Referents for English *It* and *That*: What Differences Are There between Them, If Any?

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1. Introducion

A series of my previous papers (i.e. Nakamura 1996, 1998, 2007) challenged the claims of Kamio & Thomas (1999), who discuss the choice of English anaphoric pronouns *it* and *that* from a semantic point of view. Although my semantic perspectives shown in the three articles above, I believe, have successfully accounted for *it* versus *that* cases including the counterexamples to Kamio & Thomas's argument, there still remain a couple of *it/that* phenomena I have not yet fully analyzed:

> (1) First put the vase on a table, then take a picture of it/that.
> [it = the vase; that = the vase on a table]
> (2) First put a vase on the table, then take a picture of it/that.
> [it = the table; that = a vase on the table]
> (3) First square 19 and then cube it/that.[1]
> [it = 19; that = the square of 19]
> (4) The authorities regretted the strike, but it/that was inevitable.
> [it = the strike; that = the authorities' regret of the strike]
> (Based on Kamio & Thomas 1999: 65)

Kamio & Thomas try to explain these four structures, asserting *it* and *that* have different referents respectively, using the notion of what they call 'prior knowledge'.

As I will point out in what follows, however, there are a number of structures quite similar to examples (1)–(4) above, which cannot be explained by Kamio & Thomas's theory. After offering these counterexamples, the present study will account for the phenomena from a different point of view from Kamio & Thomas's.

2. Kamio & Thomas's (1999) Analysis of Related Phenomena

Kamio & Thomas examine the choice between *it* and *that* based on the notion 'prior knowledge'. They define this notion as 'typically information which a speaker already has access to before it enters into the relevant conversational exchange' (p. 291).

First, observe the following two instances where the differences in the reference of *it* and *that,* according to Kamio & Thomas, can be felt. Examples (1)–(4) in the preceding section are repeated here as (5)–(8):

    (5) First put the vase on a table, then take a picture of it/that.
               [it = the vase; that = the vase on a table]
    (6) First put a vase on the table, then take a picture of it/that.
               [it = the table; that = a vase on the table]

In these examples, Kamio & Thomas argue that the referent of *it* is consistently a noun with the definite determiner, and thus it is an 'old information' NP which has already entered into the discourse.

On the other hand, *that* in (5) and (6), can refer to the table-plus-vase configuration created by these sentences themselves. Therefore, in (5) and (6) the referent of *it* is the previously mentioned noun, marked with the definite article *the*. The referent of *that* need not be prior knowledge, and thus *that* refers to the vase and table together, a configuration whose existence is created by the utterance itself.

Next, observe Kamio & Thomas's account of the following mathematical instructions:

> (7) First square 19 and then cube it/that.
> $$[\text{it} = 19; \text{that} = \text{the square of } 19]$$

Kamio & Thomas say that *it* in (7) refers to a previously mentioned quantity, namely '19', while *that* refers to the newly created quantity, 'the square if 19'. Kamio & Thomas, furthermore, offer example (8) to show how 'the ability of *it* to pick up a referent that is prior knowledge to the speaker interacts with properties of factive verbs':

> (8) The authorities regretted the strike, but it/that was inevitable.
> $$[\text{it} = \text{the strike}; \text{that} = \text{the authorities' regret of the strike}]$$

In (8) *it* in the second part means 'the strike', while *that* means 'the authorities' regret of the strike'. That is, Kamio & Thomas interpret the object of *regret* to constitute prior knowledge to the speaker, while the assertion made in the first part of the sentence is not

seen as prior knowledge.[2]

3. Native Speakers' Judgments

To know how acceptable Kamio & Thomas's characterization of *it* and *that* is by speakers of English, I asked 16 native speakers to consider pairs of sentences (1)–(4), and to describe what *it* and *that* in a given sentence refers to respectively.[3] More than half of these informants agreed with the distinction in reference between *it* and *that* made by Kamio & Thomas, as far as examples (3) and (4) are concerned.[4] The main problem with Kamio & Thomas's argument is shown in the responses by the native speakers to examples (1) and (2) (repeated again as (9) and (10)):

(9) First put the vase on a table, then take a picture of it/that.
[it = the vase; that = the vase on a table]
(10) First put a vase on the table, then take a picture of it/that.
[it = the table; that = a vase on the table]

As for these two structures, all informants, i.e. 16 speakers, commented that both *it* and *that* can refer to the table-plus-vase configuration. It can be said, therefore, that Kamio & Thomas's argument about (9) and (10) should be seen fallacious.

4. Discussions

4.1. Counterexamples: *It* Referring to Expressions of New Information

While Kamio & Thomas's point of view shown in the preceding section seems to account for a number of occurrences of *it* and *that*, it is not difficult to find cases that are taken to contradict their claims. That is, there are cases where the speaker or writer uses *it* for references with new information, as in examples (11)–(15).

In examples (11) and (12) below, according to Kamio & Thomas, *it* should refer to the noun with the definite article, namely 'The basement' in (11) and 'The entire community' or 'the Ceremony' in (12) (In the subsequent examples intended *it/that* are italicized):

(11) It rained day and night for two days. The basement flooded and everything was under water. *It* spoiled all our calculations.

[it = the fact that it rained day and night for days and the basement flooded and everything was under water]

(Halliday & Hasan 1976: 52)

(12) The entire community attended the Ceremony each year. For the parents, *it* meant two day's holiday from work; they sat together in the huge hall. (L. Lowry, *The Giver*)

However, *it* in both examples actually refers to the assertion made in the preceding context, which is taken to be new information: the fact that it rained day and night for days and the basement

flooded and everything was under water in (11), and the fact that the entire community attended the Ceremony each year in (12).

