

## Constructions can encode context—the case of copular clauses

Russell Lee-Goldman

University of California, Berkeley  
rleegold@berkeley.edu

### 1 Introduction

- Parties to a telephone call face one major task: figure out who you are talking to.<sup>1</sup>
- Focus on two ways: copular clauses with either *this* or *it* as the subject.
- Not all combinations of *this/it* and statement/question are possible.<sup>2</sup>

- |                              |                               |
|------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| (1) Providing identification | (2) Requesting identification |
| a. This is Kim.              | a. Who is this?               |
| b. It's Kim.                 | b. Is this Kim?               |
| c. It's me                   | c. #Who is it?                |
| d. #This is me.              | d. #Is it Kim?                |

- A related task: figure out who's knocking on your door.

- |                              |                               |
|------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| (3) Providing identification | (4) Requesting identification |
| a. #This is Kim.             | a. #Who is this?              |
| b. It's Kim.                 | b. #Is this Kim?              |
| c. It's me.                  | c. Who is it?                 |
| d. #This is me.              | d. #Is it Kim?                |

#### Questions for today

- Why do we see these patterns of acceptability?
- What type of copular clauses are these, and what are their syntactic, semantic, and functional properties?
- What about them can be understood based on general linguistic or communicative principles, and how much must be listed as part of special constructions?

#### The bigger picture

- Which features of communicative context are conventionally connected to syntactic structures?
- What is context? What can studying grammar tell us about it?

<sup>1</sup>Thanks to Eve Sweetser, Line Mikkelsen, Yoko Hasegawa, Chuck Fillmore, Michael Ellsworth, Oana David, and Christine Sheil for their advice and comments. Any remaining errors are my own.

<sup>2</sup>Discussion is limited to conversations without caller ID, video phones, or similar technologies that may aid identification.

## 2 On the telephone: *this*

Preliminaries: some features of telephone calls

1. After signalling a connection has been made, parties to a call pass through an *identificational/recognitional sieve*. (Schegloff, 1979, 71)
2. Identification via voice sample (*hi*) is preferred if possible, but if not then by *recognitional* (*mom, Russell*).
3. Asymmetrical access to information: the caller has a better idea who is on the other end than the answerer does. The caller's identity takes priority. (Schegloff, 1968, 1076; Schegloff, 1979, 33, 65)

### 2.1 Function

- *This be X* (TBX) can be either a declarative or interrogative, and can be used to talk about either the speaker or the addressee (examples in the appendix).
- TBX supports identification of self or addressee only on the phone.
- TBX is usable only during the initial identificational sieve.

- (5) (ring)  
Emily: Electronics Wholesale.  
Harold: Hello, I'm calling on behalf of Shippers Plus.  
:  
:  
Emily: It looks like we might have to contact each other later to finish this up. My office number is 555-1234.  
{ My name is Emily, just ask the receptionist for me. /  
Just ask the receptionist for Emily. /  
# This is Emily. }

- Nothing predicts these contextual restrictions: they are encoded as part of a TBX construction.

### 2.2 Form and meaning

Two questions:

1. What does *this* refer to? (and why can it refer to either party?)
  2. What type of copular clause is TBX?
- An easy, but wrong, answer: *this* refers to either the speaker or the addressee, and the copular clause is equative: *I=Russell, You=who?*

- The problem: In general, demonstrative pronouns can't refer to people.

- (6) a. This/That's my teacher.  
b. #This/That's pretty mean.  
c. #This/That teaches me math.

