

Use of Nonstandard Reduplicative Copula *Is Is* by
Speakers of English in the Upper Midwest

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Abstract

The following linguistic research was conducted to ascertain if the syntactic reduplicative copula *is is* pattern is used by speakers in the Fargo, ND/Moorhead, MN area and if so, for what reasons. Research was conducted through guided conversations, recorded lectures, and written surveys. Guided conversation findings revealed that both males and females used the *is is* pattern. Furthermore, our findings supported those reported by Shapiro and Haley that the *is is* functions to create anticipation and emphasis on the speaker's main argument; our findings also matched David Tuggy's claim that the *is is* pattern fits into the category of focus formulas. A majority of our samples matched Elizabeth Coppock et al.'s claim that *is is* occurs in assertions as well as Deborah Tannen's proposition that conversational repetition can enhance comprehension and foreground the speaker's emphasis on the following utterance. Nearly all participants had heard the pattern and recalled that it had been used when someone was making a point or explanation. However, several participants assumed that the *is is* was used when speakers were stumbling over their words or hesitating, which differs from the ways in which it was primarily used in the guided conversations. Finally, the majority of participants said that they react neutrally to the *is is* or barely notice it, suggesting that the feature is not stigmatized.

Introduction

Purpose

The nonstandard grammatical construction *is is* (sometimes referred to in the literature as ISIS or 2B), considered a widespread trait of contemporary speech, consists of a noun phrase beginning with a sentence topic word like “thing,” “point,” or “fact,” then the word *is* twice and often the word *that*, and a finite clause (e.g., “The thing is is that he forgot to call her”). David Tuggy claims that this construction “exists in the grammatical systems of many speakers of American English” (720). Likewise, Michael Shapiro and Michael Haley document occurrences in political speech, interviews, and a soap opera (305) and Patrick McConvell reports that businesspeople, journalists, and high school and college students have used it even in prepared or scripted speech (qtd. in Coppock, Brenier, Staum, and Michaelis 2).

The research concerning the *is is* construction has been limited to studies which primarily investigate the function of the repetition. These studies seek to put the reduplicative copula in syntactical context and to explore the functions it provides for both speaker and listener. Functions reported by researchers include production, comprehension, connection, interaction (Tannen 576), and focus formulas (expressions meant to draw listeners’ attention to the forthcoming words) (Tuggy 724-26). Moreover, Shapiro and Haley argue that the *is is* creates “syntactic tension and semantic anticipation” (307) and Coppock et al. conclude that it is “licensed primarily in the introduction of assertions” (9). One researcher, Gisle Andersen, did examine instances of the “is is” construction both on the Internet and in the British National Corpus. While more complete than the other articles in that it examines data collected from a certain population, this article focuses on a geographic area other than and broader than what we wish to investigate and it does not provide the most recent understanding of “is is” use.

Because few researchers of the nonstandard reduplicative copula have reported research geared toward any specific populations, their reported data could be viewed as incomplete with regard to age, geographic location, educational background, and gender. Not only is the research incomplete, but scholarly research on this topic seems to have peaked in the 1990s and early 2000s. Andersen wrote in 2002: “the double copula construction has not been subject to much previous research and I have found no previous publications” (48), although he acknowledges Tuggy’s paper. Recent sources on the reduplicative copula include many informal language-related blog posts, but no formal academic studies.

Is the *is is* feature common to speakers of English in the upper Midwest United States in 2009, and does its usage vary significantly by age or gender? The purpose of the present study is to investigate the occurrence of the reduplicative copula *is is* and to determine if the usage of the repetition adheres to the hypotheses put forward by Tuggy, Tannen, Shapiro and Haley, and Coppock et al. in a specific population, and to provide an updated understanding of *is is* usage. This study seeks to add to the current scholarship by providing data about the frequency, function and perception of the reduplicative copula in male and female speakers in the upper Midwest. This study also compares

speakers' perceptions of why *is is* is used against speakers' actual usage in guided conversations. Furthermore, we hypothesized that the non-standard reduplicative copula *is is* emerges when speakers are making a point or assertion. As detailed in our results and discussion sections, our findings largely supported the original hypothesis. Nearly all the instances recorded for this study involved making assertions, with a few exceptions. However, the limited usage by the study participants does not allow for any definitive generalizations with regard to the demographics studied, beyond the conclusion that it is a widespread feature in this region.

Literature Review

The *is is* phenomenon is an example of linguistic reduplication, which, in general, can be defined as “a repetition of sound strings” (Kajitani 93). Reduplication occurs in many of the world's languages, with greatly differing purposes, from creating plurals in Indonesian to intensification in Turkish (Kajitani 95-99). Although reduplication occurs in English as well, according to Ghomeshi et al., “it has rarely been cited as a grammatical phenomenon of English” (308). Ghomeshi et al. list six types of reduplication in English, among them baby-talk (e.g., choo-choo), rhyme combinations (e.g., super-duper), and intensive reduplication (e.g., “You are sick sick sick!”) (309). While they describe these different functions of reduplication in English, they do not mention the reduplicative copula.

