Ambiguous copula sentences in Danish: evidence against the inversion hypothesis

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1 Introduction

Two kinds of copula sentences (Higgins (1973); Akmajian (1970)):

(1) **Predicational**

a. Bill is my best friend. (Partee, 2000, ex. 6c)

b. John is the teacher. (Heggie, 1988, ex. 1)

c. Vicente Fox is the president of Mexico.

(2) **Specificational**

a. My best friend is Bill. (Partee, 2000, ex. 7c)

b. The teacher is John. (Heggie, 1988, ex. 2)

c. The president of Mexico is Vicente Fox.

(3) **The inversion hypothesis**
Specificational copula sentences are derived from predicational structures by inversion around the copula (Williams (1983, 427ff); Partee (1986); Heggie (1988))

Goals

- show that the inversion hypothesis cannot be maintained for Danish, and thus that the distinction between predicational and specificational copula sentences cannot be reduced to inversion around the copula

- give further empirical motivation for a distinction between predicational and specificational copula sentences

2 Specification is not inverted predication

The argument in outline

1. Danish has predicational and specificational copula sentences
2. Danish allows inversion around the copula in predicational structures
3. This inversion produces a surface string similar to that of specificational copula sentences.
4. Despite surface similarities specificational copula sentences cannot be analyzed as inverted predicational strutures
5. Thus, the distinction between predicational and specificational copula sentences cannot be reduced to inversion around the copula.

2.1 Copula sentences in Danish

(4) Predicational: [$\text{DP}_{1\,(proper\ name)}$ *copula* $\text{DP}_{2\,(description)}$]

a. Sparky **er** min bedste ven.
   Sparky is my best friend

b. Sparky **er** den største tilhænger af bilfri søndag jeg kender.
   Sparky is the greatest fan of car-free Sunday I know

c. Frk. C. **var** den smukkeste pige paa ballet. (Jespersen, 1924, p. 153)
   Miss C. was the prettiest girl at ball.DEF

(5) Specificational: [$\text{DP}_{1\,(description)}$ *copula* $\text{DP}_{2\,(proper\ name)}$]

a. Min bedste ven **er** Sparky.
   My best friend is Sparky

b. Den største tilhænger af bilfri søndag jeg kender **er** Sparky.
   The greatest fan of car-free Sunday I know is Sparky

c. Den smukkeste pige paa ballet **var** Frk. C.. (Jespersen, 1924, p. 153)
   The prettiest girl at ball.DEF was Miss C.

Underlying syntactic structure: [$_{\text{VP}}$ *copula* [$_{\text{SC}}$ DP_1 DP_2]], where

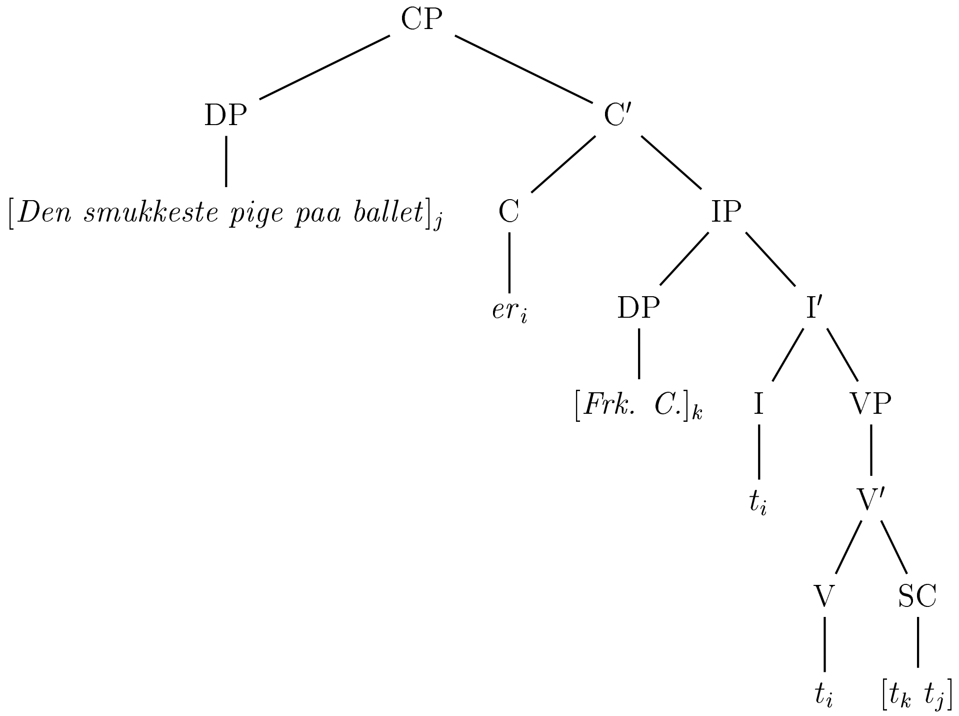
- DP_1 precedes DP_2
- DP_1 c-commands DP_2

