Extris, extris

Arnold M. Zwicky - Stanford SemFest, 16 March 2007

A. Summary. For at least 35 years (Dwight Bolinger's first example is from 1971), English speakers have been producing sentences with an occurrence of a form of BE that is not licensed in standard English (SE) and is not a disfluency — what I'll call Extris ("extra is"). There are many subtypes, but I observe that all are based on SE constructions with a specific discourse function and suggest that any SE construction with this function can have an Extris counterpart.

Examples:

- (a1) The thing that's most interesting about the film is is that it's... (AZ58: Robert Emmett, KFJC *Norman Bates Memorial Soundtrack* show, KALW, 3/5/05)
- (a2) Basically, what they were trying to tell me was, is that whatever Federal Prison Industries was doing was more important...

(AZ115: Leroy Smith, California prison safety officer, re recycling of computer monitors, interviewed on NPR's *Weekend Edition Saturday*, 4/8/06)

- (b) I think mostly it's just the "terrible twos" thing is that she has to assert her independence. (AZ87: AMZ in conversation with Jane Robinson, 7/29/05)
- B. The Isis ("is is", "double is', etc.) subtype has gotten much attention from Bolinger (1987) through Coppock et al. (to appear) as a variant of SE "thingy"-N-subject (in (a1) above) or pseudocleft (PC) sentences (in (a2) above):

(1) **N-type Isis**:

(c1) The funny thing is is your girlfriend Lisa had tanning lotion on her body too. (AZ90: character on *CSI*, seen in reruns 8/4/05)

(2) **PC-type Isis**:

- (c2) What's nice is is that it has a sort of other-worldly character about it... (AZ64: Robert Emmett, KFJC *Norman Bates Memorial Soundtrack* show, 3/5/05)
- C. [SIDEBAR] For a brief discussion of repetition disfluencies that yield *is is* and *was was*, see Zwicky (2/22/07); Coppock et al. distinguish Isis examples from disfluencies phonetically. That posting also has a brief discussion of how such sequences can appear in Pseudocleft sentences in SE. (So-called "free relatives" can also yield entirely SE *is is* and *was was*: "Whatever is is right." Qué será, será!) Neither of these counts as an example of Isis. Isis is a grammatical choice, not a disfluency, and it's non-standard (and widely deprecated, for example by the sour Cochrane (2004).

Isis seems to be below the level of consciousness for very many of those who use it, though a few people have reported to me that they notice it – and that it "feels near-right, and nearly as good as the alternative", as one of my (non-linguist) correspondents put it.

- D. [SIDEBAR] Isis occurs in informal writing as well as speech. Here are three examples from a set collected by Kathryn Campbell-Kibler:
- (d1) ... change a few variables and BANG!! it works. The problem is, is that I cannot get them to work on a windows based web server.

(KC13: http://www.cgi-perl.com/programs/Feedback/Demo/ (11/12/97))

(d2) ... they will be selecting the components that make up the Hippest Hardware for that month. The best part to that is, is that You get to vote on which hardware should they use. (KC16: http://www.snipersalley.com/ (10/14/00))

(d3) While you say it's improbable for birds to migrate south for winter, it is by no means improbable. But that wasn't my point entirly. My point was is that life cannot come from non-living matter.

(KC22: http://mobydicks.com/lecture/AlbertEinsteinhall/messages/662.html (3/8/01))

- E. [SIDEBAR] Several correspondents have assumed that Isis is mostly a blue-collar phenomenon, like many other non-standard features. I have absolutely no reason to think that is so: my examples are scarcely a random sample, but they are mostly from upper-middle class types, including NPR reporters, many Silicon Valleyites, and a huge number of college professors. Bolinger's 1971 example was from a president of the Linguistic Society of America.
- F. [SIDEBAR] Non-identical Isis, especially was + is as in (a2) and (d3), is fairly common. Bolinger also found an example with disagreement in number:
- (e) The chances are is that... (DB6: KCBS, 8/22/82)

And note the remarkable be + is in the following (also see sections K and L below):

- (f1) The evidence seems to be, is that... (AZ33: Daniel Schor, NPR's Weekend Edition Saturday, 3/20/04)
- (f2) ... out as electronic trance music. The only difference seems to be is that on the new album things are more mellow. This ain't music ...

