

How the Entrenchment-and-Conventionalization Model might enrich diachronic Construction Grammar. The case of *(the) thing is (that)*

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Abstract

Explanations of language change in terms of Diachronic Construction Grammar generalize over gradual adaptations of the linguistic behaviour of individual speakers and communities. Presenting a diachronic case study of the pattern *(the) (Adj) thing (clause_{rel}) is (is) (that)*, I argue that the time course of formal, semantic and pragmatic changes, of changes in frequency and of changes regarding dispersion over speakers and choices of lexical items offer a glimpse of the gradual individual and communal adaptations underlying processes such as constructionalization and constructional change. I interpret data extracted from various corpora from the perspectives of Diachronic Construction Grammar and the Entrenchment-and-Conventionalization Model (Schmid 2020) and discuss how the latter perspective might enrich the former.

Keywords: language change, diachronic construction grammar, entrenchment-and-conventionalization model, individual and communal grammar

1. Introduction

In this squib, I will present two mainly complementary, but partly competing explanations of how the pattern ‘(the) (Adj) *thing* (clause_{rel}) *is* (*is*) (*that*) ...’ emerged (see Table 1 in Section 2 for examples). Both explanations will be based on the same corpus data, taken from my own material (Mantlik and Schmid 2018, Schmid and Mantlik 2015) and other sources (Curzan 2012, Keizer 2013, Shibasaki 2015, Stvan 2014). They apply the explanatory machineries of usage-based Diachronic Construction Grammar (cf., e.g., Barðdal et al. 2015), on the one hand, and my *Entrenchment-and-Conventionalization Model* (or *EC-Model*; Schmid 2020), on the other.

Diachronic Construction Grammar investigates language change by identifying formal, semantic and functional changes of constructions and interpreting them in terms of processes such as constructionalization or constructional change. As pointed out by Gregersen (2018) in a review article of Barðdal et al. (2015), one problem with this approach concerns the ambivalent status of constructions and of the *constructicon*, i.e. the inventory of constructions: “Does the ‘constructicon’ refer to the individual speaker’s linguistic repertoire, or is it an abstraction over the whole linguistic community?” (Gregersen 2018, 358). This is where the EC-Model comes into play, since it emphasizes the need to distinguish between individual knowledge and communal conventions when investigating linguistic structure, variation and also change. According to this model, the knowledge underlying individual speakers’ repertoires emerges and is sustained and continually adapted by the routinization of symbolic, syntagmatic, paradigmatic and pragmatic associations under the influence of language use and various other forces. Linguistic knowledge is not represented in the form of units, but in that of more or less routinized patterns of associations. In contrast, conventions shared by communities are regularities of behaviour sustained by the processes of usualization and diffusion. Put at its briefest, usualization brings about and sustains regularities in the reciprocal matching of the forms and meanings of linguistic elements and patterns, while diffusion brings about and sustains the spread of such regularities across speakers and communities and across usage contexts. The EC-Model aims at representing both knowledge and conventions in a decidedly dynamic way and therefore refrains from rashly postulating linguistic entities such as constructions, cognitive schemas or collective conventions on the basis of observed usage patterns.

The overall goal of this squib – in addition to investigating the diachronic change and current usage of *(the) thing is (that)* – is to demonstrate how the EC-Model might refine the constructionist approach.

2. Characterizing and illustrating the patterns in Present-Day English

The commonality of the patterns targeted in this study and illustrated in Table 1 lies in the forms *thing* and *is* and their focalizing function (Tuggy 1996, Schmid 2000, Delahunty 2012, Keizer 2013). In my view, four prototypical usage types stand out from the wide range of combinations of forms, meanings and functions. Note that these usage types are not conceived of as linguistic entities. From an exemplar-based perspective, one could imagine these usage types as particularly densely crowded clusters of exemplars. As shown in Table 1, the four usage types can be specified by identifying elements that are obligatory or optional or that never or rarely occur in a given usage type. While it is generally possible to pair formal specification with typical meanings and functions, semantic and pragmatic aspects are not distinctive enough in this case to serve to distinguish between the four usage types.

