

Extris, extris – Arnold M. Zwicky – Stanford SemFest 2007

For at least 35 years, 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 – our Extris (“extra *is*”). There are many subtypes, but we 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.

The Isis (“*is is*”, “double *is*”, etc.) subtype has gotten much attention – from Bolinger through Coppock et al. – as a variant of SE “thingy”-N-subject or pseudocleft (PC) sentences:

- (1) N-type Isis: The funny thing is is that Lisa was there too.
- (2) PC-type Isis: What’s nice is is that it has a sort of other-worldly character.

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 – our Th:

- (3) N-type Th: That’s/Here’s our suggestion for it is that...
- (4) PC-type Th: That’s/This is what we hear all the time is that...
- (5) *There* Th: There’s one thing I need to do is leave a check.

Then there are McConvell’s (2004) FreeBe’s, in which initial material is either explicitly cataphoric (as in (1)-(5)) or implicitly so:

- (6) Exp FreeBe: We looked at it this way is that...
- (7) Imp FreeBe: I’d like to say is that...

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 (SU: “set-up”), that it is about to be introduced, and then supplying it in a following expression (PO: “pay-off”, a.k.a. “counterweight”). The SUs are variously phrasal, hypotactic, and paratactic:

- (8) Simplex: The problem is (that) it’s time to leave. (1)
- (9) Pseudocleft: What I think is that it’s time to leave. (2)
- (10) Paratactic Apposition:
 - (a) That’s/Here’s the problem: it’s time to leave. (3)
 - (b) There’s one thing I need to do: leave right now. (5)
 - (c) I’m telling you: it’s time to leave. (7)

What the extra form of BE does in the Extris examples is explicitly mark the PO part of the SU+PO construction and so focus on it.

In any case, it seems likely that every sort of SU+PO construction (including some not listed above) has an Extris counterpart for at least a few speakers.

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

- (11) Reading Sherlockian pastiches is is what I do to relax.

Extris versions are potentially available for all SU+PO constructions, but speakers differ as to which ones they use. Many have none. Some have fairly high rates of Isis, but no Singlis, and some have moderate rates of Singlis (of certain sub-types), but no Isis. And there’s at least one who seems to be a near-categorical user of Extris, of all types. The Extris types have a common function, but they are independent constructions.

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- LINGUIST list, 2001: 12.1904
- LINGUIST list, 2004: 15.150, 15.427, 15.518, 15.535, 15.560
- Melon Colonie blog, Jackson Ninly, 16 January 2004
- sci.lang newsgroup, September-October 2001
- Language Log postings:
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<http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languageelog/archives/001123.html>
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