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REVIEW OF PATTEN (2012), *THE ENGLISH IT-CLEFT: A  
CONSTRUCTIONAL ACCOUNT AND A DIACHRONIC  
INVESTIGATION*

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

The *it*-cleft construction has provided a rich source of puzzles for syntacticians, semanticists, pragmati(c)ists, historical linguists and philosophers of language. As noted on the back cover, “[t]he English *it*-cleft is noted for its non-standard structure and for its unusual pragmatic and discourse-functional properties.” Amanda Patten’s aim in this book is twofold: (i) to provide an analysis of the English *it*-cleft in terms of Construction Grammar, and (ii) to contribute to the limited literature on the history of the English *it*-cleft. Perhaps the overarching argument of the book is that (usage-based) Construction Grammar (henceforth CG; e.g., Goldberg 2006) is ideally suited to accounting both for the properties that *it*-clefts share with other present-day constructions and those that are idiosyncratic. Chapters 2–5 are largely concerned with providing a constructional analysis of the present-day English *it*-cleft and related constructions. Patten’s main focus here is on specificational *it*-clefts such as (1a), but she also attempts to explain their apparent relatedness to specificational copular sentences such as (1b) and predicational *it*-clefts such as (1c):

- (1) a. It was BILL that I kissed.
- b. The one that I kissed was BILL.
- c. It is a long road that has no turning.

Patten discusses a number of properties of specificational *it*-clefts that are unusual from the point of view of present-day English grammar. She argues that specificational *it*-clefts constitute a construction (or ‘schema’) in the CG sense, and

that their idiosyncratic properties are listed as part of this schema in the same way that conventionalised properties of lexical items are listed as part of their lexical entries. Under her analysis, the *it*-cleft construction belongs to a hierarchical network of constructions, constituting a subordinate schema of the more general ‘specificational inversion’ schema. Patten further argues that some of the idiosyncratic properties of *it*-clefts are relics from previous stages of English that have been ‘fossilised’ in the *it*-cleft construction, while others have arisen in the course of the *it*-cleft’s history as a result of ‘schematisation’: the creation of new schemata closely related to the standard *it*-cleft in the constructional network.

## 2 DISCUSSION

The starting point for Patten’s discussion is the fact that specificational *it*-clefts have some unexpected properties from the point of view of present-day English grammar. First, a sentence such as (1a) apparently involves modification by a restrictive relative clause (*that I kissed*) of either the pronoun *it* or the proper name *Bill*, yet this kind of modification is generally ruled out in present-day English. Second, the role of the initial *it* is unclear: is it ‘referential’, or is it merely a semantically empty expletive element inserted to satisfy the requirement for a clausal subject? If the former, then cleft *it* is unusual in that *it* cannot normally have a human referent; if the latter, then the question arises of how the remainder of the cleft is semantically composed to give the specificational (‘exhaustive listing’) interpretation of the cleft. Furthermore, *it*-clefts have discourse-pragmatic properties not associated with their simple sentence counterparts (e.g., *I kissed Bill*): for example, in (1a) *Bill* is normally interpreted as focused, and the sentence as a whole implies that someone complained (an existential presupposition) and that no one (relevant) other than Frank complained (exhaustiveness).

Any account of *it*-clefts should therefore attempt to account for their unusual syntactic and discourse-pragmatic properties, as well as their truth-conditional relatedness both to other specificational sentences and to non-specificational sentences. Perhaps the central question here is how much of the *it*-cleft’s structure is really idiosyncratic (i.e., learned or listed) and how much is reducible to more general principles or rules of grammar. Patten’s answer to this question is based on her adherence to a usage-based Construction Grammar framework (e.g., [Goldberg 2006](#)). According to CG, constructions are “represented as symbolic pairs of form and meaning, much like individual lexical items” (p. 9). Within usage-based CG, constructions belong to a default inheritance hierarchy; thus, constructions inherit their properties by default from constructions dominating them in the hierarchy, but a construction may contain properties which conflict with those of a dominating construction. In general, constructions must be ‘motivated’: the more properties a construction inherits from dominating constructions, the more moti-

vated it is considered to be.<sup>1</sup> Patten treats specificational *it*-clefts as a construction in this sense, and argues that many of its properties are inherited from other present-day constructions (e.g., specificational constructions more generally). On the other hand, the idiosyncratic properties of *it*-clefts (the modification of *it* by a restrictive relative; the obligatory extraposition of this relative; the unusual agreement patterns found; the particular range of clefted constituents permitted; the possibility of ‘new information’ in the cleft clause) do not appear to be synchronically motivated in this sense. In the second half of the book, Patten discusses how these idiosyncratic properties can be explained in terms of the *it*-cleft’s diachronic development.

The more synchronic part of the book begins with a discussion of the *it*-cleft’s place in the family of specificational copular constructions. Because of the clear structural and interpretative parallels between *it*-clefts and other constructions, it is tempting to assimilate the *it*-cleft as much as possible to some other related construction. Within (transformational) generative grammar, it is often assumed that (truth-conditionally) synonymous constructions are underlyingly identical in structure in some sense, with differences in surface constituent order derived transformationally. Accordingly, previous generative analyses of *it*-clefts have generally argued that they are structurally related either to specificational copular sentences or to focus-fronting constructions such as BILL *I kissed*. For example, Percus (1997) proposes that *it*-clefts are derived from an underlying structure like (2a-i) via extraposition of the relative clause (and spell-out of the ‘remnant’ subject as *it*), as in (2a-ii); on the other hand, É. Kiss (1998) proposes that they involve movement of the clefted constituent to the left edge of the clause, as in (2b):

- (2) a. i. [[the one [that I kissed]] was Bill] →  
       ii. [[[the one  $t_i$ ] was Bill] [that I kissed] <sub>$i$</sub> ]  
       b. i. [that I kissed Bill] →