(Stowell (1978); Williams (1980); Heggie (1988); Bowers (1993); Svenonius (1994); Rothstein (1995); Moro (1997); Heycock and Kroch (1999); Adger and Ramchand (2001))

2.2 Inversion around the copula

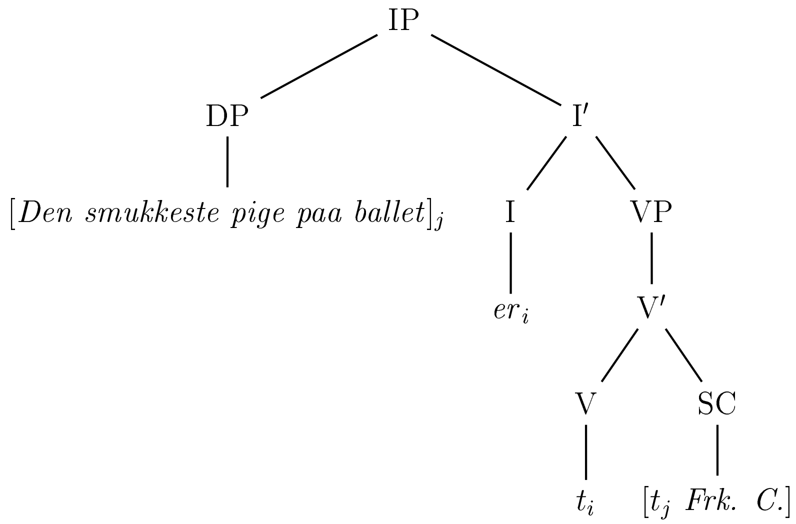
Heggie (1988) argues that a specificational copula sentence like *The teacher is John* is derived from a predicational structure (*John is the teacher*) by movement of the predicate (*the teacher*) to COMP and Subject-Aux inversion (of *John* and *is*). Applying this analysis to Danish gives (6) as a derivation for (5c):

(6) **Inverted predicational structure**



Claim (6) is a legitimate derivation of the string in (5c), but so is (7):

(7) **Specificational struture** (abstracting away from V2)



Jespersen's observation: there are two ways of negating (8) (= (5c)):

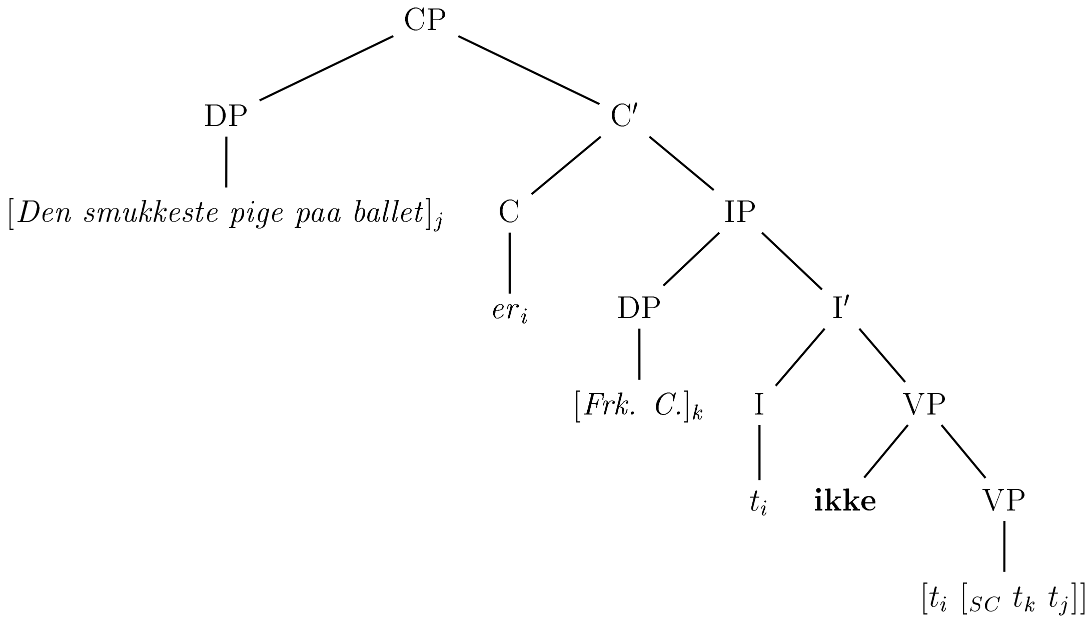
(8) Den smukkeste pige paa ballet var Frk. C..
The prettiest girl at ball.DEF was Miss C.