- They only seem to be able to refer to people as subjects of certain types of copular clauses (demonstrative-**be**-X, DBX).
- Moreover: When they seem to refer to people, evidence suggests they still don't actually do so. (Mikkelsen, 2005; Birner et al., 2007; Ward, 2008)
  - Tag question subjects are always *it*: *This is Kim, isn't it?*
  - Non-restrictive relative clauses are out: *#This, who you met yesterday, is Kim*
- Birner et al. (2007) and Ward (2008): DBX clauses are equative.<sup>3</sup> The subject refers to a variable in an open proposition (OP), "a proposition that contains one or more unspecified elements, which are represented as variables" (320).<sup>4</sup>

(7) A: I think Sue made those cookies.  
 B: No, **that was Pierce**.  
 OP: X MADE THOSE COOKIES  
 Interpretation: 'X made those cookies, X=Pierce'

### My proposal

1. TBX, as a type of DBX, is an equative clause.
2. The subject refers to variable in an OP.
3. General cultural practices surrounding telephone conversations lead to the salience of OPs that concern the parties' identities.

### 2.3 An OP-based analysis

- Still to be accounted for: the speaker/addressee flexibility of *this*  
 → general indexical principles + open propositions

#### Speaker/addressee flexibility

- General pattern of alternation between speaker- and addressee- relevance in statements and questions. (Fillmore, 1973, 14)
 

(8) a. This is Kim. ( $\approx$  I am Kim)  
 b. Who is this? ( $\approx$  Who are you?)

(9) a. John may come in. (I give permission.)  
 b. May John come in? (Do you give permission?)

(10) a. John seemed happy. (I thought so.)  
 b. Did John seem happy? (Did you think so?)

(11) a. Heading out now. (I am heading out.)  
 b. Heading out now? (Are you heading out?)

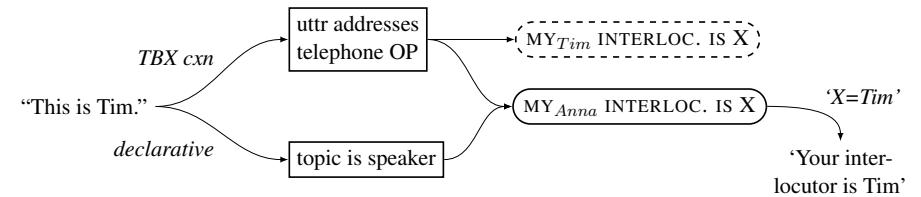
<sup>3</sup>Birner et al. (2007) do allow for some DBX sentences to have human-referring subjects, but these have properties not seen in telephone contexts, so I do not address them.

<sup>4</sup>Mikkelsen (2005) proposes a specificational analysis, and Heller & Wolter (2007) propose a predicational analysis. Both proposals suffer from several drawbacks. See Lee-Goldman (2011) for discussion.

Immediate and automatic relevance of interlocutors' identities

- ⇒ Each person is oriented to resolving an OP: MY INTERLOCUTOR IS X
- ⇒ Their orientation to the OP is public knowledge (cf. Gunlogson, 2003)

- Specify that *this* can refer to the variables in these OPs.
- Suppose Tim calls Anna, and says *This is Tim*.



- As a statement, it states something about the speaker. Anna's OP (MY<sub>Anna</sub> INTERLOCUTOR IS X) is the only one that could reference the current speaker, so her OP's variable is referenced by *this*. The interpretation is essentially 'your interlocutor is Tim'.
- If Tim asks *Who is this?*, he is taken to be asking about the addressee. Only his OP concerns his addressee, thus he is saying 'MY<sub>Tim</sub> INTERLOCUTOR IS X, X=who'.

#### The constructional remainder

1. The lexical specification of *this* (*\*That's Kim/Who's that?*); its limitation to subject position (*\*Kim is this*).
2. TBX's association with an OP.
3. TBX's association with the telephone scenario.

#### Higher-order OPs

- MY INTERLOCUTOR IS X is specified once by the construction, but it is not a single OP to which the speakers attend.
  - Unlike X TOOK THOSE COOKIES (above), and all the examples discussed by Birner et al. (2007).<sup>5</sup>
- It is a higher-order OP, versions of which are relevant to different speakers.
- Speakers have their own goals but are aware that others have similar (but not identical) goals.
- Why not two OPs, attended to by both speakers? THE CALLER'S/ANSWERER'S IDENTITY IS X
  - TBX is still possible even when there is no caller or answerer.

