

# Specificational copular clauses

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**Two kinds of copular clauses** (Halliday 1967; Higgins 1979; Akmajian 1979)

(1) PREDICATIONAL

- a. The recipient of this year's Nobel Prize for Literature is from Turkey.
- b. The lead actress in that movie is terrible.

(2) SPECIFICATIONAL

- a. The recipient of this year's Nobel Prize for Literature is Orhan Pamuk.
- 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 Prize for Literature

- post copular expression provides value for variable:

Orhan Pamuk

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 specificational clauses

- 1. Special syntax (predicate topicalization) (Heggie 1988)
- 2. Special case of predication (Rothstein 2001)
- 3. Special case of equation (Heycock and Kroch 1999, Heller 2005)

**New proposal** Special alignment of semantic properties with syntactic position driven by information structure (Mikkelsen 2005; Heycock and Kroch 2002)

(7)		topic/focus		topic/focus
	PREDICATIONAL CLAUSE	<i>The recipient</i>	<i>is</i>	<i>from Turkey</i>
		subject		predicate complement
	SEMANTIC INGREDIENTS	referential DP		predicative XP
		subject		predicate complement
	SPECIFICATIONAL CLAUSE	<i>The recipient</i>	<i>is</i>	<i>Orhan Pamuk</i>
		<b>topic</b>		<b>focus</b>

### Key claims about specificational clauses

- i. Standard syntax: initial DP is subject (Section 4)
- 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.<sup>1</sup>

- 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.<sup>2</sup>

(8) [The lead actress in that movie] lives in Belmont, doesn't {**she**/\*he/\*it}?

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

(9) [The lead actress in that movie] is Swedish, isn't **she**/\*it?

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

(10) [The lead actress in that movie] is Ingrid Bergman, isn't **it**?

### 1.1.2 Left dislocation

Left dislocation leaves resumptive pronoun inside CP:

(11) 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.

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

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

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

<sup>1</sup>See Doron (1988:282–286), Engdahl (2001:132–133), Heggie (1988:67–71), Jespersen (1927:123–124), Kuno (1972:355–363), Mikkelsen (2002b, 2003, 2005: chapter 4), Moro (1997:71–75), Partee (1972), Schlenker (2003:169–173), and Zamparelli (2000:17–18) for data and discussion.

<sup>2</sup>Bolinger (1957:17–22, 116–122; 1975:279); Bowers (1976:237); Bresnan (1994:97); Jespersen (1924:198, 302, 323); Kay (2002:§4); McCawley (1998:251); Quirk et al. (1985:§11.8).

### 1.1.3 Question–Answer pairs

- (14) Q: What nationality is the lead actress in that movie?  
A: **She**/\*it/\*that is Swedish. [Predicational]
- (15) Q: Who is the lead actress in that movie?  
A: {**It/That**} is Ingrid Bergman. [Specificational]

**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:

- (16) **The most successful such enterprise** is i-flex solutions Ltd., whose Flexcube is the world’s bestselling banking software package.<sup>3</sup>

- Possessive DP:

- (17) **Our next speaker** is Claudia Maienborn.<sup>4</sup>

- Partitive DP:

- (18) **One of the inspirations behind the Front** is Dr Manorani Saravanamuttu ...

[BNC]

- Indefinite description:

- (19) **A philosopher who seems to share the Kiparskys’ intuitions on some factive predicates** is Unger (1972), who argues that ...<sup>5</sup>

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

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

- Strongly quantificational DP:

- (20) **\*Most actresses in that movie** are Ingrid Bergman and Liv Ullmann.

- Most pronouns:

- (21) **\*She** is Ingrid Bergman, isn’t it?

- (22) **\*They** are Ingrid Bergman and Liv Ullmann, isn’t it?

<sup>3</sup>Shailaja Neelakantan “India’s IT Firms: Beyond Outsourcing”, *The Wall Street Journal Europe*, November 20, 2003, p. A9.

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

<sup>5</sup>Delacruz (1976:195, fn. 8).

... except the predicate anaphors *it* and *that*, which do occur here (Mikkelsen to appear):

(23) **That's** Ingrid Bergman, isn't it?

(24) **That's** Ingrid Bergman and Liv Ullmann, isn't it?

