

## Prologue

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Over the past four decades, I have produced a series of books characterising aspects of the syntax of standard English (Radford 1981, 1988, 1997a, 1997b, 2004a, 2004b, 2009a, 2009b, 2016). During that time, I have become increasingly aware (mainly from paying close attention to the language used on popular British radio and TV stations) that in colloquial English we find non-canonical structures (i.e. structures not reported in grammars of standard varieties of English) which are very different in nature from the structures found in the kind of standard English used e.g. in national newspapers or news bulletins on radio and TV. I have used occasional examples of such colloquial English structures as the basis of some of the exercise material in my syntax books, asking readers to describe how the non-canonical structures in the exercise material differ from the canonical structures described in the main text. Examples of non-canonical structures mentioned in earlier books of mine are given below (where the constituents of interest are highlighted in bold or italics):

- (1)
  - a. *What a mine of useless information* **that** I am (Sir Terry Wogan, BBC Radio 2; Radford 1988: 501)
  - b. Let's find out **how good** you are *a driver* (Jeremy Clarkson, BBC2 TV; Radford 2009a: 426)
  - c. That's the guy **who** I think's *sister* is the lead singer in a new band (Radio presenter, Top Shop, Oxford Street, London; Radford 1988: 526)
  - d. *What* is thought **has** happened to him? (Reporter, BBC Radio 5; Radford 2004a: 429)
  - e. *To which* of these groups do you consider that you belong **to**? (Form issued by the Council in the town where I live; Radford 2009a: 233)
  - f. I hit **shots** that I know I can hit *shots* (Tiger Woods, BBC Radio 5; Radford 2016: 313)
  - g. This information is asked for on the census-form, [**which** they threaten to fine you up to a thousand pounds if you don't fill *the thing* in] (Civil Liberty spokesman, BBC Radio 5; Radford 2016: 477)

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Such structures are interesting for (at least) five different reasons.

One is that they raise the question of whether (as prescriptivists would have us believe), non-canonical structures like those above are simply instances of ‘sloppy grammar’ produced by people who have an inadequate mastery of the syntax of ‘proper English’, so that sentences like those in (1) have no real structure (or have a ‘wild’ structure not conforming to principles of Universal Grammar (UG)). In this monograph, I shall argue strongly against this view, and instead maintain that they have a UG-compliant structure of their own, and that studying this structure closely tells us a great deal about parametric variation in syntax.

A second reason why non-canonical structures like those in (1) are interesting is that they have the potential to raise challenging descriptive questions about the structure of particular types of phrase or sentence. By way of illustration, consider the WH+COMP structure in (1a), where an (italicised) wh-phrase is followed by a (bold-printed) overt complementiser. One descriptive question which this raises is how an overt complementiser like *that* comes to be used in a main-clause wh-exclamative structure, when overt complementisers in English are generally not used in wh-clauses, nor in main clauses either. Could the answer be (as suggested by Zwicky 2002: 227) that (1a) is a reduced variant of a cleft sentence structure such as ‘What a mine of useless information *it is* that I am’, with the (italicised) *it is* string undergoing deletion in the phonology?

A third reason why non-canonical structures are interesting is that they can potentially cast light on theoretical issues. For example, the possibility of extracting *how good* out of the phrase *how good a driver* in (1b) calls into question the robustness of the claim made by Bošković (2005, 2008a, 2009a) that languages with (definite/indefinite) articles disallow left branch extractions – and indeed the same could be said about extraction of *who* out of the DP *who’s sister* in (1c). As a further example, consider a sentence like (1d). What appears to happen here is that *what* originates as an argument of the verb *happen* and then (via successive movement operations) becomes first the subject of *has* and then the subject of *is*. However, this latter movement provides an apparent empirical challenge to two principles widely considered to be universal. One is the Phase Impenetrability Condition/PIC of Chomsky (1998) under which a constituent c-commanded by a phase head P is impenetrable to any constituent c-commanding the maximal projection of P. If all finite clauses are CPs and all CPs are phases (as Chomsky claims), PIC would bar T-*has* from attracting *what* to move from being the specifier of T-*is* to becoming the specifier of T-*has*, because there is a CP phase boundary

intervening between the two. Furthermore, the same movement would also violate the Inactivity Condition of Chomsky (2008: 150) which makes an A-chain inactive for further syntactic operations once its uninterpretable features have been valued: this is because the uninterpretable case feature on *what* will be valued by agreement with T-*is* and thereafter be inactive and so unable to be attracted by T-*has*. Thus, sentences like (1d) can potentially force us to re-evaluate the putative universality of fundamental principles.<sup>1</sup>

