

# ***That's a beautiful dress that you're wearing: a curious relative clause construction in English\****

Min-Joo Kim  
*Texas Tech University*

## **1 Introduction**

In colloquial English, sentences like (1)–(4) are commonly heard:<sup>1</sup>

- (1) That's a beautiful dress that you're wearing.
- (2) That's a cute puppy that you have in your picture.
- (3) That's a lovely accent you have there.
- (4) That's an interesting idea you brought up.

These sentences, without a doubt, exemplify a type of relative clause (RC) construction, as they all contain an embedded clause (CP) which contains a gap and this gap is co-indexed with the noun phrase that immediately precedes it (henceforth head N), as sketched in (5) for (1). (Here,  $t_1$  stands for the gap inside the embedded clause of an RC.)

- (5) [TP That's [*a beautiful dress*]<sub>1</sub> [CP that you're wearing  $t_1$ ]]

In this paper, however, I show that these RCs exhibit several curious properties that make them stand out, and they pose interesting challenges to theoretical syntactic and semantic analyses of RCs. Since such RCs have not been dealt with in the extant literature, for ease of reference, below, I call them *what's that RCs*.

## **2 Characteristic properties of *what's that RCs***

What I call *what's that RCs* exhibit at least five characteristic properties.

First of all, they occur in copular clauses, occupying the post-copular position, and the subject of their embedding clauses is the distal demonstrative *that*. To exem-

---

\* I would like to thank Jake Arstein for helping me with data collection and discussion. I also wish to thank Jake Arstein, Stephan French, and Kristen West for grammaticality judgments.

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all grammatical linguistic data presented here are from Google searches the author conducted between October 15, 2016 and May 1, 2017.

plify this, consider first (6)–(9): These data show that the post-copular noun phrases that occur in (1)–(4) cannot occur in object positions.

- (6) \*I like a beautiful dress that you're wearing.
- (7) \*I like a cute puppy that you have in your picture.
- (8) \*I like a lovely accent you have there.
- (9) \*I like an interesting idea you brought up.

Consider now (10)–(13). These data show that replacing the subject of the embedding clause of a *what's that* RC with *this* or *it* yields ungrammaticality or pragmatic infelicity; it has to be *that*.

- (10) a. \**It's* a beautiful dress that you're wearing.  
b. #*This* is a beautiful dress that you're wearing.
- (11) a. \**It's* a cute puppy that you have in your picture.  
b. #*This* is a cute puppy that you have in your picture.
- (12) a. \**It's* a lovely accent you have there.  
b. \*/#*This* is a lovely accent you have there.
- (13) a. \**It's* an interesting idea you brought up.  
b. \*/#*This* is an interesting idea you brought up.

Secondly, *what's that* RCs require that their head Ns be indefinite and this is exemplified by the ungrammaticality of the data given in (14)–(17).

- (14) \*That's *the* beautiful dress that you're wearing.
- (15) \*That's *the* cute puppy that you have in your picture.
- (16) \*That's *the* lovely accent you have there.
- (17) \*That's *the* interesting idea you brought up.

Thirdly, the head Ns of these RCs must be modified by an attributive adjective (ADJ). To see this, compare (18)–(21) with (1)–(4).

- (18) \*That's *a* dress that you're wearing.
- (19) \*That's *a* puppy that you have in your picture.
- (20) \*That's *an* accent you have there.
- (21) \*That's *an* idea you brought up.

*That's a beautiful dress that you're wearing*

Fourth, what I call *what's that* RCs require that the relative pronoun (REL) be either *that* or null but not a *wh*-pronoun. This is illustrated by the badness of the data in (22)–(25).

- (22) \*That's a beautiful dress *which* you're wearing.
- (23) \*/#That's a cute puppy *which* you have in your picture.
- (24) \*That's a lovely accent *which* you have there.
- (25) \*That's an interesting idea *which* you brought up.

Fifth, the embedded clause of a *what's that* RC may only have present or simple past tense or realis mood. By way of illustration, consider (26)–(29) in comparison with (1)–(4); these sentences all have an irrealis mood in their embedded clauses.