3. The diachrony of the four usage types

The origins and diachronic developments of the four usage types can be divided into four stages, indicated on the left in Figure 1. In what follows I will discuss these four stages in chronological order.

4. Stage I: From Germanic and Romance to Usage Types 1 and 2

4.1 Data

Stage I encompasses what was required for the pattern *the thing is that* to appear in Middle English. The lexical component, i.e. the noun *thing*, is inherited from Germanic (*OED3*, s.v. *thing*). Importantly, from Germanic onwards the noun *thing* carries the meaning ‘a matter with which one is concerned [...], an affair, a business, a concern, a subject’ (*OED3*, s.v. *thing*, I.3.a). So counter to my own observation that in the pattern Det–N–BE–*that*, *thing* is “redundant from a propositional point of view” (Schmid 2000, 334), *thing* actually comes complete with the notion of an important issue that must be discussed and seen to.

According to Mantlik (2011) and Schmid and Mantlik (2015), the grammatical component of the pattern, i.e. the structure Det–N–BE–*that*, is modelled on an equivalent structure existing in Latin and French and enters English by means of translations from Latin or French sources.

Examples (1) and (2) provide Latin and 14th-century French illustrations of the pattern that presumably gave rise to English Det–N–BE–*that*, taken from Book V. IV of Boethius’ *Consolatio Philosophiae* (see Mantlik 2011, 173-195). A modern English translation is given in (3):

- (1) Cuius caliginis causa est quod humanae ratiocinationis motus ad diuinae praescientiae simplicitatem non potest amoueri; [...]. (Bieler 1957).
- (2) Et la cause de si grant obscurté et de si grant ignorance si est que le mouvement de la raison humaine ne peut [...] atteindre ne soy adjoûster a la simplece de la providence de Dieu; [...]. (Cropp 2006)
- (3) And the reason of this obscurity is that the movement of human reasoning cannot cope with the simplicity of the Divine foreknowledge; [...]. (Boethius 1897, transl. by H. R. James)
- (4)

The corresponding pattern in the Romance languages already served the focalizing function preserved up to the present day.

The first attestation of the use of *thing* in the pattern can be found in Chaucer’s work (1430). Initially, the noun *thing* is used in the form and function of the modern Usage Type 2, i.e. with premodifying adjectives serving a presentative or discourse-structuring function, frequently also with intervening relative clauses expressing writers’ desires, as in example (4):

- (5) ... **the grettest and most thinge that I desire** is that thou haue in thy self a gloryous and vertuouus lyf .. (William Caxton, *Game and Playe of the Chesse*, 1474)

Uses of the more general Usage Type 1, i.e. without adjectives and relative clauses, emerge a little later. Overall, both the variable pattern Det–N–BE–*that* and the lexically specific pattern *the* (Adj) *thing* (clause_{rel}) *is that* are used with low frequency and by a small number of writers in Stage I (Schmid and Mantlik 2015).

Table 1: Survey of prototypical usage types of the pattern *(the) (Adj) thing (clause_{rel}) is (is) (that)*

Usage Type	Usage Type 1 focalizing, compositional	Usage Type 2 focalizing, presentative and/or discourse-structuring	Usage Type 3 focalizing, ‘double <i>is</i> ’	Usage Type 4 focalizing, ‘bare-noun’
Form	<i>the thing is (that) ...</i>	<i>the Adj thing (clause_{rel}) is that ...</i>	<i>the (Adj) thing (clause_{rel}) is is that ...’</i>	<i>thing is, ...</i>
Obligatory	<i>the thing is, that</i> -clause	<i>the Adj thing is; that</i> -clause, typically introduced by overt <i>that</i>	<i>the thing is is</i> , typically followed by <i>that</i>	<i>thing is</i> , realized as an autonomous intonation unit in speech, followed by comma in writing
Optional	complementizer <i>that</i> , i.e. <i>that</i> can be omitted	clause _{rel}	Adj, clause _{rel}	–
Excluded	Adj and clause _{rel}	–	–	Det, Adj, clause _{rel} , <i>that</i>
Meaning	compositional	compositional	similar to Usage Types 1 and 2	semantically more or less empty
Function	directs attention to content of the <i>that</i> -clause; often used in adversative contexts	directs attention to the content of the <i>that</i> -clause (presentative) and characterizes it by an evaluative or focusing Adj, or uses the pattern to structure discourse	similar to Usage Types 1 and 2	pragmatic marker
Examples (taken from the <i>Corpus of Contemporary American</i> , Davies 2008-)	I was going to say, you know, black-and-white. " # " Well, that’s part of it. But the thing is that I’m starting to like Java, feel for her. (COCA, FIC, 1993)	“... They even told us what clothes to wear off duty.” # The remarkable thing is that such a restless character was able to accept service discipline for so long (COCA, NEWS 1990)	At the time, I had a strong reaction to it, obviously, but I was able to brush it off because I continued to work. But the thing is is that sometimes you think it’s easier to let things go ... (COCA, SPOK, 2018)	I’d hate to think I was holding you back. You haven’t... ever. Thing is , Dad, I’m... damn proud of my bar stools. (COCA, TV, 2017)

