What’s special about specificational clauses

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Two kinds of copular clauses (Halliday (1967:§6); Higgins (1979); Akmajian (1979))

(1) Predicational
      a. The recipient of this year’s Nobel Peace Prize is from Kenya.
      b. The lead actress in that movie is terrible.

(2) Specificational
      a. The recipient of this year’s Nobel Peace Prize is Wangari Maathai.
      b. The lead actress in that movie is Ingrid Bergman.

Question What’s the difference between (1) and (2)?

Some intuitions and analogies

1. Aboutness (Akmajian 1979:162–165)
   • Like (3), (1a-b) tell us something about the referent of their subject:
     (3) Chris ran a marathon in 3 hours and 8 minutes.
   • (2a-b) don’t tell us something about their subject, they tell us who it is.

2. Variables and values (Higgins 1979:153ff, 234ff)
   • specificational subject introduces variable:
     \( x \) such that \( x \) received this year’s Nobel Peace Prize
   • post copular expression provides value for variable:
     Wangari Maathai

3. Filling out forms (conversation with B.H. Partee in late May 2002)

(4) a. Name:
b. Address:
c. Shoe size:
d. Height:
e. Marital status:
• Conventional (specificational) response:

(5) a. Name: Bob McPhearson
b. Address: 1 Easy Street
c. Shoe size: 44
d. Height: 2 meters
e. Marital status: single

• Unconventional (predicational) response:

(6) a. Name: difficult to spell
b. Address: easy to remember
c. Shoe size: a problem
d. Height: my advantage
e. Marital status: irrelevant

Previous accounts of specialness of specificational clauses

1. Special syntax (Heggie 1988)
2. Special case of predication (Rothstein 2001)
3. Special case of equation (Heycock and Kroch 1999)

New proposal  Special alignment of semantic properties with syntactic position driven by information structure (Mikkelsen 2004b; Heycock and Kroch 2002)

(7) topic/focus topic/focus

Predicational clause  The recipient is from Kenya

subject predicate complement

Semantic ingredients referential DP predicative XP

subject predicate complement

Specificational clause  The recipient is Wangari Maathai

topic focus

Key claims about specificational clauses

i. Standard syntax: initial DP is subject (Ask me later!)

ii. Subject is non-referential (Section 1)

iii. Subject is topic (Section 2)

iv. ii. and iii. are connected (Section 3)
1 Specificational subject is non-referential

1.1 Evidence from pronominalization

Starting assumption  pronominalization is sensitive to the semantic type of its antecedent.¹

- In the domain of humans:
  - *she* and *he* are used to pronominalize referential DPs,
  - *it* and *that* are used to pronominalize non-referential DPs, including predicative DPs.
- Use pronominalization to probe the semantic type of copular subjects.
- Three environments:
  - Tag questions
  - Left dislocation structures
  - Question–answer pairs

1.1.1 Tag questions

The form of the pronoun in a tag question is determined by the subject of the tagged clause.²

(8) The lead actress in that movie lives in Belmont, do(es)n’t {she/*he/*it/*they/*we}?  

Predicational copular clause: *she* → referential subject.

(9) The lead actress in that movie is Swedish, isn’t *she/*it?

Specificalional clause: *it* → predicative subject:

(10) The lead actress in that movie is Ingrid Bergman, isn’t it?

Danish:  *hun* = Eng. *she*, *det* = Eng. *it/that*

(11) Den højeste spiller på holdet er ikke svensker, er {*det / hun}?  

  *The tallest player on the team isn’t Swedish, is it/she?*

(12) Den højeste spiller på holdet er ikke Minna, er *det*?  

  *The tallest player on the team isn’t Minna, is it?*

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1.1.2 Left dislocation

Left dislocation leaves resumptive pronoun inside CP:

(13) My father, he’s lived here all his life. [cf. Ross (1967:235, ex. 6.136)]

Use subject left dislocation to probe semantic type of copular subjects:

**Predicational copular clause:** she → referential subject.

(14) The lead actress in that movie, she/*it/*that is Swedish.

**Specificational clause:** it, that → predicative subject:

(15) The lead actress in that movie, it/that is Ingrid Bergman.

Danish facts are parallel, and contrast extends into inanimate domain (grammatical gender: common vs. neuter):

(16) Den største by i Skotland, {den / *det } er vist større end København. [Predicational]

  the largest city in Scotland, it-COM / it-NEU is PTC bigger than Copenhagen

  ‘The largest city in Scotland, (I believe) that/it is bigger than Copenhagen.’

(17) Den største by i Skotland, {*den / det } er vist Glasgow. [Specificational]

  the-COM largest city in Scotland, it-COM / it-NEU is PTC Glasgow

  ‘The largest city in Scotland, (I believe) that/it is Glasgow.’