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<sup>1</sup> Although Patten does not present an in-depth critique of the generative approach in general (only of specific generative analyses), she does criticise what she calls the “componential model of grammatical knowledge” (p. 17). She appears to conflate the idea that there are separate syntactic, semantic and phonological components associated by linking rules with the idea that “complex structures are built out of discrete, atomic elements in accordance with the combinatorial rules specific to each component” (loc. cit.). In fact, it is not clear to me that the idea of ‘constructions’ as such is diametrically opposed to either of these ideas: all three seem to be combined in the frameworks of Di Sciullo & Williams (1987) and Culicover & Jackendoff. (2005). What is really at stake is the extent of compositionality. Thus, Patten claims that “the meaning and function of more specialized linguistic patterns cannot be determined from the general rules of semantic interpretation [...] the meaning of specialized linguistic patterns is *conventional* [...] Such structures are also sometimes *noncompositional* [...] These, less regular expressions are therefore problematic for a strictly componential model of language structure, since aspects of their meaning and/or use cannot be generated from the application of highly general linking rules” (loc. cit.). In addition to falsely equating ‘componential’ with ‘fully compositional’, this seems to strike rather a defeatist note. As I try to show in Reeve (2012), I believe that the correct analysis for *it*-clefts lies somewhere in between strict compositionality and constructionality.

- ii. [it was [Bill<sub>i</sub> [that I kissed *t<sub>i</sub>*]]]

These syntactic derivations have crucial semantic/pragmatic implications. A derivation like (2a) can capture the ‘presuppositional’ properties of *it*-clefts and specificational sentences in the same way: both contain an underlying definite description (*the one that I kissed*), and definite descriptions are associated with an existential presupposition and with exhaustiveness. However, a derivation like (2b) must essentially stipulate these properties for *it*-clefts, as focus-fronting constructions more generally do not show the same ‘presuppositional’ properties as *it*-clefts. Patten accounts for the connections between *it*-clefts and specificational sentences more generally by classifying *it*-clefts as a subconstruction of specificational sentences. *It*-clefts thus inherit by default all of the properties of specificational sentences, including existential presuppositions and exhaustiveness.<sup>2</sup> An important piece of evidence for the extraposition approach comes from the contrast between *it*-clefts and *there*-clefts, the latter of which do not give rise to a presupposition or an exhaustive reading. For example, (3) leaves it open whether there are other colleagues besides Mark and Oliver who are available (p. 84; see also [Reeve 2012: 23–4](#)):

- (3) Well, there’s Mark and Oliver that are available to work Saturday.

This suggests that the presence of *it* is crucially responsible for the exhaustive interpretation of *it*-clefts.

Having established *it*-clefts as a member of the family of specificational sentences, Patten goes on to tackle the nature of specificational meaning. There are broadly two accounts in the literature of how the two DPs in a specificational sentence such as (1b) are related semantically: either (i) the two DPs are both referring expressions (or individuals), and the sentence asserts that the two DPs have the same referent (the ‘equative’ approach), or (ii) the initial DP is a predicate, and the sentence asserts that the second DP belongs to the set denoted by that predicate (the ‘inversion’ approach). The equative approach thus assimilates specificational sentences to identity statements such as (4a), while the inversion approach claims that specificational sentences are ‘inverted’ versions of true predicational copular sentences such as (4b), where the second DP is predicated of the first:

- (4) a. John is Bill.  
b. Bill is a doctor.

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<sup>2</sup> This raises the question of why a redundant specification of inheritance is needed to express the fact that both *it*-clefts and specificational sentences more generally exhibit presuppositional properties. Under the view that the presuppositional properties are due to the presence of a definite subject (a view to which Patten subscribes), they would presumably be derivable from the lexical entries for the definite article and *it*, and hence would not need to be inherited. The status of *it*-clefts as a subconstruction of specificational sentences seems, under Patten’s account, to be motivated more by the idiosyncratic properties of *it*-clefts, which would override the defaults provided by the somewhat less idiosyncratic specificational copular sentence.

Patten opts for the inversion approach, but concentrates more on removing potential stumbling blocks for this approach than on providing positive argumentation for it. The first potential problem for an inversion approach is that predicate inversion is not a productive possibility (e.g., \**A doctor is Bill*); the second is that specificational meaning seems to consist in something more than just predication (i.e., it involves providing an ‘exhaustive list’ of the members of the predicate set). With regard to the first problem, Patten argues that this is not a restriction on predicate inversion as such, but that such inversion imposes certain information-structural requirements (cf. the possibility of *A psychologist who works at St. Eligius is Dr. Hugh Beale*). As for the difference between specificational and predicational interpretations, Patten characterises this difference as follows (p. 35):

[W]e can say that *the best surgeon* describes, or ascribes a property to, *John*. However, the sentence in (20) [*John is the best surgeon.*—MJR] allows an additional interpretation. If the referent *John* is focused, the sentence acquires a specificational reading on which *John* is identified as matching the description *the best surgeon*. In contrast, the sentence in (19) [*John is a surgeon.*—MJR] does not invite this interpretation; even when the referent *John* is focused [...] there is still the sense that we are ascribing a property to *John*.

