

**DISCOURSE  
AND COMMUNICATION:  
COGNITIVE AND FUNCTIONAL  
PERSPECTIVES**

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and  
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## DISCOURSE FUNCTIONS OF *TH*-CLEFTS IN ENGLISH

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### Abstract

*This paper investigates a variant of the 'wh'-cleft construction in English illustrated by sentences such as 'The thing that he loved most of all in the whole world was the sea', the so called 'th'-cleft. Following Collins (1991), such construction is considered a type of pseudo-cleft construction because of its formal and functional similarity with the 'canonical' pseudo-cleft with a fused relative clause introduced by a 'wh'-interrogative. The main aim of this study is to examine th-cleft constructions in Modern English, focusing on their main discourse and informational functions.*

**Keywords:** *Th-clefts, pseudo-clefts, English, British National Corpus, London-I und Corpus*

### Resumen

*Este estudio investiga una variante de la construcción inglesa "wh'-cleft" (o pseudo-escindida con palabra "wh"), como en la oración en inglés "The thing that he loved most of all in the whole world was the sea", y que por su similitud con la anterior puede denominarse "th'-cleft" o escindida en "th". Siguiendo a Collins (1991), tal construcción se considera un tipo de pseudo-escindida ("pseudo-cleft") por sus características similares, desde el punto de vista formal y funcional, con la pseudo-escindida "canónica", que contiene una cláusula de relativo introducida por una interrogativa en "wh". El propósito principal de este estudio es examinar esta construcción en inglés actual, principalmente desde la perspectiva de sus funciones discursivas y de la distribución de la información.*

**Palabras clave:** *Escindidas en "th", pseudo-escindidas, inglés, British National Corpus, London-I und Corpus.*

## 1. Introduction

Like other types of cleft construction, the so called *th*-cleft is a construction which makes it possible to put special emphasis on a particular constituent (which, following Collins 1991, can be called 'the highlighted element') and does this by dividing up the sentence into two sections. In particular, *th*-clefts share formal and functional properties

with the prototypical pseudo-cleft construction, introduced by a *wh*-interrogative such as *what*, thus a *wh*-cleft (cf. 1a). The examples in (1b) and (2) illustrate this construction in English:

- (1) a. What he loved most of all in the whole world was the sea.  
b. The thing that he loved most of all in the whole world was the sea. (BNC: F72, S-classroom)
- (2) But I think *the ones who suffer most are the children*. (BNC: CEK, W-news)<sup>12</sup>

Just as the form *what* in the *wh*-cleft in (1a) is expressed as *the thing* in the *th*-cleft in (1b), so the forms *what*, *how*, *where*, *when*, and *why* in other *wh*-clefts are expressed as *the thing*, *the way*, *the place*, *the time* and *the reason*, respectively, in the corresponding *th*-clefts. In the case of *the one* this is the only grammatical form, the *who*-cleft being an unacceptable sentence in English (compare (2) with \**Who suffer most are the children*). On the basis of other related terms such as *it*-clefts and *wh*-clefts, this construction has been referred to in the literature as '*th*-cleft' (cf. Prince 1978, Collins 1991 and Calude 2005 and 2006, among others).<sup>13</sup>

Following up from a previous study on the same construction (cf. Martínez Caro 2008), my aim here is to further investigate the way *th*-clefts function in discourse, by looking at naturally-occurring examples from different registers in English. Both basic and reversed *th*-clefts will be looked at and, among the latter, special attention will be drawn to the so called 'demonstrative *th*-clefts' (cf. section 3). As other types of cleft, these constructions are interesting instances of the necessary interaction

<sup>12</sup> In the examples, indication is given of the corpus used –BNC and LLC— and the text code. S stands for Spoken and W for written, and within each of these two, reference is made in the BNC to the text type: conversation (*conv*), speech, lecture (*lect*), news, academic (*acad*), fiction (*fic*), etc. In longer examples the *th*-cleft construction is distinguished in italics.