(AZ35: http://www.popmatters.com/music/reviews/s/sorma-mirage.html)

(f3) ... The signal seems to be is that the mainstream party wants Kerry to be the nominee, probably mainly for purposes of his likely electability and then also for ...

(AZ36: http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/content/2004/s1057305.htm (3/2/04))

- G. **[SIDEBAR**] Quite a range of thingy Ns occur in N-type Isis: *thing*, *fact*, *problem*, *question*, *point*, *trouble*, *truth*, and many more. These can occur with both premodifiers and postmodifiers: *the only thing*, *the worst problem*, *the fact of the matter*, *the thing that's nice*, and much more. It doesn't look as if N-type Isis is built on a few frozen sequences like *the thing is is*, as some people have suggested to me.
- H. There are also Singlis (single-is) examples, where the SE counterparts are not copular. In one set (Jehn, Ross-Hagebaum), the clauses are deictic or existential my Th:
 - (3) **N-type Th**: That's/Here's ... N ... is...
- (g) Here's our suggestion for the QP itself is that... (AZ78: Dan Jurafsky, in Stanford oral exam, 4/18/05)
 - (4) **PC-type Th**: That's/This is WH-Clause-Subject is...
- (h) That's what we hear on the program all the time is that... (AZ80: Laura Flanders on KALW's *Your Call*, 5/5/05)
 - (5) *There* Th: There's NP ... is...
- (i1) There's one thing I need to do is leave a check. (AZ101: friend in conversation with her husband, 9/05)
- (i2) There's one problem, is that.. (DB30: on KGO, 1/9/82)
- H. Then there are McConvell's (2004) FreeBe's, in which initial material is either explicitly cataphoric (as it is in types (1)-(5) above) or implicitly so:
 - (6) Expl FreeBe:
- (j1) We looked at it **this way**, my partner and I, is that... (AZ4: interviewee at Folsom St. Fair, KGO-TV evening news, 9/30/01; cf. (b) above)
- (j2) **As** we said at the first is that all the... (AZ53: Luc Baronian in BLS presentation, 2/19/05)
 - (7) **Impl FreeBe**:
- (k) For the many years I have been teaching historical linguistics I've always been annoyed is that... [something about how the same old examples of historical "laws" are always trotted out] (AZ54: Paul Newman in BLS presentation, 2/20/05)
- I. What unites (1)-(7) is that they are all variants of SE constructions that introduce content by announcing, in an explicitly or implicitly cataphoric expression ("set-up", or SU), that it is about

to be introduced, and then supplying it in a following expression ("pay-off", or PO, a.k.a. "counterweight"). They are all "SU+PO constructions". The set-ups are variously phrasal, hypotactic, and paratactic:

- (8) Simplex: cf. (1)
- (i) Solid: The problem is (that) it's time to leave.
- (ii) Split: The problem is, it's time to leave.
- (9) Pseudocleft: cf. (2)
- (i) Solid: What I think is (that) it's time to leave.
- (ii) Split: What I think is: it's time to leave.
- (10) Paratactic Apposition (Brenier & Michaelis):
 - (i) That's/Here's the problem: it's time to leave. (3)
 - (ii) That's/This is what we hear: it's time to leave. (4)
 - (iii) There's one thing I need to do: leave right now. (5)
 - (iv) We looked at it this way: we had to leave. (6)
 - (v) I'm telling you: it's time to leave. (7)
- J. What the extra form of BE does in the Extris examples is explicitly mark the pay-off part of the SU+PO construction and so focus on it. This focusing BE is the second one in Isis examples; the first BE in such examples belongs to the set-up, and is phonologically phrased with it.

In any case, it seems likely that every sort of SU+PO construction will turn out to have an Extris counterpart for at least a few speakers.

- K. [SIDEBAR] Here's yet another type, building on set-ups like *the reason being*. The N being (for various thingy Ns, with or without prenominal and postnominal modifiers) started out as an adverbial subordinate construction, a variant of the Simplex construction in (8), as in
- (1) This situation is similar to the one with OpenConnection where OpenConnectionReply is forwardable, the reason being that outstanding requests can be ... (http://www.omg.org/issues/issue4648.txt)

Here, it's an embedded SU+PO construction: "the reason being: that outstanding requests can be ..."