- (26) \*That's a beautiful dress that you'll be making.
- (27) \*That's a cute puppy that you *may* have in your picture.
- (28) \*That's a lovely accent that you *wish to* have.
- (29) \*That's an interesting idea that you *are to* bring up.

Additionally, consider (30)–(33), which are all judged good and which all have simple past- or present-tensed embedded clauses, just like (1)–(4) but unlike (26)–(29).

- (30) That's an interesting idea you *have come up* with.
- (31) That's an interesting idea you *tried* with the Rover.
- (32) That's a crazy idea you *'ve got* there.
- (33) That's a wonderful life you *have*!

Finally, let me also point out that although *what's that* RCs typically have *you* as the subject of the embedded clauses, cases where the embedded clause's subject is a 3rd person are not hard to come by, as shown in (34)–(37).<sup>2</sup>

- (34) That's a beautiful dress *she* is wearing!
- (35) That's a cute puppy that *she* has in her picture.
- (36) That's a lovely accent that *she* has there.
- (37) That's an interesting idea that *she* has brought up.

---

<sup>2</sup> Sentences (35)–(37) are constructed but I have verified their grammaticality with native speakers of English.

In sum, then, what I call *what's that* RCs have the following characteristic properties:

- (38) *Characteristic properties of what's that RCs*
- i. They occur in copular sentences whose subject is *that*, occupying the post-copular position.
  - ii. Their head N is indefinite.
  - iii. Their head N must be modified by an attributive ADJ.
  - iv. Their REL cannot be a *wh*-word; it must be *that* or null.
  - v. Their embedded clause's tense/aspect/mood must be simple past or present, not irrealis.

### 3 Questions raised by *what's that* RCs

*What's that* RCs raise several non-trivial questions for generative linguists, in particular those interested in syntax–semantics interface issues.

First of all, even though their head Ns cannot be definite, they are interpreted in a way that is analogous to how RCs with definite head Ns are interpreted. To see this, consider first (39), which is a close approximation of the intended meaning of (1). (Here and below, embedded clauses are put inside square brackets, i.e., '[ ]'.)

- (39) *Interpretation of (1), which contains a what's that RC*  
 That's a beautiful dress that [you're wearing].  
 → (I see that) [you're wearing a dress] *and it* is beautiful.

Consider now (40), which is comparable to (1) but which does not exemplify what I call a *what's that* RC since it contains a definite head N.

- (40) *Interpretation of a RC whose head N is definite*  
 That's *the* dress that [you were wearing the other day].  
 → [You were wearing a dress the other day] *and it* is that one.

Considering both (39) and (40) shows that, in both cases, the embedded clauses introduce a new discourse referent and the REL contributes the logical connective '&' and a pronoun that refers back to the newly introduced discourse referent, as indicated by italics.

For comparison, consider now the sentences in (41), which are similar to (1)–(4) but which do not exemplify what I call *what's that* RCs. These sentences are interpreted in a very different way than those in (1)–(4). For example, the embedded clause of (41a) does not introduce a new discourse referent which is referred back to by the REL *that*, as shown in (42); instead, here, the embedding clause

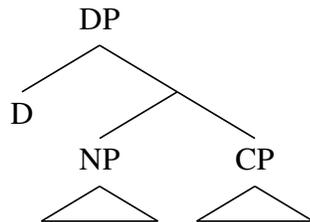
*That's a beautiful dress that you're wearing*

is first interpreted verbatim and then the embedded clause is interpreted, with the REL being given the meaning of 'and' plus a definite pronoun which refers to the discourse referent introduced by the embedding clause.

- (41) a. That's *an* interesting point that I hadn't considered.  
 b. That's *a* stupid prank that's very unsafe.
- (42) *Interpretation of (41a), which contains a RC whose head N is indefinite but which does not instantiate a what's that RC*  
 That's an interesting point that [I hadn't considered].
- a.  $\rightarrow$  (I see that) [I hadn't considered a point] *and it* is interesting.  
 b.  $\rightarrow$  That's an interesting point *and* [I hadn't considered] *it*.