Linguistic research investigating the reduplicative copula is incomplete and primarily anecdotal in terms of specific demographic groups that use it. Tannen draws on the work of discourse analyst M.A.K. Halliday in investigating the connections between repetition, conversation and literary discourse, and reports that repetitions of all varieties, not just the reduplicative copula *is is*, function in *production*, *comprehension*, *connection*, and *interaction* of spoken English (576). These four functions provide an overarching *coherence* which assists both the speaker and audience participation in “sense-making” (Tannen 575). Halliday, in *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*, explains that cohesion, similar to coherence, is “establishing relations within the text” (288), and he states that repetition is one way to create this lexical continuity in a text (289). The functions of the specific type of repetition *is is* fall into Tannen's two categories of *comprehension* and *connection*. There are two specific advantages gained by speakers using the *is is* repetition. Comprehension is improved because repetition provides for a “semantically less dense discourse” (Tannen 582), thus allowing for the listener to absorb what has already been said, while preparing to listen closely to what follows. Connection between conversants is strengthened because the repetition evidences the speaker's emphasis, which intensifies both the repetition and the following utterance. Tannen concludes that repetition of all kinds is relatively automatic and pervasive in oral communication, and that such repetition serves to bolster interpersonal involvement in the on-going dialogue (601).

Tuggy, using the Cognitive Grammar model, examines the 2-B construction for schema (715), full and partial sanction (718), and 2-B prototype (720). Tuggy's findings reveal that, when separated from “stuttering, hesitation or other repetitive errors” (728), at the center of 2-B usage is the “Focus Formula (FF)” function (724). Tuggy defines FFs

as “expressions which are well established in the language (thus ‘formulas’), whose primary function is to focus attention on structures they are attached to” (724). Thus, the repeated *is* is less than fully verbal, and can disappear as a syntactical unit of meaning: “The thing *is is* is such a strongly entrenched, automatic unit, that it is easy for speakers to bring it out from their minds as a unit, even before they have figured out what they want to say next” (725). Among Tuggy’s conclusions is the sense that the 2-B has become established in the grammar of many speakers of American English. Although Tuggy asserts that the 2-B construction is “limited in its geographical distribution... [and that] there may be social differentiations,” he does not report specific 2-B data collected from guided conversations (714). However, he does report personal observations of the 2-B construction from men and women from diverse backgrounds, in ages ranging from childhood to 80 years. Tuggy also reports that many speakers who use the 2-B construction, when queried about using it, will consider it grammatically incorrect (774).

Andersen’s conclusions align with Tuggy’s; he claims that speakers use *is is* as a focusing construction to “add focus to the information-rich parts of the utterance, at the same time constituting apt strategies for buying processing time while planning the main content of the utterance” (43).

Shapiro and Haley also analyze the reduplicative copula’s function as a delay which “creates syntactic tension and semantic anticipation” (307). Their findings emphasize the dual role of nominalization and conjunction of the *that* which usually follows the *is is* construction, as in: “What I’ve said *is is* that...” (306). The *that* which follows the *is is* construction is actually the “expanded or multiword subordinate conjunction”: *is that* (311). This coincides with Tuggy’s analysis of the 2-B construction as a single syntactical, FF unit (724).

Coppock et al. in their 2006 conference presentation “ISIS: It’s Not Disfluent, But How Do We Know That?” argue that both Tuggy’s and Shapiro and Haley’s analyses are lacking because those analyses presuppose that the reduplicative copula is a grammatical construction of English, when in fact no studies had ruled out the possibility that it is merely a repetition disfluency. Therefore, Coppock et al. examined multiple instances of *is is* from the Fisher English Training Speech corpus and determined that the reduplicative copula is in fact a grammatical English construction rather than a widespread disfluency. They also found that the construction appeared “primarily in the introduction of assertions” (9).

Mark Liberman in the 2004 *Language Log* blog post titled “The thing *is is* people talk this way” argues against the reduplicative copula as a simple production error. Liberman asserts that instead of speaking incorrectly, those who use the reduplicative copula are “producing phrases that are grammatical—in terms of a non-standard grammar” (1). This is in line with the observations made by Tuggy, Tannen, and Shapiro and Haley, which point to the *is is* construction as a functional unit of speech. Although the reduplicative copula is not recognized as a written standard, and while some scholars such as Liberman consider it “stigmatized” even when spoken, it is nevertheless accepted and utilized by speakers of all educational backgrounds.

Although the *is is* pattern seems to have begun as a feature unique to speech, it is starting to appear more frequently in written contexts, in keeping with the linguistic principle that “speech is primary, writing is secondary and is always derivative of speech” (“What is Linguistics?”). In 1996, Tuggy predicted: “I have not observed it in

written communication, though I would be surprised not to do so soon” (714). In keeping with Tuggy’s prediction, Andersen, in 2002, has witnessed it in not only speech but also in writing, which he cites as evidence for the fact that “the repeated instance of *is is* is not as haphazard and random as spelling mistakes or hesitational features” (45). An Internet search engine yields many examples of the *is is* in writing, typically in the context of blog posts or comments. Example (1) comes from a science-related blog; (2) is from a comment in response to an online newspaper article; (3) is a comment from a discussion group in a social networking website.