(25) Carla heard the car coming before it topped the little rise in the road that around here they call a hill. **It's** her, she thought. Mrs. Jamieson — Sylvia — home from her holiday in Greece.<sup>6</sup>

(26) **It's** her, isn't it?

- Names:

(27) \***Susan** is Mrs. Robertson, isn't it?

## 2 Specificational subject is topic

### 2.1 Evidence from Question–Answer pairs

(28) **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:

(29) Q: Who is John?

A: John is the mayor.

- Subject focus:

(30) Q: Who is the mayor?

A: John is the mayor.

- Contrastive focus on complement or subject:

(31) 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:<sup>7</sup>

- Complement focus is fine:

(32) Q: Who is the mayor?

A: The mayor is John

- But subject focus is infelicitous:<sup>8</sup>

(33) Q: Who/What is John?

A: #The mayor is John.

- also no contrastive focus on subject DP:<sup>9</sup>

(34) Q: Is the mayor Sam?

A: #No, the FIRE CHIEF is Sam.

A: No, the mayor is JOHN

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<sup>6</sup>Opening paragraph of Alice Munroe's "Runaway", *The New Yorker*, August 11 2003, p. 63.

<sup>7</sup>See Higgins (1979:234–6), Partee (2000:199–200), Heycock and Kroch (2002:148–149), Mikkelsen (2002a:§4) and the works cited there.

<sup>8</sup>See Heycock and Kroch (2002) for detailed discussion and defense of this claim.

<sup>9</sup>Data from Partee (2000:200, ex. (46)), who credits Williams (1997).

Upshot (Standard Wisdom) In a specificational clause

- complement is focus
- subject is topic

## 2.2 Beyond Question–Answer pairs: Discourse-driven inversion

- Based on 1700+ attested examples, Birner (1994, 1996) argues that (35)–(37) involve DISCOURSE-DRIVEN INVERSION.
- Inversion allows the presentation of relatively familiar information (**bold**) before a comparatively unfamiliar logical subject (underlined).

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

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

(37) 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)

(38) 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.<sup>10</sup>

(39) [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]<sup>11</sup>  
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.

## 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

<sup>10</sup>Hendrik 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.

<sup>11</sup>Sarah Kershaw “For Native Alaskans, Tradition Is Yielding to Modern Customs”, *The New York Times* August 21, 2004.

**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!

(40)

		topic/focus		topic/focus
PREDICATIONAL CLAUSE	<i>The recipient</i>		<i>is</i>	<i>from Turkey</i>
	subject			predicate complement
SEMANTIC INGREDIENTS	referential DP			predicative XP
	subject			predicate complement
SPECIFICATIONAL CLAUSE	<i>The recipient</i>		<i>is</i>	<i>Orhan Pamuk</i>
	<b>topic</b>			<b>focus</b>

**An analogy with voice alternations**

(41)

ACTIVE CLAUSE	<i>My pig</i>		<i>ate</i>	<i>the peanuts</i>
	subject			object
SEMANTIC ROLES	agent ('eater')			patient ('eaten')
	subject			by-phrase
PASSIVE CLAUSE	<i>The peanuts</i>	<i>were eaten</i>		<i>by my pig</i>

(42)

	DEFAULT ALIGNMENT	MARKED ALIGNMENT
NON-COPULAR CLAUSE	active	passive
COPULAR CLAUSE	predicational	specificational

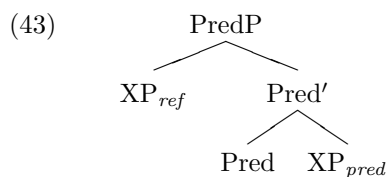
## Why are specificational clauses not morpho-syntactically marked?