<sup>13</sup> As Prince 1978 points out, the term was used for the first time by Catherine N. Ball, who presented a paper at the 1977 University of Pennsylvania Linguistics Colloquium, entitled '*Th*-clefts'. Notice, however, that some authors use this label for a similar construction to the *it*-cleft (typically) introduced by the demonstratives *this* or *that*, as in *This was Jeanette who told me* (cf. Hedberg 1990). Calude (2005, 2006), in turn, uses the term more generally to cover two types of construction: headed *th*-clefts (the similar construction to the *it*-cleft as in Hedberg's example) and headless *th*-clefts (as in the so called reversed *wh*-clefts, e.g. *This is what I mean*, but also covering the construction discussed here: *That's the only reason that I went along*).

of different linguistic levels of analysis in the explanation of a single phenomenon in linguistics.

## 2. The database

The study is based on a database extracted from the British National Corpus (BNC) and a section of the London-Lund Corpus of Spoken English (LLC) consisting of ten selected texts amounting to 60,000 words approximately. The BNC is a 100 million word collection of samples of written and spoken language from a wide range of sources, designed to represent a wide cross-section of current British English. The texts selected from the LLC are face-to-face conversations, surreptitiously recorded, where markers of phonological transcription – not present in the BNC data— have been omitted (for a printed version, see Svartvik and Quirk 1980).

The BNC spoken and written texts comprise various subtypes such as conversation, meetings, classroom interaction, news, fiction, academic discourse and other types, which are indicated in the coding of the examples.

The corpus analysis from the ten texts of the LLC derives from an earlier study on the expression of focus in English and Spanish (Martínez Caro 1999). For searching the BNC, Mark Davies' interface programme BYU-BNC was used, where strings such as *the thing/things that* or *the one/ones* + [*pn*] (= personal pronoun) were searched for in the different registers.<sup>14</sup>

## 3. Delimiting the class of *th*-clefts: some formal properties

There is no agreement as to the domain of the term 'pseudo-cleft' in the literature: some authors restrict it to *wh*-clefts (e.g. Prince 1978); others include superficially similar constructions which include other non-*wh*-words. In this study I follow Collins (1991), who argues that the class of pseudo-clefts comprises three subclasses: '*wh*-clefts' as in (3a), '*th*-clefts', as in (3b) and '*all*-clefts', as in (3c):

- (3) a. What he needs is a passport.  
b. The thing he needs is a passport.  
c. All he needs is a passport.

<sup>14</sup> See: <http://corpus.byu.edu/bnc/> and the reference on the final list of references.

*Th*-cleft constructions typically consist of a NP subject followed by some form of the verb *to be* functioning as the copula and the highlighted element. The NP is introduced by the definite article *the* in conjunction with the pro-form equivalents of the English interrogatives (*thing, one, place, time, reason, way*) and an optional relative introducing the relative clause restricting the NP head.<sup>15</sup> For example, from (1a) above we may get (1b) with *The thing that...* or other *th*-cleft equivalents such as *The thing which he loved most of all in the whole world was the sea*, or simply *The thing he loved most of all in the whole world was the sea*. In order to restrict my scope of research, in this study only *th*-clefts lexically headed by *thing* and *one* have been considered, both basic and reversed.

Like other types of pseudo-cleft, *th*-clefts are identifying constructions, expressing a relationship of identity between the highlighted element and the lexically-headed NP. Thus in (1b), the sea is identified as the thing which satisfies the definition provided in the subordinate relative clause: *that he loved most of all in the whole world*. As identifying constructions, *th*-clefts need to be distinguished from superficially similar attributive constructions. Whereas identifying constructions are typically reversible and involve the identification of two entities, or participants, attributive constructions are not reversible and the identity is established between an entity and some attribute ascribed to it (Collins 1991: 2). Thus, compare the *th*-cleft in (4b) with the attributive construction in (4a):

- (4) a. The thing that's flying towards me is *multicoloured* (BNC: BMS, W-fict)  
 b. The thing that's flying towards me is *my child's new toy*.

Whereas (4b) is reversible, the construction in (4a) is not.

Considering the reversibility of pseudo-clefts (see below), Huddleston (1984) and Ward, Birner and Huddleston (2002) recognise two main types of pseudo-cleft: basic pseudo-clefts and reversed clefts

<sup>15</sup> These pro-forms or 'pro-nouns' (cf. Halliday and Hasan 1976: 102-104) should be distinguished from the class of 'general words' *thing, person, man, place, kind* and so on, which function as anaphoric reference items (Mahlberg 2005). Alternative items to the pro-forms *thing* and *one* like *point, idea, problem* in the case of the former, and others such as *person, man, woman*, in the case of the latter, have been excluded from my database of *th*-clefts (see Collins 1991: 29-30), as in the example '*the very first [...] person I met before lunch was [dʒi ɒm] history don who was just sweet*' (J.L.C.: T1.3, 959-63).

