Epistemic *would*, clefts, and functional compositionality

In this paper, we examine the behavior of three constructions that we will argue are functionally complex, in that the functional properties of each are not associated with the construction as a whole, but are due to an interaction of the functions of its components. The constructions in question are *that*-clefts, equatives with epistemic *would* and demonstrative subjects, and what Hedberg (2000) has called truncated clefts. These constructions share a complex of basic properties, including a demonstrative subject, an equative copula, and the presence of a contextually salient open proposition (Prince 1986) for which the postcopular constituent instantiates the focus. We show that when these properties co-occur, they give rise to an interpretation in which the speaker uses the demonstrative to refer to the variable in the open proposition (OP), as illustrated in (1):

(1)   A (holding cup): Whose is this?
          B: *That would be my son.* My youngest son, to be exact.

Here, A's question gives rise to the OP 'This cup belongs to X', and the demonstrative in *That would be my son* is used to refer to this variable. This ability to use a demonstrative subject to refer to the OP variable predicts a number of interesting properties, including (a) an ambiguity between the variable-referent reading and a reading on which the demonstrative is used to refer to some salient discourse entity; (b) apparent number disagreements, in particular a singular demonstrative (agreeing with the variable) in a context where the postcopular NP is plural; and (c) apparent tense disagreements, in particular a present-tense verb complex (due to the present-time instantiation of the variable) in reference to a past-time event. All of these properties are exhibited by each of the three constructions listed above. For example, as observed by Ward, Birner, & Kaplan (2003), equatives with epistemic *would* such as those in (2) are ambiguous:

(2)   A: I'm looking for the name of a magician. He works in Hawaii and just finished a lecture tour in the
             US and Canada. One of the routine in his lecture included a display of a regular size penny, then
             using a magnifying glass the penny would get bigger and bigger up to 3 inches. Who is this
             magician?
          B: *That would be Carl Andrews,* and the trick you are referring to is Gregory Wilson's Dishonest Abe.
             Mr. Andrews's handling is streamlined for table-hopping.

Here, *that* may be be used to refer either to the variable in the OP 'this magician is X,' with the clause then providing the identity of X, or to the referent of the NP *this magician,* with the clause then providing the magician's identity.

The same ambiguity is found with clefts (3a) and with so-called truncated clefts (3b):

(3)   a. A: Who's the person who got 100% on the Spanish test?
               B: *That's Sally that got 100%.* Everyone else failed it.

          b. A: What's the state that grows the most corn?
               B*: That's Iowa.*

In (3a) *that* can be used to refer either to the previously-evoked individual or to the variable in the OP 'The person who got 100% on the Spanish test is X.' In (3b), similarly, the demonstrative *that* can be used to refer either to the state in question or to the variable in the OP 'The state that grows the most corn is X.'

Likewise, all three constructions permit a singular demonstrative and copula in the context of a plural postcopular NP:

(4)   a. One of the best mulches is composted leaves, so good for the garden, the flower bed, and a
               wonderful amendment to the soil. Also, here's hoping you won't burn your leaves, wasting them,
               despite the fact that burning them is illegal in most Illinois counties – *that would be the populated
               ones,* like Cook, DuPage, Lake, e.g.

          b. A: Is it true that the President and the CEO are resigning?
               B: No, *that's the top three members of the Board of Directors* that are resigning.

    c. A: Didn't you say your journal articles were going to be reviewed in *Newsweek*?
         B: No, *that's my books.* The media don't care about my journal articles.

In each, the only apparent antecedent for the demonstrative *that* is a plural NP. But a plural antecedent for a singular anaphor should be ungrammatical, as in other cases of number mismatch between demonstrative *that* and its antecedent:

(5)   Burning leaves is illegal in most Illinois counties – **That's the populated ones*, like Cook, DuPage, Lake, e.g.

The reason the examples in (4) don't suffer a similar ungrammaticality is that the demonstrative here is used to refer not to the plural NP, but rather to the (singular) variable in the OP. For example, associated with the italicized utterance in (4a) is the OP 'the Illinois counties in which burning leaves is illegal are X', where X is some set of Illinois counties.

Finally, all three constructions permit a present-tense copula in reference to a past-time event:

(6)   a. A: Do you remember a rainy afternoon we spent together? My father had driven your mother and David into town for a music lesson.
         B: How old was he?
         A: I don't know... Fourteen, fifteen.
         B: *That would be the oboe.* (Cf. That would have been the oboe.)

       b. A: When was this roof put on?
         B: Let's see; *that's 1946 that this roof was put on.* (Cf. That would have been 1946 that this roof was put on.)

       c. A: Can you tell me when the new roof was put on?
         B: Let's see… *that's 1946.* (Cf. That would have been 1946.)

Because the demonstrative is used here to refer to the OP variable, each of the italicized clauses in (6) makes an assertion about the present instantiation of the variable; hence, *have*, indicating past time reference (as in *That would have been…*), is not required.

The properties that we have shown to be associated with these three constructions can be explained by positing that the functional constraints on each of the three constructions are built up from the complex of the individual constraints on the demonstrative, the equative, and the open proposition. The salience of the OP guarantees that the variable will be sufficiently salient for demonstrative reference, and the equative then equates this variable with its postcopular instantiation. Thus, each construction's observed complex of properties is the natural result of combining an OP with a demonstrative subject and equative syntax. These results suggest that not all functional properties are assigned on a construction-by-construction basis, but rather that languages contain a range of functionally compositional constructions, with each possessing a complex set of discourse-functional properties built up in a predictable way from the functions of the individual constructions' components.

References

Hedberg, N. 2000. The referential status of clefts. *Language* 76.891-920.

Prince, E.F. 1986. On the syntactic marking of presupposed open propositions. In Farley, A., P. Farley, & K.-E. McCullough, eds., *Papers from the Parasession on Pragmatics and Grammatical Theory*, *22nd Meeting of the Chicago Linguistic Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. pp. 208-222.

Ward, G., B. Birner, & J. Kaplan. 2003. A pragmatic analysis of the epistemic *would* construction in English. In Facchineti, R., M. Krug, & F. Palmer, eds., *Modality in Contemporary English*. Mouton de Gruyter, pp. 71-80.