.4	2	0.9	3	1.3
Total	130	56.5	100	43.5	230	100.0

Table 1: *Syntactic realizations of the X-slot (columns) and Y-slot (rows).*

The present study is limited to tokens of the *that's X is Y* construction that begin with initial *that's* or *that is*. In the vast majority of examples (N = 207; 90.0%), be-2 agrees with the present tense form of be-1. Only in a few instances (N = 21; 9.1%) do the two copulas not agree in tense, with be-2 occurring in the past tense form *was*, as shown in (12). In all such cases, the X-slot is realized either as a headless RC with a verb in the past tense or as an NP containing an RC in which the verb is in the past tense. In two examples (0.9%), the two copulas do not agree in number (*is – are*).

- (12) That's what I noticed when I was there was the ice storms you got around February. (SWB)
- (13) I think that must be the worst job in the world is being a vet.

While *that's* is clearly the most frequent initial element, it is not a fixed part of the construction either. The non-contracted variant *that is* is attested, and so are other forms of be-1, including its combination with modal verbs as in (13). Furthermore, the initial demonstrative may be *this* instead of *that*. A maximally abstract construction label would thus be *DEM BE-1 X BE-2 Y*. However, the one used here represents the most frequent realizations of the demonstrative and copula positions of the construction.

2. *That's X is Y as an information-structure amalgam*

As was already mentioned, I consider the *that's X is Y* construction a fully conventionalized sentence pattern, not the result of performance errors. While it is a syntactic construction in its own right, it is at the same time related to other independently existing constructions of English. This view is consistent with a Construction Grammar approach to linguistic organization (see, e.g., Fillmore and Kay 1993, Lambrecht 1994, Goldberg 1995, among others), in which grammar

consists of a structured inventory of constructions. One way to motivate the form and function of a given construction is to relate it to other constructions that need to be posited in the grammar for independent reasons. In the case of the *that's X is Y* construction, two independently existing construction types come together in an unusual way to give rise to a constructional amalgam.

Let me introduce the two components of the *that's X is Y* construction. Throughout this section, the attested *that's X is Y* tokens in (3) and (5) will serve as paradigm examples. From these can be derived the two sentences in (14) and (15). These sentences have a non-predicating semantic structure, that is, rather than predicating a property of a topic referent, they are used either to establish an identity relation between two referents, the identified and the identifier (see (14)), or to specify a value for a given variable (see (15)). Small capitals indicate the locations of the main sentence accents, which fall here on the sentence-final focus phrases expressing the identifier/value.

- (14) My big area of interest in linguistics is DISCOURSE.
 (15) What I'm trying to do is go back to BLONDE.

A well-known property of such sentences is their reversibility, that is, the constituents containing the identified/variable and the identifier/value can be inverted, so that the focal identifier/value constituents occur sentence-initially:

- (16) DISCOURSE is my big area of interest in linguistics.
 (17) Go back to BLONDE is what I'm trying to do.

In parallel to the established terms *wh*-cleft and reverse *wh*-cleft constructions for (15) and (17), respectively, I will categorize sentences like (14) as equative and those like (16) as reverse equative constructions. The reverse constructions are frequently used with the demonstrative *that* as initial constituent:

- (18) THAT's my big area of interest in linguistics.
 (19) THAT's what I'm trying to do.

What *wh*-cleft and equative constructions have in common is their identificational function.

Thus, two types of identificational constructions, the reverse and the non-reverse type, provide the two amalgam components for the *that's X is Y* construction. And it is from these components that the construction inherits certain formal and functional properties, which therefore do not need to be stipulated for the amalgam. The *that's X is Y* construction inherits the non-predicating semantics of its components, the sentence-initial focus phrase in the form of the demonstrative pronoun *that*, and the sentence-final focus phrase in a variety of forms. Moreover, it inherits the topical constituent in the X-slot, either in the form of an NP or a headless RC. But it also displays idiosyncratic

properties, in particular, the presence of two focus phrases and its referent-specifying discourse function. While the amalgam is related to its components, it is not reducible to them. Its syntactic form can be motivated by appealing to its pragmatic, that is, information-structural properties, as well as to those of its component constructions. We are dealing here, then, with an information-structure amalgam (see also Lambrecht 1988). This analysis is spelled out in more detail in the remainder of this section.

Those tokens of the *that's X is Y* construction in which the X-slot is realized as a headless RC are analyzed as amalgams of the *wh*-cleft and the reverse *wh*-cleft constructions. I will take as uncontroversial the observation that cleft constructions (see, e.g., Prince 1978, Lambrecht 2001) express the same logical proposition as their corresponding canonical sentences, but impose a pragmatic structuring on that proposition in terms of a “backgrounded” or presupposed and “foregrounded” or focused part. To characterize the *that's X is Y* construction and its components more precisely, I will adopt the information-structure framework developed in Lambrecht (1994), and elaborated, *inter alia*, in Lambrecht and Michaelis (1998) and Lambrecht (2001). I will introduce the relevant information-structural categories as we proceed.