Patten argues that both predicational and specificational copular sentences involve the concept of ‘class inclusion’ (which appears to be equivalent to the formal semantic interpretation of predication as set membership), but that specificational sentences differ because the ‘more referential’ DP (e.g., *Bill* in (1b)) is focused. Because definite predicative DPs denote a ‘restricted set’ which must meet a condition of ‘inclusiveness’ or ‘uniqueness’ (i.e., this set must characterise the subject and nothing else), the focused subject ends up representing the exhaustive list of the members of the restricted set. While I share the intuitions expressed in the above quote, it seems to me that the problem of distinguishing specificational meaning only arises in this form if specificational sentences are treated as inverted versions of predicational sentences. Under an equative account, the interpretative asymmetry that Patten notes can also be captured in terms of type ambiguity, with the ‘less referential’ DP having an intensional type and the ‘more referential’ DP an extensional type, as under ‘question-answer pair’ approaches to specificational sentences (e.g., Schlenker 2003, Romero 2005). Furthermore, assimilating specificational sentences to predicational sentences will only yield a gain in terms of simplicity if identity statements can also be assimilated in this way. This is not a straightforward task, however, given that, for example, identity statements cannot occur in small clause form as the complement of *consider*-type verbs (e.g., \**I consider Tully Cicero*). This suggests that proper names, unlike definite descriptions, cannot be treated as predicates.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the ‘non-referential’ reading of the initial DP

<sup>3</sup> Den Dikken (2006) argues for an inverse predication analysis of identity sentences, but requires the

of specificational sentences is also available in cases where the DP cannot be analysed as an underlying predicate (e.g., Heycock & Kroch's 1999 example *The best value for the dollar has changed*). I was therefore not convinced of the case made here for an inverse predication analysis.

Patten next asks why a 'specificational inversion' construction should exist alongside the non-inverted predicational copular construction. Her answer is that specificational inversion constructions are motivated (in the CG sense) "by inheritance from a highly general information structure construction" (p. 40) in which new information or focus is clause-final. She goes on to argue in Chapter 4 that *it*-clefts also inherit their fixed word order in this way. However, the statement that "[l]ike other specificational inversion constructions, *it*-clefts have a fixed information structure, in which the focus is located in clause-final position" (p. 73) is problematic unless it is stated explicitly what is meant by 'clause-final' here, as the clefted constituent (standardly the focus of the *it*-cleft) is not clause-final in the sense of being the final constituent in the matrix clause. In fact, it has been suggested by Vallduví (1990) that the information structure of *it*-clefts is somewhat different from that of standard specificational sentences, as *it*-clefts feature a 'given' constituent both preceding and following the focus (the 'link' and 'tail' respectively in Vallduví's tripartite information structure). This kind of distinct information structure might thus be a better candidate than 'clause-final focus' for motivating the entrenchment of the *it*-cleft construction. It may also be that some of the differences between *it*-clefts and *wh*-clefts that Patten discusses in Chapter 8 are ultimately attributable to such differences in information structure, although more work is clearly needed in this area.

In Chapter 4, Patten discusses the structural position of the cleft clause. Although she does not commit to a particular syntactic structure for the *it*-cleft, she assumes that the cleft clause is in the same structural relation to *it* as the extraposed relative clause in (5a) is with respect to its 'host' DP *a man* (cf. the 'non-extraposed' version in (5b)):

- (5) a. A man came in that I kissed.  
 b. A man that I kissed came in.

According to Baltin (1981, 2006), the relative clause in (5a) is right-adjoined to the matrix IP. However, a number of authors (e.g., Delahunty 1982) have provided evidence that the cleft clause of *it*-clefts is actually adjoined to VP, which would suggest that it is in an extraposition relation with the clefted constituent rather than with *it*.<sup>4</sup> Some of the evidence comes from constituency tests (VP-ellipsis, VP-

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first DP in such sentences to be the predicate. While this resolves the small clause problem (since the second DP in small clause complements of *consider* must be the predicate), it raises the question of why this restriction should hold at all, and furthermore invokes an apparently *ad hoc* type of ellipsis.

<sup>4</sup> In fact, Culicover & Rochemont (1990) argue that extraposition from subject can target VP as well as IP (a possibility that Hedberg 1990 capitalises on in her analysis of *it*-clefts), though I expressed scepticism about this in Reeve (2012).

fronting, coordination, right node raising, parenthetical insertion), which Patten rejects as being inconclusive. Another, somewhat more indirect, piece of evidence comes from agreement, which Patten takes more seriously. In present-day English, verbal person and number agreement in the cleft clause appears to be controlled by the clefted constituent rather than by *it*. Person agreement varies according to dialect, but the most common variant, according to Akmajian (1970), is (6b), where there is no person agreement (or, perhaps, person agreement with *it*). The fact that all those who allow (6a), with person agreement, also allow (6b), but not *vice versa*, suggests that the option in (6b) is somehow more basic:

- (6) a. It is I who am responsible.
- b. It is me who is responsible.

Number agreement appears to be more problematic: the cleft clause verb/auxiliary may agree with the number of the clefted constituent, as in (7a). Patten argues, however, that cleft *it* is ‘semantically underspecified’, allowing plural and non-human referents. She cites (7b) as a case where there is a potential mismatch in number between the agreement in the matrix clause and that in the subject-modifying relative clause. She further notes that her dialect of English permits examples like (7c), where the cleft clause auxiliary clearly agrees with *it* rather than with *John and Margaret* (the assumption here being that *John and Margaret’s responsible* would be ungrammatical in the relevant dialect).

- (7) a. It’s John and Margaret who are responsible.
- b. The group of physicians that is/are responsible for this mix-up has/have been disbanded.
- c. % It’s John and Margaret that’s responsible for this.
- d. \* It are John and Margaret that is/are responsible for this.

