

INTRUSIVE *BE* CONSTRUCTIONS IN (SPOKEN) ENGLISH: APPPOSITION AND BEYOND*

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This paper examines intrusive *be* constructions in English. There are two main types, commonly referred to as Double-*be* (or extris, ISIS, 2-*be*) and Single-*be* (Singlis, free-*be*) constructions (Bolinger 1987, McConvell 2004, Tuggy 1996, 2003, 2007). (See references in McConvell and Zwicky 2006.) Examples appear in (1a) and (1b).¹

- (1) a. One of the realities **is**, *is* that we have hit the wall with respect to spending.
- b. I realized when he said that *is* he just doesn't care. (Massam 1999)

We can observe that intrusive *be* (i.e. the second *be* in (1a) and the only *be* in (1b)), unlike canonical *be*, is optional, and appears not to have a subject. My goals in this paper are to summarize the literature, to categorize intrusive *be* sentences, and to propose a preliminary syntactic analysis of *be* as a focusing Appositive⁰, with extensions as a Focusing Relational head and as a Focus head.

1. Previous Analyses

In many discussions of these constructions, they are treated as ungrammatical. This is mainly in web discussions by non-linguists and prescriptive grammarians. Zwicky (2007) mentions Cochrane (2004), who considers intrusive *be* to be “mysterious and meaningless”. In general, linguists are more charitable, considering it to be “marginal” (Tuggy 1996) or “a vagary of performance” (Shapiro 1993). The link with performance has caused comparison with other disfluencies, and the strong consensus is that sentences such as (1a,b) are legitimate speech constructions, not errors or disfluencies (Coppock et al. 2006, Brenier and Michaelis 2005, also Andersen 2002, Curzan 2012, McConvell 2004, Tuggy 1996, Zwicky 2007, among others).

Among the linguists that consider intrusive *be* constructions not to be errors, the majority considers them to constitute blends or amalgams. For example Andersen (2002) considers (2) to be a conflation of two constructions, clausal subject postponements and pseudo-clefts.

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¹ Data is from my collection of examples, from Sali Tagliamonte's Canadian English corpus, and from papers on the topic. Sources are provided after each example, and those without a source are sentences I have heard since my 1999 paper. Punctuation varies with respect to whether there is a comma before intrusive *be* (Bolinger 1987, and others).

- (2) The intermediary is is awareness of our eye movements.

Similarly, Ross-Hagebaum (2004) and Calude (2008) consider sentences like (3) to be a mix of a *that*-cleft and a *what*-cleft, while McConvell (1988) (see also McConvell 2004), considering Single *be*, considers (4) to be a blend of an extraposed relative clause and a copular sentence.

- (3) That's what you're meant to do is nest. (Calude 2008)
- (4) I made the point once before, is that we have to *work* on this committee. (McConvell 2004)

In all of these analyses, effectively, the speaker is considered to be, during speech (i.e. not via abstract underlying representations), reanalyzing the first part of the sentence as a noun phrase, which can then serve as subject of *be*.

I will now mention two other analyses that make reference to the notion of blend or amalgam, but which also present particular insights that will be key in the analysis of the present paper. The first is (2003), who notes the relation between intrusive *be* constructions and appositive sentences such as (5), in which a pause is required after *be*, which also lacks ability to cliticize to 's.

- (5) The problem is: we have to go.

This notion, that intrusive *be* sentences involve apposition, will be central to my analysis. Brenier and Michaelis (2005) also propose an amalgam analysis, considering sentences like (5). They argue there is a syntax-prosody mismatch here, due to the double function of simplex *be* as a verbal head and a focus marker. The insertion of *be* mends this mismatch (cf. Shapiro's 1993 idea of *be* as the "unpacking of the covert copula"). The idea that *be* spells out a meaning and supports a prosody that is there in (5) is a key idea in this paper.