(1) The key point is is that unless a thesis (or any publication) explicitly carries a license (or possibly a site meta-license) actually stating that it is BOAI compliant, then I cannot re-use it (Petermr).

(2) The thing is, is that while all us college students (go UW!) hate the tuition spikes, none of us want to give up the libraries, or the computer systems that need manning, or the nice gyms (Cavecche).

(3) Well the thing is with MSUM is that it is so small that most times they end up on the sidewalk of the street (Hertel).

Andersen notes that, as in example (2), “Internet users commonly insert a comma between the two tokens of *is* in the double copula construction,” possibly because “the writer uses the comma as a way of preventing the erroneous interpretation that the double copula is a spelling mistake” (56). In example (3), Hertel interrupts the reduplicative copula with the prepositional phrase “with MSUM,” showing one variation on the nonstandard reduplicative copula. According to Andersen, who found the most tokens of the reduplicative copula in chat rooms and discussion boards during his Internet research, “many types of Internet texts are produced on the fly by users who have little time to ponder over the use of particular ways of expression” (44). Perhaps instances of the *is is* are easier to find in computer-mediated contexts than in print because the generally more casual nature of internet communication is closer to speech than a published print work, although, as Andersen notes, the internet “represents the whole continuum from ‘virtually spoken’ to ‘virtually published.’” He also notes that this characteristic of the Internet makes it a useful corpus for researching new linguistic features (45).

Beyond the scholarly research surrounding this phenomenon, the public’s continuing interest in the reduplicative copula, while not overwhelming, is evident from several writers of linguistics-themed blogs who have commented on it in the past few years and especially in the past year. On the Language Log, Liberman states that, “though stigmatized, [it] is widely used by highly educated people” (3). It is interesting that while the *is is* pattern is nonstandard English, Liberman believes this reduplicative copula is often used by those who have a higher education.

However, other bloggers have come to quite different conclusions on the *is is* phenomenon. The Grammarphobia Blog hypothesizes that the double “is” is completely accidental and happens when people stutter, forget that they have already said the verb “is” and thus repeat “is” again (O’Conner and Kellerman) According to another blogger (Taradiddle), the *is is* copula is a part of careless speech, which seems to contradict the

notion that more highly educated people would use this form of dialect. Finally, one blogger who does not understand why the reduplicative copula is used states that, “It’s unnecessary. It’s annoying. And well, it’s just plain wrong!” (Suclarke). This strong criticism of the feature supports Liberman’s claim that this feature is stigmatized. H.P. Grice’s conversational principles provide some insight into why some people stigmatize the reduplicative copula. Grice offers explanations for the choices people make during conversation (quality, quantity, relation and manner). He suggests that participants in a conversation “expect your contribution to be neither more nor less than is required.” While he does not address the reduplicative copula specifically, his work does shed light on the reasons some people find the reduplicative copula to be annoying or unnecessary: it violates the maxim of “be brief” (125).

Speakers who stigmatize the reduplicative copula do not recognize the argumentative, declarative function of the reduplicative copula. However, the use of phrases to mark pragmatic information occurs in other languages as well. In Danish and Norwegian, certain adverbs “lend a special shade to the meaning of the whole sentence.” For example, the Norwegian adverb *vel* can add the connotation of “hesitant supposition” to a sentence (Marm and Sommerfelt 95). Other Norwegian adverbs can “express the speaker’s conviction concerning the truth of the statement, and also his emotional attitude toward it or the listener” (Haugen and Chapman 303). The reduplicative copula can exhibit this same quality of adding pragmatic information to a sentence; Andersen claims that the reduplicative copula can indicate “a personal belief or opinion of the speaker” (51).

Methods

This study used three methods—guided conversations, recorded lectures, and surveys—to gather data about the *is is* feature and demographic groups that commonly use it. The guided conversations were meant to elicit natural *is is* usage so that we could examine the contexts and purposes for which it was used. The surveys, which were given to the participants of the guided conversations, were meant to provide data about participants’ experiences, beliefs, and attitudes pertaining to the reduplicative copula. The recorded lectures provided us with several more examples of *is is* usage for further analysis of the grammatical contexts in which it appears.

Data Collection Techniques

Guided Conversations. The main research method was guided conversations, a data collection technique developed by sociolinguist William Labov. Goals of the guided conversation include prompting participants to use the speech styles natural to their communities, allowing participants to engage in conversation primarily among themselves and not the researchers, and allowing participants to raise topics that interest them (Labov 32-33).

In keeping with these objectives, guided conversations were used to elicit the reduplicative copula in natural conversation. Results could be affected if participants were constantly aware their speech was being observed, a phenomenon known as the “observer’s paradox,” identified by Labov. In order to lessen the effect of the observer’s

paradox, the guided conversation attempts to involve participants to the degree that they “forget” they are being recorded (Labov 30).

We conducted six guided conversations with approximately 4 participants each, totaling 23 participants. The researchers, through their education or occupation, knew all participants chosen for the study. Although participants were primarily chosen based on familiarity with the researchers, attempts were made to draw from a broad sample of demographic backgrounds. Seventeen of the participants were undergraduate students at North Dakota State University, and six of the participants were not currently students at NDSU but had been college educated. Participants ranged in age from the teens to the 50s. Fourteen males and nine females were recorded.