(see also Collins 1991 and Biber *et al.* 1999). Likewise, *th*-clefts can be basic and reversed. In the second type of *th*-cleft, the highlighted element initiates the construction, leaving the NP constituent headed by *thing* or *one* after the copulative verb, acting as subject complement. An example of such reversed *th*-cleft is the following, with the highlighted element (the subject of the sentence) in italics:

- (5) Apparently *state of pavements* is the thing that people complain about most to local councils. (BNC: KBK, S-conv)

This reversed alternative of the *th*-cleft is not very common in English. In the same situation, (reversed) *wh*-clefts are generally preferred (cf. Biber *et al.* 1999: 787). However, a particularly common reversed *th*-cleft in English is the construction with a demonstrative as subject (usually *that*, but sometimes also *this*) followed by the copula and the highlighted element. Following Biber *et al.* (1999: 961) who use the term 'demonstrative *wh*-cleft,' I will call this construction the *demonstrative th*-cleft. (6) exemplifies this construction:

- (6) What's that then? plate, oh I don't Oh *that's the thing that you put behind it*. (BNC: KC9, Sp-conv)

Both pseudo-clefts in general and *th*-clefts in particular (but not *it*-clefts) may highlight a whole clause or longer stretch of discourse instead of focusing on a single clause element. This is especially common in spoken discourse (cf. Carter and McCarthy 2006: 787). In our case, this use of *th*-clefts with a clausal highlighted element is limited to *the thing*-clefts, which may thus highlight finite *that*-clauses or *wh*-clauses (as in 7a, for instance), and non-finite clauses like infinitive clauses or *ing*-clauses (see 7b):

- (7) a. The thing that I object to is that many old people and the disabled relied on taxis to get them into that area, (BNC: K55, W-news)  
 b. you become insular and we become introverted and *the only thing that matters is me having a good time*, my world centres around me and me enjoying myself (BNC: FLU, S-sermon)

The fact that the post-verbal constituent in this type of *th*-cleft is a clause often results in constructions with fairly heavy and complex identified elements, which following the end-weight principle naturally come at the end, like (8) where the highlighted element has been italicised:

- (8) The thing that is really appealing about In England Now is *that self-important, overhearing medical people are still aghast at the idea of a major journal of international repute devoting space to humour*. (BNC: AAG, W-news)

This type of example contrasts sharply with reversed *tb*-clefts where the highlighted element consists of a single demonstrative pronoun or personal pronoun, two very common realisations of the NP subject in reversed *tb*-clefts:

- (9) a. And we're on an H P Laserjet Two D for some reason. Well *that's the one I've got at work* you see. (BNC: G4K, S-classroom)  
 b. Anyway, *she was the one who did the talking*. (BNC: A08, W-fict)  
 c. Can I just ask about the evaluation. Are you saying that that's in this next workshop? Yeah. *Is that the thing that's in the next workshop?* (BNC: G4X, S-meeting)

Another structural difference between pseudo-clefts in general, including *tb*-clefts, and *it*-clefts is that they can serve as a construction to highlight a verbal predicate (*The only thing you need is sleep*). By contrast, clefts can easily highlight a prepositional phrase, an adverbial phrase or an adverbial clause, whereas pseudo-clefts, including *tb*-clefts, cannot (as in *It is to him that she has remained faithful*. Cf. Biber *et al.* 1999: 960).

I take the standpoint that the lexical head in *tb*-clefts should be necessarily restricted by a relative clause.<sup>16</sup> Superficially similar examples of *tb*-cleft where the lexical head is followed/complemented by a non-finite *to*-infinitive clause (as in the frequent combination *The thing to do + BE...*), for instance, have been excluded from the database on the basis that there is no *wb*-cleft counterpart readily available, as is the case with the rest of *tb*-clefts considered (as in *The thing to do is obviously to swing the PhD subject round to something nearer what I'm being paid to do* [LLC: T2.4b, 1065-66]). Likewise, constructions containing sequences such as *the (adjective) thing is/was*, that is where the head is not postmodified but immediately followed by the copula, have been excluded (as in *The thing is*

<sup>16</sup> However, examples where one can think that the relative clause following the lexical head has been reduced but where the elliptical information can still be easily retrieved have indeed been included in the corpus. A case in point is the sequence 'worth + V-ing' seen as a reduced (relative) clause in 'It seemed to her that *the only thing worth doing was to walk deep into those glades*, far away from everything.' (BNC: F99, W-fict) (cf. *the only thing that is worth doing...*).