The core problem for a syntactician faced with these sentences is: How to draw a tree? It is possible there is no syntactic derivation for these sentences because they are not syntactically valid (e.g. they are blends or errors), but since it has been argued that they are valid, they must have a syntactic derivation.

There are some previous syntactic analyses. Massam (1999) analyzes Double-*be* constructions as reduced pseudo-clefts (based on Bošćović 1997) (cf. Bolinger 1987, Sihler 2000). The rough idea is as below (simplified), where intrusive *be* both is a copula needing a subject (via the EPP feature), and has a focus feature. In certain appositive contexts, it is possible for the Wh-word in the pseudo-cleft to be null. For Single *be*, the EPP feature is lost, as in (6b).

- (6) a. [~~What~~ the problem is *vbl*] *is* that I like you.
[F/EPP]
- b. Our kids are great on vacations, but when we come back, *is*
they need to play. (Massam 1999) [F]

There are several problems with this analysis as discussed by Dickerman (2009) and Brenier and Michaelis (2005). One key problem is that intrusive *be* is treated as a main verb, but it does not act like one, as will be illustrated below.

A second syntactic analysis is that of Curzan (2012) and Tuggy (1996) who consider that *the thing is* is a unit or chunk of discourse, “no longer parsed word by word” (Curzan 2012). This is illustrated in (7).

(7) [_{DP} The problem is] is that I like you.

A problem for this analysis is also that the first instance of *be* is not treated like the verb of the sentence, whereas the second *be* is, which is contradicted by their behavior, as will be discussed below.

A final syntactic analysis is found in the work of Bolinger (1987), Koontz-Garboden (2001), Shapiro and Haley (2002) and Zwicky (2003), who all consider the idea that *is that* is a complex complementizer, as shown in (8).

(8) The problem is [_{CP} is that [I like you]].

A problem here is that *that* is not always present in the construction (Brenier and Michaelis 2005), but the key idea here, i.e. that *is* is merged in a functional head rather than being a verb, is one that will be developed in this paper. This idea is also found in Massam (1999), McConvell (1988), Coppock and Staum (2004) and Dickerman (2009), who all consider the analysis that *be* is a focus particle (i.e. in the left periphery of CP). Brenier and Michaelis (2005) criticize this idea because of the fact that *be* also has a relational (identity) function, it is only used in very specific contexts and not more generally for focus, and that it does not behave like other grammaticalized verbs serving in adverbial functions in that it can take a complementizer as in (8). The analysis presented below will consider *be* as a functional head, but not as a left peripheral one, rather as a relational head, somewhat like an applicative head, thus avoiding these problems.

An important point is raised by many authors on intrusive *be*, namely that double *be* appears most often with appositive nouns (or “Theta role by Recognition” nouns (Stowell 1981)). Examples from Curzan’s (2012) list of nouns in her extensive corpus study are in (9). I also consider demonstratives, headless relatives, and *it* to be appositive DPs in this paper.

(9) Curzan (2012): *the reality, the speculation, the principle, the complaint, the thinking, the gamble, the implication, the charge, the consequence...*

As a result of the problems with the syntactic analyses to date, Coppock et al. (2006) state “The jury is still out on what is going on syntactically”. This paper hopes to begin the process of bringing the jury back in.²

Almost every author working on the construction comments that it is a recent development, still in progress, which is spreading geographically and in usage contexts. Curzan (2012) shows that its frequency has increased over the years. However, Bolinger (1987) shows that the construction has existed for at least 130 years with his example (10), noting also that his own first heard example was spoken in 1971 by a former LSA president.

² There is also the issue of grammaticalization (Coppock and Staum 2004, Tailleur 2012) and the historical development of the construction, but I will put this aside in this paper.

- (10) My excuse and reason is, is the different way all the Wedgewoods view the subject from what you and my sister do. (letter of Charles Darwin (1809-1882), cited in Bolinger 1987)

In conclusion, from the literature on intrusive *be*, we know that it is not a disfluency, it is more common in speech but is found in writing, it is widespread and it is used by educated speakers (Albright 2004, Zimmer 2012). It clearly has a prosodic dimension and is focus related, appearing in set-up and pay-off constructions (Zwicky 2007), and it is used with appositive nouns.