A potential problem for this account is that, as far as I know, no dialect of English permits matrix plural agreement in *it*-clefts, as in (7d). Of course, one could simply stipulate this as a property of the *it*-cleft construction, but this seems rather unsatisfying, and presumably would not be motivated in the CG sense. Given the contrast between (7b) and (7d), then, it is not clear how we can treat cleft *it* as “morphosyntactically singular, but conceptually underspecified” and number agreement as a “semantic phenomenon” (p. 101).<sup>5</sup> In addition, there are other agreement phenomena which point towards agreement with the clefted constituent (see Reeve 2012: 38). Another indirect argument for the VP-internal position (or at least origin) of the cleft clause comes from a series of arguments for a ‘promotion’ analysis according to which the clefted constituent of certain types of *it*-cleft (e.g., non-DP/PP-clefts, clefts with distributive *different* in the cleft clause) originates in the cleft

<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, it has been argued convincingly in Sauerland & Elbourne (2002) that a distinction must be made between ‘syntactic’ and ‘semantic’ number agreement.

clause and moves to post-copular position. Importantly, this differentiates *it*-clefts from *wh*-clefts, where the clefted constituent is arguably always base-generated in post-copular position (see [Reeve 2012: 40ff.](#)). Thus, while I agree with many of Patten's arguments for a discontinuous-constituent analysis of *it*-clefts, I do not believe that this requires a structure which is parallel to that of relative clause extraposition from a subject. A further reason to think that *it*-clefts are syntactically distinct from true extraposition-from-subject constructions is that predicational *it*-clefts apparently come in two flavours: what I called 'true' and 'false' predicational clefts in ([Reeve 2012: 89ff.](#)). These behave differently with respect to various tests: for example, 'true' predicational clefts such as (8a) invariably have *it* as the subject pronoun and permit VP-fronting (thus patterning more with specificational *it*-clefts) while 'false' predicational clefts such as (8b) have an agreeing subject pronoun and do not permit VP-fronting (thus patterning with extraposition from subject) (*ibid.*:92).<sup>6,7</sup>

- (8) a. I said that it was an important thing that he did, and an important thing that he did it was.  
 b. \*I said that they were just fanatics who were holding him, and fanatics who are holding him they are.

Combining the idea that *it*-clefts involve a discontinuous definite description (*it* plus the cleft clause) with the idea that the cleft clause in some sense modifies the clefted constituent, as in [Han & Hedberg \(2008\)](#) and [Reeve \(2012\)](#), appears to lead to a compositionality problem: the cleft clause semantically modifies something which it does not syntactically modify. My proposed solution to this problem was to relax compositionality such that semantic modification does not entail syntactic sisterhood, but only syntactic locality (a similar proposal was made in [Kiss \(2005\)](#), implemented in a modified HPSG framework). It seems to me that this kind of analysis is not totally at odds with what Patten is proposing: she is arguing that the *it*-cleft is a subconstruction of the specificational inversion construction based on their functional similarity and shared history, but this does not seem to bear on the synchronic syntactic analysis of the construction, only on its semantic interpretation.

The remainder of the book (Chapters 6-8) deals with the diachronic development of the *it*-cleft, arguing that usage-based CG provides an ideal framework within which to analyse the changes that have occurred in the history of the construction. This part of the book provides a particularly important contribution to the literature, as few authors have given much consideration to the diachronic as-

<sup>6</sup> I originally gave this a "?\*" judgement, but I believe that I may have been misled by the alternative (though less sensible) reading 'They are fanatics and they are holding him'.

<sup>7</sup> Patten considers the fact that predicational clefts can have plural subjects to be problematic for my account ([Reeve 2012](#)). In fact, I argued that this variation in subjects is no longer problematic if we recognise two different kinds of predicational clefts, only one of which is syntactically parallel to specificational *it*-clefts in terms of the relation between *it* and the cleft clause. Patten does not discuss the evidence I provide for the true/false predicational cleft distinction.



pects of the *it*-cleft, and, as the back cover notes, the prior literature on the subject is “largely unchallenged”. Chapter 6 argues that a number of idiosyncratic properties of the *it*-cleft result from the ‘fossilisation’ of patterns which were productive in earlier periods of English. Chapter 7 argues that a number of other idiosyncratic properties result from the creation of new constructions or schemas based on the frequent occurrence of novel uses of existing constructions. The latter chapter is the result of Patten’s own corpus investigation, and makes use of four historical English corpora covering the history of British English up until 1914. Chapter 8 then provides a more detailed account of these changes in terms of ‘grammatical constructionalisation’ and compares this with other existing accounts.

Three idiosyncratic aspects of modern *it*-clefts are attributed to fossilisation: the invariable use of *it*, the obligatory extraposition of the cleft clause, and the peculiar agreement patterns. With respect to the first of these, the use of *it*, Patten provides some evidence that *hit* (the Old English equivalent of *it*) could be used for a human referent, which is no longer generally possible.<sup>8</sup> Patten suggests that the continued use of underspecified *it* “allows the speaker to contrast singular and plural entities as possible instantiations of the same set” (p. 167), but beyond this does not (as far as I can tell) say why the retention of *it* in *it*-clefts is motivated from the point of view of the present-day language. As for the second property, obligatory extraposition of the cleft clause, Patten notes that Old English (OE), which already has a number of examples of *it*-clefts (*pace* Ball 1991), also permits restrictive modification of *hit* by an adjacent relative clause, which is no longer possible. Furthermore, extraposition was the preferred option in OE, as in (9) (O’Neil 1977, cited on p. 157):

- (9) þa men common on East Engle [þe onþæm anum scipe wære]  
lit. ‘the men came to East Anglia [who on the ship were]’

In fact, it was only in Middle English (ME) that relative clauses regularly occurred adjacent to the DPs they modified. *It*-clefts, on the other hand, failed to undergo this change; rather, it became impossible for the cleft clause to occur adjacent to *it* (e.g., \**It that I kissed was Bill*). Patten suggests that this is because extraposition in the *it*-cleft continued to be ‘motivated’ in the CG sense. She gives various possible motivations for extraposition: it allows heavy constituents to be reordered

<sup>8</sup> This is based on one example which does not seem very conclusive, as *it* does seem possible in place of *he* (though perhaps not preferred) in the equivalent modern English sentence (Patten’s translation of her example (18), p. 155):

- (i) “Who is this old man?” The angel said to him: “He is a bishop who did more evil than good...”  
(*The Blickling Homilies*; Ball 1991)

There is a difference in meaning (though not a truth-conditional one)—*he* gives rise to a predicational meaning, while *it* gives rise to a specificational meaning—but it is not completely clear (to me at least) what the intended meaning of the OE original is, so it is difficult to interpret the possibility of *hit* as evidence that it could be used more generally than in present-day English.

