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Clefting in spoken English

Cleft constructions such as (1) *That's what I thought*, and (2) *This is my mother we are talking about!* are much more frequent in spontaneous spoken English than other cleft types (twice more than IT-clefts, three times more than basic WH-clefts and over ten times more than reversed WH-clefts). What is their function in discourse and what do they tell us about the nature of spoken language?

The scope of this research extends beyond cleft constructions alone and taps into the syntax of unplanned spontaneous speech in general, uncovering problematic examples found in this type of linguistic data. The discussion provided here is part of a larger study which contrasts and compares TH-clefts (exemplified above) with other cleft types in terms of various structural and discourse-related properties, collected from 200,000 words of unplanned, spontaneous conversations found in the Wellington Corpus of Spoken New Zealand English. The aim is to obtain a better understanding of the nature of spoken language.

Following Ball (1967), we use the label TH-cleft and propose that the construction is neither a reversed WH-cleft (as assumed by some researchers, see Collins 2004, Hedberg 1988, Lambrecht 2001, Weinert and Miller 1996), nor an IT-cleft (Huddleston and Pullum 2002), despite sharing a number of properties with these. The current work extends Ball's term to include both types of cleft constructions exemplified above in (1) and (2). The paper follows Biber *et al* (1999), in treating TH-clefts as distinct from the other cleft types. Moreover, some TH-clefts appear to be distinct not only from other cleft types, but also from clefts found in written language. In speech, they can be (apparently) incomplete, syntactically loosely integrated in the discourse or truncated. This presents problems for existing syntactic theories and raises questions regarding their applicability to spoken data.

The paper aims to show that TH-clefts should be classified as distinct from IT-clefts and WH-clefts, and to exemplify how their structure highlights problems in analysing spoken language.

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