2. Descriptive Catalogue of Intrusive *be* Constructions

Zwicky (2007) provides a detailed catalogue of intrusive *be* constructions (also Curzan 2012) and considers that the various sorts have a common function, but are all independent constructions. In the analysis in Section 3, however, I claim that most descriptively distinguished types belong to only one main structural type, although there are also some extensions. There is as far as I can see, descriptively only one type of Double *be* construction, but there are several types of Single *be* constructions discussed in the literature, so in this section I focus on Single *be*. I isolate six descriptively different types, as outlined below.

2.1 Type 1.a. Deictic Subject and Appositive Object

This type, extensively discussed by Ross-Hagebaum (2004) (also Calude 2008, Jehn 1979) straddles Double and Single *be*, as it contains two instances of *be*, but the two are not contiguous. Their pattern and an example are shown in (11).

- (11) **Type 1.a. Pattern:**

DEICTIC	<i>be</i>	Appositive DP	<i>be</i>	XP
That	's	what all this stuff's based on	<i>is</i>	intuition.

(Calude 2008)

There are several variants in this general pattern. For example, the deictic subject, as well as being *that* as in (11), can be *which*, *here*, or *there* as below.

- (12) a. Yes, which is the problem with the phonology paper is that I was starting from scratch. (Massam 1999)
- b. Here is one problem, is that Florida is undecided.
- c. There's one thing I need to do is leave a check. (Zwicky 2007)

The appositive type of object DP, which is a headless relative in (11), can also have variants, such as a demonstrative *wh*-cleft, a DP, or a pronoun, as shown below. I consider all of these to belong to the appositive class.

- (13) a. Maybe that's why we're self-reliant is we don't expect anything from the government. (Massam 1999)

- b. That is the other thing I wanted to say about this is that we that we never have agreed to the conditions. (Massam 1999)
- c. That's just it, is that we shouldn't have been there in the first place. (Massam 1999)

And finally, there are variants for the XP in the pattern. It is a DP in (11) and (14a-b), but it can also be a CP (13b), an infinitive (14c), or a PP (14d).

- (14) a. And that's my big area of interest in linguistics is discourse. (Ross Hagebaum 2004)
- b. That was your insulation, was the newspapers. (Tagliamonte database)
- c. That's my dream I guess is to have my own darkroom. (Ross-Hagebaum 2004)
- d. That's where I met all of my friends was during frosh-week. (Tagliamonte)

2.2 Type 1.b Regular Subject and Deictic (i.e. Appositive) Object

This type of Single *be* construction, discussed by McConvell (1988, 2004), Massam (1999), and Zwicky (2007), is a true Single *be* construction with only one instance of *be* in the sentence. The pattern and an example are shown below.

(15) Type 1.b Pattern:

SBJ	V	DEICTIC	is	XP
We	have to do	this	is	we have to go back...

(Full example: I think we have to do this, at least logically, is we have to go back to the way it was. (Massam 1999))

As with Type 1.a there are several variants found, for example, the deictic in object position can be *this*, *that*, *this way*, or *what* as shown below.

- (16) a. We've addressed this many times in this program is the banks are making a ton of money.
- b. You see that again and again, is that phonologists come up with theories for English which just don't work for Tiberian Hebrew. (Massam 1999)
- c. We looked at it this way is (Zwicky 2007)
- d. You know what is, we've got kids ages 7 and 10 and they've grown out of those videos. (Massam 1999)

2.3 Type 2.a Regular Subject and Appositive Object

This type of intrusive *be* construction is also discussed by McConvell (1988, 2004) and Massam (1999). The pattern and an example are provided in (17).