*that The Smiths are the only human band in England*. [BNC: ART, W-biography]).<sup>17</sup>

Notice that in *tb*-clefts both *one* and *thing*, as pro-forms, have a plural as well as a singular form and can be premodified by elements such as adjectives or numerals. One of the most important motivations for using *tb*-clefts rather than the 'canonical' (and more discussed) *wb*-cleft is that the former structure allows for expansion of the same kind as is found with NPs occurring in other kinds of clause whereas the latter does not (Ward, Birner and Huddleston 2002: 1423). See for instance, where the NP head *thing* is premodified by the phrase *only other commercially available Old English*:

- (10) well I think we're onto a good thing with this cassette because *the only other commercially available Old English thing I know is that record* (LLC: T3.2c, 1028-30)

### 3.1. Less prototypical *tb*-clefts

Certain less prototypical *tb*-clefts have been found where some of the common features described above in relation to *tb*-clefts are missing. In these examples, often "factors such as language planning and processing, speaker-interactive variables and other situational and discourse phenomena" have to be taken into account (Collins 1991: 44).

In particular, there are examples of *tb*-clefts with omission of the copula that typically relates the identifier and identified elements or a comma between these two elements, or both (cf. 11a), and *tb*-clefts with intervening material between the NP and the identified element (e.g. 11b):<sup>18</sup>

- (11) a. I think *the thing that worries me more than anything else about them, that a lot of em have aspirations erm greater than their finances*. If you actually look at what we've paid for some of the players say over the last two (BNC: KN2, S-brdcast)

<sup>17</sup> As argued in Carter and McCarthy (2006: 148), *the thing is* is a frequent sequence in spoken English which functions as a discourse marker focusing attention on what follows, "usually signalling that there is a problem".

<sup>18</sup> See Carter and McCarthy (2006: 788), who also refer to *wb*-clefts in spoken language where the copular verb is often omitted.

- b. I [ə] I think they're all right but I wouldn't guarantee them he said as a matter of fact *the only ones I can guarantee* and I can guarantee those absolutely if they're used according to direction *are those that I've got here* (L.J.C: T1.1, 478-83)

#### 4. Informational properties of *th*-clefts

In terms of given and new information, the *th*-cleft typically shows a basic distribution of the information, with the given information tending to come at the beginning and the more important or focus information towards the end of the sentence, thus conforming to the general tendency of end-focus principle, by which communicatively more important information tends to come later.<sup>19</sup> This basic distribution of information is reflected by the segmentation of *th*-clefts into two parts. In functional approaches to cleft constructions, these two parts are seen to represent the theme and the rheme of the sentence, from a conception of theme as the point of departure of the sentence (cf. e.g. Halliday 1985). The purpose of the construction is signal explicitly what is taken as background and what is the main communicative point (Biber *et al.* 1999: 962).

Regarding the informational properties of pseudo-clefts in general, one point which has been discussed in the literature is the status of the relative clause. In *th*-clefts, the relative clause may be given, as in the following example (with the initial NP in bold):

- (12) finally just before we leave second messenger gated channels, I'd like to consider two more which have been worked on er extensively and one of which we'll er deal with er next week. ***The one we'll deal with next week*** is the case of cyclic A M P activated chloride channels, these are found in secretory epithelia. (BNC: J8K, S-lect)

but it does not necessarily have to, although this does not mean that it is then presented as the main focus either. According to Huddleston

<sup>19</sup> In terms of intonation, this is reflected by the fact that *th*-clefts typically consist of two, or more, tone units and one of them usually coincides with the NP containing the relative clause which will naturally contain some kind of new information; the other tone unit contains the highlighted element which also receives the natural end focus (Collins 1991: 118ff).

(1984), in basic *th*-clefts the content of the relative clause is presented as something not being *at issue*.