after light constituents, it allows the focus to be placed in the “cognitively-preferred clause-final position” (p. 158) (though cf. the discussion above), and it ensures that *it* remains stressless, as is necessary for weak pronouns. She furthermore argues that *it*-clefts have come to align less with relative clauses and more with other kinds of extraposition constructions (e.g., *it*-extraposition constructions such as *It is a miracle that he survived*).<sup>9</sup> With regard to the first motivating factor, placement of heavy constituents after light, it would be useful to know what kind of ratio of light-heavy to heavy-light tokens could be considered decisive for motivating a change or a lack of change; as it is, we just have an intuition that *it*-clefts will meet this requirement while standard cases of relative clause modification will not. Furthermore, given that Patten appeals to a “highly general information-structural construction” in which the focus is clause-final (p. 40), one might wonder why this requirement did not win out over the light-heavy requirement, as non-extraposition would actually be favourable from this point of view. Presumably this has to do with the relation to specificational sentences more generally; a non-extraposed structure for *it*-clefts would not be motivated in any way that distinguishes them from specificational sentences in general. One thing that is not clear, however, is why the continued occurrence of relatively ‘heavy’ relatives in extraposed position (as documented by Suárez-Gómez 2006) did not lead to the positing of a new ‘extraposed relative’ schema, which would make extraposition of such relatives obligatory as it is in *it*-clefts.

As we have seen, the cleft clause verb appears to agree with the clefted constituent for number (and sometimes person), which is potentially problematic for the discontinuous-constituent analysis. Patten observes, however, that the agreement properties of the matrix copula have changed over time: in the earliest examples it agreed with the clefted constituent for number, but from the 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards it began to show consistent singular agreement. This is particularly clear in the following two examples, which are different versions of the same text:

- (10) a. ...when it is þin owe spirite þat spekiþ þees iueles, or it ben þees oþer iuel spirites þat spoken hem in þee.  
lit. ‘...when it is your own spirit that speaks these evils, or it are these other evil spirits that speak them in you’  
(e15<sup>th</sup> *A Tretis of Discreyson of Spirites*; Ball 1991)

<sup>9</sup> The suggestion of a prosodic motivation, due to Bolinger (1977), does not seem very convincing to me given that *it* followed by a zero relative would have the same kind of stress pattern as a free relative, which of course may occur in pre-copular position:

- (i) a. What I want is some coffee.  
b. \*It I want is some coffee.

As for alignment with other extraposition constructions, this tallies to a certain extent with my own proposal that *it*-extraposition and *it*-clefts involve the same syntactic locality relationship between *it* and the extraposed clause (Reeve 2012: 107ff.), though I do not discuss the diachronic development of the constructions at all.

b. ....or it is þees oþer iuel spirites...

lit. ‘...or it is these other evil spirits...’

(mid-15<sup>th</sup> *A Tretis of Discreyson of Spirites*; Ball 1991)

On the other hand, Ball (1991) shows that the apparent agreement between the cleft clause and the clefted constituent holds consistently throughout the *it*-cleft’s history. Patten observes, however, that *it* was sometimes used with plural reference in OE and early ME; thus, the apparent number agreement between the cleft clause and the clefted constituent could in fact be number agreement with *it*. Later, *it* became restricted in most contexts to denoting non-human, singular individuals, which led to the treatment of cleft *it* as morphosyntactically singular. According to the argument made in Chapter 4, however, cleft *it* is unusual in retaining its ability to have a plural referent (being “semantically underspecified”, p. 165). In support of this, Patten cites two examples where agreement apparently must be semantic (e.g., Shakespeare’s *’Tis not the many oaths that makes the truth*, where the cleft clause verb is singular).<sup>10</sup> I expressed some scepticism above about the idea that cleft *it* is semantically underspecified but morphosyntactically singular. A further problem is what the motivation (in the CG sense) might be for retaining underspecified *it* in *it*-clefts alone. Patten claims that there is a “practical advantage” in retaining underspecified *it*: “By not marking number until the act of specification is complete, the construction allows the speaker to contrast singular and plural entities as possible instantiations of the same set” (p. 167). It is not actually completely clear to me why this is advantageous as opposed to having the pronoun agree with the clefted constituent for number regardless of what it is contrasted with. The alternative I pursued in (Reeve 2012: Chapter 3) is to treat *it* as morphosyntactically underspecified (lacking  $\phi$ -feature specifications and hence appearing in a ‘default’ form), an option which is restricted to *it*-clefts because of their peculiar syntax. Of course, this does not address the question of how the agreement changes in the *it*-cleft’s history took place, a question which deserves further research from a generative perspective.

We have also seen that the pronoun in predicational clefts varies according to the number of the referent, appearing as either *it* or *they*. This split occurred following the reanalysis of *it* as morphosyntactically singular in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. As this split did not occur in specificational *it*-clefts (which invariably feature *it*, apart from a short period of variation around the 17<sup>th</sup> century), Patten considers this to be evidence for a semantic difference between the discontinuous constituents of specificational and predicational *it*-clefts (however, see the discussion above on ‘true’ and ‘false’ predicational clefts), with the former being a predicate and the latter a referential expression. Apparently problematic for Patten’s analysis, however, is the fact that the pronoun in predicational clefts does not normally agree for gender with the clefted constituent (e.g. *It’s no reliable man that you hired, but a crook*),

<sup>10</sup> It is not actually clear whether this is really semantic agreement or morphosyntactic agreement with *it*. In any case it does not involve agreement of any kind with the clefted constituent.

which is surprising if the definite description in predicational *it*-clefts is referential and if semantically non-specific *it* is reserved for non-referential DPs. Patten claims that, in this case, “the use of *it* with human reference is a relic from an earlier time” (p. 167). However, this would lead us to expect that *it* could be used with human reference in other referential DP positions, which is of course not the case (e.g., \**It came into the room*, with *it* referring to the crook). In the absence of a clear evidential criterion for fossilisation of *it* in this particular referential position, then, this seems to be a stipulation rather than an explanation.