- (17) **Type 2.a Pattern:**
SBJ V OBJ is XP
 I made the point *is* that we have to *work*....
 (Full example: I made the point once before *is* that that we have to *work* on this committee. (McConvell 1988))

There can be several different variants on the appositive DP object.

- (18) a. The premier has done something quite different, *is* she has reached out to the other parties.
 b. I want to recommend something that might help *is* that you must say to them when you are available before the committee is struck.
 c. But, all of them to a man, know first and foremost one of the most vital necessities in this life, *is* they know how to throw a party. (from the TV show *Shameless*, U.K. Channel 4)³

This sub-type is often found with the main verb *have*, as shown below.

- (19) Anne has the same problems with her anxieties *is* that she wakes up in the night.

2.4 Type 2.b Appositive Unaccusative Subject

This type is similar to the previous one except that the verbs are unaccusative verbs, and the appositive is the subject of the verb. The pattern and an example appear below in (20), with an additional example provided in (21).

- (20) **Type 2.b Pattern:**
SBJ V is CP
 The fact remains *is* that people's living standards are being cut
 (McConvell 1988)

- (21) The problem arises *is* that... (Bolinger 1987)

We can observe from the examples above that Types 1.a, 1.b, 2.a, and 2.b all have an overt potential subject for intrusive *be*, which is either a demonstrative, headless relative, or appositive DP, all of which I consider to belong to the general appositive class of DPs. In all cases, though the potential subject DP is already committed to another verb, either as its subject or object,

³ This example illustrates a phenomenon found in these constructions, that of repetition, where the post intrusive *be* material repeats the subject and the verb found before intrusive *be* (but not identically here): “*All of them know something, is they know...*”

hence it is syntactically unable to serve as the subject of *be*. The next two types to be presented do not have an overt potential subject at all for intrusive *be*.

2.5 Type 3.a. Covert Potential Subject for *be*

McConvell (1988, 2004) Massam (1999) and Zwicky (2007) discuss this type. It can be seen that while there is no overt potential subject for *be*, there is a sort of covert one available. Thus in (22), the subject of *be* might be the null object of *tell*, that is, the sentence might be understood to mean something like (23).

- (22) **Type 3.a Pattern:**
SBJ **V** **is** **CP**
 She was telling me *is* that they have to eat with the kids
 (Massam 1999)

- (23) She was telling me (*this/something*): that they have to eat with the kids.

Further examples are given below.

- (24) a. I realized when he said that *is* he just doesn't care. (Massam 1999)
 b. I'd like to say *is* that ... (McConvell 2004)

2.6 Type 3.b. No Overt or Covert Potential Subject for *be*

For this type there is no evident potential subject for *be*, not even a covert one. The pattern and an example are provided in (25) with more examples in (26).

- (25) **Type 3.b Pattern:**
Complex-AdvP/CP **is** **CP (*that)**
 When they come back *is* they need to play.
 (Full example: Our kids are great on vacations but when they come back *is* they need to play. (Massam 1999)

- (26) a. You can still account for productivity, *is* you just need a separate level. (Massam 1999)
 b. For people who know me, *is* I don't like confrontations or conflicts. (Massam 1999)
 c. After we were done hay season was we got two weeks to go and play. (Tagliamonte database)
 d. I love taking pictures, and also too *is*, I like drawing.
 e. These are all good questions that you're asking, *is* you get one choice only and then you have to move on.

We have seen that there are, descriptively, three groups of Single *be* construction, each of which contains two subtypes. Below, I will analyze types

(1), (2), and (3a) as a unified class, with type (3b) as an extension. In addition I will present a further extension, based on data from Zwicky (2007).

3. The Forms of Intrusive *be*

An important clue to the structure of intrusive *be* constructions lies in the forms that *be* can take. First, for obvious reasons all forms of *be* in these sentences are in third person, since they are predicated on appositive nouns. However, there are further constraints on the forms of intrusive *be* for tense, finiteness, and number. While the first instance of the verb *be* in the Double *be* construction can vary in form, intrusive *be* is almost always in the present tense singular form. It can optionally appear in the past in Double *be* constructions only in the context of a past tense main verb *be*, presumably through some form of concord, as in (27a), but notably it does not necessarily agree for tense, as shown in (27b).