A fourth reason why non-canonical structures are interesting is that they offer the potential to shed light on the nature of microvariation in English, and thereby contribute to our understanding of microcomparative syntax. They also raise the sociolinguistic issue of whether (some) such structures are restricted to use in certain ‘fringe’ registers or varieties of English, as is often claimed. A case in point is provided by WH+COMP structures like (1a), where a wh-constituent is followed by an overt complementiser. Such WH+COMP structures are generally considered to be restricted to use in a handful of varieties of English. For example, they are reported as characteristic of Irish English in Henry (1995); and Zwicky (2002: 227) remarks that the speaker who produced sentence (1a) is ‘not only a speaker of Irish English, but a proud speaker of this variety, given to exaggerating his Irishness’. However, data I have collected from live, unscripted radio and TV broadcasts suggest that such structures are used by a far broader spectrum of speakers from diverse social and geographical backgrounds.

A fifth reason why non-canonical structures are of interest is that they raise the psycholinguistic question of whether (some) such sentences could be the result of processing errors – e.g. blends or memory lapses. For example, a sentence like (1d) could in principle be the result of a blend between an impersonal passive like *What is it thought has happened to him?* and an infinitival structure like *What is thought to have happened to him?* In much the same way, a preposition doubling structure like (1e) could in principle result from a memory lapse, if (when reaching the end of the sentence), the speaker forgets having pronounced a copy of the preposition at the beginning of the sentence and spells it out again at the end of the sentence.

So, as we see from the foregoing discussion, non-canonical structures are of interest from five different perspectives (prescriptive, descriptive, theoretical, sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic). This book aims to characterise a set of

<sup>1</sup> See Danckaert et al. (2016) for an interesting account of this type of structure.

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non-canonical syntactic structures found in colloquial English. The data used here come mainly from recordings which I have made of popular programmes on British radio and TV stations over the past decade, using live, unscripted broadcasts in order to avoid possible prescriptive influences from copy-editors. Typical sources were popular sports broadcasts from BBC Radio 5, BBC Radio 5 Sports Extra, BBC World Service, Talksport Radio, BBC TV, ITV, Sky Sports TV and BT TV. Programmes recorded included discussion forums, phone-ins and sports commentaries. The data were collected in an informal (unscientific) manner and transcribed orthographically by me. For obvious reasons, I excluded utterances containing dysfluencies (e.g. incomplete sentences), as well as structures produced by non-native speakers. These broadcast data are (where appropriate) supplemented and complemented by data from other sources (e.g. internet data).<sup>2</sup>

Although I have collected data on numerous non-canonical structures over the past decade, in this book I focus on aspects of the cartography of the clause periphery in colloquial English (i.e. that part of the structure on the lefthand edge of the clause, preceding the subject). This gives the book a novel focus in two respects: firstly because there is relatively little cartographic work on English, and secondly because there is even less work based on spoken language data. The book is organised into four core chapters as follows. Chapter 1 presents an overview of research into the clause periphery in English since the 1950s. Chapters 2–4 take a detailed look at the syntax of topics, complementisers, and *how come*, examining where they are positioned with respect to a variety of other peripheral constituents in colloquial English, and how they are derived. More specifically, chapter 2 examines the syntax of three types of topic found in colloquial English, which differ in whether they are linked to their associated proposition syntactically (via a gap), lexically (via a resumptive expression), or pragmatically (via a chain of pragmatic inferencing). Chapter 3 deals with complementiser spellout in colloquial English: it focuses mainly on non-canonical uses of the