- 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 A Minimalist implementation

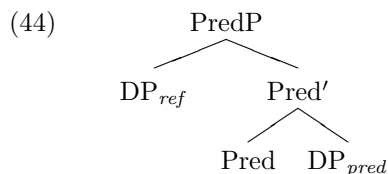
### 4.1 The predicational core: PredP

- In copular clauses, predication relation is syntactically mediated by the projection of a functional head, Pred:<sup>12</sup>



- Pred takes two arguments—a predicative one and a referential one.
- semantic selection (s-selection):
  - $XP_{pred}$  can be AP, PP, NP, DP, and VP.
  - $XP_{ref}$  is typically DP (but can be a type-shifted CP or AP)

- In PredPs underlying specificational clauses, both are DPs:



- Fixed order of Merge (governed by semantic type of Pred head:  $\langle\langle e,t \rangle, \langle e,t \rangle\rangle$ )
  - $XP_{pred}$  Merged first (i.e. as complement of Pred)
  - $DP_{ref}$  Merged second (i.e. as specifier of Pred)
- Evidence from word order in small clause (= PredP) complements (Rothstein 1995:41ff)

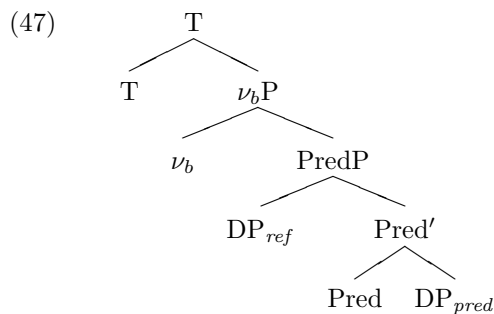
(45) I consider [<sub>PREDP</sub> Susan my best friend]

(46) \*I consider [<sub>PREDP</sub> my best friend Susan]

<sup>12</sup>See e.g. Bowers (1993), Svenonius (1994:28–31), Adger and Ramchand (2003). Pred is the term used by Svenonius (1994) and by Adger and Ramchand (2003). Bowers (1993) calls it Pr.

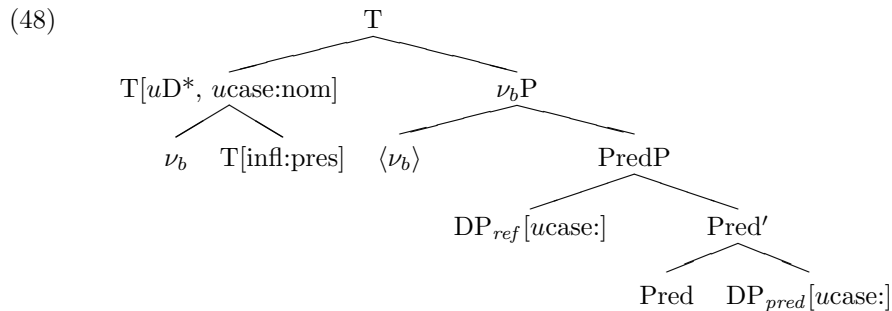
## 4.2 Copular clauses

- Minimal clause structure shared by predicational and specificational clauses:



- $\nu_b$ 
  - c-selects PredP ( $uPred$ )
  - is unaccusative:
    - \* no external argument (no  $uD$ )
    - \* no accusative case (no  $u\text{case:acc}$ )
  - spelled out as the copula
  - behaves as an aux wrt. raising to T ( $u\text{Infl:}^*$ )
- T
  - c-selects  $\nu_bP$  ( $u\nu_b$ )
  - locus of tense (interpretable **pres past**, or **non-fin** feature)
  - finite T assigns nominative ( $u\text{case:nom}$ )
  - requires DP in specifier position ('The EPP';  $uD^*$ )
  - may bear uninterpretable topic feature ( $u\text{top}$ ) — grammaticalization of preference for topic subjects
- $DP_{ref}$  and  $DP_{pred}$ 
  - need case ( $u\text{case:}$ )
  - neither, one, or both may be topic ( $[\text{top}]$ )

**What will always happen**  $\nu_b$  moves to T (left-adjoins to T):

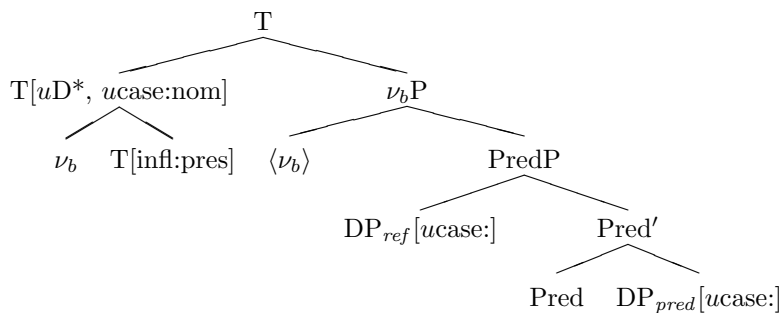


**What happens next depends on:**

- Whether T bears  $[\text{utop}]$
- Which DP bears  $[\text{top}]$  (if any)