<sup>5</sup>Some OPs they cite do have pronominals, e.g., I HEARD THE NAMES OF X (22c), but these are interpreted as resolved to particular individuals.

There is further evidence for treating TBX as conventionalized: other languages recruit different resources to accomplish the same function.

## (12) Japanese

- a. *Kochira wa Tanaka desu.*  
this.way TOP T. COP.HON  
'This is Tanaka.' ('I am Tanaka.')
- b. *Kochira wa donata desu ka?*  
this.way TOP who COP.HON Q  
'Who is this?' (≠ 'Who are you?')
- c. *Kore/koitsu/kono hito wa Tanaka desu.*  
this/this.person/this person TOP T. COP.HON  
'This is Tanaka.' (≠ 'I am Tanaka')
- d. *Tanaka desu*  
Tanaka COP.HON  
'It's Tanaka.'

## (13) Mandarin

- a. *Zhè shì Lǐ*  
this COP Li  
'This is Li.' (≠ 'I am Li')
- b. *Wǒ shì Lǐ*  
I COP Li  
'I am Li.'

- Greek: *I am X* (Sifianou, 1989, 533).
- Dutch *Met X* 'with X' (Houtkoop-Steenstra, 1991)

**Summary** TBX is a construction inherits its syntactic properties from the more-general DBX construction, but adds the restrictions that (i) the subject is *this*, (ii) *this* refers to a variable in an OP made salient due to the nature of a telephone conversation, (iii) it is usable only on the phone during the initial identificational sieve.

### 3 New construction, new context: *it*

- *It be X* (IBX) usable on the phone. It diverges syntactically and functionally from TBX in several ways.
- It must be declarative.

- (14) [On the phone]
- a. It's Russell.  
b. #Is it Russell?  
c. #Who is it?

- The answerer cannot use IBX in their first turn.

- (15) (ring) Hi, this/#it is Russell.

⇒ *It* requires its referent to have the highest level of cognitive focus (or givenness; Gundel et al., 1993; Hedberg, 2000). The answerer's identity is of lesser concern than that of the caller (due to the information asymmetry)—the question of answerer's identity is salient enough to licence *this*, but not *it*.

- IBX is associated with an *expectation* of contact.
  - *Hi, this is X*: 0 of 96 tokens are between acquaintances.
  - *Hi, it's X*: 29 of 40 tokens are between acquaintances; 1 between strangers who had arranged to have a phone call. [COCA]
  - Corollary: only IBX supports a voice-sample identification

- (16) a. It's me.  
b. #This is me.

- IBX is not limited to the telephone. Residents responding to a hail at their door also can use IBX.
- Unlike telephoners, they can use *wh*-questions.

- (17) [At the door]
- a. Who is it?  
b. It's Russell.  
c. #Is it Russell (by any chance)?

- There is no expectedness constraint for the question. It still holds for the declarative.

- (18) (Who is it?)
- a. It's Pizza Palace, with your order.  
b. #It's the Linguistic Society of America, do you have a moment?

- The same OP analysis for TBX extends straightforwardly to IBX in both contexts.

#### The constructional account

- Declarative IBX is a syntactically-limited subtype of DBX. It has a constant function across contexts: one construction for both the phone and the door. Stipulated:
  1. Limitation to declarative clauses.
  2. Association with expected contact.
- *Wh*-IBX is limited to the door and doesn't have an expectedness constraint → it's a separate construction.

### 4 Summary, discussion, and prospects

Construction	Examples	Context of use	Constraints
TBX	<i>This is Chris Is this Chris? Who is this?</i>	telephone	Either party, any sentence type
IBX	<i>It's Chris.</i>	(either)	Declarative only. Generally for expected initiators of contact (by calling, knocking, etc.).
who-is-it	<i>Who is it?</i>	front door	For residents only. No expectation constraint.