- (27) a. My feeling **was was** that she doesn't have a professional hold on the situation (Massam 1999)
- b. The thing **was, is** that she would have been fine anyway. (Massam 1999)

In fact, the first (main verb) *be* in the Double *be* construction can be in other forms, while intrusive *be* remains as *is*. It is the second *be* that is optional.

- (28) a. The problem **being is** that I am probably going to test positive. (Massam 1999)⁴
- b. The only difference seems **to be is** that on the new album things are more mellow. (Zwicky 2007)

In the data I have seen so far, there are no examples of intrusive *be* in the plural (*are*).⁵ If the main verb is *are*, intrusive *be* still appears in the form *is*.

- (29) a. The cruel facts of life **are, is** that not every person who teaches Art is a good artist himself (McConvell 1988)
- b. My concerns **are is** that... (Shapiro and Haley 2002)
- c. The chances **are is** that... (Zwicky 2007)

The same situation is found with Single *be* constructions, where *be* is consistently third person (for clear reasons) and is past only in the context of another past verb, as in (30a). Furthermore, it too does not agree with the potential subject in number. This is seen in (30b) and (30c).

⁴ Zwicky (2007) notes that even though *reason being* clauses originated as adverbial subordinate clauses, they are often now used as main clauses.

⁵ Erin Grant and I have found a few examples of Double *be* with intrusive *are*, in MICASE (2007), but only in cases where the first *be* is also *are*, and in each of the three examples there are adjacent speech errors or pauses, leading to the conclusion that these examples are not necessarily valid. More work needs to be done, however, on this point.

Note here that Double *be* (*Db*) is identical to Single *be* type 2.b, with an unaccusative verb (*be*), so that the merged object ends up as the subject.

This analysis considers intrusive *be* to be an appositive head with a focusing feature applied to its complement. It is a relational head in that it relates the appositive DP in its specifier to the DP in its complement via specificational apposition. It is similar to an applicative head in that it adds another XP to the clause in excess of normal valency, as well as creating a relation between two arguments. The first instance of *be* in the Double *be* construction is a normal verb, inflecting in a normal way. Intrusive *be* on the other hand is not a normal verb, inflecting only under concord. Since the overt appositional DP specifier is also the object of a higher verb, the construction constitutes an argument sharing or Raising to Object/ECM type of construction, which lends itself to the blend analyses which have been proposed. Intrusive *be* is optional only because pronunciation of Appo⁰ is optional. This optionality makes *be* a variable element, though it is always there syntactically in this construction. Its pronunciation (or not) is controlled by style and register, being more common for some speakers than others, and more common in speech than writing.

There are other construction specific properties that need further comment. The structure is generally only possible with apposition nouns. Examples such as (34b) show that ‘normal’ apposition as in (34a) cannot appear with intrusive *be*, although there are seemingly related constructions that should be further explored, as in (34c) and (34d).

- (34) a. That is my father, Mr. Smith.
 b. *That is my father is Mr. Smith. (* with intended reading)
 c. That was your insulation, was the newspapers.
 (Tagliamonte database)
 d. He was a good man, George//He was a good man was George.

Given this, the intrusive *be* structure cannot be identical to a ‘normal’ apposition structure, such as for (34a), hence the relevant Appo⁰ must relate its complement and specifier in a very specific way. A ‘normal’ appositive either has a different structure (see de Vries 2006 for an overview of proposals), or it has an Appo⁰ head with different properties, one that never gets pronounced.

Another point is that the appositional relation is more predicative than a ‘normal’ appositive. It plays a part in the assertion, is obligatory (35), and is not ‘orphaned’ in the clause (Haegeman 1991).

- (35) *The fact is.