Patten then observes that, while the history of number agreement turns out to support the discontinuous-constituent analysis of *it*-clefts, the history of person agreement appears to argue against it. In the earliest examples of clefts with focused pronouns, the pronouns always appear in the nominative case and often trigger person agreement in the cleft clause, as in (11) (p. 168):

- (11) Wherefore it is onely I that haue offended. (1531 *Elyot Governour* II)

This might be taken to support an expletive analysis according to which the clefted constituent moves out of the cleft clause (as Ball 1991 proposes on the basis of historical evidence). Patten notes, however, that the use of nominative case on a post-copular pronoun is independent of whether the gap in the cleft clause would also be assigned nominative, and that person agreement of this type is also found in cases where the agreement trigger could not have moved out of the clause containing the agreement. Examples of each case are given below (p. 169):

- (12) a. Why, is it hee you love best, quoth the Parson?  
(1597 DELONEY-E2-P1, 16.235)
- b. Y am he that haue synned, and Y dide wickidli...  
‘I am the one that have sinned, and I acted wickedly...’  
(a1440 *Wycliffite Later Version*; Ball 1991)

Next, Patten shows that the gender agreement seen in OE *hit*-clefts was almost always with *hit* (i.e., neuter) rather than with the clefted constituent (p. 171):

- (13) Ða þa he on þære eorðan læg astreht þa hwon hit[n.] gast[m.] wære þæt[n.]  
ðær mid hwylcere hiwunga gebæde hi.  
‘Whilst then he lay prostrate on the earth he [was troubled in his mind, considering whether] at all it might be a spirit that, by some strange appearance, was praying there.’

(Skeat 1881: 19)

This is taken to provide strong support for the discontinuous/extraposition analysis over the expletive analysis. However, I would have liked to see some arguments for treating *þæt* as a neuter relative pronoun rather than as a complementiser akin to modern *that*. While it is true that we might expect at least some gendered relative pronouns if the cleft clause genuinely agreed with the clefted constituent, it

could equally be the case that *hit*-clefts at this stage never feature an overt relative pronoun at all. Clarifying this is particularly crucial given that Patten presents it as a strong argument against the expletive analysis of Ball (1991). Finally, as I noted above, there are discontinuous-constituent analyses in which the cleft clause nevertheless agrees with the clefted constituent (Han & Hedberg 2008, Reeve 2012).

Chapter 7 deals primarily with two historical changes in the *it*-cleft: the increase in the range of possible clefted constituents, and the development of so-called ‘informative-presupposition’ clefts, in which the cleft clause contains new or focal information. Alongside the gradual increase in the occurrence of specificational *it*-clefts over time, Patten observes an increase in the occurrence of non-nominal clefted constituents (first PPs, then clauses, then AdvPs, APs, etc.). *It*-clefts in OE only had DP foci, with PP foci first occurring in ME and becoming more frequent at the end of the Early Modern English (NE) period, when clausal and AdvP foci first emerged. Patten interprets this gradual change in terms of semantic rather than syntactic categories, arguing that there was originally a preference for the most ‘discrete’ entities (proper names, pronouns and animates) in cleft position; this is supported by the fact that abstract DPs only appeared as cleft foci from late ME onwards.<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, when less ‘discrete’ cleft foci first appear, there is a strong tendency for them to occur in lists or with focusing adverbs (e.g., *only*) (p. 201):

- (14) a. for ’tis shame of the fault and the disgrace that attends it that they should stand in feare of, rather then paine, if you would have them a temper truely ingenuous. (1685 LOCKE-E3-H,57.206)  
 b. ’Tis opportunity, ’tis a lone-hour only, that can make me happy. (1685 BEHN-E3-P1, 167.206)

Patten interprets these strategies as ‘individualising’ strategies, or ways of making non-discrete foci more discrete. In fact, even in present-day English, APs, for example, are infelicitous as cleft foci without a contrastive interpretation, as can be seen by comparing the following two exchanges (Heggie 1993: 50):

- (15) a. A. What colour are her eyes?  
       B. # It’s green that her eyes are.  
 b. A. What colour are her eyes?  
       B. Her eyes are green.  
       C. No, it’s BLUE that her eyes are, not GREEN.

In Reeve (2012), this fact is given a syntactic account: DP-clefts may have a structure in which the DP is base-generated in post-copular position, while AP-clefts

<sup>11</sup> While this generalisation appears to work for these examples, and possibly for the temporal sequence ‘DP then PP then AdvP’, it is less clear how the appearance of different types of clefted AdvPs at different stages (means/reason then temporal/spatial then manner) could fit into it.

must be derived via A'-movement of the AP. The requirement for a contrastive interpretation of the AP thus falls together with the requirement for A'-moved foci in general to be interpreted contrastively (e.g., Molnár 2006). It would be interesting to investigate whether the history of the 'listing' requirement can be interpreted in terms of syntactic change from a movement structure to a base-generation structure. On my own analysis (Reeve 2012), the base-generated structure requires the presence of a relative pronoun/operator in the cleft clause, while the movement structure forbids it. This suggests the hypothesis that in OE only the most 'discrete' cleft foci are associated with a relative operator, while the less 'discrete' foci initially lack a corresponding operator, hence forcing a movement structure and a contrastive interpretation. This would require the *þæt* which appears in all OE *hit*-clefts to be analysed as a complementiser rather than as a neuter relative pronoun, as suggested above. Under this hypothesis, the dropping of the 'listing' requirement for a particular type of clefted constituent would be predicted to cooccur with the development of a corresponding relative operator for the constituent in question.