Participants in this study were not informed as to the particular language feature under consideration (in keeping with the guidelines of guided conversations); however, they were aware the study required recorded segments of natural conversation. The consent form used to inform participants of guided conversation parameters can be found in Appendix A.

Conversations and lectures were recorded with either a handheld voice recorder or a laptop computer with Apple’s Garage Band program, and instances of the reduplicative copula were transcribed. Guided conversations lasted from a half hour to an hour, and were held in locations where there was little chance of interruption.

The conversations began with the researchers posing questions that pertained to something appropriate for the group, for example, religion or their own studies. These topics were chosen to provide participants several opportunities to construct arguments and make points, the hypothesized contexts of *is is* use. In one guided conversation, participants were asked to describe their chemistry research in case the context of explaining complex topics would elicit *is is* use. In most of the guided conversations, participants were acquainted with each other, so they were able to carry the conversation with little prompting from the researchers.

Any tangents that seemed particularly controversial among the group members were followed up by further questions. The types of questions asked were similar to: “Which candidate do you support and why?” and “Do you feel that college students are sufficiently prepared to enter the work world? Why or why not?” For more sample questions for guided conversations, see Appendix B.

Surveys. The second method of data collection involved issuing an anonymous exit survey to the participants of the guided conversations. Participants were given a label consisting of a number and a letter in order to link their speech to their survey answers while keeping their identities anonymous. We requested basic demographic information (gender, age, hometown, level of education, occupation) and asked four simple, open-ended questions in order to understand to what people attribute the *is is* construction. Questions on the survey asked whether or not participants had heard the *is is* feature used and under what circumstances, why they thought people used it, and how they reacted when they heard it. These questions were directed at determining attitudes about the reduplicative copula among college students. Questions were also formulated to compare subjects’ self-reported results with data from the guided conversations. A copy of the questionnaire can be found in Appendix C.

Recorded Lectures. The final method of data collection came from four recorded lectures of a professor of religion and history at North Dakota State University.

The professor whose lectures were recorded was chosen on the basis of his frequent use of the nonstandard reduplicative copula. This method was chosen to provide the researchers with more instances of the reduplicative copula in context. Approximately three hours' worth of speech was recorded. As with the guided conversation participants, the professor was aware that a certain verbal feature was being observed, but was not aware of what it was. At the conclusion of the recording, the professor was given the same survey as the guided conversation participants and his answers are included in the survey results.

Analytical Methods

By examining the context of each repeated *is*, we distinguished the nonstandard reduplicative copula from forms which are considered correct according to prescriptive grammar and from stuttering or verbal hesitation. For example, the following sentence exemplifies a usage of the reduplicative copula that aligns with the rules of prescriptive grammar: "What you think God *is is* the value structure that forms and shapes your world." In this case, the clause "What you think God is" makes up the complete subject and the second "is" functions as the main verb. We also ignored instances of the repeated *is* that occurred as a result of stuttering. For example, one speaker uttered, "How do we know whether... in the Catholic church... *is is* open to modern day revelation, um, and and that's handled through the Vatican." The speaker stops and restarts his sentence, inserts the filler word "um," and repeats the word "and," suggesting hesitancy. Additionally, the *is is* here does not follow the typical form of the nonstandard reduplicative copula, in which the copula is followed by a "that"-clause.

In assessing whether our recorded examples of *is is* use functioned in making an assertion as our hypothesis predicted, we used Coppock et al.'s definition that in the assertive category, "the *is is* sequence precedes a declarative clause" (5), while "[a]uthors never present *ISIS* in predicative sentences (e.g., "*John is (is) happy*") (4). Similarly, Princeton University's WordNet Database offers a more specific definition of assertion as "a declaration that is made emphatically (as if no supporting evidence were necessary)" ("Assertion"). The part of the definition most meaningful for our analysis is the word "emphatically"—a characteristic displayed in the following example from our data: "The point of the matter *is is* that God loves us because it's our nature to love—very powerful stuff." Here, the addition of "very powerful stuff" to the end of the declaration implies that the speaker considers his point to be important.

Results

In four out of six guided conversations and in four of four recorded lectures, the nonstandard reduplicative copula was heard. We found a total of 13 instances of the nonstandard *is is*: five in our guided conversations and eight from recorded lectures. In five of the instances, speakers used no "that" following the *is is*. To see all examples of the reduplicative copula in context, see Appendix D. Two women and four men used it, all of whom currently live in the Fargo, ND/Moorhead, MN region. It was heard in

subjects as diverse as a 21-year old man, a 23-year old woman, a 45-year old woman, and a 79-year old man.

The survey answers also yielded interesting results to supplement our observations during the guided conversations. The questions, and a summary of the answers received from the participants, are as follows:

1) Have you heard anyone use the “is, is” language feature before? If so, describe the context in which you have heard it.

Only 10% of people surveyed responded with never having heard or taken notice of *is is* before. Out of the majority that did recognize it, 5% didn’t remember the situation, 10% felt it was used to fill silence while thinking (e.g., “I think people use the repeated words as a sort of filler”), and 60% remembered it being used to explain an idea, often in a debate or argument setting. For example: “The person/people were arguing about something that they felt very strongly about—I myself do it often when I am trying to make a point.” Table 1 shows a summary of the responses, with all percentages rounded to the nearest whole percent.