- There do exist syntactic constructions (not simply fixed expressions or lexical items) which are tied to features of the conversational context.
  - The register or genre: telephone vs front door.
  - Actions recognized in those contexts: the identificational sieve
  - Situation-specific assumptions: expectedness of contact
- Conversation Analytic research yields a number of insights relevant to grammatical analysis.
- Linguistic analysis supplements CA research with precise means of generalization and reveals connections across parts of a language.
- Grammar is what's conventional, not just what's (syntactically and semantically) well-formed (Morgan, 1978; Sadock, 1978; Ariel, 2008).

Future work:

- Scrutinize what “on the telephone” or “at the front door” really mean. How/when do people distinguish these situations?
- Integrate research that problematizes the idea that linguistic structure (merely) reflects features of the context.
- More and different constructions.

## A TBX examples

- (19)
- [Answerer self-identifies]  
Montgomery County Crisis Center. **This is Jim.** May I help you?
  - [Answerer confirms ID]  
JOY Hello?  
VOICE Hi! How are you?  
**JOY Is this Damien?**
  - [Answerer requests ID]  
KING: I understand we have a police officer who was involved. New York City, hello?  
1st CALLER: New York, New York Yes  
KING: Hi, **who is this?**
  - [Caller self-identifies]  
**This is Venus Duncan.** I'm calling ab – for Oprah Winfrey.
  - [Caller confirms ID]  
The phone rings and he picks it up.  
ED Hello.  
**GEORGE Is this Ed?**
  - [Caller requests ID]  
“Hello?”  
**“Who the hell is this?”**  
“You called my phone, and you're asking me who I am?” (Sarahca Peterson, *From Behind This Chair*)

## References

- Ariel, M. (2008). *Pragmatics and Grammar*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Birner, B. J., Kaplan, J. P., & Ward, G. L. (2007). Functional Compositionality and the Interaction of Discourse Constraints. *Language*, 83(2), 317–343.
- Fillmore, C. J. (1973). May we come in? *Semiotica*, 97–116. (reprinted in Fillmore, 1997)
- Gundel, J. K., Hedberg, N., & Zacharski, R. (1993). Cognitive Status and the Form of Referring Expressions in Discourse. *Language*, 69(2), 274–307.
- Gunlogson, C. (2003). *True to Form: Rising and Falling Declaratives as Questions in English*. New York: Routledge.
- Hedberg, N. (2000). The Referential Status of Clefts. *Language*, 76(4), 891–920.
- Heller, D., & Wolter, L. (2007). That is Rosa: Identificational Sentences as Intensional Predication. In A. Grønn (Ed.), *Proceedings of SuB 12*. Oslo: Department of Literature, Area Studies and European Languages, University of Oslo.
- Houtkoop-Steenstra, H. (1991). Opening sequences in Dutch telephone conversations. In D. Boden & D. Zimmerman (Eds.), *Talk and Social Structure*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Lee-Goldman, R. (2011). *Context in Constructions*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of California, Berkeley.
- Mikkelsen, L. (2005). *Copular clauses: Specification, Predication and Equation*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Morgan, J. L. (1978). Two Types of Convention in Indirect Speech Acts. In P. Cole (Ed.), *Syntax and Semantics 9: Pragmatics* (pp. 261–280). New York: Academic Press.
- Sadock, J. M. (1978). On testing for conversational implicature. In P. Cole (Ed.), *Syntax and Semantics 9: Pragmatics* (pp. 281–297). New York: Academic Press.
- Schegloff, E. A. (1968). Sequencing in Conversational Openings. *American Anthropologist*, 70(6), 1075–1095.
- Schegloff, E. A. (1979). Identification and Recognition in Telephone Conversation Openings. In G. Psathas (Ed.), *Everyday Language: Studies in Ethnomethodology* (pp. 23–78). New York: Irvington Publishers, Inc.
- Sifianou, M. (1989). On the Telephone Again! Differences in Telephone Behaviour: English versus Greek. *Language in Society*, 18(4), 527–544.
- Ward, G. (2008). Brave new world. In *Proceedings from the 44th Annual Meeting of the Chicago Linguistic Society* (pp. 81–105).