The second historical change Patten examines in Chapter 7 is the increase in the occurrence of cleft clauses containing new information. Patten provides evidence that cleft clauses in OE were restricted to containing information which was present in the immediate discourse context (one interpretation of the term 'old information'). Then, in ME, cleft clauses began to contain information that was not immediately salient, but nevertheless represented 'shared knowledge' of the interlocutors, as in (16a) below. Only in late ME do we find the first 'informative-presupposition' clefts (I/P-clefts) such as (16b), in which the cleft clause represents 'certifiable fact' which the hearer may nevertheless not know. Later still, we find I/P-clefts being used with a 'performative' function, which allows the speaker to distance themselves from the assertion being made, as in (16c):

- (16) a. Abid a while, I prey þe, and taak good kep ho it is þat lenep hym so boldely to Cristes brest and slepþ so sauerly in his lappe.  
lit. 'Abide a while, I pray thee, and take good keep who it is that leans him so boldly to Christ's breast and sleeps so surely in his lap.'  
(c1400 CMAELR3, 45.586)
- b. It was he þat graunted Kyng Herri þe Secunde to go into Yrlond and turne hem to þe feith, (a1464 CMCAPCHR, 108.2367)
- c. Aman. Pray be so just then to me, to believe, 'tis with a World of Innocency I wou'd enquire, Whether you think those Women we call Women of Reputation, do really 'scape all other Men, as they do those Shadows of 'em, the Beaux. (1696 VANBR-E3-P1, 43.108)

In Chapter 8, these two historical changes are interpreted in terms of 'schematisation': the entrenchment of more abstract, higher-order constructions (as opposed to 'fossilisation', which involves the entrenchment of subordinate constructions). This is essentially the CG interpretation of the more widely-used term 'grammati-

calisation'. Patten interprets the change in the range of cleft foci as an "extension from the prototype" (i.e., 'discrete' DP) (p. 213), and argues that this is supported by 'coercion' effects: the fact that non-nominal elements in cleft position are assigned 'nominal characteristics' (e.g., the listing requirement). As for the changes in the informational status of the cleft clause, Patten argues that these are governed by the presuppositional nature of the definite description in *it*-clefts. She claims that "Over time, speakers are able to further manipulate what sorts of information can be marked as presupposed" (p. 215). It is not entirely clear what gave rise to this change, though Prince's (1978:898) explanation seems as good as any: "The fact that *it*-clefts may present information as known without making any claims that the hearer is thinking about it (or, in fact, even knows it) presents the speaker with a strong rhetorical temptation: what is to prevent him/her from putting new information into the *that*-clause?" Once new information is found in a number of *it*-cleft tokens, these tokens are abstracted over to form a new *it*-cleft subtype, the I/P-cleft. The general *it*-cleft schema now becomes more abstract, stipulating only those properties shared by all of its subconstructions, which in turn means that informational requirements on the cleft clause are relaxed. At this point, I wondered about the predictions that the constructional network in Patten's Figure 11 (p. 216) might make: does the postulation of a new schema for the I/P-cleft mean that this construction should increase in frequency, for example, or perhaps that *it*-clefts overall should increase in frequency? Otherwise it is not entirely clear to me what the value is of positing a separate schema for I/P-clefts as opposed to making the existing *it*-cleft schema less specific in terms of informational requirements.

Next, Patten compares her account with alternatives in the literature, including Ball's (1991) claim that the OE impersonal construction, illustrated in (17), plays a central role in both historical changes.

- (17) Ðæt gelamp on sumre niht, þæt þær com sum man to þæs halgan weres spræce.  
'It happened one night that there came a certain man to speak to the holy man.'  
(*Saint Guthlac*; Ball 1991)

Ball argues that the impersonal undergoes a partial merger with the *it*-cleft in Late ME, producing a new construction (the AdvP/PP-cleft) where the cleft clause is a sentential complement rather than a relative clause. The version of this construction that has new information in the 'cleft clause' then merges with the DP-focus *it*-cleft to form the DP-focus I/P-cleft. Patten notes, however, that there is no evidence for treating AdvP/PP-clefts as distinct from DP-clefts; in addition, AdvP- and PP-clefts appear at different times in the historical record. Furthermore, the cleft clauses of DP- and AdvP/PP-clefts undergo parallel developments, and there is little evidence of an early connection between I/P-clefts and AdvP/PP-clefts, or of a time delay before the appearance of DP-focus I/P-clefts, as we might expect under Ball's analysis. In addition, postulating a separate AdvP/PP-cleft does not explain why DP-clefts contain more abstract foci over time, together with 'individualising

effects' such as listing and focus adverbs, nor why *it*-clefts later go on to allow more non-DP foci. Finally, the influence of impersonals does not explain the development of 'performative' I/P-clefts, which Patten attributes to presuppositionality (which is a feature of *it*-clefts but not impersonals). In summary, "an account which relies solely on characteristics acquired from the impersonal construction [...] is unable to account for the full extent of the *it*-cleft's [...] development" (pp. 220-1). Patten also discusses and argues against a proposal by Filppula (2009) that the development of *it*-clefts was heavily influenced by Celtic and a proposal by Los (2009) that the loss of verb-second in English was crucial in this respect.<sup>12</sup> The remainder of the chapter is devoted to a rather more speculative discussion of the discourse-pragmatic differences between *it*-clefts and *wh*-clefts, such as Prince's (1978) observation that *wh*-clefts require the *wh*-clause to contain 'inferable' information, or information that the speaker assumes to be in the hearer's consciousness (as in Chafe's 1976 notion of 'givenness'), as shown by the fact that (18b) is less acceptable than (18a) (p. 234):

- (18) a. '...So I learned to sew books. They're really good books. It's just the covers that are rotten.'
- b. ....So I learned to sew books. They're really good books. What's rotten is just the covers. (Prince 1978: 896)

Patten relates this difference to the fact that *it*-clefts are associated early on with 'discourse-old' (rather than 'inferable') information, which is not so dependent upon speaker-hearer interaction.