Consider again sentence (15). By employing this *wh*-cleft, the speaker lends expression to her assumption that, at the time of utterance, “the hearer already knows or believes or is ready to take for granted” (Lambrecht 2001:474) that she is trying to do something. The open proposition ‘speaker is trying to do x’ is pragmatically presupposed or “old information”, coded by the headless RC *what I'm trying to do*. At the same time, the speaker asserts that the intended activity consists in changing her hair color back to blonde. The pragmatic assertion or “new information” conveyed by using the given *wh*-cleft consists in the specification of a value for the variable in the presupposed open proposition. It is this identity relation between variable and value that “the speaker expects the hearer to know or believe or take for granted as a result of hearing the utterance” (Lambrecht 2001:474). The assertion is achieved by substituting the focus denotatum ‘go back to blonde’ for the variable in the open proposition, where focus is defined as “that component of a pragmatically structured proposition whereby the assertion differs from the presupposition” (Lambrecht 2001:474). The presence of the focus denotatum makes the utterance into a pragmatic assertion, that is, makes it possible for the sentence to convey a piece of new information to the hearer.

As argued in Lambrecht (2001), the felicitous use of *wh*-clefts requires the speaker to make further assumptions about the hearer's state of mind. The kind of pragmatic presupposition introduced in the preceding paragraph pertains to the assumed knowledge state of the hearer at the time of utterance. It is referred to as *knowledge* or *K-presupposition*. Thus, the open proposition ‘speaker is trying to do x’ is K-presupposed. In the adopted framework, to know a proposition means to have a mental representation of its denotatum, not to know its truth or falsehood. In addition, the adequate use of (15) requires that the state of affairs expressed by the K-presupposed proposition is also assumed by the speaker to be

“of present concern in the discourse, so that her assertion can be interpreted as expressing *relevant information* with respect to this state of affairs” (Lambrecht 2001:476; emphasis in the original). Such speaker assumptions regarding the status of denotata as centers of current interest in the discourse at utterance time are called *topicality* or *T-presupposition*. The information structure of sentence (15) can now be represented as follows.²

- (20) K-Presupposition: ‘speaker is trying to do x’
 T-Presupposition: the K-presupposition is of current interest
 Focus: ‘go back to blonde’
 Assertion: x = ‘go back to blonde’

Turning to reverse *wh*-clefts, it is well-known that they tend to occur in spoken discourse with a demonstrative pronoun as focus phrase, most frequently *that*, less often *this* (see, e.g., Collins 1991, Oberlander and Delin 1996, among others). It is this type of reverse *wh*-cleft that serves as a component of the *that*'s *X is Y* amalgam. The information structure of reverse *wh*-clefts parallels the one of *wh*-clefts; the analysis of sentence (19) is given in (21).

- (21) K-Presupposition: ‘speaker is trying to do x’
 T-Presupposition: the K-presupposition is of current interest
 Focus: ‘that’
 Assertion: x = ‘that’

Now, sentence (5), repeated here as (22), is an amalgam based on the *wh*-cleft in (15) and the reverse *wh*-cleft in (19). Its information-structure analysis is given in (23).

- (22) [THAT]'s (what I'm trying to do) is [go back to BLONDE].

- (23) K-Presupposition: ‘speaker is trying to do x’
 T-Presupposition: the K-presupposition is of current interest
 Focus 1: ‘that’
 Assertion 1: x = ‘that’
 Focus 2: ‘go back to blonde’
 Assertion 2: x = ‘go back to blonde’

Notice that (22) has two focus phrases, that is, it expresses two assertions. (Focus phrases are indicated by square brackets, topical constituents are marked by parentheses.) Moreover, the construction has a referent-specifying discourse

² A third kind of presupposition is the so-called *consciousness* or *C-presupposition*, which has to do with the speaker's assumptions about the activation states of mental representations of denotata in the hearer's long-term and short-term memory (Lambrecht 2001:475). Since C-presuppositions are entailed by T-presuppositions, I will not represent them in the analyses.

function (see Section 3). The initial demonstrative pronoun always refers back to a referent already established in the prior discourse, but this antecedent tends strongly to remain referentially vague. The second focus denotatum is referentially more specific and resolves this vagueness. It is the second assertion that carries the communicatively most important new information by rendering the anaphorically vague referent more specific.