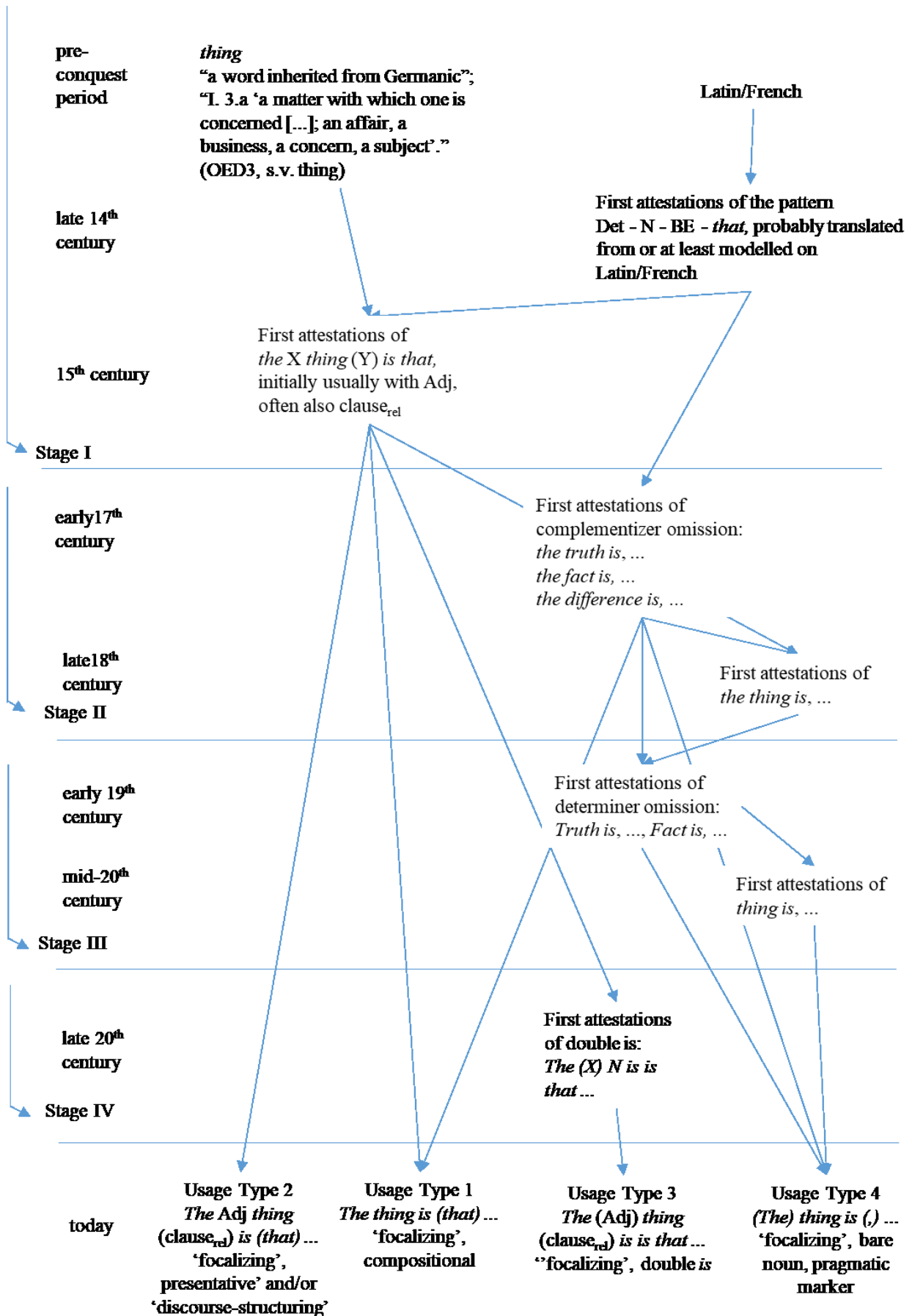


Figure 1: Survey of the diachronic development of (the) (Adj) thing (clause_{rel}) is (is) (that)

4.2 The constructionist perspective

From the perspective of Construction Grammar, the pattern Det–N–BE–*that* can be regarded as a type of “shell-noun construction” (Schmid 2000), in which an abstract noun provides a conceptual shell for the propositional content expressed in the *that*-clause. The construction seems to have emerged by means of contact-induced constructionalization (Boas and Höder 2018): a schematic pattern opening a variable slot for certain abstract nouns, paired with focalizing and presentative or discourse-structuring functions, developed out of translations of corresponding constructions existing in Latin and French. One of the nouns attracted by the construction was *thing*. The construction *the* (Adj) *thing* (clause_{rel}) *is that* became conventionalized in two formal and functional variants corresponding to Usage Types 1 and 2.

4.3 The perspective of the EC-Model

The perspective of the EC-Model focusses on the following aspects discussed in Section 4.1: the low usage frequency of the pattern, the small proportion of writers who make use of it, the wide range of nouns used in the pattern, and the slow and gradual increase in frequency. Taking these aspects into consideration, the EC-Model explanation states that from the late 14th century onwards, we can observe sporadic uses of the pattern Det–N–BE–*that*, most of which were apparently translated from Latin or French. As lies in the nature of translating, items were transferred in a lexically specific form, rather than as variable patterns.

The findings reported in Section 4.1 suggest the following: a) It may have taken several decades and generations for the pattern to become usualized as a native English utterance type, i.e. for a communal regularity of behaviour relating to the form, meaning and function of the pattern to emerge. b) Diffusion through the speech community was slow. c) Only few writers repeated the pattern frequently enough to entrench it by routinizing pragmatic, symbolic and syntagmatic associations representing the functional, semantic and syntactic characteristics of the pattern. d) The usage profiles of these writers suggest that not even they had a holistic, schema-like representation of the pattern.