<u>Percent of responses</u>	<u>Response</u>	<u>Example quote</u>
10	No	
20	Yes, but don’t remember situation	
10	Yes, as filler	I think people use the repeated words as a sort of filler
60	Yes, argument situation	“The person/people were arguing about something that they felt strongly about”

Table 1: Summary of Answers to Question 1

2) Are you aware of yourself ever using this feature of language? Do you use the feature purposely or unconsciously?

Fourteen percent of people responded that they had not consciously used the construction and 40% responded that they had, but were unaware of the situation or if it was intentional or not.

Out of participants who were conscious of the construction, 19% responded that they remember using it when they were engaged in conversation and needed time to think or had lost track of their words and used it to get back on track, for example, “I usually don’t aim to use it, but if I end up down a word choice path and get lost, it will become part of my words” and “Maybe if I pause too long.”

Fourteen percent of the participants have used it, then realized that it was incorrect after having said it, as shown by the response “I only realize it in situations when I know I shouldn’t – like interviews.”

Lastly, 14% claimed to have used it purposefully in an attempt to explain something: “I used it on purpose to explain why a certain event occurred and why the event occurred at all.” Table 2 summarizes the responses.

<u>Percent of responses</u>	<u>Response</u>	<u>Example quote</u>
14	No	
40	Yes, but unsure of situation	
19	Yes, needed time to think	“Maybe if I pause too long”
14	Yes, then realized it was wrong	“I only realize it in situations when I know I shouldn’t – like interviews”
14	Yes, purposefully	“I used it on purpose to explain what a certain event occurred...”

Table 2: Summary of Answers to Question 2

3. Why do people use the *is is* construction?

As shown in Table 3, 4% didn’t know while 19% responded that the speaker likely picked it up after hearing someone else use it, for example: “It is common here...” and “Creates a statement people have heard in the same context before.” One attributed it to “lazy speech.”

Four percent of surveys showed the opinion that the feature occurred when in explanation, as in, “I could see people using the ‘is is’ feature of language when they are in deep discussion making many comments in a short amount of time.”

Four percent felt that “...it’s used more as a unit of emphasis.”

Half of respondents thought that the *is is* was simply verbal filler that allows the speaker to reorganize their thoughts as in, “Maybe they get stuck on their sentences like I do” and “Perhaps they use it to stall their thought process when they are trying to get their point across, such as the word, ‘um.’”

<u>Percent of responses</u>	<u>Response</u>	<u>Example quote</u>
4	I don’t know	
19	Heard it before and adopted it	“It is common here...”
8	Other	“Lazy speech”
14	For explanation	“...in deep discussion...”
4	To draw attention	“...a unit of emphasis...”
50	Filler	“Perhaps they use it to stall their thought process...”

Table 3: Summary of Answers to Question 3

4) How do you react when you hear it?

As shown in Table 4, 75% of respondents react neutrally to the *is is*, shown by responses such as, “It’s common enough that I accept it” and “I notice it but ignore it.”

Only one person commented negatively with “I will probably correct myself every time I do it from now because it sounds silly” and one person viewed it in a positive light: “I would take that person seriously because it makes it feel like they are trying to express something important and they want their attention.”

<u>Percent of responses</u>	<u>Response</u>	<u>Example quote</u>
75	Neutral	“It’s common enough that I accept it.”
8	Negative	“...it sounds silly.”
8	Positive	“I would take that person seriously...”

Table 4: Summary of Answers to Question 4

Discussion

We compared our collected data against these theories surrounding the subject: Shapiro and Haley’s idea of syntactic tension, Tuggy’s Focus Formula (FF) theory, Tannen’s idea of repetition serving to increase comprehension within group discourse, and Coppock et al.’s conclusion that the *is is* happens when making assertions. For the most part, our recorded instances followed these grammatical frameworks; however, there were some notable exceptions. This varied usage serves as a reminder that, while there has been some research about the reduplicative copula, understanding its use remains uncertain. We also explored the incongruities between our subjects’ written responses to the survey questions regarding the *is is* feature, and the ways in which they actually used it in the guided conversations. Finally, we identify areas where further research is needed.

Syntactic Tension

Shapiro and Haley argue that the *is is* feature serves as a delay which “creates syntactic tension and semantic anticipation (306). They also explain its relationship with the *is that* grammatical feature which they call an “expanded or multiword subordinate conjunction” (311). This delay is not defined by pauses in speech, but by the speakers’ waiting to present the point until the end of the sentence: “since it is precisely the targeted argument that finally relieves the tension and fulfills this anticipation, it gets strong climactic emphasis” (307). This explanation is in line with Tuggy’s description of focusing constructions, which “often achieve their purpose by lengthening a relatively short construction to which the speaker wishes to direct attention. The slight lengthening produced by a 2-B in comparison with a 1-B, and the repetition of the word *is*, may be intended to focus attention more strongly on what follows” (739). Example (1) fits this hypothesis.