In reversed *th*-clefts, the so-called highlighted element (placed initially) may indeed be presented as the main focus but it is also common to find the focal information at the end, coinciding with the NP containing the relative clause.<sup>20</sup> This is related to the nature of this highlighted element, which often coincides with a demonstrative pronoun such as *that* or (the less common) *this*. In reversed *th*-clefts the relative clause may contain more significant material than in the basic *th*-cleft.

- (13) But he said it would be quite wrong to say that the country's history had been one long mistake since the revolution. His was the party's explanation; that *Stalin was the one who distorted everything*, and that Leninist ideals of socialism should be reinstated. That, too, has been the message of this Revolution Day --; back to Lenin and 1917, to a "radical renewal of socialism" as one (BNC: A7V, W-news)

In (14), where the general topic is the Soviet Union's history, the main function of the *th*-cleft is to say something informative and relevant to the present discourse topic about Stalin, which can be easily inferred from this discourse topic.

As an example of *th*-cleft with main focus on the construction initial element (in bold), see:

- (14) I actually dissuaded er What's the proportion of females on that floor? Er, good question! Actually noticed, with an inkling of as well. So er ***she was the one who pointed that fact to me***. I wouldn't have worked it out, so erm Stop digging will you! There haven't been any other erm any other areas er, of complaint with er Mm. i er in (BNC: FLS, S-meeting)

This use of reversed *th*-clefts with a focal initial element is more frequently associated in the corpus with non-demonstrative *th*-clefts, that is, *th*-clefts where the highlighted element is a full NP or a personal pronoun.

<sup>20</sup> This again is reflected in the intonational pattern of this construction, typically realised as a single tone unit with placement of the nuclear stress in the relative clause.

An important issue in the interpretation and function of *th*-clefts in English is that, as with *wh*-clefts and also clefts, they introduce an implication of *uniqueness* or *exclusiveness* which is absent, or not necessarily present, in the non-cleft form (see, for example, Huddleston 1984: 466; Halliday 1985: 43; Collins 1991: 69; Hannay and Mackenzie 2002: 145). Thus, compare:

- (15) a. And I would like to make another quote if I may, *he was the one that talked about Scotland being the land of cakes*, and brother Scots, where the women made the cakes (BNC: FLI, S-brdcast)  
 b. And ... he talked about Scotland being the land of cakes

(15a), but not necessarily (15b), implies that he was the only one that referred to Scotland in those terms. The *th*-cleft thus provides an implicit rejection of other possibilities.

In many demonstrative *th*-clefts, and definitely among the ones where the demonstrative does not convey focal information, the unit formed by the demonstrative and the copula—typically *that's*—constitutes a grammaticalised unit whose main function is to anticipate the contents of what follows in the utterance, that is, the contents of the NP containing the relative clause and which seems to have lost part of its lexical meaning. As Halliday (1985: 43) notes, these constructions have evolved in English as a ‘thematic resource’ (see also Collins 1991: 135).

### 5. Discourse functions of *th*-clefts

One parameter along which *th*-clefts may be described in discourse terms is that of contrast. Thus, for instance, Givón (1993: 177-78) characterises pseudo-clefts as ‘potential’ contrastive constructions (“when associated with stress-focus”). In the taxonomy of focus set up by Dik (1997)<sup>21</sup>, this parameter of contrast is categorised into two types, referred to as *parallel contrast* (involving an explicit contrast between two pieces of information) and *counter-presuppositional contrast* (involving an assumption of the hearer’s contrary belief). *Th*-clefts may indeed express parallel contrast (see, for example, 16a) and although counter-presuppositional contrast is more directly related to *it*-clefts (e.g. Givón 1993: 179), examples of *th*-clefts with this function may be also found

<sup>21</sup> See also Hengeveld and Mackenzie (2008: chapter 2).

(for instance, 16b), sometimes as a device for correcting a previous statement.

- (16) a. B: I told them *the only thing we're concerned with is communication*  
 A: [m] -  
 B: [dhi] report on English examining as you know talked about [dhi] best writing of different kinds *but the only thing they can think of ((as)) the best writing of different kinds is to extend the number of*  
 A: ((that's so))  
 (B: *literary authors* (LLC: T1.1, 869-79))  
 b. It is a case of believing on Jesus Christ. There's a whole load more that follows after that, but the, but the follows doesn't get us saved! *The thing that gets us saved, the thing that makes us a new creation in Christ, the thing that makes us a Christian is putting our trust in Jesus Christ, believing in the Lord Jesus Christ.* (BNC: KJU, S-sermon)

In (16b) the implication of exclusiveness involved in the complex *th*-cleft construction helps the speaker to express an obvious opposition with the kind of presupposition implied by the previous statement (and more generally, the idea that it is only Jesus Christ that can save us and nothing else we may think of).