5. Stage II: Complementizer omission

5.1 Data

Following a gradual increase in the range of nouns used in the pattern Det–N–BE–*that* and the proportion of authors using it, the year 1605 marks the first attestation where the complementizer *that* is omitted, found in Francis Bacon’s *The Proficiency and Advancement of Learning* (Mantlik and Schmid 2018, 195):

- (6) [...] and so goeth on in an irony. But **the truth is**, they be not the highest instances that give the [...]

This usage gains some currency, but remains restricted to the noun *truth* for around 70 years, after which the first sporadic instances of *difference*, *business*, *misfortune*, *result* and *fact* occur in the works of a very small number of authors (Mantlik and Schmid 2018: 195). The first zero-*that* uses of *the thing is* are found as late as 1778 in a novel by Fanny Burney. According to data from COHA, *the thing is* zero-*that* remains rare until the mid-19th century, when numbers of attestations gradually begin to increase (Mantlik and Schmid 2018, 198).

Complementizer omission is accompanied by functional changes giving more prominence to the focalizing function in adversative and argumentative contexts and paving the way towards the use of *the thing is* in the function of pragmatic marker characteristic of Usage Type 4. In addition, the data indicate that there is a stylistic shift of the zero-*that* variant towards use in less formal contexts.

Figure 2, taken from Mantlik and Schmid (2018, 206), plots the changes in the normalized frequency of the variants *(the) thing is that* and *(the) thing is Ø* in COHA. The figure shows that the zero-variant shows a sharp rise in frequency starting in the 1950s, ushered in by a more gradual increase from the 1920s onwards.