This is presumably tied to the two-part nature of the construction, in which there is a setup and a payoff (Zwicky 2007), where the first part of the sentence introduces the object and the second part elaborates on it. In this it resembles existential sentences, which are similarly odd without the information shown in parentheses below.

(36) There is a claim (that the world is flat).

Not surprisingly, certain existentials, such as the contact relatives in (37), also found mainly in speech, have also been analyzed as amalgams (Lambrecht 1988).⁶ Notably too, there is also extensive debate about the nominal or sentential nature of existential complements such as in (36).⁷

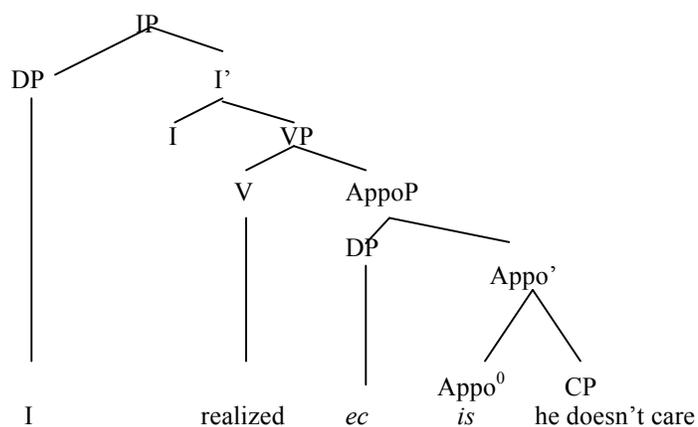
- (37) a. There's really none of the original schools that I started in are existing anymore. (Tagliamonte database)
- b. I'm the kind of guy likes to know who's buying his drinks. (from the movie *The Shining*)

To some extent, the existential nature of the setup in intrusive *be* constructions is due to the construction rather than the verbs used in the construction, (unlike regular existentials), but not entirely: if the main verb is clearly not serving primarily to introduce the object, the sentence is odd.

(38) ? I wrote down the point, *is* that he won't be coming to our meetings anymore. (made-up example)

Remaining to be analysed are the Types 3.a and 3.b, in which there is no overt potential subject for *be*. For the first type, where there is a potential covert subject for *be*, as (22-24) above, we can simply assume an empty category, which brings these in line with the examples in (33).⁸ This is shown in (39), which is the tree diagram for (a shortened version of) (24a).

(39)



⁶ These are also found extensively in some dialects, such as Irish English, discussed in Henry (1995).

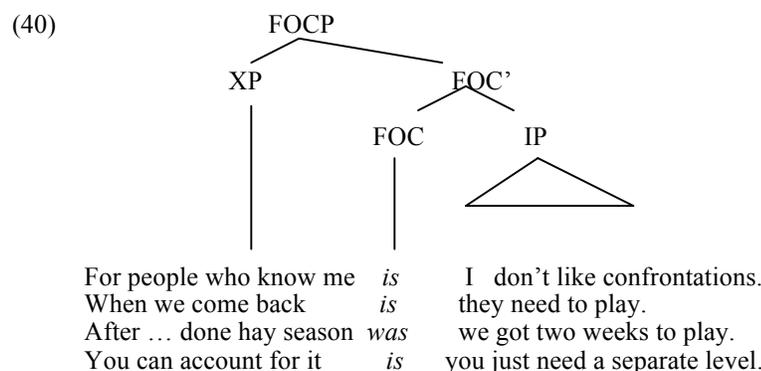
⁷ See discussion of this debate in Massam (2009).

⁸ Alternatively, and more abstractly, we could consider the verb itself to be the specifier of the Appo Phrase, since it is cognate with the missing object.

Although this analysis is preliminary and more research is required, I will posit that intrusive *be* in Appositive Intrusive *be* Constructions, that is, types 1.a, 1.b, 2.a, 2.b, 3a, and Double *be*, is the optionally pronounced version of an appositive/focus head that relates an apposition noun in its specifier to the more specified payoff phrase in its complement.

