

**A Pragmatic Analysis of a Focus-Indicating Modal:  
That would be *would***

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In this talk (representing collaborative work), I analyze and compare two copular constructions of English, both with a demonstrative pronoun occurring in subject position: epistemic *would* equatives and *that*-equatives (Birner, Kaplan, and Ward 2007; Hedberg 2000; Heller & Wolter 2008; Mikkelsen 2007; *inter alia*), as illustrated in (1)a-b, respectively:

- (1)a. Ohio State puts its undefeated season on the line in another road game, but it's against a team that could very well be worse than Indiana. *That would be Purdue.*  
[[bleacherreport.com](http://bleacherreport.com)]
- b. G: Who's that up there at the podium?  
C: *That's our guest speaker.*  
[G.W. and C.L. in conversation]

Drawing upon a large corpus of naturally-occurring data, I show that the modal in an epistemic *would* equative serves to mark the FOCUS of the utterance, thus requiring that an OPEN PROPOSITION (in the sense of Prince 1986) be contextually salient, with the post-copular constituent serving as the instantiation of the variable of that open proposition (OP). The information structure of the epistemic *would* construction accounts for the humorous and/or ironic tone often associated with its use. The *that*-equative construction, on the other hand, is more constrained. It may also be used to instantiate an OP; however, for *that*-equatives, unlike epistemic *would* equatives, such a possibility is determined contextually rather than morpho-syntactically.

As for the interpretation of the two constructions, I present the results of a series of empirical studies that show that use of an epistemic *would* equative conveys a high degree of speaker commitment to the truth of the proposition expressed. Indeed, far from being a marker of tentativeness as has been claimed (Palmer 1990, Perkins 1983), our results suggest that use of epistemic *would* conveys an even higher degree of speaker certainty than does use of a *that*-equative.