Kamio & Thomas's framework cannot account for the use of *it* in the following example, either:

(13) Mix an egg and a cup of milk into the flour. Pour *it* on the heated frying pan. (Yoshimoto 1986: 54)

It here is taken to refer to the mixture of an egg, a cup of milk and the flour, not to the flour alone. If we followed Kamio & Thomas's theory, *that* should be chosen here instead of *it*.

The following is an intriguing counterexample from a novel:

(14) "Don't believe me?" Langdon challenged. "Next time you're in the shower, take a tape measure."

A couple of football players snickered.

"Not just your insecure jocks," Langdon prompted. "*All* of you. Guys and girls. Try it. Measure the distance from the tip of your head to the floor. Then divide *that* by the distance from your belly button to the floor. Guess what number you get."

"Not PHI!" one of the jocks blurted out in disbelief.

"Yes, PHI," Langdon replied. "One-point-six-one-eight. Want another example?" Measure the distance from your shoulder to fingertips, and then divide *it* by the by the distance from your elbow to your fingertips. PHI again. Another? Hip to floor divided by knee to floor. ..." (D. Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*)[5]

How could Kamio & Thomas explain the use of *it* and *that* in this passage where Langdon, the speaker, chooses *that* for the first time, and *it* for the second time to refer to 'the distance between ...'? This example clearly shows how in some cases *it* and *that* are interchangeable, and not fixed as Kamio & Thomas assert.

Lastly, consider this passage I devised myself:

(15) At the exhibition she was wearing a new pantsuit. *It/That* looked fascinating.

Interestingly enough, many native speakers, asked for their comments on the referent of *it* in (15), replied that *it* refers to 'a new pantsuit', which is interpreted to be new information since it is with an indefinite article.

4.2. An Alternative Account

Here I want to claim that my semantic approach, the one used in my previous related studies (i.e. Nakamura 1996, 1998, 2007), will be adoptable in analyzing *it/that* expressions Kamio & Thomas (1999) cannot give a satisfactory account for.

I assert that the basic mechanism governing the choice of *it* and *that* is quite simple principle: *that*, owning to its demonstrative force, serves to point emphatically and specifically to previously mentioned information, while *it* simply identifies the referent neutrally. In examples (11)–(15) in section 4.1, this principle seems to work in a quite straightforward way, and the choice of *it* and *that* depends on whether or not the speaker or writer intends to emphasize and specify the referent. Therefore, it can be said that

it and *that* in (11)–(15) are interchangeable without the restrictions proposed by Kamio & Thomas.

The two *it/that* cases observed in (3) and (4) (= (7) and (8)) can be accounted for by saying that the referent of *it* can generally be identified immediately and easily by the reader since it is mentioned clearly in the linguistic context, although ambiguity remains (see note 4). Therefore, the referent tends to be referred to by *it* with neutral reference, and that *that*'s pointing force leads to its function to pick up a referent which appears to be hidden in the context.[6]

5. Concluding Remarks

This paper is the fourth paper in which I look at the arguments of Kamio & Thomas regarding the usage of *it/that*. I have attempted to give an alternative and broader perspective than that given by Kamio & Thomas, and to offer a more flexible framework concerning *it/that* usage. I hope that my focus on the semantic perspective of the choice of *it* (referring neutrally) and *that* (pointing emphatically and specifically) will lead to further research on related topics such as the semantic differences between *do it, do that, do this* and *do so*.

Notes
1   To my knowledge, the semantics of *it/that* in this kind of mathematic instructions was first discussed by Isard (1975: 289–290). Isard's discussion is echoed by Linde (1979: 350), Chiba & Murasugi (1987: 127) and Imanishi & Asano (1990: 237).

2   A related observation about the opposition of *it* and *that* is made by
    Swan (1995), who comments that 'when more than one thing has
    been mentioned, *it* generally refers to the main subject of discus-
    sion; *this* and *that* generally select the last thing mentioned'. His
    examples are:
    (i) We keep the ice-cream machine in the spare room. It is main-
        ly used by the children, incidentally. (The machine is used by
        the children)
    (ii) We keep the ice-cream machine in the spare room. This/That
        is mainly used by the children, incidentally. (The spare room
        is used by the children)

                                                        (Swan 1995: 596)
    Using Kamio & Thomas's framework, it is possible to explain that
    it in (i) refers to *the ice-cream machine*, which is a previously men-
    tioned item, and that *that* in (ii) to t*he spare room*, which is prior
    knowledge to the speaker.
3   The informants consisted of nine university or college teachers, five
    university students and two English language school teachers.
    Many of them (12) were from Australia, two from the UK and two
    from the USA.
4   Some speakers disagreed with Kamio & Thomas's account of sen-
    tences (3) and (4). For example, seven people wrote that in (3) *it*
    also refers to 'the square of 19', and three people commented that
    in (4) 'the authorities' regret of the strike' can also be referred to by
    it.
5   My example sources other than linguistics books or articles are
    given below. Only the authors' names and the titles are shown in
    the text.
    Brown, Dan. 2006. *The Da Vinci Code.* Anchor Books.
    Lowry, Lois. 1993. *The Giver.* Dell Laurel-Leaf.
6   Chiba & Murasugi (1987: 127) and Imanishi & Asano (1990: 238),
    dealing with a structure like (3) (= 7), write that the pronoun *it* is

used to refer to an explicit expression in the linguistic context, while the demonstrative *that* is used when the referent is identified indirectly by inference.

References

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