Rather than expressing a contrast with the hearer's presuppositions, other examples of *th*-clefts have been found in the database that have a reinforcing function where the speaker seems to agree or confirm information which has been presented by the hearer (see Martínez Caro 1999: 193ff), as in:

- (17) how am I going to suddenly be better at it. How's it going to be different. So I said well a lot of it's an attitude. Exactly *that's the only thing you can really change*. Also I mean Doesn't it make you feel funny to have Erm therefore it doesn't really. I mean therefore she doesn't pass. So there is some judgement and skill involved. (BNC: KBK, S-conv)<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Notice that in the BNC examples no indication is given to pieces of discourse spoken by the different participants intervening in the interaction. In this example, particularly, it seems clear that more than one participant is involved in the interaction.



The discourse functions of *th*-clefts may be also related to the parameter of topicality. When *th*-clefts are not used contrastively, they may serve to introduce a new topic into the discourse and identify it explicitly. See for instance (with the expressions referring to the new introduced entity in bold):

- (18) a. Witnesses gave only a vague description of the driver, concentrating on his clothes, for *the only thing visible inside the car was a blue, fur-edged anorak*, the hood pulled up tight. The local police sounded surprised by Nowak's apparent lack of cooperation. He grunted, they said, and weaved and ducked like a ... (BNC: G15, W-fict)
- b. So we welcome you Bill. We've received a number of apologies for absence. And *the ones I've had so far are these, Emma, Peggy, Will, Jan and Martin, Stan, Terry, Richard, Peter and Jim*. Quite a substantial list. Are there any others? Any others? (BNC: FYB, S-interview)

Example (18b) has a demonstrative as highlighting element (*these*), referring to a set of entities which are explicitly mentioned right after the *th*-cleft proper, as a way of right-dislocated element.

A further discourse function typical of *th*-clefts, in particular of reversed *th*-clefts, is that of providing a link with the preceding discourse, a specific link that is at issue at that particular moment in the discourse (cf. Hannay and Mackenzie 2002: 145). This cohesive effect is particularly found when the highlighted element has been mentioned earlier in the discourse, linking up with what has come previously in the discourse. This has a similar effect to the one achieved by thematic fronting (cf. Huddleston 1984: 465) and may result in the theme-rheme discourse sequencing referred to by Daneš as 'simple linear thematic progression', by which the rheme of a particular utterance becomes the theme of the next one (cf. Daneš 1974: 118). See the following examples, where *they* in each case acts as a cohesive element connecting the previous discourse where the full referent of this element is presented (*the hazelnut ones* and *the kids*):

- (19) a. 'd have known you were going I'd have got you to get me the nut ones. I can't never get them from Lynn. Oh they had the hazelnut ones. Yeah *they're the ones I like*. Tut oh! Do you like

hazelnut? Yeah, love it. Oh I don't. Oh! Oh! I found this book in your drawer Junie. (BNC: KCT, S-conv)

- b. She said electrical sockets had been ripped out of walls. Suffering "There was no way I could move into those houses, especially with the kids. *They are the ones who are really suffering*," she said. She also claims she has collected more than 3,000 signatures in support of her protest. (BNC: K2N, W-news)

This effect can also be achieved by basic *th*-clefts when their relative clause contains information which is recoverable from previous discourse or reversed *th*-clefts with an anaphoric element in first position, such as *that* or *this* or their plural counterparts (Huddleston 1984: 465-66; see also Ward, Birner and Huddleston 2002: 1424-27):

- (20) So we welcome you Bill. We've received a number of apologies for absence. And *the ones I've had so far are these, Emma, Peggy, Will, Jan and Martin, Stan, Terry, Richard, Peter and Jim*. Quite a substantial list. Are there any others? Any others? (BNC: FYB, S-interview)

In this respect, Carter & McCarthy (2006: 787) point that whereas *this*-clauses tend to point *forward* (cf. example (20) where *these* refers to the entities which are mentioned immediately after the demonstrative), *that*-clauses generally point *back* in the text.