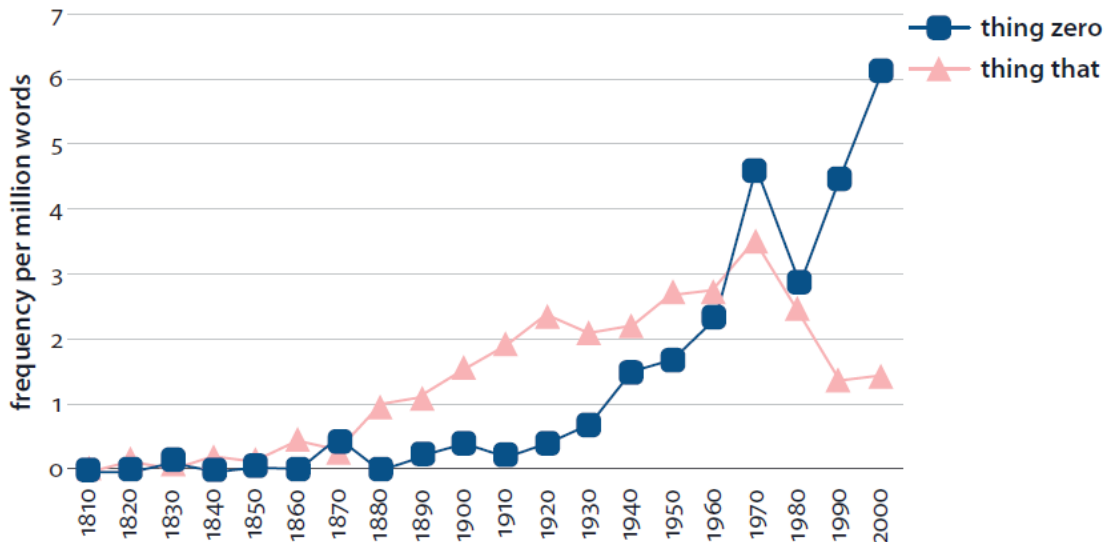


Figure 2: Normalized frequencies of *(the) thing is that* and *(the) thing is Ø* in COHA (Mantlik and Schmid 2018, 206)

5.2 The constructionist perspective

In Stage II, the shell-noun construction Det–N–BE–*that* undergoes a formal change – omission of the complementizer *that* – and a functional change towards use as a pragmatic marker. As shown by Mantlik and Schmid (2018), the collocational preferences and restrictions of the zero-*that* variant diverge from the full variant with overt *that*. Taking into account the stylistic differences observed and anticipating the later development, we can interpret this as a case of “pre-constructuralization constructional change” (Traugott and Trousdale 2013, 27), eventually bringing about a new but related construction via “constructional split” (De Smet 2012, 38).

5.3 The perspective of the EC-Model

The evidence regarding frequency as well as pragmatic and stylistic changes suggests that in Stage II, more and more writers across several generations begin to strengthen pragmatic associations between the pattern DET–N–BE–*that* and its adversative and emphatic focalizing function. Reinforced by these pragmatic associations and rising frequencies of usage, syntagmatic associations with certain frequent and functionally matching nouns occurring in the pattern (*truth*, *fact* as well as *point* and later *thing*) become strengthened in the minds of

these writers. This is indicated by the high usage frequency of these nouns in the pattern. Pragmatic associations with less formal contexts also support this tendency. The semantic and functional similarity of the nouns used most frequently suggests that paradigmatic associations reflecting the smaller range of nouns occurring in the complementizer-omitted version are also strengthened.

The overall effect of these routinization processes is that syntagmatic associations linking the components of the pattern grow in strength, while external syntagmatic links to the surrounding clause constituents weaken, making the pattern syntactically and pragmatically more autonomous (Schmid 2020, 235-237). This renders the complementizer *that* redundant. Highly frequent variants such as *the truth is*, *the fact is*, *the reality is* and also *the thing is* undergo syntagmatic strengthening in lexically specific form and acquire chunk-like status. The slow and gradual increase in usage frequency and dispersion across writers indicate that these entrenchment processes remain restricted to certain writers in the early phase of Stage II. It is not before the 18th and early 19th centuries that the lexically specific variants of the zero-*that* pattern begin to spread by diffusion, become usualized in the wider speech community and are transmitted across generations as a conventionalized utterance type. The sharp rise in the frequency of *(the) thing is* \emptyset reported in Figure 2 indicates that the shift from individual cognitive chunking to chunk diffusion (Schmid 2020, 315-316) and transmission begins in the 1950s.

