

The discursive status of extraposed object clauses

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Abstract

This paper presents a corpus-based analysis of the English object extraposition construction, which involves the anticipation of a complement clause by an expletive pronoun *it* in object position, as in *he'll appreciate it that you've taken the time to return his book*. In the existing literature, the presence or absence of anticipatory *it* has been associated with interpretive differences in terms of the givenness and/or presupposition of the extraposed clause. From an empirical perspective, however, neither of these concepts can be applied to all instances of optionally extraposed object complements. As an alternative, I propose that object extraposition essentially has a discursive function: it involves the speaker's emphatic assertion of the main clause predication in order to convey additional speaker-hearer related meanings. © 2016 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

In this paper I will propose that object extraposition constructions as in (1) generally express interpersonal meanings that are not necessarily evoked in their non-extraposed counterparts. Following [Davidse \(1994\)](#), it will be argued that object extraposition involves the explicit marking of the reified, i.e. nominalized, status of the complement clause. Depending on the particular context in which the grammatical marker *it* occurs, its presence is either (i) optional and emphatic, or (ii) highly marked. The speaker's choice to add this explicit marker in such contexts will be argued to have a specific discursive effect: by individuating the complement clause as a conceptually autonomous, nominalized clause, the speaker clearly sets it off from the main clause in which it is a constituent, thereby drawing attention to the relation between the two clauses. In simple declarative clauses, the foregrounded relation between main and complement clause involves the speaker's emphatic assertion (signalling e.g. speaker certainty, intensity, counterexpectation from the preceding discourse, or further elaboration in the following discourse) that the main clause predication holds. This discursive meaning provides a more general explanation than previous accounts which restricted the use of object extraposition to semantically presupposed complement clauses (which are inherently nominalized ([Davidse, 1994](#))) or to complement clauses that contain information that is given in the discourse (which can constitute a contextual motivation for nominalizations in marked contexts).

- (1) I appreciate order and control. I like *it that everything's done according to the rules*. (CB)¹

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¹ The corpus examples are reproduced with the kind permission of HarperCollins. They were extracted from the Collins WordbanksOnline Corpus, henceforth abbreviated as CB.

Object extraposition is a construction in which a complement clause is anticipated by the pronoun *it* in object position, with the clause itself moved further towards the end of the sentence.² The complement clause in (1), for instance, realized in the *that*-clause, is placed after the ‘anticipatory’ and co-referential pronoun *it*. Similarly in (2), the complement clause is placed after the object complement *surprising* instead of immediately following the main clause verb. The pronoun *it* thus as it were ‘anticipates’ this ‘postponed’ complement clause in object position. As such, utterances with extraposition are said to deviate from the ‘canonical’ Subject–Verb–Object order (cf. Quirk et al., 1985:720–721).

(2) I find *it* surprising *that figurative art still seems underrated* (CB)

(3) *it* is surprising *that figurative art still seems underrated*

Extraposition of object clauses is highly infrequent, especially compared to that of subject clauses as in (3) (Quirk et al., 1985:1062; Kaltenböck, 2004:65).³ To explain actual occurrences of object extraposition, as well as possible interpretive differences in contexts where object extraposition is optional, the construction has been related to various discursive properties involving informational prominence, factivity, and givenness.

First and foremost, the occurrence of extraposed object clauses has been associated with contexts containing a co-occurring object complement (2) or intervening adverbial (4) in which extraposition is said to be obligatory (Quirk et al., 1985:1050, 1393). The strong tendency to have extraposed (2,4) rather than non-extraposed (2',4') structures in such contexts is usually accounted for with reference to the principles of *end-weight* or *end-focus*: long or complex constituents tend to occur at the end (cf. (2)), as do constituents that carry the information focus of the sentence (cf. (4)) (Quirk et al., 1985:1355ff).

(4) He denied *it* until the very last minute *that he WOULD become the Club's new trainer*.

(2') ??I find *that figurative art still seems underrated* surprising

(4') ??He denied *that he WOULD become the Club's new trainer* until the very last minute.

However, the factors of end-weight and end-focus cannot account for extraposed clauses *without* intervening elements, as in (1). In this example, the anticipatory pronoun *it* can be left out without negative effects on the processing of the sentence, and its occurrence is not dependent on any intervening constituents as the anticipatory pronoun *it* and the *that*-clause are adjacent to each other in object position.

To examine the discursive properties of occurrences of object extraposition without intervening material further, a set of corpus data was extracted from the Collins Wordbanks Online Corpus (CB). All 1987 instances of lexical predicates immediately followed by the combination of the anticipatory pronoun *it* with a *that*-complement clause were extracted from the corpus.⁴ The resulting data set was subdivided into three categories. Firstly, extraposition is obligatory for objects to prepositional or phrasal-prepositional verbs as in (5), which make up 32.1% (638 tokens) of the data. This is due to a general constraint in English that a preposition cannot directly introduce a *that*-clause as its complement (Quirk et al., 1985:1049). Secondly, there is a small but highly frequent set of semi-fixed expressions (56.0%, 1112 tokens) mainly expressing hearsay (6a) or inference (6b), for which the pronoun *it* is an inherent part of the expression. Thirdly, there is a set of instances as in (1), instantiated in the remaining 237 tokens (11.9%), for which the extraposed and non-extraposed clauses are attested in very similar contexts and cannot be accounted for in terms of constraints of a grammatical or lexicalized nature. It is for this third set that potential interpretive differences between extraposed and non-extraposed object clauses have been related to the notions of factivity and/or givenness (see below).

(5) a. You can *depend on* it that your close relationship will be no secret. (CB)
b. David *came right out with* it that there'd been a fight (CB)

(6) a. *Rumours had* it that he and his family were possessed by the devil. (CB)
b. *I take* it that you'll be at the rendezvous. (CB)

² I follow common terminological practice in referring to ‘object complements’ as opposed to ‘subject complements’, without further implications regarding potential differences in syntagmatic relation to the matrix. For further discussion, I refer to Section 5.

³ Considering all 1808 instances of *it*-extraposition in the ICE-GB corpus, Kaltenböck (2004:73) found that “subject *it*-extraposition clearly outnumbers object *it*-extraposition by a ratio of roughly 1:16, marking the 107 instances of extraposed object clauses as marginal cases of extraposition.”

⁴ Besides instances with intervening constituents between the pronoun and the extraposed clause, the search thus also excludes instances with other clause types that can be extraposed, or with complement clauses without an explicit complementizer. Object extraposition can apply to *that*-clauses with and without an overt complementizer *that*, (*for*) *to*-infinitives, gerundial clauses and to *wh*- or *if*-clauses (Kaltenböck, 2004:66).

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