(1) “He votes more liberal... but *I feel like the reason is is I think that* Obama unifies the country more than Hillary does.”

Here, the speaker punctuates his argument with qualifiers like “I feel like” and “I think that.” Although the insertion of qualifiers could be interpreted as lack of confidence, they do serve to draw out the first clause, perhaps placing even more emphasis on the targeted argument in keeping with Shapiro and Haley’s explanation of “delay of closure and end focus on a targeted argument” (310).

Focus Formula

Tuggy argues that constructions like the “The thing is is that” act as a “focus formula” or an “expression which [is] well established in the language, whose primary function is to focus attention on structures they are attached to” (724). Among other examples of focus formulas Tuggy lists are *it seems to me (that)*, *listen to this*, and *in fact*. He says that a construction with the reduplicative copula is “about as pure an FF as there is: its only function is to focus attention on the following clause” (725). While Shapiro and Haley describe a syntactic tension or delay for emphasis, Tuggy describes a similar function of language which “focuses attention on a following clausal structure” (724).

Our examples of the *is is* patterns were preceded by such words as *reason*, *part*, *question*, *thing*, and *point*. Each of these words signals that a particular singular thought is to follow. In this sense, they all serve as focus formulas in that they draw attention to the following point. Example (2) shows *is is* used as a focus formula.

(2) Roman Catholics view that Eucharist is a gift – but the Pietists will say that you can go to Eucharist too much; they don’t look at the church as a God given thing. *Still, the point of the matter is is that* for the whole 1600 years up till the point of Pietism it has been the focal point of religion – trying to help people become Christian who don’t even go to church.

Here, the speaker explains a specific example (“the Pietists will say that you can go to Eucharist too much; they don’t look at the church as a God given thing”), then alerts the listener to the overall significance of that example (“it has been the focal point of religion”) by preceding it with the focus formula “the point of the matter is is that.”

Comprehension

While syntactic emphasis is at the core of both Shapiro and Haley’s and Tuggy’s explanations, Tannen argues that the *is is* function falls under a specific type of repetition that improves comprehension in a conversation by providing a “semantically less dense discourse” that eases the listener’s transition between what has been said and what is to come (575). Example (3) represents a clear and successful usage.

(3) “...so...I just don’t know, maybe they would but...I just don’t know if they’d ever go through with any of that, *and part of it is is the people* of the United States right now, the large majority of them want to be out. And if I’m a politician and I can tell people that we’ll be out in 24 months, I will.”

The speaker could have eliminated “and part of it is is,” but that construction seems to be used consciously to clarify the statement and, in keeping with Tannen’s theory, lengthen the discourse into something less dense to ease the listener into the next phrase.

Our data showed that, though the feature may be used as a simplifying feature, it does not always translate into a more easily understandable phrase. For instance, in example (4), the speaker does make the utterance less dense in accordance with Tannen’s

theory of comprehension, but fails to ease the listener into the final phrase, because he has not fully formulated it. Thus, this statement does not exemplify a successful use of repetition to enhance the listener's comprehension.

(4) "Modern medicine is there for a reason, our bodies can't fix it...*so the point is is that...* cognizance won't have...cognizance...knowledge it just won't have..."

The speaker tries to use the *is is* feature to lead up to a clear point, but is not able to gather his thoughts quickly enough to sustain the conversation. In this respect, the reduplicative copula serves the purpose of not only the syntactic tension that Shapiro and Haley describe, but also a delay in which the speaker endeavors to clarify his thoughts, though it was executed unsuccessfully in this case.

Assertion

Although Coppock et al.'s study was never published, we did want to test the validity of their conclusion that the reduplicative copula is "licensed primarily in the introduction of assertions," (9), which they define as "a declarative clause" (5). Example (5) shows an *is is* used preceding a declaration.

(5) What sticks out in my mind is is you go to a one world currency, you go to a one world religion.

The speaker makes an authoritative declaration in if-then form ("[If] you go to a one world currency, [then] you go to a one world religion"). The use of the reduplicative copula for emphasis seems also to coincide with Tuggy's and Shapiro and Haley's theories but the construction is unique in that, in place of a word like "point" or "thing," the speaker uses "What sticks out in my mind."

Example (6) does not match Coppock et al.'s claim that the *is is* occurs prior to declarative clauses. They state that "authors never present *ISIS* in predicative sentences (e.g. John is (is) happy)" (4), though example (6) appears to be an exception to this rule.

(6) What turned the bishop on *is is* the coming of indulgences.

The *is is* functions like a typical linking verb, with "the coming of indulgences" renaming "What turned the bishop on." In this case, the *is is* was uttered fluently, suggesting that it was not a repetition error. The speaker may be so familiar with using the reduplicative copula in assertive contexts that it seemed acceptable to transfer the usage to a much less common construction.

Based on our data, the *is is* often preceded not simply declarations but declarations meant to be persuasive. The speakers' choices of sentence topic words like "point" and variations on that such as "what sticks out in my mind" suggest a rhetorical strategy of positioning themselves within an argument and drawing attention to their view. An example of this persuasive type of assertion occurs when a speaker defends her view against another speaker who asks, "Well, first of all, why won't [a one-world

currency] benefit the United States?” The speaker responds with “What sticks out in my mind *is is* you go to a one world currency; you go to a one world religion.” Although this particular example occurred in the context of a dialogue, the samples from the recorded lectures show that use of the *is is* is not limited to dialogue.