4.2 Analysis of Focus Intrusive *be* Constructions

We now turn to the last descriptive type, type 3.b, as in (26) where there is no covert or overt potential subject for *be*. First, we see these examples contain no appositional relation at all, so it is clear we have a different type of construction here. I propose the structure in (40), which shows the relevant sentences (shortened to fit the diagram in some cases from the real versions in (26)).



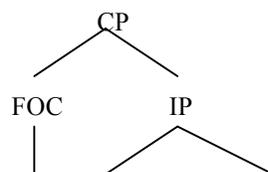
Although this is similar to the earlier analyses which consider *be* to be a focus marker, it differs in that *be* here necessarily has material in its specifier, that is, it retains the relational aspect of the appositive head, which is a hallmark of the construction noted by many researchers. But crucially, here the relation is not one of apposition, but some other tight relation (contextual, temporal-causal, manner), with focus on the second part. Interestingly, here the main clause is what follows intrusive *be*, rather than what precedes it, as in the other cases. This switch echoes the typical pattern for cleft reduction (Tailleur 2012), suggesting that this construction has developed later than the others, supported by the fact that fewer speakers use intrusive *be* in non-appositive contexts.

This analysis in turn sets the stage for a next step for intrusive *be*⁹, noted by Zwicky (2007), in his comment: “The way is open for speakers to see *is* or *is that* as a mere introductory formula for an assertion... the setup is dispensable”. He provides an example (41a), and I provide a structural analysis in (41b).

(41) a. Is that you can get a 5-year balloon for 24.25% (Zwicky 2007).

⁹ Note that my language here suggests a historical development from appositional *be* to focus-relational *be* to focus *be*. I have no evidence that this historical trajectory is correct, but it is true that each type is rarer across speakers than the preceding type, as noted for focus-relational *be* above.

b.



is (that) you can get a 5-year balloon.

5. Remaining Questions and Conclusion

This paper presents a preliminary structural analysis for intrusive *be* constructions, but many questions remain. As well as the various interesting properties discussed by the authors cited here (e.g. prosody issues, historical issues, corpus frequencies), there are also syntactic questions such as how the apparently optional agreement for tense occurs between the main verb and *be*. If it is true that there is no such agreement for number, this also needs explanation.

It would also be interesting to further explore the relations between intrusive *be* and other types of apposition and modification, such as relative clauses (Acuña-Fariña 1999, Looock 2010, Potts 2002, etc.), and it would also be interesting to compare the constructions with other constructions involving doubling of functional heads such as poly-definites (Kolliakou 2004, Lekakou and Szendrői 2007, Kyriakaki 2011) and Russian preposition doubling (Goncharov 2013). And finally, it would be interesting to compare intrusive *be* constructions with other somewhat non-canonical uses of *be*, such as the example in (42), a kind of ‘add-on’ non-restrictive modifier.

(42) But I know people from Hailebury that go to N-L-P *is* the big one.

And finally, there are examples with predicative main verb *be*, which will require a different analysis. The few examples I have seen of this suggest that *be* is being used as a hedge, but this requires further analysis.¹⁰

(43) a. One of them *is is* really uh overweight. (Coppock et al. 2006)

b. The headline *is is* kinda cute. (McConvell 2004)

I have proposed that intrusive *be* is primarily the optionally pronounced version of an appositional/focus head that is otherwise silently pronounced as a pause (written as a colon). It focuses its complement while relating its complement to its specifier (the object of another verb), which must be appositional. The construction creates an existential context, a factor that needs further study. There is virtually no difference between most types of Single *be*,

¹⁰ Liberman (2011) and Zimmer (2011) give examples of triple-*be*, which is also deserving of more attention. For now, I would consider it reduplication or a disfluency.

nor between Single *be* and Double *be*. There is however, an extension of *be* as a non-appositional relational-focus head, then a further extension as a simple focus marker for assertions, and perhaps as a predicational hedge.

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