### 3 CONCLUSION

This book provides a detailed description of the English *it*-cleft that focuses on its various idiosyncrasies and makes a strong case for a discontinuous-constituent analysis of the construction. Perhaps its most important contribution, however, is the historical component: the generalisations and trends that Patten's investigation has uncovered should give pause to anyone working seriously on the structure of *it*-clefts, copular sentences, relative clauses or extraposition constructions. It should furthermore serve as a spur to those (such as myself) who have hitherto been concerned only with synchronic aspects of these constructions to take their historical development more seriously.

That said, I have some concerns in relation to Patten's interpretation of the data in terms of usage-based CG. In contrast to generative models, usage-based CG puts a premium on token and type frequency—this is what entrenches schemata

<sup>12</sup> Without having looked into the matter in detail, I find it surprising that verb-second would be considered crucial in the increase in frequency of the *it*-cleft. The modern Scandinavian languages retain verb-second, yet the *it*-cleft occurs with even higher frequency in those languages than in English (e.g., Gundel 2002).



and leads to the creation of new schemata.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, Patten provides frequency information that clearly shows a general increase in the occurrence of specificational (as opposed to predicational) *it*-clefts over time (p. 194), and a clear sequence in the appearance of cleft foci of different categories, as well as differing frequencies (pp. 197, 202). For other phenomena, however, the focus is on providing attestation of relevant properties, which means that conclusions about the entrenchment of such properties surely have to be taken with a pinch of salt. I mentioned one case above (the entrenchment of obligatory extraposition) where it is not clear what distinguishes extraposition in *it*-clefts, which became obligatory, and extraposition of heavy relative clauses, which remained optional. The question is, how high do token or type frequencies need to be to lead to the entrenchment of schemata? Patten acknowledges the relevance of this question (posed by Croft 2007), but believes that it is “unlikely that frequency alone can account for [the *it*-cleft’s] entrenched form [...] the *it*-cleft has become less associated with the constructions which inform the behaviour of its component parts and instead aligns with other constructions which support the *it*-cleft’s structure *as a whole*, such as information structure generalizations and extraposition constructions” (pp. 178-9). It still remains unclear, however, what relative contribution is made by these factors. On the other hand, the limited amount of historical data is clearly the main obstacle to understanding here, and this caveat would presumably apply to any approach. A further point concerns ‘motivation’, the main criterion for construction status (and “what imbues a constructional approach with explanatory adequacy”, according to Goldberg 2003: 120). The definition of motivation appears clear (“the more properties that are inherited from other constructions, the more we can say that the construction is motivated”, p. 20); what is less clear is how falsifiable predictions can be made without a complete network of constructions and a specification of all their properties, and also some idea of what constitutes ‘enough motivation’ to be a construction. Otherwise the attribution of ‘motivation’ has something of a *post hoc* flavour. On occasion, I was also confused by whether certain explanations for entrenchment (e.g., the “practical advantage” of retaining ‘semantically underspecified’ *it* in specificational *it*-clefts) were meant to be motivations in this sense or merely functionally-based explanations independent of the constructional hierarchy.

The book certainly sets a compelling challenge for alternative models of lan-

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<sup>13</sup> For example: “Assuming a usage-based approach, both language learning and language change involve the speaker inductively generalizing over actually occurring instances to form mental schemas (or constructions) which are represented in the language system. The storage and organization of the speaker’s grammatical knowledge is dependent upon, and can change according to, patterns of activation. Token frequency (the number of times a given instance is activated) results in the entrenchment of an instance as a unit in the language system. Furthermore, the repeated use of an instance which is already stored as a conventional unit in the speaker’s grammar activates (and so strengthens) that construct, making it more entrenched. In contrast, type frequency (the frequency or activation of different *types* of instance) results in the entrenchment of a more basic schema.” (pp. 21-2).

guage change. It would be interesting to investigate, for example, how recent generative models of language change (e.g., Hale 1998, Roberts & Roussou 2003) could account for the diachronic developments that Patten observes. In Roberts & Roussou's model, grammaticalisation involves the reanalysis of lexical heads as functional heads, together with the loss of some of the content of these heads. One might interpret some of the changes in *it*-clefts in a similar way. To take just one example, obligatory extraposition, I argued in Reeve (2012) that the cleft clause enters separate syntactic relations with *it* and the clefted constituent, and hence must satisfy locality requirements with respect to both of them. I also suggested that *it* is underspecified for *phi*-features because it simply consists of a D with no complement NP, which means that there is no way for the cleft clause to form a constituent with *it* (assuming that non-extraposed relative clauses adjoin to NP). If the cleft clause is adjoined to VP, however, it may satisfy both of these locality requirements under the definitions I propose. The change from optional to obligatory extraposition in clefts could then be seen as a structural simplification of *it*: it once involved a full DP structure (i.e., D selecting NP) with a neuter gender feature (and possibly other *phi*-features), but then *it* became 'underspecified', losing the selectional feature on D as well as the neuter gender feature, which resulted in the loss of the *it*-adjacent adjunction site for the cleft clause.<sup>14</sup> Assuming that gender is the relevant feature, this would lead us to expect that obligatory extraposition would coincide in the historical record with loss of gender agreement between the cleft clause and *it*. Given that both gender agreement and *hit*-adjacent relatives are found in OE but not in ME, this may appear at first sight to be true, but of course more work would be required to test this prediction. These remarks are speculative, of course, but they illustrate that there is much work to do on the question of how to relate the detailed syntactic structures argued for in the generative literature with the historical developments that Patten and others have uncovered.

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<sup>14</sup> Roberts & Roussou 2003 interpret stage two of Jespersen's cycle (the development of 'low' negation) in a similar way: a full DP becomes reinterpreted as a functional head. This change thus involves 'structural simplification'.

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