Of all the theories, Tuggy’s focus formula seemed to be the most applicable to our data, followed by Shapiro and Haley’s notion of syntactic tension. Although Tannen’s explanation for the use of the *is is* for comprehension and Coppock et al.’s claim regarding its use in assertive contexts are also largely applicable, those ideas seem more limited in accounting for reasons why speakers use the *is is*.

Responses to Exit Surveys

We also asked subjects themselves to explain their understanding of the *is is* feature. Just as the examples we gathered fit different uses and theories, so too did the responses to the written survey illustrate a variety of ideas that did not always concur with the data gathered in the guided conversations.

One of the most noticeable differences occurred when the subjects were asked to describe the context in which they had heard the *is is* feature before. When asked where they heard the usage, 60% of participants recalled hearing it in an argument or debate setting, yet when asked why they thought it was used, only 14% said it was for the purpose of explanation. Half of respondents felt that the real reason for the use was for filler, but this notion of the *is is* feature as a place filler does not comply with the sense of purpose that is found in the instances it was used in the guided conversations. Several speakers (especially in examples 2, 3, 4, 5, and 7) appeared to use the reduplicative copula with the purpose of alerting the listener to a clear point. The hesitation or error that a place filler implies does not account for the sense-making pattern that appears in our gathered examples. Likewise, Tuggy states that “hesitation and especially stuttering are relatively minor factors in the sanction of the 2-B... however, it is worth noting that they are frequently offered as hypotheses by culprits or witnesses trying to explain an instance, erroneous to them, of a 2-B” (729). This could explain why many of our participants responded in this way.

All but two of our respondents felt impartial toward the *is is* usage. With the only negative comment being the mild evaluation that it “sounds silly,” we may assume that, contradictory to Liberman’s claim that it is stigmatized, there is little to no stigma against the usage, at least in this region. In fact, one person responded positively with “I would pay attention to that person...” The overall neutral attitude towards the nonstandard reduplicative copula seems to be largely due to increased acceptance, which we can see from comments like “It’s common here...” and “I just ignore it.” As people become less likely to notice it, the usage may spread further.

We found usage from people in their early twenties to a 79-year old professor; however, the wide variety of responses indicates that the subjects were aware of this feature, whether they noticed it in their own speech or not. This finding coincides with Tuggy’s hypothesis that this feature of language transcends age, gender, and regional gaps.

Further Areas of Research

While this study illuminated certain aspects of the reduplicative copula *is is*, it also raised new questions to be answered in future research. Our conversations were all informal to semi-formal (based on how well participants knew each other), and further research would be needed to determine if the *is is* feature appears in more formal, structured conversations. Tuggy observes that “[the] 2-B tends to be avoided in carefully planned speech” (714); therefore, if the subjects are given a topic ahead of time and asked to prepare statements in advance, would the *is is* feature be as prevalent as in a spontaneous conversation? Further research could focus on less frequent variations on the *is is*, including *is was* and *was is*. In addition, all the subjects in this study were college educated and lived in the same region. A wider pool of subjects may shed light on the differences between the perception and use of this feature of language. Such further study would help to explain the inherent differences between written and spoken grammar.

This study has supported Andersen’s conclusion that the reduplicative copula “appears to be spreading in several dimensions, from the spoken language to the written language of the Internet, from American English more generally, and from informal to (more) formal contexts” (57). Tuggy wrote that he was interested to see this “snapshot of an erroneous construction in the process of achieving grammaticality” (743). As one blogger has reported, even President George W. Bush and President Barack Obama have used this feature (Suclarke). This reminds us that even those we consider to be prominent and highly educated use nonstandard features in their speech. Our results support the hypothesis that the reduplicative copula is indeed in the process of becoming more common and is meanwhile becoming more widely accepted by speakers of English.

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Appendix A

Consent Form

NDSU Research Study: A Study of Unique Language Variations

To Whom it May Concern:

We are a research group at North Dakota State University consisting of a graduate student, Abigail Gaugert, and two undergraduate students, Derek Pinnick and Jessica Aasen. We are conducting a research project to investigate patterns of speech in this region. Results of this study will help us learn more about the origins and makeup of dialects and varieties of language use.

You are invited to participate in this research project. Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you may decline or withdraw from participation at any time, without penalty. If you decide to participate, please sign and return this form to the research member who invited you to join.

Our project requires that we record segments of natural conversations. Should you choose to take part in our study, you and a group of up to 8 other participants will take part in a conversation in the presence of one of our research teams. This conversation will be recorded, and the data analyzed for specific language patterns.

Although you will be identified in the information we collect, your identity will not be revealed in the research results, and your responses will remain confidential.

If you have any questions about this project, please e-mail Abigail Gaugert at Abigail.gaugert@ndsu.edu. You may also e-mail our advisor Dr. Bruce Maylath at bruce.maylath@ndsu.edu. If you have questions about the rights of human participants in research, or want to report a problem, contact the NDSU IRB office, 701-231-8908, or ndsu.irb@ndsu.edu

Thank you for your participation in this research. If you wish to receive a copy of the report, you may supply us with your email address at the conclusion of the conversation and we will be happy to forward you a copy of our final analysis.

