THE IT IS THAT-CONSTRUCTION AND ABDUCTIVE INFERENCE

KEITA IKARASHI
University of Tsukuba*

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1. Introduction

It has been pointed out that the it is that-construction, exemplified by the italicized sentence in (1), has a wide range of interpretations, such as explanation, interpretation, excuse, conclusion, and so forth, which I assume are illocutionary forces determined in actual contexts (cf. Declerck (1992), Otake (2002, 2009)). In (1), for example, the construction gives an explanation or an excuse for the speaker’s inability to repay some money.

(1) I cannot pay you back today. It’s just that all the banks are closed. (Koops (2007: 207))

Whatever illocutionary force the construction has, however, it basically serves to provide a cause of what is stated in the previous sentence (cf. Curme (1931), Bolinger (1972), Carlson (1983); Cambridge International Dictionary of English). Bolinger (1972) thus paraphrases it as the it is be-

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1 In fact, these interpretations have often been discussed in the study of speech acts and performative verbs (cf. Austin (1962), Fraser (1974)).

2 The it of the it is that-construction is generally regarded as an expletive (cf. Declerck (1992)). Thus, the it is that-construction should be distinguished from the expression in (i), in which it refers to the specific problem mentioned in the preceding sentence.

(i) I’ve got a bit of a problem. It is that all the banks are closed.

(Otake (2002: 142))
cause-construction (see also Declerck (1992: 209)). The it is that-construction in (1), for instance, can be paraphrased as the it is because-construction shown in (2).

(2) I cannot pay you back today. It’s because all the banks are closed.

This paraphrase suggests that the proposition all the banks are closed is a cause of what is stated in the first sentence.3

The observation that the it is that-construction introduces a clause denoting a cause raises interesting questions. Note first that the it is that-construction superficially has no expression indicating causality like because in the it is because-construction. How, then, does the causal interpretation of the it is that-construction arise? Previous studies do not address this question seriously.4

Furthermore, although Bolinger (1972) mentions the similarity between the it is that-construction and the it is because-construction, these two constructions show different behaviors with respect to the tense forms each can take. Compare the following examples:5

(3) He was shot in his house. It is that he knew too much.

(Delerck (1992: 219))

(4) He was shot in his house. ??It is because he knew too much.

Here, the causal relationship between the past two events is at issue, and both constructions serve to associate these events. However, the it is because-construction in (4) is not as natural as the it is that-construction in (3); it is more natural for the it is because-construction to be in the past tense (i.e., It was because he knew too much.). On the other hand, the same restriction of the tense form is not imposed on the it is that-construc-

3 Otake (2009) points out that the it is that-construction does not necessarily express the cause; it can be used to express the effect. As Otake himself puts it, however, the construction rarely expresses an effect. Thus, it is highly likely that there is some special licensing condition on the it is that-construction expressing an effect. Although it is important to clarify such a licensing condition, this issue lies beyond the scope of this paper and is left for future research.

4 Otake (2009), for example, claims that the it is that-construction provides an interpretation of the preceding context; in other words, it “offers an explanation of the previous information on the basis of information that the speaker already has (Otake (2002: 142)).” Based on this claim, he notes merely that the causal interpretation of the construction is derived from the speaker’s interpretation of the preceding context. He is not concerned with why the construction mainly provides a cause.

5 Example (4) was pointed out to me by Kevin Moore (p.c.).
tion. Then, why is the *it is that*-construction allowed to be in the present tense in (3)?

