Reexamining Higgins' taxonomy: a split in the Identificational class

Based on a variety of tests, Higgins (1979) distinguishes four kinds of copular clauses:

(1) Susan is tall. **[Predicational]**

(2) The woman standing by the door is Susan. **[Specificational]**

(3) a. That is Susan. **[Identificational]**
b. That woman is Susan.

(4) She is Susan. **[Identity clause]**

Later work, pioneered by Williams (1983) and Partee (1986), seeks to explain this taxonomy in terms of the semantics of the expressions flanking the copula. Thus Geist (2002) and Mikkelsen (2002) argue that the subject denotes an individual in (1) and (4), but a property in (2). The present paper extends this project to the lesser-studied Identificational class in (3). I argue that this class is not semantically uniform: while *that woman* in (3b) denotes an individual, *that* in (3a) denotes some contextually salient property (e.g. standing by the door), which is then applied to the individual denoted by the post-copular phrase.

If *that* were an individual-level demonstrative in (3a), it would presumably refer to the person Susan, just like *that woman* refers to Susan in (3b). However, unlike *that woman*, *that* is unable to refer to a human. First, *that* does not combine with predicates defined only for humans: *That woman voted*, but **That voted.* Second, *That is from Sweden*, unlike *That woman is from Sweden*, cannot express that a person is from Sweden. Third, tag questions show that anaphoric reference to *that* is made with the neuter pronoun *it*, and not *she*: *That is Susan, isn't it/*she?* vs. *That woman is Susan, isn't *it/she?* (Higgins 1979:283).

We can understand these differences if *that* can denote a property, but not a person: voting can be predicated of a person, but not of a property, and *it* can refer to a property, but not to a person. Property-denoting *that* is not limited to sentences like (3a), but is also found as a predicate anaphor: *They said that Sheila was beautiful and she is that* (Ross 1969:357).

Whereas the subject itself determines its property-level denotation in a specificational clause like (2), *that* in (1) obtains its meaning either from a cleft clause following the proper name (*That is Susan that's standing by the door*) or from a contextually salient property. I thus propose that (3a), along with *It is Susan*, is a hidden cleft (Declerck 1988, Büring 1998, Hedberg 2000), where *that* denotes a variable of type $\langle s,\langle e,t\rangle\rangle$. In an overt cleft abstraction over this variable and subsequent functional application integrates the meaning of the cleft clause. In a hidden cleft the semantic composition leaves the variable free to be instantiated by a contextually salient property.

A closer look at the semantics of the subject NPs reveals that the similarity of form which led Higgins to group (3a) with (3b) is deceiving. Instead we find a deeper semantic similarity between (3a) and Specificational clauses, and between (3b) and Identity clauses. This in turn suggests a revision of Higgins' taxonomy that eliminates the Identificational class altogether.