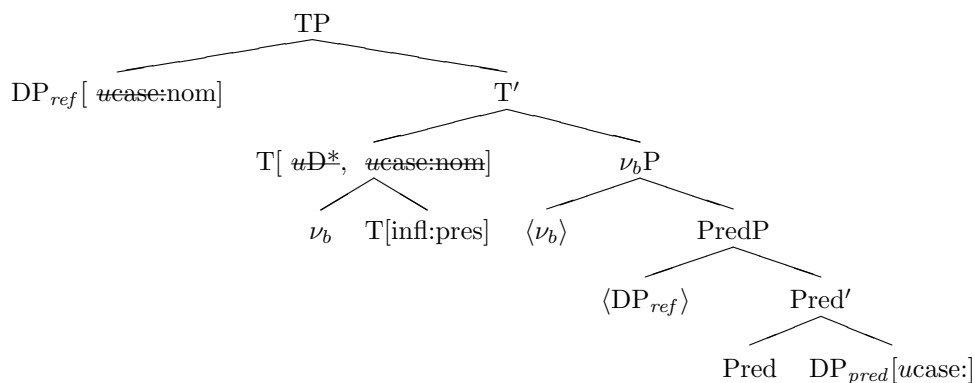
**Scenario A** T does not bear [*utop*], neither DP bears [*top*]:

(49)



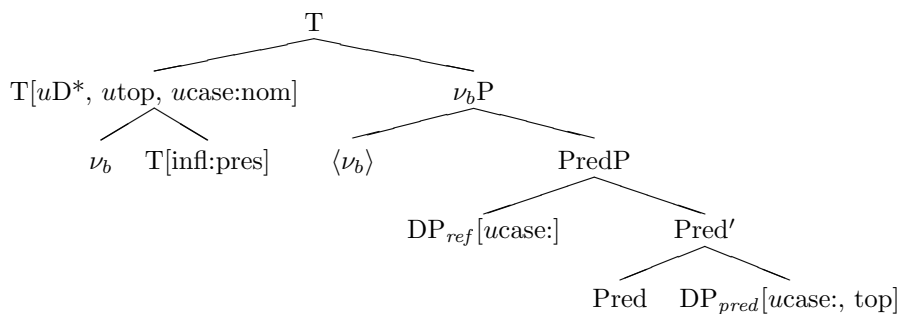
→ Predicational clause ( $DP_{ref}$  Moves to Spec-TP)

(50)



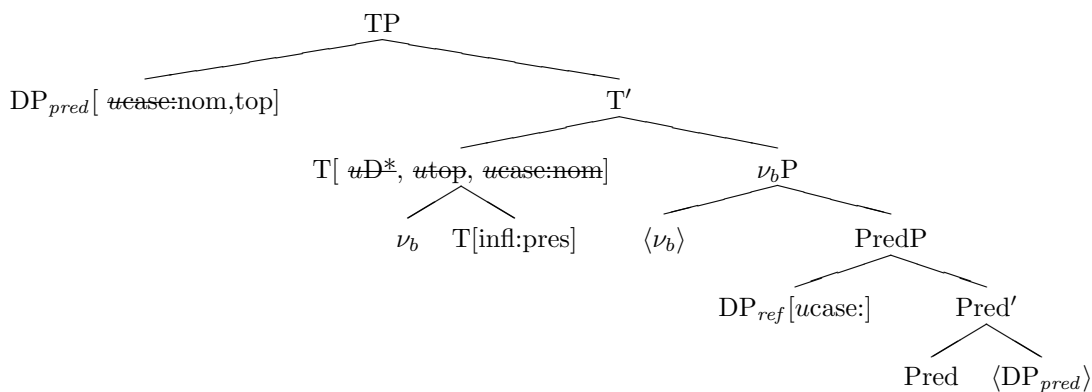
**Scenario B** T bears [*utop*],  $DP_{pred}$  bears [*top*]