That's X is Y tokens in which the X-slot is realized as an NP are analyzed as amalgams of the equative and reverse equative constructions. It is important to note that in equative constructions such as (14), no K-presupposition in the form of an open proposition is attached to the subject NP. However, by uttering the sentence in (14), the speaker assumes the denotatum of *my big area of interest in linguistics* to be a center of current interest, that is, to be T-presupposed. This referent serves as the topic of the sentence, and the remainder of the sentence supplies relevant information with respect to it.³ Recall that equative constructions do not predicate a property of a topic referent, but identify that referent with the focus referent coded in the complement of the copula. The information-structure analysis of (14) is as follows.

- (24) T-Presupposition: 'my big area ... in linguistics' is topic for focus x
Focus: 'discourse'
Assertion: x = 'discourse'

Reverse equative constructions require a slightly different information-structure analysis. As in the case of reverse *wh*-clefts, it involves a K-presupposed open proposition. This presupposed open proposition is syntactically marked by the inversion structure of the sentence with its sentence-initial focus phrase. Thus, in uttering sentence (18), the speaker gives expression to her assumption that the hearer already knows that she has a big area of interest in linguistics. Moreover, she also assumes that the denotatum of this proposition is of current concern, that is, T-presupposed. The referent of *that* is the focus denotatum, and it is its substitution for the variable in the open proposition that constitutes the pragmatic assertion. This is spelled out in (25).

- (25) K-Presupposition: 'speaker's big area of interest in linguistics is x'
T-Presupposition: the K-presupposition is of current interest
Focus: 'that'
Assertion: x = 'that'

Now, sentence (3), repeated here as (26), is an amalgam based on the equative construction in (14) and the reverse equative construction in (18). As the information-structure analysis in (27) shows, the *that's X is Y* construction here

³ See Lambrecht (1994:131) for a definition of topic in terms of relevance and aboutness.

inherits the presupposed open proposition from its reverse equative amalgam component.

- (26) [THAT]'s (my big area of interest in linguistics) is [DISCOURSE].
- (27) K-Presupposition: 'speaker's big area of interest in linguistics is x'
 T-Presupposition: the K-presupposition is of current interest
 Focus 1: 'that'
 Assertion 1: x = 'that'
 Focus 2: 'discourse'
 Assertion 2: x = 'discourse'

Adding the notation for information-structural properties to the construction label, we thus get: *[that]'s (X) is [Y]*.

The analysis presented so far contains one oversimplification: it has ignored the fact that the constituent in the X-slot usually contains one or more peaks of prosodic prominence, in addition to the focus accents on the initial demonstrative and the focus phrase in the Y-slot. Consider the more accurate renderings of examples (3) and (5) in (28) and (29), respectively.

- (28) [THAT]'s (MY big area of interest in linguistics) is [DISCOURSE].
 (29) [THAT]'s (what I'm trying to DO) is [go back to BLONDE].

Despite the fact that the X-slot expresses a topical denotatum, which by definition is a relatively predictable element in a proposition, it is nevertheless accented. This is in contradiction to the widely-held belief that sentence accents signal "new information" (see, e.g., Selkirk 1984, among others). In the information-structure framework adopted here, however, sentence accentuation is not seen as exclusively marking foci or new information. Rather, the discourse function of sentence accents is to symbolize "an instruction from the speaker to the hearer to establish a pragmatic relation between a denotatum and a proposition" (Lambrecht and Michaelis 1998: 498). The pragmatic relation that is signaled by a sentence accent may be either a focus relation or a topic relation, so that we need to distinguish focus accents from topic accents.

Constituents with focal denotata, whose relation to the proposition is by definition unpredictable, must be accented.⁴ A topical constituent, on the other hand, is assigned an accent only if the topic relation between its denotatum and the proposition "has not yet been ratified at the level of the utterance" (Lambrecht and Michaelis 1998:499). A ratified, or established, topic denotatum is one whose presence in the proposition the speaker takes to be predictable for the hearer at utterance time to the point that it can be taken for granted.

⁴ See Lambrecht and Michaelis (1998) for a few principled exceptions.

With the categories of topic accent and ratified topic in place, the earlier representations of the information structure of our paradigm sentences can be revised as follows.

- (30) Information structure of (5) (= (29); replaces (23)):
K-presupposition: 'speaker is trying to do x'
T-presupposition: the referent 'speaker' is ratified
Focus 1: 'that'
Assertion 1: x = 'that'
Focus 2: 'go back to blonde'
Assertion 2: x = 'go back to blonde'
- (31) Information structure of (3) (= (28); replaces (27)):
K-presupposition: 'speaker's big area of interest in linguistics is x'
T-presupposition: 'someone's big ... in linguistics is x' is ratified
Focus 1: 'that'
Assertion 1: x = 'that'
Focus 2: 'discourse'
Assertion 2: x = 'discourse'