a. Den smukkeste pige paa ballet var Frk. C. **ikke**.
The prettiest girl at ball.DEF was Miss C. not

b. Den smukkeste pige paa ballet var **ikke** Frk. C..
The prettiest girl at ball.DEF was not Miss C.

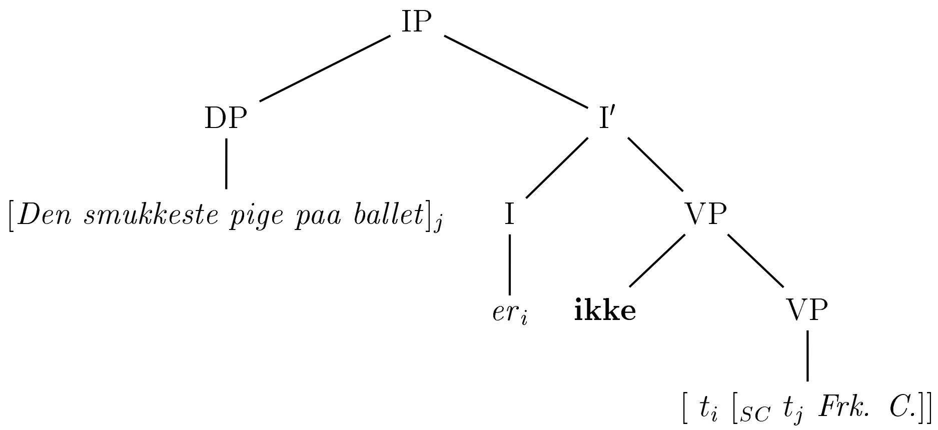
Analysis Negation marks the left edge of VP (Vikner, 1995, 46ff). (8a) is the negation of the inverted predicational reading of (5c), cf. (6):

(9)



(8b) is the negation of the specificational reading of (5c), cf. (7):

(10)



2.3 Further evidence for the two structures

Binding Danish has a third person reflexive possessive pronoun *sin* which must be bound by a local subject (Vikner, 1985). Binding is possible when the reflexive occurs in a fronted predicate complement (11a), but not when it occurs in a subject phrase (11b):

(11) a. [Den største beundrer af sin$_i$ kones kogekunst]$_j$ er Peter$_i$ **ikke** t$_j$
The greatest admirer of REFL wife's cooking is Peter not
'Peter$_i$ isn't the greatest admirer of his$_i$ wife's cooking'

b. *[Den største beundrer af sin$_i$ kones kogekunst]$_j$ er **ikke** t$_j$ Peter$_i$
The greatest admirer of REFL wife's cooking is not Peter

NPI The negative polarity item *nogen* (any) is licensed in complement position by negation. *nogen* can appear in the fronted predicate complement in (12a), but not in the subject phrase in (12b):

(12) a. [*Nogen* stor tilhænger af bilfri søndag]$_j$ er Sparky **ikke** t$_j$
Any great fan of car-free Sunday is Sparky not
'Sparky is not a great fan of carfree Sundays'

b. *[*Nogen* stor tilhænger af bilfri søndag]$_j$ er t$_j$ **ikke** Sparky
Any great fan of car-free Sunday is not Sparky

Embedding Some of the verbs that take clausal complements, including *bevise* (prove), do not allow topicalization in the complement clause (Vikner, 1995, 70–2). The inverted predicational structure cannot be embedded under one of these verbs, since Spec-CP is not available as a landing site for the fronted predicate complement:[1]

(13) Juryen beviste at ...
jury.DEF proved that ...

a. *[$_{CP}$ den smukkeste pige paa ballet var Frk. C. **ikke**]
the prettiest girl at ball.DEF was Miss C. not

b. [$_{IP}$ den smukkeste pige paa ballet **ikke** var Frk. C.]
the prettiest girl at ball.DEF not was Miss C.