If you agree to participate, please sign below.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Appendix B

Guided Conversation Questions

(These represent examples of questions we will ask to begin a conversation)

Questions for Students:

1. Do you think that you were adequately prepared for college coming out of high school?
2. Are you satisfied with the academic standards imposed at NDSU?
3. Do you think the Gen. Y stereotype is applicable to you?

Questions for Non-Students:

1. Has President Obama responded appropriately to the economic crisis?
2. Should we move to a one-world currency?
3. Have humans actually land on the moon?

Appendix C

Exit Questionnaire

1. Have you ever heard anyone use the “is, is” language feature before? If so, what was the context(s) in which person was speaking? Do you remember who used it and where?

2. Are you aware of yourself ever using this feature of language? If so, did you do it on purpose? What was the context(s) in which you used it?

3. Why do you think people use the *is is* language feature?

4. What is your reaction when you hear it used?

Demographic information

Gender:

Age/Level of education:

Job:

Ethnicity:

Hometown/ Other states you have lived in:

Years lived in Fargo:

Appendix D

Recorded Instances of the Nonstandard Reduplicative Copula

Speaker	Instance of <i>is is</i> in context
1D	<p>Male speaker: "...he's probably more, like, mentally stable than she is, so, if nothing else, at least maybe he can hold it together for their relationship, but I don't know. I just think it's gonna get really, really ugly when it starts to crumble."</p> <p>Female speaker: "<i>That's the thing is, you know, is</i>, once it starts to go, I think it will go in a big way. They're both consenting adults, I guess."</p>
3A	<p>Male speaker: Well, first of all, why won't it benefit the United States?</p> <p>Female speaker: <i>What sticks out in my mind is is</i> you go to a one world currency; you go to a one world religion. You start following the prophecies of the Bible, honestly. I wouldn't like that idea at all.</p>
5B	<p>Female speaker: "I personally think that people have way more mental capability than we're exercising."</p> <p>Male speaker: "There's no reason, there's no incentive to care without knowing you have to care, I mean it's the same thing, I have this argument all the time when people aren't taking care of themselves just medically. Modern medicine is there for a reason, our bodies can't fix it...<i>so the point is is that</i> cognizance won't have...cognizance...knowledge it just won't have..." [fades away until another subject starts talking]</p>
5C	<p>Male speaker: "I guess if John McCain were out of the picture and I had to pick between Hillary and Obama, I'd pick Obama right now. I think I'm less confident in that recently but I still think I'd pick Obama, which is funny 'cause Obama is more liberal, he votes more liberal but <i>I feel like the reason is is I think that</i> Obama unifies the country more than Hillary does."</p>
6A	<p>Male Speaker: "When the democrats took over the house in two years ago when that election went through they could've stopped the war then. They all said they would; they're like, "We're gonna get in and stop the war"... We're still there; in fact they actually voted for the surge to increase money so we could send more troops over, and they fund the war so...I just don't know, maybe they would but...I just don't know if they'd ever go through with any of that, <i>and part of it is is</i>... the people of the United States right now, the large majority of them want to be out. And if I'm a politician and I can tell people that we'll be out in 24 months, I will."</p>

7	Nobody tells me what I have to do to please God because I am marching to the beat of a different drum. <i>The point of the matter is is that</i> God loves us because it's our nature to love – very powerful stuff. We are creating the culture of the Western world for the next 500 years—part of the world in which we live—if we lived 500-600 years ago, we wouldn't know anything about this stuff.
7	The requirement of the Council of Trent was to make sure that a Bishop resided in the diocese. <i>What turned the bishop on is is</i> the coming of indulgences. Bishop Albrecht also wanted to buy the diocese.
7	<i>The question is is</i> where does he get an idea like that? He gets it from studying the Old Testament. It was the Priests of Jerusalem who determined the policy.
7	You can find warrants for both infant and adult baptism in the New Testament. <i>What Luther says is is that</i> there's this infant in baptism...
7	Church colleges in our region have choirs that would put other choirs in the country to shame because it is so Pietistic. <i>The point of the matter is is that</i> tradition is locked in that tradition of Pietism. Pietists believed it was insufficient to just go to church and spend the rest of the week doing your thing.
7	Roman Catholics view that Eucharist is a gift – but the Pietists will say that you can go to Eucharist too much – they don't look at the church as a God given thing. <i>Still, the point of the matter is is that</i> for the whole 1600 years up till the point of Pietism it has been the focal point of religion – trying to help people become Christian who don't even go to church.
7	It is very important to understand that every form of separation is a form of death – the theme of death often comes into romantic literature. <i>The point of the matter is is that</i> the things that we love can drive us to death.
7	You only know somebody through love. – ex. Writing a recommendation for graduate school – if a teacher knows a student much better, than he can't be objective about the student; but if you don't a student, <i>the point of the matter is is that</i> I have to know you, I have to know where you're going, I want to know what shapes you. I know you best when I love you.