ISIS: It's not a disfluency, but how do we know that?

The double-*is* construction (ISIS) is an innovative pattern of spoken English that contains two contiguous finite forms of the copula, neither of which is apparently subordinate to the other:

(1) but the thing {**IS IS**} that that's the only trick it knows
(Fisher English corpus, 03_03193-A-329_62)

Two conflicting approaches to the analysis of ISIS appear in the literature. Massam (1999) attempts to assimilate ISIS to classical phrase-structure rules by analyzing it as a variant of the equative Pseudocleft pattern; others, including McConvell (1988), Tuggy (1996), Zwicky (2002) and Brenier & Michaelis (2005), analyze ISIS as a syntactic amalgam. What the two approaches have in common is the assumption that ISIS is the speaker's target, rather than a speech error.

But to our knowledge no analysis of ISIS thus far has succeeded in ruling out an alternative account of copula doubling—one in which the repeated copulas constitute a disfluency. As a function word immediately preceding a complex constituent (a clause), the word *be* is in fact a prime candidate for repetition as a disfluency in this construction. Is ISIS a conventional construction of English or merely a common disfluency? We investigated this question using a database of 800 repeated-copula tokens from the Fisher English telephone speech corpus. After tagging each repeated-copula token according to its lexico-syntactic type, including its subject headword (e.g., *thing*, *problem*) and the constituent following the copulas (e.g., clause), we extracted a number of phonetic and phonological features for each token. We then compared the value of these features for copulas in constructions bearing the typical syntactic properties of ISIS (preceding a clause, having *thing* or *problem* as subject headword) to those of repeated-copula tokens in non-ISIS syntactic environments.

We found that copula-doublings in ISIS environments differ from disfluencies in several crucial respects. In disfluencies, as Shriberg (1999) shows, the pitch contour of the reparandum (*be1* for us) is similar to that of the repair (*be2*). In the ISIS environment, in contrast, we find that *be1* is significantly higher in pitch than *be2*. In general, *be1* is more prominent than *be2* in the ISIS environment, exhibiting greater intensity, more voicing, and less vowel reduction. This prominence asymmetry is reversed among repeated-copula tokens in the non-ISIS environment, where *be2* tends to be more prominent than *be1*. Higher prominence on *be2* is the expected pattern if *be2* is a repair and *be1* is a reparandum (Levelt and Cutler 1983).

Moreover, the overall duration of both *be1* and *be2* tends to be shorter in the ISIS environment, and there are fewer and shorter pauses between *be1* and *be2*. These facts argue against any kind of disfluency analysis of ISIS, even one which treats it as a planned disfluency that signals an upcoming delay in speaking (Clark & Wasow 1998). The phonetic properties of repeated copula tokens in prototypical ISIS environments are so different from those of disfluencies that we conclude that ISIS is indeed a construction of spoken English.