Abstract

The aim of this paper is to clarify the referential status of it and that used as the subject of specificational sentences. Whether considered to be referential or non-referential, these pronouns are often treated similarly in the literature, their functional differences being hardly recognized. After a brief survey of recent literature, it will be argued that both pronouns are connected with the notion of a noun phrase involving a variable, as proposed by Nishiyama (2003), and are considered to be non-referential. It will then be suggested that a specificational sentence with it as its subject assigns the value for a variable, while a specificational sentence with that as its subject confirms the identity of the value which has already been assigned.

Key words

copular sentences, cleft constructions, pronouns, referential/non-referential distinction, noun phrases involving a variable

1 Introduction

We shall be concerned here with the referentiality of the pronouns it and that in the types of copular sentences shown in (1) and (2).

(1) **Who is the tallest girl in the class?—It/That is Molly.**  
(Mikkelsen 2005: 76)

(2) **It/That was John that I saw.**  
(Hedberg 2000: 892)

These types of sentences have been classified as specificational (or sometimes equative or identificational) sentences (cf. Higgins 1979, Declerck 1988, Nishiyama 2003, Mikkelsen 2005), together with the types of sentences exemplified in (3) and (4).

(3) **What John bought was a bottle of wine.**
(4) **The one who opened the door was John.**

It will be helpful to contrast specificational sentences with other basic types of copular sentences for a clear understanding of their semantic properties.