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<th>Title</th>
<th>A NOTE ON THE IT IS THAT-CLAUSE CONSTRUCTION</th>
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<tbody>
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A NOTE ON THE IT IS THAT-CLAUSE CONSTRUCTION

Yutaka SOEDA

Sentences that are introduced by it is are logically interesting. That is why a great deal has been written about anticipatory (or preparatory or provisional) it, of which frequent and detailed mention is made in terms of anaphoric or cataphoric reference. So there is no need whatsoever to describe it here in any detail. In this paper I will discuss another use of it which looks similar to anticipatory it (in the it is... that construction) —hereafter called type A, but which is clearly different from it. For some reason, however, this use of it (in the it is that construction) —hereafter called type B— has received little attention so far. One of the reasons may be that type A is so predominant in English grammar that type B in question tends to impress us as a minor point. But type B certainly needs comment.

To facilitate matters let us look at three examples of the construction of type B:

[1] Gerald: Yes, I think you were. I know we'd have done the same thing. Don't look like that, Sheila.

Sheila (rather distressed): Sorry! It's just that I can't help thinking about this girl. (Priestley, J.B. An Inspector Calls)

[2] Harvester: Well, if you want to know, I thought you silly, nervous, and hysterical. Good heavens, I've been in practice long enough to know how wildly people talk. I should be kept pretty busy if I paid any attention, for instance, to what one woman says about another.

Nurse: Or it is that you're frightened to death of a scandal? (Maugham, W.S. The Sacred Flame)

[3] Lady Sneerwell: Well, if Mrs. Evergreen does take some pains to repair the ravages of time, you must allow she effects it with great ingenuity; and surely that's better than the careless manner in which the widow Ochre cauls her wrinkles.

Sir Benjamin: Nay, now. Lady Sneerwell, you are severe upon the widow. Come, come, 'tis not that she pains so ill—but, when she has finished her face she joins it on so badly to her neck, that....

(Sheridan, R.B. The School for Scandal)

In [1]～[3], at any rate, it is clear that it is anaphoric and that that means because. If it were cataphoric, it wouldn't make sense at all. The OED helps us here
in that it gives a hint on the meaning of *that*, but it gives no examples of the construction in question.

Now consider the following examples:

\[4\] . . . , but it is the colleges themselves that admit students in the first place, and provides the accommodation where most of their students study, eat and sleep. Thus *it was that* I applied for admission to Queen's College, rather than directly for Cambridge University. (Mobbs, M.C. *Universities Observed*)

\[5\] I grew afraid that others would know of my idolatry. I felt, Dorian, that I had told too much, that I had put too much of myself into it. Then *it was that* I resolved never to allow the picture to be exhibited. You were a little annoyed; but then you did not realize all that it meant to me. (Wilde, O. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*)

In \[4\] and \[5\] it is again anaphoric, but *that* means not *because* but *why*. So we might be able to paraphrase *it was that as that was why*. In this connection, let us look at what *CGEL* has to say about this construction.

'With *be*, this type of extraposition is used for expressions of *possibility* and (especially) for reflective questions,

It may be that she no longer trusts you.

Could it be that you left the keys in your office?' (§18.33)

In this description no explicit distinction is made between the construction in question and extraposition, and further, expressions of possibility and reflection are not directly associated with clausal extraposition, but rather with the modals (*may* and *can* in this case) preceding *be*. An essential point here is that in the two examples in *CGEL* it is never anaphoric and *that* means neither *because* nor *why*. On the other hand, as far as \[1\]~\[5\] are concerned, *it* is anaphoric and *that* means *because* or *why* according to the context. In other words, extraposition does not help to clarify the construction of type B.

In Middle English, too, we occasionally come across the same construction.

By God that sit above,

Nere it that thou art sick and wood for love. (Chaucer, *The Knight's Tale* 1. 1600)

And n'ere it that we be so neigh the tente

Of Calcas, . . . (Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde* Book V 148-9)

In this connection, we should note two ME phrases *al be it* (*that*) and *how be it that*, both meaning *although*. My claim here is that *it* in these complex phrases is
A NOTE ON THE IT IS THAT-CLAUSE CONSTRUCTION 33

cataphoric.

In place of type A construction as used in [1]～[3], it is of course possible to say it is because... (e.g. It will be because we do not regard cry as ambiguous.). In that case, it is again anaphoric. Instead of type B construction as seen in [4]～[5] above, there is a much clearer expression like 'it is for that reason...', which is an instance of cleft sentence. As the examples suggest, it is easy for ambiguity to arise. How, then, can we explain the historical development and use of type B, despite the various meanings of 'that'? To summarize the analysis of 'it is that...' so far, it is tempting to speculate that this usage has grown up through (1) the superficially similar anticipatory it in particular, and (2) a similar use of 'that'(conj.) as in 'There is another necessary condition and that is that a pitch difference must be perceptible.'

Notes:
1. Kruisinga(1931) excludes this sentence-type from the discussion on provisional it. (§2442)
2. OEDa. That II.2: Introducing a clause expressing the cause, ground, or reason of what is stated in the preceding clause.
   Ibid., II.2.b: Not that... (ellip.) = 'I do not say this because...' or 'It is not the fact that...', 'One must not suppose that...'

REFERENCES