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Demonstrative Clefts in Spoken English

by

Andreea S. Calude

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
in
Linguistics

University of Auckland

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ABSTRACT

This research concerns the structural and discourse related properties of cleft constructions found in spoken New Zealand English. In particular, the main analysis focuses on one cleft type, namely on the demonstrative cleft; examples include (a) *That's what I had in mind* and (b) *That's what I thought*. The demonstrative cleft has received little attention in the literature, and this is reflected in its inconsistent classification (some believe it to be a reversed wh-cleft, others classify it together with *it*-clefts, and others still use the label 'th-cleft').

The current work investigates the clefts exemplified in (a) and (b), in terms of 23 different structural and discourse related properties. These properties were identified by consulting existing literature on clefts, and data from the Wellington Corpus of Spoken New Zealand English (about 200,000 words of spontaneous conversation). Additionally, the same excerpts of conversation were also examined for *it*-clefts, wh-clefts and reversed wh-clefts, whose most significant properties in spoken language are also related here. The data were tagged manually for the various cleft constructions investigated, and difficult examples were cross-checked by and discussed with other linguists.

The thesis consists of three introductory chapters (Chapters 1, 2 and 3), which introduce the data investigated and the constructions analysed. Chapter 4 presents the analysis of the demonstrative cleft. Following this, peripheral and problematic demonstrative clefts, that is, clefts which deviate from the prototypical demonstrative cleft model are discussed in Chapter 5. Finally, Chapter 6 deals with other cleft types in English, namely *it*-clefts, wh-clefts and reversed wh-clefts, and their most significant properties in spoken language. The thesis concludes with a summary chapter (Chapter 7).

One innovative aspect of the research concerns the fact that in spoken language, clefts can be "un-integrated" or loosely integrated inside the syntactic structure which they are part of, while still being tightly connected within the discourse portion in which they are found, e.g.,*That's what you have to do when moving into a new house is nest*, and *That is what the government wants you to do is to vote Labour* (termed here double cleft construction). Double clefts are discussed in Chapter 4. The corpus also contains un-integrated wh-clefts, such as *What I want to do is I want to study clefts*, treated in Chapter 5. Previous studies suggest that in spoken language, the distinction between the syntax of clauses and the overall organisation of discourse is not always clear; clauses which do not appear to be syntactically subordinate may nonetheless be subordinate in terms of the discourse role they play. This is problematic for existing syntactic theories which rely on tightly integrated structures. An adequate analysis of un-integrated constructions, in terms of their syntax and discourse function will be of interest both to theoretical syntax and to computational linguistics.

The research contributes to existing knowledge of the grammatical constructions used by speakers of New Zealand English and English worldwide. Given the significant differences between the grammar of spoken language and that of written language, this work helps increase understanding of spoken language and of what it means to be a 'speaker'.

In memory of W. Scott Allan
– for his guidance, humour, and kindness, and for luring me into the dark and enchanting world of linguistics.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As many people know, a doctoral degree is never just about writing a thesis. The process becomes an engrossing, enriching, and at times scary journey – a journey in which you are, thankfully, not the only passenger. Riding along with you, for better or for worse are various other people, who may turn out to be your best friends.

For me, the guidance, patience, expertise and encouragement of my main advisor have been indeed indispensable. Jim Miller gently and patiently introduced me to the grammar of spoken language, a field I had known very little about, and one which I eventually grew to have a passionate interest in. Jim also arranged for me to use the Wellington Corpus of Spoken New Zealand English and provided me with access to the transcript files. There are too many things for which I am indebted to Jim to list here, but here is a selection. Jim made ample time to meet with me to discuss readings and drafts of thesis chapters, papers, conference abstracts and reports. He spent countless hours filling in funding applications and recommendations on my behalf. He also introduced me to other key fellow researchers. Additionally, he was always interested to hear how I was doing, how I felt about my work, and about any doubts or setbacks I was experiencing. Over the three years, Jim (and his wife Margaret) became more than just a supervisor, but also a dear friend(s).

Secondly, I was also extremely privileged to have had Frank Lichtenberk as my second advisor. Frank was in part responsible for my budding enthusiasm for linguistics research, in his role as a Masters supervisor. During my PhD, he was a constant supporter, forever willing to read and comment on any piece I would be working on. Even during his year-long sabbatical leave, Frank not only maintained regular contact with me by e-mail, but was also kind enough to allow me to use his office (and thus his wonderful library of linguistics books). In the final stages of my thesis, Frank read and re-read meticulously and voraciously drafts of my chapters, for which I am incredibly appreciative.

Additionally, I have been blessed with the help of many people, including Bernadette Vine and her team at the Victoria University of Wellington, Steven Miller, Ute Knoch, Alison Wray, Jean Hudson, Heidi Quinn, Wilfredo Flores Hernandez, Colleen Bright, Simon Greenhill, Andy Gibson, Nick Hay, and others which I apologize in advance for leaving off this list.

On a more personal note, I would like to thank my mom, Elena and my dad, Cristian for fueling me to attempt and persevere with my goal, for believing in me even when others did not (myself included), for continually supporting me throughout this extremely intense and exciting stage in my life, and finally, for never asking me the one question doctoral students loathe most *'so what job will you get with that?'*. I would also like to thank my boyfriend, Gareth Karl, who sustained me through what was at times a very tough existence (both mentally and physically). More specifically, I am thankful to him for introducing me to Subversion. Like my mom and dad, Gareth always stood by me, and helped me get through the worst disasters (such as, papers getting rejected) as well as, celebrating with me even the smallest victories (like finishing my first chapter).

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