The key to answering the above two questions is inference. When interpreting texts, the text receiver makes inferences to support the coherence of the texts (cf. de Beaugrande and Dressler (1981)); inference plays a significant role in guaranteeing coherence between utterances. It is thus reasonable to assume that the utterances in (1) and (3) are coherent because of the operation of inference made by the hearer. Based on this assumption, I will propose that the *it is that*-construction causes the hearer to make a certain type of inference. Given this proposal, the above two questions can be answered in a principled way. In addition, the proposal makes it clear that the *it is that*-expression is functionally equivalent to assertive predicates in the sense of Hooper (1975), and thus it should be handled in the same way as these predicates.\(^6\)

The organization of this paper is as follows. Section 2 proposes the role that the *it is that*-construction plays in discourse in terms of inference and answers the questions given in this section on the basis of the proposal. Section 3 provides evidence in support of the proposal given in section 2. Section 4 argues that the specificational property of the construction observed by Declerck (1992) can be subsumed under the proposal in this paper. Section 5 demonstrates that the *it is that*-construction has the same properties as assertive predicates. Section 6 concludes this paper.

2. Proposal

Focusing on the relationship between the *it is that*-construction and inference, I will propose the following generalization:

\[(5) \text{ The *it is that*-construction invites abductive inference.}\]

To put it differently, the *it is that*-expression functions as a marker indicating to the hearer that the sentence in the *that*-clause is abductively related to the preceding sentence.\(^7\)

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\(^6\) By the term “the *it is that*-expression,” I mean the upper clause *it is* of the *it is that*-construction.

\(^7\) Here, one might ask from where the generalization in (5) is deduced. An anonymous reviewer has pointed out that the generalization can be attributed to the structure of the construction proposed by Declerck (1992). Declerck claims that the construction can be understood as a reduced cleft-sentence; for instance, the *it is that*-construction in (ia) is assumed to have a hidden presupposition, as illustrated in (ib).
The notion of abduction is crucial to the proposal in (5). In abduction, we first observe a phenomenon, then make up the list of possible explanations of the phenomenon under consideration, and finally, select an explanation from our list of possible explanations (Delaney (1993: 15–16)).\(^8\)

A causal relationship is typically involved in abduction (cf. Hinkelman and Spackman (2000)). More specifically, a cause is inferred from an effect through abductive inference. Suppose, for example, that you observe that the ground is wet. You then come up with a set of propositions, such as *someone watered the ground*, *it rained*, *a water pipe ruptured*, and so forth, that could have caused the state of the ground. Finally, you select the most probable proposition, say, *it rained*, from the set. This inferential process is summarized in (6).

\[
\text{(6) The ground is wet.} \\
\text{If it had rained, the ground would be wet.} \\
\text{It rained. (Conclusion)}
\]

If the proposal given in (5) is correct, we can answer the questions in section 1: (i) how does the causal interpretation of the *it is that*-construction arise, and (ii) why is the *it is that*-construction allowed to be in the present tense in (3).

The first question can be answered as follows. A cause is inferred from an effect in abduction. Because the *it is that*-construction invites abductive inference, causal interpretation is involved in the construction despite the absence of expressions that superficially ensure causality the way that *because* does.

\[
\text{(i) a. How is it possible that she has such a grip on the boy? Is it that he is} \\
\text{infatuated with her?} \\
\text{b. How is it possible that she has such a grip on the boy? Is it that he is} \\
\text{infatuated with her that (is the reason why) she has so much power over him? (Declerck (1992: 217))}
\]

According to the reviewer, the construction urges the hearer to think of possibilities for the hidden presupposition and to understand the previous utterance in the light of the content of the *that*-clause; the structural relationship between the *that*-clause and the hidden presupposition ensures the abductive relationship established between the *that*-clause and the previous utterance. I would like to thank the reviewer for suggesting the possibility just mentioned. I will investigate the question of what guarantees the generalization in (5) in future research.

\(^8\) Note that the validity of the conclusion of abduction is not necessarily guaranteed, because there are other propositions that can explain the state of affairs in question. Thus, abduction is probable inference.
The proposal in (5) also immediately gives an answer to the second question. Recall that the *it is that*-expression is a marker indicating to the hearer that an abductive relationship is established between the events expressed by the preceding sentence and the *that*-clause. It is thus reasonable to say that the tense form of the *be*-verb of the construction reflects when the abductive relationship to be recognized by the hearer is established. Notice that abduction is a cognitive process and is itself irrelevant to the actual occurrence of a series of events; even if the causal relationship between past events is at issue, they can be abductively associated with one another at the speech time. Thus, the tense form of the construction is not required to correspond to that of the past events as in (3), repeated below in (7).

