

Embedding weak pronouns

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Introduction. The present paper addresses a puzzle concerning the use of weak pronouns in embedded responses. In Dutch embedded responses, the definite pronoun *het* ‘it’ may be used, see (1). In contrast, the English weak pronoun *it* cannot occur in embedded responses, see (2).

(1) A: Heeft Jan de kat gevoerd? B: Ik {denk | geloof} *(het) {(wel)/niet}
has Jan the cat fed I think believe it WEL/not

(2) A: Did John feed the cat? B: I {*think | #believe} it.

Webber (1991) already noted for English that *that* is used more often to refer to propositions than *it*. Note that in other environments, i.e. in responses to assertions and in topic position, *it* and *het* behave similarly. In (3), both *it* and *het* seem to suggest that the referent was known to the speaker already (Cornish 1992, Gundel et al. 2003), see (3). This effect is not found for the demonstratives *that/dat*. From the perspective of theories on pronominal reference the different use of the weak pronouns, in (1)-(2), and their similar behavior in (3), is puzzling.

(3) A: Computerwetenschappers verdienen meer dan taalkundigen.
Computer.scientists earn more than linguists

B: {Dat | Het} is verschrikkelijk.
that it is terrible

(cf. Gundel et al. 2003:42)

Background. Existing saliency hierarchies for reference to nominal entities suggest that more reduced pronouns signal that their antecedents are more given (Gundel et al. 1993), accessible (Ariel 1994) or familiar (Prince 1981). Gundel et al. (2003) explain Webber’s finding in Gundel et al.’s (1993) givenness hierarchy. This hierarchy suggests that *it* requires its antecedent to be ‘in focus’. Gundel et al. (2003) argue this cognitive status is not easily attained by clausally introduced entities, as compared to entities introduced as DPs. They suggest this is due to the low ‘world immanence’ of propositions (following Asher 1993). They further argue *it* signals that the speaker knew the proposition referred to already (cf. Cornish 1992); see e.g. (3). This is in line with the use of weak pronouns as a ‘correlate’ of factive verbs, see (4) (cf. Sudhoff 2016).

(4) Jan betreurt het, dat Marie weggaat. (cf. Sudhoff 2016)
Jan regrets it that Marie leaves

Note that on Gundel et al.’s (2003) account the use of Dutch *het* in (1) is unexpected.

Wolter (2006) extends her saliency account of nominal reference to reference to proposition-like entities with *it* and *that*. Building on work by Kratzer (1989, 2004) and Percus (2000), Wolter argues that both *it* and *that* are evaluated with respect to a salient situation. The difference between the two is that *that* presupposes that the situation relative to which its referent is interpreted is *not* the default situation. Default situations are situations regarding which we evaluate the truth of propositions, i.e. ‘the situation variable associated with the main predicate’ (Wolter 2006:63). All other situation variables (e.g. those forming arguments of nouns) are non-default ones. However, in (3), it seems that *it/that* are evaluated with respect to the same situation: both proforms target the proposition introduced by A (as there is no other proposition available). To account for (3), I suppose that when both *it* and *that* may be used to refer to propositions, the demonstratives offer a way for the speaker to distance himself from the proposition. After all, these presuppose that the referent is not part of the default situation. This invites the listener to infer that the speaker was not familiar with the content yet. By Heim’s (1991) Maximize Presupposition, we infer that the speaker did know the proposition when *it* is used in context like (3).

Proposal. In the following, I assume Wolter’s account of the proforms. I suggest that the difference seen in (1)-(2) are due to competition with other items that might be used in embedded responses. I assume that the proposition-like entity targeted by the proforms is propositional content (following Kratzer 2006, Moulton 2009, 2015).