Conclusion: The distinction between specificational and predicational copula sentences cannot be reduced to inversion around the copula.

[1] There is no verb movement in the embedded clause, hence the finite verb appears to the right of negation in (13b).

3 Predication vs. Specification

Extraction Unlike predicational copula sentences, specificational structures do not allow extraction (Jespersen (1924, p. 153), see also Moro (1997) and Heycock and Kroch (1999) on English):

(14) *Frk. C. var den smukkeste pige paa ballet **ikke**.
Miss C. was the prettiest girl at ball.DEF not

Note that (14) also shows that (unmodified) proper names cannot function as predicates (Higgins (1973, 264ff); Rapoport (1987, 171ff); Doron (1988))

Object shift Object shift – whereby a direct object pronoun surfaces left of negation – is possible in predicational copula sentences:

(15) Sparky var min løbemakker sidste år, men ...
Sparky was my running.partner last year, but ...

a. han er **det** ikke længere
he is it not anymore

b. han er ikke længere ***det**
he is not anymore it

but not in specificational copula sentences:

(16) Min løbemakker er Sparky, men ...
My running.partner is Sparky, but ...

a. min cykelmakker er ***ham** ikke
my cycling.partner is *him not

b. min cykelmakker er ikke **ham**
my cycling.partner is not him

Is this contrast due to a difference in syntactic structure or to a difference in information structure, particularly topic-focus structure? (Note that the object pronoun is unstressed in (15), but stressed in (16))

Object shift is assumed to require the presence of an external argument (e.g. Holmberg and Platzack (1995, 157ff)). What does the possibility of object shift in (15) tell us about the syntactic structure of (predicational) copula sentences?

Tag questions Specificational copula sentences allow *it* in the tag, predicational ones do not (cf. Higgins (1973, 283)):[2]

(17) The president of Mexico is Vincente Fox, isn't it?

(18) *The president of Mexico is very tall, isn't it?

In contrast, a gender pronoun is impeccable in a predicational sentence (20), but odd (at least for some speakers) in a specificational construction (19):

(19) ??The president of Mexico is Vincente Fox, isn't he?

(20) The president of Mexico is very tall, isn't he?

Note that this contrast is preserved when the lexical head of the subject NP is gender specific:

(21) The lead actress is that movie is Ingrid Bergman, isn't ??she/it?

(22) The lead actress in that movie is very tall, isn't she/*it?

The use of *it* in specificational tags might be licensed by a concealed question reading, e.g. *the answer to the question 'who was the lead actress in that movie' is Ingrid Bergman, isn't it* for (21) (Bill Ladusaw, p.c. 09/10/01).[3]

The distribution of pronouns further distinguishes specificational copula structures (23) from (inverted) predicational structures (24):

(23) **Specificational**

a. Den smukkeste pige paa ballet var ikke Frk. C., var **??hun** / **det**?
The prettiest girl at ball.DEF was not Miss C, was she / it?

(24) **Predicational**

a. Frk. C. var ikke den smukkeste pige paa ballet, var **hun** / ***det**? [uninverted]
Miss C was not the prettiest girl at ball.DEF, was she / it?

b. Den smukkeste pige paa ballet var Frk. C. **ikke**, var **hun** / ***det**? [inverted]
The prettiest girl at ball.DEF was Miss C not, was she / it?

[2] There is some variation among speakers. Not all speakers allow *it* in (17), but the ones that do report a clear contrast between (17) and (18). No speakers accept *it* in (18).

[3] Büring (1998) discusses a possibly related contrast between pronominal (*He might be my best friend*) and expletive (*It might be my best friend*) identity constructions.

4 Conclusion

The data presented above shows that, in Danish, the distinction between specificational and predicational copula sentences cannot be reduced to inversion around the copula. This supports the conclusions reached for English by Heycock and Kroch (1999) and Partee (2000).

The differences between predicational and specificational copula constructions with respect to extraction, object shift, and the distribution of pronouns in tag questions indicate that the two constructions are fundamentally distinct. The challenge is to understand this distinction and provide an account for the observed differences.

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