At some point it was liberated from the subordinate clause, to stand alone as a SU+PO sentence:

- (m1) The reason being that my trusty Fuji suffered an... (http://www.flickr.com/photos/aocrane/page2/)
- (m2) The reason being that the DNA needs to be concentrated up before a detection PCR specific to the microbe can work....

(http://www.biocompare.com/forums/ViewThread.aspx?threadid=217)

This construction is widely deprecated, as a sentence fragment. But it's very frequent in informal writing.

Things are now open for the creation of an Extris variant:

(n1) ...and the reason being is because the board determines...
(AZ72: participant in townhouse homeowners' association meeting, 3/9/05)

(Usage advisers deprecate *reason is because* in all of its manifestations; again it's very common.)

(n2) The reason being is so I can talk directly to you, my fans, who have stuck by me & who continue to support me.

(AZ105: Britney Spears, letter to her fans, reported to me by Kevin Ryan, 12/30/04)

Ryan noted that reason being is and point being is were quite common; that, in fact reason being is that was (at the time) ten times as frequent on Google as the plain N-type Isis, reason is is that; and that even thing being is got hundreds of hits.

- L. [SIDEBAR] Yet another type looks much like N-type Isis, but has some verb other than BE in the first slot:
- (o1) The problem arises is that...

(DB7: KGO, 4/10/86)

(o2) The fact remains is that...

(DB8: KCBS, 11/13/81)

- M. So extraneous forms of BE turn up in all sorts of SU+PO constructions. In the other direction, extraneous forms of BE don't seem to occur, except as disfluencies, anywhere but in SU+PO constructions. You don't find things like
- (p) Reading Sherlockian pastiches is is what I do to relax.
- N. Extris versions are potentially available for all SU+PO constructions, but speakers differ as to which ones they use. Many have none. Some (several of my friends and colleagues) have fairly high rates of Isis, but no Singlis that I've observed. (Isis users also seem to differ as to their preferences for N-type Isis vs. PC-type Isis.) And some people have moderate rates of Singlis (of certain sub-types), but no Isis; I myself produce the occasional Singlis example, like the FreeBe in (b) above, but have not yet been detected in an Isis. And there's at least one person who seems to be a near-categorical user of Extris, of all the types discussed above: KALW's Robert Emmett, the source of my examples (a1) and (c2).

Emmett manages to achieve compound Extris on occasion, as in these combinations of PC-type Th with Isis:

(q1) That's what I thought that was so cool is is that you... (AZ59: Emmett, 3/5/05; there's a *that*-trace violation as a bonus)

(q2) That's what makes the movie so powerful is is that...

(AZ66: Emmett, also on 3/5/05; six plain Isis examples intervened between (q1) and (q2))

It seems to be that though the Extris types have a common function (and a shared element of form), they are independent constructions.

O. [SIDEBAR] Almost nothing is known about the details of variability in Extris constructions: who uses them, on what occasions, for what purposes.

They've been reported in virtually all parts of the English-speaking world; it's entirely possibly that they've been innovated on many different occasions, as a response to the "double function" of BE – serving simultaneously as part of the set-up and as part of the pay-off – in the Simplex and Pseudocleft constructions of SE. But it's quite likely that they've spread along the usual paths of social associations, so that we can expect to see some patterns in their social distribution.

For a single speaker, the Extris constructions are in alternation with their SE counterparts, and no doubt there's patterning in these choices, but we know nothing about it.

P. And now for one last trick...

All the Extris constructions have pay-offs introduced by a form of BE, most commonly *is*, and this is most often followed by the complementizer *that*. The way is open for speakers to see *is* or *is that* as a mere introductory formula for an assertion. In which case you can use it as an assertion marker with free-standing clauses; the set-up is dispensable, or can be thought of as being "in the air". Yes, this has happened:

(r1) Is what you need to do is...

(AZ47: reported on ADS-L by Bill LeMay, 4/21/03, as from Northeastern Iowa)

(r2) Is that you can get a 5-year balloon for 4.25%. (reported by Ron Butters, from a real-estate agent, 2004)

As far as I know, Robert Emmett hasn't yet reached the SIAM (sentence-initial assertion marker) stage.

But... is that it's time for this paper to be over.

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