6. Stage III: Determiner omission

6.1 Data

In Stage III, beginning in the early 19th century, we see the first attestations of determiner omission, again led by the frequent nouns *truth* and *fact* as well as *point* (Stvan 2014). As in the case of complementizer omission, *thing* lags behind considerably in this ‘bare-noun’ Usage Type, with the first clear cases cropping up in mid-20th century:

- (7) He’s a sergeant soldier an’ he has bullets what don’t shoot you. **Thing is**, it’s not nice.
The man should let the tiger out o’ the cage ... (COHA, FIC 1959)

6.2 The constructionist perspective

In Stage III, the constructional split beginning in Stage II gains further momentum when determiner omission sets in in uses with the nouns *truth*, *fact* and *point*, and much later also *thing*. As a likely effect of the developments in Stages II and III, the frequent forms *truth/fact/point is* and eventually also *thing is* become stored and conventionalized as lexically specific constructions in their own right.

6.3 The perspective of the EC-Model

The omission of determiners in Stage III is a further effect of syntagmaticalization and pragmaticalization processes. Like the complementizer *that* before, the determiner is no longer needed as a syntagmatic signpost signalling the beginning of a subject noun phrase. However, determiner omission is a much stronger sign of the emancipation of the pragmatic marker Usage Type 4 from Types 1 and 2, because it excludes the use of *that* (cf. **thing is*, *that* ...). This is a sign that the syntactic roles of *the thing* as subject and *is* as verb of a main

clause are no longer active in uses as a pragmatic marker, first in the minds of individual speakers and then increasingly in the wider community, driven by diffusion.

7. Stage IV: Double *is*

7.1 Data

The use of ‘double-*is*’ in the pattern DET–N–BE–*that* emerges in the last quarter of the 20th century (Bolinger 1987, Tuggy 1996, Curzan 2012). Despite the attention it has received from linguists, it must be said that double-*is* has remained extremely rare until today. Anecdotal evidence (see Zimmer 2011 and related *Language Log* entries) indicates that there is considerable inter-speaker variation regarding the use of double-*is*. As mentioned in Section 2, determiner omission and complementizer omission are very rare (Brenier and Michaelis 2005), which sets double-*is* apart from the bare-noun Usage Type 4.

7.2 The constructionist perspective

Construction grammarians are faced with the question whether the double-*is* Usage Type is a formal variant of Usage Types 1 and 2 (and thus a case of constructional change) or a related but distinct type of construction resulting from constructionalization. The shared formal characteristics (rare omission of determiners and *that*) and pragmatic functions point towards constructional change (Schmid 2000, 334; Delahunty 2012, 56; Keizer 2013, 213). Brenier and Michaelis (2005) regard double-*is* as an “adaptive amalgam” and “formal idiom” inheriting its structural and functional properties from the simple N–BE–*that* construction and the verb-phrase construction. Other authors draw attention to the support coming from formally identical but structurally different – and perfectly conventional – uses of *is is*, e.g. as in *wh*-clefts like *what the problem is is that ...* (Tuggy 1996), or explicitly invoke *wh*-clefts (Bolinger 1987) as one source construction.

7.3 The perspective of the EC-Model

The evidence cited in Section 7.1 – low frequency, low dispersion across speakers, small number of nouns, rare in written text – indicates that the use of double-*is* remains an effect of usage-driven entrenchment for some speakers, rather than an utterance type that has been conventionalized in the community at large. From the perspective of the EC-Model, double-*is* results from two stages of syntagmatic strengthening producing chunk-like representations in the minds of those speakers who use it.