Notably, the way (41a) is interpreted is in accordance with what would be predicted by applying the semantic operation Predicate Modification (Heim & Kratzer 1998) given in (43), and this suggests that the material occurring in the post-copular position of (41a) and (41b) has a syntactic structure that is typical of restrictive RCs under which both the head N and the RC are under the scope of the same determiner as given in (44), however such a structure might be derived (see, e.g., Kayne 1994, Ch. 8, and Alexiadou et al. 2000)).

- (43) *Predicate Modification* (Heim & Kratzer 1998)  
 If  $\alpha$  is a branching node and  $\{\beta, \gamma\}$  the set of its daughters, then, for any assignment  $a$ ,  $\alpha$  is the domain of  $\llbracket \alpha \rrbracket^a$  if both  $\beta$  and  $\gamma$  are, and  $\llbracket \beta \rrbracket^a$  and  $\llbracket \gamma \rrbracket^a$  are both of type  $\langle e, t \rangle$ . In this case,  $\llbracket \alpha \rrbracket^a = \lambda x : x \in D$  and  $x$  is in the domain of  $\llbracket \beta \rrbracket^a$  and  $\llbracket \gamma \rrbracket^a$ .  $\llbracket \beta \rrbracket^a(x) = \llbracket \gamma \rrbracket^a(x) = 1$ .
- (44) *Syntactic structure of typical restrictive RCs*



On the other hand, the fact that sentences in (1)–(4) are interpreted in a rather different way (as spelled out in (39) for (1)) raises the question of what might be their underlying structure and how their interpretations can be formally composed. What is clear is that in the case of sentences like (1)–(4), the RC is not under the scope of the indefinite article *a* (if it carries any meaning). Therefore, we cannot assign the structure given in (44) nor apply the semantic operation Predicate Modification in interpreting them.

In this context, I should also mention that what I call *what's that* RCs resemble free relatives in terms of their meaning. By way of example, all the sentences in (1)–(4) and (35) are synonymous in meaning with those given in (45)–(49).<sup>3</sup>

- (45) *What you're wearing* is a beautiful dress.  
 (46) *What you have in your picture* is a cute puppy.  
 (47) *What you have there* is a lovely accent.  
 (48) *What you brought up* is an interesting idea.  
 (49) *What she is wearing* is a beautiful dress!

Yet, given that *what's that* RCs have a distinctively different form than free relatives, one cannot help but to wonder how exactly their meanings might be derived in a compositional manner.

Obviously, the demonstrative *that* that occurs in the subject position of the embedding clause of a *what's that* RC plays some role, not to mention the content of the embedded clause; the subject *that* seems to indicate that the speaker is commenting on something that is within their perceptual space and the embedded clause's content spells out what that something is. But beyond this, I do not have much to offer at this point and I therefore have to leave the questions raised above to future research.

#### 4 Summary and conclusion

In this paper, I have introduced a hitherto unremarked-on RC construction in English, which I have labeled here as *what's that* RCs for convenience. These RCs exhibit several interesting semantic properties and in conjunction with the particular syntactic form they take, they present equally many interesting puzzles to anyone interested in the syntax and semantics of RCs.

#### References

Alexiadou, Artemis, Paul Law, André Meinunger & Chris Wilder. 2000. *The syntax of relative clauses*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

<sup>3</sup> By contrast, the sentences in (41) are not, as shown in (i).

- (i) a. That's an interesting point that I hadn't considered.  
       → *What I hadn't considered* is an interesting point.  
     b. That's a stupid prank that's very unsafe.  
       → *What's very unsafe* is a stupid prank.

*That's a beautiful dress that you're wearing*

Heim, Irene & Angelika Kratzer. 1998. *Semantics in Generative Grammar*. Blackwell.

Kayne, Richard. 1994. *The Antisymmetry of Syntax*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.