The accents on the constituents in the X-slots of *that's X is Y* tokens do not mark foci. They are topic accents that are used by the speaker to ratify the current topics. While the open propositions coded in the X-slot are K-presupposed, their topical roles in the larger discourse context are not salient enough for them to be taken for granted on the level of the utterance, that is, they are not yet ratified. Such accents are thus topic ratification accents. They signal that portion of the K-presupposition which is not contained within the T-presupposition (see Lambrecht and Michaelis 1998). Sentence (3) (= (28)), for instance, was uttered in an introductory class to linguistics, at a point when the different sub-disciplines of the field were introduced. For every sub-discipline (a list of which was projected onto a screen), the speaker had pointed out a fellow faculty member who specializes in that area. When turning to the field of discourse analysis, she uttered sentence (3). Thus, the fact that different linguists have different areas of specialization was already established as topical in the discourse. However, that the current topic at the level of the utterance would be the *speaker's* field of interest still needed to be ratified, which was achieved by the topic accent on *my*.

3. Discourse functions of *that's X is Y*

This section describes the more salient discourse functions with which *that's X is Y* tokens are used in context. As was mentioned above, the construction always has a referent-specifying function. The anaphoric referential vagueness of the initial demonstrative pronoun may manifest itself in a number of ways. For example, there may be more than one referent in the prior discourse that in principle can be construed as the antecedent of the demonstrative. In example

(32), *that* can be understood as referring to ‘semi-classical music’, ‘real classical music’ or ‘everyday type of ordinary music’. Which of these three speaker B has in mind is specified in the Y-slot.⁵

- (32) A: I like semi-classical.
 ... The real classics I’m not ... as familiar with as,
 you know,
 the .. ordinary sounds that you hear every day .. [type of thing].
- B: [Uh-huh].
 ... Yeah,
 that’s about --
**That’s about all I listen to,
 is the classical .. stuff.**

Referential vagueness may also obtain if a suitable antecedent for the demonstrative has to be inferred from what was said in the prior discourse, or if an antecedent has to be construed from the composite content of an extended discourse stretch. The latter case is illustrated in (33). In the stretch of talk that has been omitted, speaker B dominates the conversation, talking about her cooking preferences. The cumulative content of her contribution constitutes the anaphoric referent of *that*.

- (33) A: How about you,
 what do you like to ... [to cook]?
- B: [Uh] we --
 It’s funny that,
 .. um,
 we’re talking about this.
 (40 seconds omitted)
- B: **That’s what I like to make,
 is just real neat stuff like that,**
 but.

There are cases where it seems indeed possible to assign the initial demonstrative a non-vague anaphoric referent. In (34), for instance, *that* refers back to ‘they’re not gonna do it’. However, it remains the content of the Y-slot that elaborates, and hence specifies, this referent in accordance with the speaker’s communicative intentions.

⁵ The examples in this section come from the SWB; they were re-transcribed using a slightly simplified version of the discourse transcription conventions of Du Bois et al. (1993).

- (34) A: You know,
I- I- I have real strong beliefs in capital punishment,
but when it comes right down to it,
... [yeah].
B: [They're] not gonna do it.
A: Uh yeah,
I- [I'm wondering though] --
B: **[That's my biggest] problem is,**
... even if you give them the death penalty,
... they appeal it,
and appeal it,
and appeal it.

Furthermore, notice that the X-slot tends strongly to express the larger discourse theme or a particular aspect thereof. A very clear example of this is (33), where *what I like to make* almost literally echoes speaker A's question *What do you like to cook?*, which defines the theme for the following stretch of discourse. These discourse themes are frequently of an evaluative nature and pertain to the interlocutors' opinions and attitudes towards certain phenomena, including the conversational activity itself. In (32), the interlocutors discuss their music tastes, in (33) – their cooking preferences, and in (34) – their views on capital punishment.

Example (34) shows nicely another aspect of the discourse use of the *that's X is Y* construction. Speakers often use it to state concisely a point to which they attach some importance in the discourse. Frequently, this concise mention is a more succinct rephrasing of a point that has already emerged in the preceding discourse. In (34), speaker B uses the *that's X is Y* token to rephrase and thus state more clearly a point that she just made. It is known from the prior discourse that she is a strong supporter of capital punishment and in fact thinks that it is not applied strictly enough. So, one of the problems she has with the current system is that too often *they're not gonna do it*. This view is a point of some importance to speaker B. Using the *that's X is Y* construction, she rephrases it more concisely.

Lastly, in addition to the more thematically oriented functions reviewed so far, *that's X is Y* tokens can also serve discourse-structuring functions. Example (33) is a case in point. Speaker B here ends her lengthy contribution by tying everything she said in response to speaker A's question back to the larger discourse theme and supplying a final succinct summary statement. As we see, different functions may simultaneously underlie the use of any one *that's X is Y* token.

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