1.1.3 Question–Answer pairs

(18) Q: What nationality is the lead actress in that movie?  
A: She/*it/*that is Swedish. [Predicational]

(19) Q: Who is the lead actress in that movie?  
A: {It/That} is Ingrid Bergman. [Specificational]

Danish facts are parallel, and contrast extends into inanimate domain:

(20) Q: Hvor stor er den største by i Skotland?  
how big is the-COM largest city in Scotland

A: {Den / *Det } er vist større end København. [Predicational]

  it-COM / it-NEU is PTC larger than Copenhagen

  ‘I believe it’s larger than Copenhagen.’

(21) Q: Hvilken by er den største (by) i Skotland?  
which-COM city is the largest (city) in Scotland

A: {*Den / Det } er vist Glasgow. [Specificational]

  it-COM / it-NEU is PTC Glasgow

  ‘I believe it’s Glasgow.’

**Upshot** Subject of predicational clause is referential, subject of specificational clause is predicative.

**A prediction** Only DPs capable of being predicative (property-denoting) can occur as subject of specificational clauses.
1.2 Which DPs occur as specificational subjects?

**Case 1**: Definite descriptions, possessive DPs, partitive DPs, indefinite descriptions

Can be predicative (Partee 1987) → do occur as specificational subjects.

- **Definite description**:
  
  \[(22) \text{The most successful such enterprise} \text{ is i-flex solutions Ltd., whose Flexcube is the world’s bestselling banking software package.}^3\]

- **Possessive DP**:
  
  \[(23) \text{Our next speaker} \text{ is Claudia Maienborn.}^4\]

- **Partitive DP**:
  
  \[(24) \text{En af de danske skribenter, jeg altid har beundret næsten uden reservation, er den som One of the Danish writers I always have admired almost without reservation is the as tennis-spiller mere kendte Torben Ulrich.}^5\]

  \[\text{‘One of the Danish writers that I have always admired almost without reservation is Torben Ulrich, who is in fact better known as a tennis player.’}\]

- **Indefinite description**:
  
  \[(25) \text{A philosopher who seems to share the Kiparskys’ intuitions on some factive predicates} \text{ is Unger (1972), who argues that . . .}^6\]

**Case 2**: Strongly quantificational DPs, (most) pronouns, and names

Can not be predicative (McNally 1992:6,87,93; Mikkelsen 2004a) → do not occur as specificational subjects.

- **Strongly quantificational DP**:
  
  \[(26) * \text{Most actresses in that movie} \text{ are Ingrid Bergman and Liv Ullmann.}\]

- **Most pronouns**:
  
  \[(27) * \text{She} \text{ is Ingrid Bergman, isn’t it?}\]

  \[(28) * \text{They} \text{ are Ingrid Bergman and Liv Ullmann, isn’t it?}\]

  \[\ldots \text{except the predicate anaphors it and that, which do occur here:}\]

  \[(29) \text{That’s Ingrid Bergman, isn’t it?}\]

  \[(30) \text{That’s Ingrid Bergman and Liv Ullmann, isn’t it?}\]

  \[(31) \text{Carla heard the car coming before it topped the little rise in the road that around here they call a hill.}\]

  \[\text{It’s her, she thought. Mrs. Jamieson — Sylvia — home from her holiday in Greece.}^7\]

  \[(32) \text{It’s her, isn’t it?}\]

- **Names**:
  
  \[(33) * \text{Susan} \text{ is Mrs. Robertson, isn’t it?}\]

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4Rainer Blutner, session chair at the workshop “Pragmatics in Optimality Theory” at the 14th ESSLLI in Trento, August 14 2002.

5Dan Turrel, quoted in Lars Bukdahl “Beatnik med boldøje” (Beatnik with an eye for the ball), *Weekendavnen Bøger*, May 9–14 2003, p. 2.

6Delacruz (1976:195, fn. 8).

7Opening paragraph of Alice Munroe’s “Runaway”, *The New Yorker*, August 11 2003, p. 63.
2 Specificational subject is topic

2.1 Evidence from Question–Answer pairs

(34) **Question–Answer Congruence** (Halliday 1967)
The constituent in the answer that corresponds to the wh-phrase in the question is the focus.

**Claim 1** Predicational clauses have a flexible focus structure.

- Complement focus:

  (35) Q: Who is John?
  A: John is the mayor.

- Subject focus:

  (36) Q: Who is the mayor?
  A: John is the mayor.

- Contrastive focus on complement or subject:

  (37) Q: Is Sam the mayor?
  A1: No, Sam is the FIRE CHIEF.
  A2: No, JOHN is the mayor

**Claim 2** Specificational clauses have a fixed focus structure.\(^8\)

- Complement focus is fine:

  (38) Q: Who is the mayor?
  A: The mayor is John

- But subject focus is infelicitous:\(^9\)

  (39) Q: Who/What is John?
  A: #The mayor is John.

- also no contrastive focus on subject DP:\(^10\)

  (40) Q: Is the mayor Sam?
  A: #No, the FIRE CHIEF is Sam.
  A: No, the mayor is JOHN

**Upshot (Standard Wisdom)** In a specificational clause

- complement is focus
- subject is topic

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\(^9\)See Heycock and Kroch (2002) for detailed discussion and defense of this claim.