In the first stage of syntagmatic strengthening, the three components *thing is that* are glued together pairwise, to yield the chunks *thing-is* and *is-that*. The syntagmatic strengthening of the first chunk receives support from the high frequency of all uses of *thing is*, regardless of their syntactic structure, including those of Usage Type 4. The chunking of *is that* receives support from the high usage frequency of this 2-gram (391 occurrences per million words in COCA), which is mainly due to the pattern N–BE–*that*. Both of these two chunks are pragmatically associated with the communicative goals typical of this pattern, i.e. focalizing, presenting, discourse-structuring. As is typical of syntagmatic strengthening and the changes caused by it (Schmid 2020, 161, 235-236), grammatical elements are reduced in their syntactic function, so that *is* begins to lose its role as copula in the chunk *thing-is*, while the chunk *is-that* takes over this role. Since *that* is an integral part of this chunk, it is not omitted in double-*is* uses. In this stage, *thing is is that* can be ‘parsed’ as [*thing is*] [*is-that*].

In the second stage of syntagmatic strengthening, speakers who use the sequence *is is* very frequently begin to chunk the sequence *is is* or even *is is that*. As mentioned by Tuggy (1996), speakers are familiar with the sequence *is is* from other structures, which provides support for this otherwise unlikely chunking process. Once *is is (that)* becomes entrenched as a unit, it can be extended to other nouns and also other structures with focalizing function. The idea that *is is (that)* has acquired a chunk-like status in the minds of some speaker is supported by examples where *thing* is separated from *is is that* by a relative clause (as in “**the thing** you always worry about most **is is that** a country will get a shortcut to nuclear weapons”, COCA, SPOK, 2005) and so far extremely rare examples of “copula tripling”, as documented on *Language Log* (Zimmer 2011): “and the thing [is is is] that this isn’t Google”.

8. Discussion and conclusion

The constructionist approach explains the emergence, change and differentiation of the patterns under investigation in terms of general processes such as constructionalization, constructional change, constructional splits and constructional amalgams. It proceeds from the working assumption that these processes bring about and operate over constructions, i.e. conventional and stored form–meaning pairings. In doing so, it hypostatizes usage patterns as linguistic entities or units which undergo change. With regard to its methodology, it looks at a) formal, semantic and functional changes over time; b) the time course of these changes; c) changes in usage frequencies; and d) significant changes in frequency over time and how they correlate with formal, semantic or functional changes. The constructionist approach interprets these indicators of change in terms of the emergence and change of variable schemas and more or less fixed patterns.

The EC-Model approach tries to extract further pieces of information from the data in order to provide a more fine-grained picture of what has happened and what we have now. In addition to a) to d), it takes into consideration e) (changes regarding) the frequency distribution across individual speakers, especially during early stages marked by low frequencies; f) (changes of) lexical preferences of individual speakers and groups; and g) (changes regarding) the lexical dispersion of the elements filling variable slots in a pattern. Regarding the interpretation of these findings, the EC-Model tries to refine the constructionist approach in at least two ways. Firstly, it distinguishes systematically between speakers and communities to provide a clearer picture of the way in which a given change unfolds. This entails a distinction between phases where change is mainly driven by increasing entrenchment in the minds of few speakers, and therefore slow and gradual, and phases where usualization and diffusion (as well as transmission) in the community contribute to faster changes. In the early stages of the changes observed here few speakers or small groups of speakers develop routines. These show as usage patterns in corpus data, but are presumably neither represented in the format of productive schemas in these speakers’ minds nor widespread enough to be considered conventional constructions.

Secondly, the EC-Model defines conventions as dynamic regularities of behaviour and mental representations as dynamic patterns of associations. Therefore, it does not postulate linguistic or mental entities, especially as long as numbers of uses and speakers are low. Instead, it regards usage types as cognitive and behavioural attractors standing out from a pool of diverse and variable usage patterns. This frees researchers from the obligation to define and demarcate constructions as objects of investigation, but it also shifts the burden to a much more detailed description and interpretation of the usage patterns found in the data. This is not a principled theoretical disadvantage, however, but rather a methodological challenge.

In conclusion, I hope to have contributed to a better understanding of usage patterns revolving around *thing is* and to have shown that the Entrenchment-and-Conventionalization

Model might be an attractive extension – or even alternative – to Diachronic Construction Grammar.

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