(7)  He was shot in his house.  *It is that he knew too much.*  (=3)

The construction indicates to the hearer that the two past events in (7) are abductively associated at the speech time, with the proposition *he knew too much* chosen from the set of possible causes, such as *he insulted the murderer, he stole the murderer’s wallet*, and so forth.\(^9\)

It should be noted that the analysis developed here can also be applied to the example in (8), in which the *be*-verb of the construction is in the past tense.

(8)  He was shot in his house.  *It was that he knew too much.*

As with the *it is that*-construction in (7), the one in (8) also invites abductive inference, but they differ as to when the abductive relationship to be recognized by the hearer is established: the present tense form of the construction in (7), as noted above, shows that the abductive relationship between the two past events is established at the speech time, while the past tense form of the construction in (8) signals that the abductive relationship was established prior to the speech time.

Given that the *it is that*-construction invites abductive inference, the above two questions can be answered in a principled way. In the next section, I will provide evidence in support of the proposal in (5) from two different perspectives.

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\(^9\) The inferential process involved in (7) can be diagramed as in (i).

(i)  He was shot in his house.

If he knew too much, he would be shot.

He knew too much.  (Conclusion)
3. Supporting Evidence

3.1. The Absence of Inferential Processes

The proposal given above predicts that even if the proposition in the *that*-clause represents a cause, the *it is that*-construction should be unacceptable in a context in which abduction does not take place. This prediction is supported by the following example:

(9)  
A: The sun is rising.  
B: *It’s that the earth is turning.

Speaker A first describes the situation he sees in front of him, and then speaker B confirms the reason for the rising of the sun. The proposition *the earth is turning* is thus construed to be the cause of the fact stated in speaker A’s utterance. Note that we know that the movement of the sun is caused by the earth’s rotation; it is evident that there are no causes for the movement of the sun other than the earth’s rotation. If there is only one possible cause in a given context, abductive inference will not take place, because the cause is not understood to be selected from possible candidates, and therefore, abduction is not involved in (9). As the proposal predicts, the *it is that*-construction is unacceptable in this context.

The proposal further predicts that if the conversation in (9) is embedded within a context in which abduction takes place, the construction should become acceptable. This prediction is borne out by the example in (10).

(10)  
[B knows that A believes that the movement of the sun is caused by the sun’s revolution around the earth.]  
A: The sun is rising.  
B: It’s (just) that the earth is turning.

Under this circumstance, the *it is that*-construction in (9) becomes fully acceptable. In (10), because of speaker A’s belief, two possible causes for the movement of the sun coexist here, namely, the earth rotates and the sun orbits around the earth. Thus, the proposition in the *that*-clause can be interpreted to be selected as the appropriate cause from the set of two coexisting propositions; abductive inference can occur in this context. As predicted, the *it is that*-construction is acceptable in (10). The difference between (9) and (10) indicates that the acceptability of the *it is that*-construction is contingent on whether abductive inference occurs or not.

3.2. Abduction vs. Deduction

The proposal given in this paper also makes the prediction that the *it is that*-construction is not permitted when inferences other than abduction are
at issue. To confirm this prediction, I will here discuss the inference in which causality is involved in the same way as abduction, namely, deduction. Consider the following example:

(11) A: Tom looked ill when I saw him at school yesterday.
    B: What did he do then? Did he go to the hospital?
    A: No. *It’s that he left school early.

Speaker B infers from speaker A’s utterance that Tom went to the hospital, and then speaker A provides the correct information that Tom left school early. Speaker A is talking about an effect (Tom left school early) derived from a cause (Tom was ill). Unlike the examples provided so far, the it is that-construction in (11) represents an effect. It should be noted that, in this case, the cause is a sufficient condition for the effect, which is automatically derived from the cause on the basis of the general knowledge that if you are ill, you leave school early. This inferential process can be represented as in (12).