\(^10\)Data from Partee (2000:200, ex. (46)), who credits Williams (1997).
2.2 Beyond Question–Answer pairs: Discourse-driven inversion

- Based on 1700+ attested examples, Birner (1994, 1996) argues that (41)–(43) involve DISCOURSE-DRIVEN INVERSION.

- Inversion allows the presentation of relatively familiar information (bold) before a comparatively unfamiliar logical subject (underlined).

(41) We have complimentary soft drinks, coffee, Sanka, tea, and milk. Also complimentary is red and white wine.  
[Birner 1994: ex. 18b]

(42) She got married recently and at the wedding was the mother, the stepmother, and Debbie.  
[Birner 1994: ex. 25c]

(43) In the Cabinet Room of the White House yesterday, Pres. Reagan played 8 minutes of taped conversations among three Soviet pilots that took place before a South Korean jetliner apparently was shot out of the sky in Soviet airspace early Thursday.  
Listening to the pilots’ excited voices were congressional leaders, Cabinet officials and foreign advisors.  
[Birner 1996:ex. 16c]

- Hypothesis: specificational clauses are a special case of inversion:
  - serving the same information packaging function,
  - but different syntax (inversion to subject position, not to higher A-bar position, due to syntactic category of preposed element)

(44) The biggest reason people want to be Vice-President, though, is that it has become the royal road to the Presidency, even if one’s boss remains in perfect health. After Adams and Thomas Jefferson, during the republic’s first two centuries the only person ever to win a Presidential election while serving as Vice-President was Martin Van Buren, in 1836.11

(45) [Towards the end of an article discussing various challenges posed by modernization for Gambell, an Eskimo village on St. Lawrence Island in the Bering Sea]12
Perhaps the Gambell resident most concerned about what the village is facing these days is Edmond Apassingok, 41, president of the Indian Reorganization Act Council, which, along with the Gambell City Council, governs the village.

(46) [From an article about the current hip-hop scene in Israel, its political role, and its relationship with the media13]
A hip-hop scene has been developing in Israel since the mid-1990’s, and it is becoming commercially and artistically stronger and stronger. . . . The first Israeli hip-hop group was Shabak Samech, which came out with its first album in 1995. . . . [Paragraph about Shabak Samech] . . . But Shabak Samech achieved platinum status with its second album and thus opened the door to a larger audience. Since then, Shabak Samech has ceased to appear together and its members are pursuing their own individual interests. The most successful of them is the rapper Mook E, who produced the album Shma Israel (Hear, Israel). . . . [Paragraph about Mook E leading into discussion of political lyrics] . . . The MC who has most become a media icon is Subliminal. . . . [Paragraph about Subliminal] . . .

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11Hendrik Hertzberg “Vice Squads”, The New Yorker, March 22, 2004, pp. 31–34. The relevant paragraph is on p. 34. The cited paragraph actually contains two specificational clauses—the first with a CP predicate complement—but I will only discuss the second one, whose subject is in bold.


3 Bringing things together

An intuition

• the fact that the subject of a specificational clause is always topic is related to the fact that the subject DP is less referential than the post-copular DP

The idea in outline

• Other things being equal the most referential DP occupies the subject position. This is the case in predicational copular clauses.

• But the preference for the topic to be in subject position (Prince (1981), Beaver (2004)) may override this default alignment. The result is a specificational clause.

• The reason the subject of a specificational clause is always topic is that this is precondition for getting a specificational clause at all!

(47)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predicational clause</th>
<th>topic/focus</th>
<th>topic/focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>The recipient</strong></td>
<td>is</td>
<td>from Kenya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>subject</td>
<td>predicate complement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Semantic ingredients</th>
<th>referential DP</th>
<th>predicative XP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>subject</td>
<td>predicate complement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Specificational clause</th>
<th>topic/focus</th>
<th>focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>The recipient</strong></td>
<td>is</td>
<td>Wangari Maathai</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An analogy with voice alternations

(48)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Active clause</th>
<th>My pig ate the peanuts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>subject</td>
<td>object</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Semantic roles</th>
<th>agent (‘eater’) patient (‘eaten’)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>subject</td>
<td>by-phrase</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Passive clause | The peanuts were eaten by my pig |

(49)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Default Alignment</th>
<th>Marked Alignment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-copular clause</td>
<td>active</td>
<td>passive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Copular clause</td>
<td>Predicational</td>
<td>Specificational</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Why are specificational clauses not morpho-syntactically marked?

• The copula does not carry any theta roles—nobody is doing anything to anyone.
• Hence, syntax is relieved of its normal argument-structure-expressing duties, and free to express information structure without morpho-syntactic marking!

4 Conclusion

What’s special about specificational clauses is

• not their syntax — they are ordinary subject-initial clauses
• not their semantics — they involve one referential element and one predicative element
• but rather the alignment of the predicative element with subject position.
• This unusual alignment is grounded in information structure, and ultimately principles of discourse-coherence, which in turn accounts for the fixed topic–focus structure exhibited by specificational clauses.
References


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