



The American Dialect Society

The Thing Is, Some That's Aren't There at All

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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *American Speech*, Vol. 61, No. 2 (Summer, 1986), pp. 182-183

Published by: Duke University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/455170>

Accessed: 11/11/2011 12:26

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MISCELLANY

THE THING IS, SOME THAT'S AREN'T THERE AT ALL

ACCORDING TO A NOTE BY Kazuo Kato (*American Speech* 59 [1984]: 258–59), transformational grammarians have incorrectly proposed a constraint barring the absence of the English complementizer *that* in subject position.¹ In the light of a series of examples (from the literary representation of informal speech) in which sentences begin with *that*-less clauses, Kato concludes that “the constraint only works in formal written English.”

Now we have no reason to suppose that a constraint might not be limited to a particular stylistic level or even to a particular register. But we don’t think that this particular constraint is so limited; we believe that Kato’s quotations don’t involve subject complement clauses at all, but rather exemplify one or more constructions distinct from subject complements.

This is certainly true for Kato’s examples ending in *is all*. None of them can occur WITH initial *that*: for instance **That I just don’t show my feelings is all*. Quotation 10 has an imperative rather than a declarative initial clause, so that the complementizer is quite impossible: *Don’t change lanes without looking, is all* has no variant form **That don’t change lanes without looking, is all*.

Now consider Kato’s authors who chose to use a comma to separate *is all* from the material preceding it—two of the three cited. We believe they were accurately noting the intonation contour in such examples, which is that of a loose adjunct following a main clause; certainly these *that*-less clauses are not subordinate. (In informal style a fairly rich set of loose adjuncts containing forms of *be* can occur sentence-finally—*is the [only] thing, is the thing of it, is the problem, is it, is what, is all*, among others—and some of them [though not *is it/what/all*] can also occur, uninverted, as loose adjuncts preceding a clause: *The thing of it is, we’ve got to go now*.)

If Kato’s examples had subject complements, we would expect them to have alternative “extraposed” forms, with dummy-*it* subjects and sentence-final clauses. Clausal subjects in subject position are, as Kato notes, characteristic of formal written style; the informal alternative to the construction in *That he left astonishes me* is the extraposed version *It astonishes me (that) he left*. Ten of Kato’s eleven citations (including, of course, all those with *is all*) have no grammatical extraposed variant: **It is all (that) you just don’t care for I*, **It is what she said (that) she is on her own for 5*, **It was the thing of it (that) he was so damn encouraging for 11*. They simply don’t act like

sentences with subject complements. But all ten of them can be seen as composed of a main clause plus a loose adjunct with a form of *be* in it.

We believe there is an important lesson here, for syntacticians and sociolinguists alike: the unit of analysis is the CONSTRUCTION, a rather abstract notion.² This is the familiar lesson of *John is easy/eager to please, I asked/promised/believed him to be a spy, What exploded was the bomb/question*, and other syntactic "false friends." To this list we add pairs like *That you don't care is the problem/You don't care, is the problem* and *The problem is that you don't care/The problem is, you don't care*. The syntactician who lumps distinct constructions together will fail to detect genuine formal generalizations. The sociolinguist who lumps them together will misidentify the relevant linguistic variables.

Kato's example 4 (*A cop gets hurt is good. And some old lady has a coronary, that's good too. She gets pushed in the drink is better still.*) is another matter. To begin with, the relevant sentences in it, the first and last, seem quite ungrammatical to us, not merely informal. If they had been collected from natural speech, we would be inclined to suggest that they were simply mistakes; mistakes do occur, and not even especially rarely. But the examples are from a literary representation of speech, not from speech itself. Much depends on the writer's ear for speech, and on the writer's ability to represent in more-or-less standard spellings a wide range of dialectal and stylistic variants. It is only too easy to speculate about such matters, but we suggest that what is represented here as the word *is* (twice) is not /iz/ but rather /s/, a casual-speech variant of *that's* or *it's*. If they are read this way, the sentences would be grammatical (and parallel in form to the middle sentence), but once again they would not contain subject complements.

NOTES

1. Kato was responding to a point we made in passing, in a discussion of restaurant menus (*American Speech* 55 [1980] 83–92), about the conventionalization of (putatively functional) conditions on grammatical form.

2. It is possible to explicate the notion of CONSTRUCTION in transformational terms, but the transformational framework isn't necessary; in the relatively simple cases we are considering here, for instance, it would suffice to posit a separate phrase structure rule (with accompanying principle of semantic interpretation) for each construction.

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