(12) Tom was ill.
    If you are ill, you leave school early.
    Tom left school early. (Conclusion)

Because the conclusion is logically valid, the inference involved in (11) is deduction, not abduction (for the logical validity of abduction, see footnote 8). The unacceptability of the it is that-construction shows that the construction invites abductive inference, but not deductive inference.

4. Abduction and Specification

Declerck (1992) characterizes the it is that-construction as specificational in that the proposition introduced by the that-clause is identified as a value for the variable contained in the preceding sentence. Consider (13) as an example:

(13) I cannot pay you back today. It’s just that all the banks are closed.

According to Declerck, the first sentence I cannot pay you back today contains an invisible variable x, as in I cannot pay you back today for reason x, and the proposition all the banks are closed is interpreted as a value of
the variable x.10

I would like to point out that not only the causal interpretation of the *it is that*-construction discussed so far but also the specificational property observed by Declerck immediately follows from the analysis given in this paper based on abductive inference. The specificational process, in which the most appropriate value is selected from a set of possible values to specify the variable (cf. Declerck (1992: 214)), corresponds to the abductive inference process, according to which the most appropriate proposition is chosen from a set of possible propositions to explain the phenomenon in question; these two processes share the operation selecting an element from a set of possible candidates. The specificational property of the construction thus comes from abductive inference and should be understood as an aspect of abduction.11

5. An Assertive Characteristic of the *It Is That*-Expression

Finally, this section briefly discusses the assertivity of the *it is that*-expression. Given that the construction invites abductive inference, the proposition in the *that*-clause should be asserted as a conclusion of inference; because this proposition has been chosen as the most appropriate one among other possible candidates, the construction emphasizes the importance

10 Declerck (1992) also points out that the construction causes the hearer to make a certain type of inference. He claims that “in order to understand the sentence the hearer has to infer the variable for which the *that*-clause is presented as value (Declerck (1992: 212)).” The difference between abduction and the inference Declerck refers to is that the latter is not defined as narrowly as the former; because the hearer is merely instructed to infer a variable included in the preceding sentence in the latter case, the construction should be allowed to represent an effect as well as a cause; it would then be difficult to explain the unacceptability of the construction in (11). Declerck also mentions the inference on the part of the speaker, but since this paper focuses on the inference on the part of the hearer, I will not touch on the inferential aspect concerning the speaker discussed by Declerck. See Declerck (1992: 212) for details.

11 Note that specification itself does not predict the fact that the *it is that*-construction exclusively represents a cause; the causal interpretation does not directly stem from the specificational process, in which the proposition in the *that*-clause is merely specified as a value of the variable contained in the preceding utterance (cf. Otake (2009: 97–98)). Given the analysis based on abductive inference, on the other hand, the causal interpretation of the *it is that*-construction naturally follows, since abductive inference intrinsically involves the causal interpretation (see section 2). Thus, as discussed in this section, the specificational property of the construction should be subsumed under abductive inference.
of such an asserted proposition in the discourse. The *it is* expression therefore has the same properties as what Hooper (1975) calls assertive predicates, whose complements are asserted to be the core meanings or main propositions in communication; the proposal in this paper makes the similarity between the *it is* expression and assertive predicates clear.\(^{12}\)

Assertive predicates undergo certain syntactic operations that show that their complements are asserted. It is predicted that the *it is* expression shows parallel syntactic behaviors with assertive predicates. I will confirm this prediction with two syntactic operations: Negative Constituent Preposing (henceforth NCP) and tag questions.