<sup>2</sup> As should be obvious, there are methodological shortcomings in using a randomly collected set of anecdotal data. For a discussion of the relative merits and reliability of different methods of collecting linguistic data, see Schütze (1996), Cowart (1997), Hoffmann (2011: ch. 2), Weskott & Fanselow (2011), Schütze & Sprouse (2014), Radford (2016: 1–9). On the drawbacks of collecting linguistic data from a corpus (or from the web), see Schütze (2009). For a defence of the use of introspective judgement data rather than other sources of data, see Newmeyer (2003, 2005, 2006a, 2006b) on usage-based data, and Sprouse (2011), Sprouse et al. (2013), and Sprouse & Almeida (2011a, 2011b, 2012a, 2012b) on experimental data. For evidence that linguists may give different grammaticality judgements about sentences than non-linguists, see Dąbrowska (2010).

complementiser *that*, offering an account of how *that* comes to occupy a wide range of positions within the clause periphery in colloquial English. Chapter 4 deals with the syntax of *how come* clauses, and discusses variation in their use in respect of whether *how come* can or cannot be followed by *that*, and whether or not *how come* triggers Auxiliary Inversion. The book concludes with a brief Epilogue highlighting key aspects of the research findings reported here.

This book follows in the footsteps of a burgeoning tradition of work which adopts a theoretical approach to the syntax of register variation. In this sense, it is cast in the mould of research on registers such as diary styles (Haegeman 1990a, 1990b, 1997, 2000b, 2013; Matushansky 1995; Horsey 1998; Haegeman & Ihsane 1999, 2001), newspaper headlines (Simon-Vandenberghe 1981; Stowell 1991, 1996), recipe books and instruction manuals (Haegeman 1987; Massam 1989; Massam & Roberge 1989; Culy 1996; Sigurdsson & Maling 2007), note-taking (Janda 1985), telegrams and text messages (Barton 1998), telephone conversations (Hopper 1992), online blogs (Teddman & Newman 2010), and emails/postcards (Nariyama 2006). It is also in the same mould as research on specific syntactic phenomena such as subject, object and article drop (Weir 2008, 2009, 2012, 2014b, 2018), non-standard patterns of agreement (Adger & Smith 2010), and extra *be* constructions (Massam 2017). However, it differs from (most of) the above in that it is not an article focusing on one specific register or phenomenon, but rather a monograph-level study which explores the syntax of (a range of different constituents within) the clause periphery in everyday spoken English.

In this sense, the present book can more readily be compared with Alison Henry's (1995) seminal monograph on Belfast English, which offered a minimalist perspective on the syntax of subject–verb agreement, imperative subjects, *for-to* infinitives, interrogative inversion and contact relatives in Belfast English; however, it differs from her book in having a more unitary focus (on the clause periphery), and in looking at non-standard, non-dialectal variation rather than focusing on one specific dialect. A more recent comparison could be drawn with Liliane Haegeman's (2012) cartographic study of the left periphery in English; however, it differs in that her study focuses mainly on adverbial clauses and uses data from print media, whereas the present book covers a wider range of peripheral structures, and utilises data from spoken English.

Overall, this book has four main goals. One is the goal of dispelling the prescriptive myth that colloquial English is an inferior form of speech

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characterised by sloppiness and an absence of ‘proper grammar’. The second is the descriptive goal of increasing awareness of the wide range of structural variation found in non-dialectal forms of colloquial English, and showing that this variation can be characterised in formal syntactic terms. The third is the theoretical goal of showing how the syntax of non-canonical structures can contribute to debates in contemporary theoretical linguistics. And the fourth is the methodological goal of showing how a usage-based approach can contribute an invaluable source of data which complements other (e.g. introspective and experimental) approaches and lead to a deeper understanding of the nature of syntactic structure and variation in contemporary colloquial English.

I hope this book will inspire, inform and guide researchers working on one or more of the topics covered in it, and will serve as a useful source for (graduate or advanced undergraduate) research seminars on syntactic theory and English syntax. I also hope that you will have as much fun reading it as I had collecting and collating the data!