Also related to the cohesive effect of the construction, a very common discourse function associated with demonstrative *th*-clefts is to sum-up what has been said or written in the preceding text, by way of conclusion (Biber *et al.* 1999: 962). Thus, a demonstrative *th*-cleft may be an appropriate choice in the closing-up stages of a spoken interaction, although as we said the frequency of *wh*-clefts with this same function tends to be higher.

On the other hand, basic *th*-clefts may be appropriately used with an announcing function, as *wh*-clefts, by explicitly expressing the matter you want to develop at greater length in the following discourse. Thus, by contrast to demonstrative *th*-clefts, they may be suitable for the beginning stages of the discourse or turning points in the middle of it, moving from one topic to another (cf. Hannay and Mackenzie 2002: 143-44), as in (21) or (22):

- (21) One is erm like you were saying something like factor analysis, something like erm y'know kind of seeing how they cluster together. Erm on the basis of that you, and *the other thing that er is*

probably worth thinking about is looking at items which are or sort of seem to distinguish strongly between people. If everybody fills a particular item in round about the middle or if everybody agrees with it or everybody... (BNC: KGV, S-lecture)

- (22) finally just before we leave second messenger gated channels, I'd like to consider two more which have been worked on extensively and one of which we'll deal with next week. *The one we'll deal with next week is the case of cyclic AMP activated chloride channels*, these are found in secretory epithelia. (BNC: J8K, S-lect)

Finally, one further function which has emerged from the corpus analysis, mainly in interactive texts, has to do with expressing the speaker's personal opinion about a particular issue under discussion, sometimes coinciding with the speaker's intention to take the floor and with his/her adopting a different stance.

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper I have investigated the so called *th*-cleft construction, focusing on *the thing(s)*- and *the one(s)*-clefts, both basic and reversed. After having defined the class of *th*-clefts and looked at some of their formal features, attention has been drawn to the main functions of this construction in discourse and to its information-structure properties. As the evidence presented from the BNC and LLC corpora suggests, *th*-clefts are a recognisable type of construction in English, although clearly associated with other types of pseudo-cleft. One of the main motivations that the speaker has for selecting a *th*-cleft rather than a *wh*-cleft is that the former, but not the latter, allows for expansion of the same kind that is found in other NPs occurring in other kinds of clause, making the *th*-cleft a very versatile construction.

As *wh*-clefts, *th*-clefts represent one type of thematic or information alternative (or a marked variant) to a more basic pattern in English; whereas the propositional meaning is basically the same, they convey a different thematic and communicative meaning from the basic pattern. They provide a choice for the speaker to naturally emphasise the thing that is being talked about. Although very common in conversation (especially the reversed type in some combinations), they are particularly convenient in writing, since they provide unequivocal indication of the emphasised element without the aid of prosodic stress.

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## FIRST APPROACHES TO LISTENING ACQUISITION IN EFL: IMPROVING LISTENING SKILLS AT UNIVERSITY LEVEL

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*Listening comprehension is a core skill when learning a foreign language and has become increasingly important in classrooms since the 1980s. Most of our university students have been learning English as a foreign language since their primary education. However, even if their grammar skills are reasonable enough, they still have problems when it comes to doing listening exercises. This explains why many textbooks tend to include pre-listening or warming-up activities in order to help them. Given the fact that pre-listening activities are supposed to help, why is it that they still have so many problems when facing a listening activity? Why do they still make so many mistakes? The present study aims at answering the following research questions: Does the type of listening condition the type of "guess"? Do non-native listeners really use the same strategies as native listeners? And, finally, which strategies are "activated" and which are not?*

*Key words: listening comprehension, pre-listening, cognitive learning strategies.*

### 1. Introduction

Most university students have been learning English as a foreign language since their primary education. However, even if their grammar skills are reasonable enough, they still have problems when it comes to doing listening exercises, as shown by the extensive literature regarding this matter (Ur 1984; Rixon 1986; Rost 1990, 1994, 2002, to quote just a few of them). Indeed, listening comprehension is a core skill when learning a foreign language and has become increasingly important in classrooms since the 1980s, especially after the publication of the *Common European Framework of References for Languages* (CEF henceforth). In other words, "accurate and intelligent listening is a necessity, and the teacher is partially responsible to help learners acquire this skill that provides the very foundation for learning and functioning in a language" (Dominguez & Maiz, in press).