NCP fronts a negative constituent and triggers Subject Auxiliary Inversion (e.g., Never have I had to borrow money. (Hooper and Thompson (1973: 465))). According to Hooper and Thompson (1973), NCP is restricted to application in asserted clauses. NCP can take place in the complement of the assertive predicate *exclaim* but not in the non-assertive predicate *be likely*, as illustrated in (14).\(^{13}\)

\[(14)\]
\[
a. \text{I exclaimed that never in my life had I seen such a crowd.} \quad \text{(Hooper and Thompson (1973: 474))}
\]
\[
b. *\text{It's likely that seldom did he drive that car.} \quad \text{(Hooper and Thompson (1973: 479))}
\]

With this in mind, let us apply NCP to the *it is* construction:

\[(15)\]
\[
A: \text{Everyone here dislikes Tom.}
\]
\[
B: \text{It's just that never in his life has he kept his word.}
\]

NCP can take place in the *that*-clause without rendering the sentence unacceptable the way that (14b) is. This fact suggests that the *it is* expression shares the same properties as assertive predicates.

Tag questions (e.g., *This car needs a tune-up, doesn't it?* (Hooper (1975: 102))) also serve to make clear the assertive property of the *it is* expression. Tag questions can be formed from the complement clauses of certain types of assertive predicates such as *think* but not from those of non-assertive predicates such as *be likely*.\(^{14}\) Compare:

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\(^{12}\) The idea that the proposition in the *that*-clause of the construction is asserted to be true is compatible with Otake’s (2002, 2009) observation that the construction “is used to reveal the true state of affairs (Otake (2002: 151)).”

\(^{13}\) For detailed discussion on the classification of predicates, see Hooper and Thompson (1973) and Hooper (1975).

\(^{14}\) Hooper (1975) divides assertive predicates into two types, namely, strong assertive predicates and weak assertive predicates. Tag questions can be formed from the comple-
(16) a. I think this car needs a tune-up, doesn't it?
   b. *It's likely that they've left the phone off the hook, haven't they?  
      (Hooper (1975: 103))
As with NCP, it is possible to form a tag question from the that-clause of 
the it is that-construction, as shown in (17).
(17) A: Will you go out with me?
    B: Sorry. Uh …
    A: It's just that you don't like me, do you?
(17) also shows that the it is that-expression is functionally equivalent to as- 
sertive predicates.
Considering the generalization about the it is that-construction proposed 
in this paper, the proposition in the that-clause should be asserted. Thus, it 
comes as no surprise that the it is that-expression has the same properties as 
assertive predicates. This has been confirmed by two syntactic operations, 
i.e. NCP and tag questions. If the analysis developed here is accurate, the 
it is that-expression should be handled along the same lines as these predi-
cates.

6. Conclusion

It is generally said that a causal interpretation is involved in the it is that-
construction. That is why the it is that-construction can be paraphrased 
as the it is because-construction. However, unlike the it is because-
construction, the it is that-construction has no expression that indicates 
causality. In addition, the it is that-construction shows different behavior 
with respect to tense forms than the it is because-construction. To solve 
these problems, I have focused on the relationship between the it is that-
construction and the process of inference through which the text receiver 
makes texts coherent. More specifically, I have proposed that the it is that-
construction invites abductive inference. Furthermore, this proposal leads 
ment clauses of the latter, but not of the former. Because the verb think is a weak assertive predicate, a tag question is allowed, as shown in (16a). By contrast, a tag question may not be formed from the complement clause of the strong assertive predicate assert, as illustrated below:
(i) *I assert that inflation will continue, won't it?  
      (Hooper (1975: 103))
Although tag questions are not necessarily formed from the complement clauses of all assertive predicates, the predicate in question is an assertive predicate if a tag question can be formed on the complement clause of that predicate.
us to suggest that the *it is that*-expression functions like an assertive predicate. Therefore, the *it is that*-expression should be dealt with in the same way as such predicates.

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Doctoral Program in Literature and Linguistics
University of Tsukuba
1–1–1 Tennodai, Tsukuba
Ibaraki 305–8571
e-mail: ikarashi.k61@gmail.com