(51)



→ Specificational clause ( $DP_{pred}$  Moves to Spec-TP):

(52)



### 4.3 The markedness of specificational clauses

The possible scenarios (i.e. the possible numerations)

(53)	Numeration	DP <sub>ref</sub>	DP <sub>pred</sub>	T	Clause
	1. = (49)–(50)	—	—	—	Predicational
	2.	—	—	<i>utop</i>	*
	3.	—	top	—	Predicational
	4. = (51)–(52)	—	top	<i>utop</i>	Specificational
	5.	top	—	—	Predicational
	6.	top	—	<i>utop</i>	Predicational
	7.	top	top	—	Predicational
	8.	top	top	<i>utop</i>	Predicational

**Numeration 1** DP<sub>ref</sub> is structurally favored for subject position by configuration of PredP (it asymmetrically c-commands DP<sub>pred</sub>). Appropriate in any context; places no topic-demands on either DP.

**Numeration 2** Crashes because no DP can check [*utop*] on T

**Numeration 3** Structurally favored DP<sub>ref</sub> can check all features on T. Interpretable topic feature on has no effect on derivation, but only on interpretation of resulting structure: DP<sub>pred</sub> must be construable as topic, e.g. as in (54).

- (54) Q: Who is the winner?  
 A: JOHN is [the winner]. [Predicational]

**Numeration 4** Structurally favored DP<sub>ref</sub> can **not** check all features on T. Instead T Agrees with DP<sub>pred</sub>, which can due to its [top] feature. Possible context for resulting structure:

- (55) Q: Who is the winner?  
 A: The winner is JOHN. [Specificational]

**Numerations 5** As usual, T attracts closest DP that can satisfy all of its uninterpretable features, here DP<sub>ref</sub>. Resulting structures is appropriate where DP<sub>ref</sub> can be construed as topic:

- (56) Q: What/Who is John?  
 A: John is the winner. [Predicational]

**Numeration 6** Indistinguishable from 5. This allows us to understand the infelicity of A2:

- (57) Q: What/Who is John?  
 A1: John is the winner. [Predicational]  
 A2: #The WINNER is John. [Specificational]

**Numerations 7 & 8** Either DP can check all features on T. Structurally favored DP<sub>ref</sub> Moves to Spec-TP. Unclear whether this is empirically supported—can't use Question–Answer pairs, since this forces one DP to be focus (and by implication not topic).

## 4.4 Some implications

### The connection with information structure

- Only get specificational clause when  $DP_{pred}$  is topic (cf. (53))
- What about focus?

**The role of T** Prediction: Only get specificational clause when T is present.

i. TP vs. PredP complements to *consider*:

- (58) TP complement:
- a. I consider [<sub>TP</sub> Susan **to** be the best doctor in the county]. [predicational]
  - b. I consider [<sub>TP</sub> the best doctor in the county **to** be Susan]. [specificational]
- (59) PredP complement:
- a. I consider [<sub>PREDP</sub> Susan my best friend] [predicational]
  - b. \*I consider [<sub>PREDP</sub> my best friend Susan] [specificational]

ii. Preposed absolutes:

- (60) **With Joyce out of the picture**, there isn't much point in continuing this discussion.
- (61) Preposed PP takes TP complement (Roberts and Roussou 2002:127)<sup>13</sup>
- a. (With) [<sub>TP</sub> Joyce **being** the only available candidate], there isn't much point in continuing this discussion. [predicational]
  - b. (With) [<sub>TP</sub> the only available candidate **being** Joyce], there isn't much point in continuing this discussion. [specificational]
- (62) Preposed PP takes PredP complement:
- a. With [<sub>PREDP</sub> Joyce the only available candidate], there isn't much point in continuing this discussion. [predicational]
  - b. \*With [<sub>PREDP</sub> the only available candidate Joyce], there isn't much point in continuing this discussion. [specificational]

iii. Subjunctive complements (CP contains TP):

- (63) I demand that [<sub>TP</sub> I be the only person (who is allowed) to use this pillow]. [predicational]
- (64) I demand that [<sub>TP</sub> the only person (who is allowed) to use this pillow be me]. [specificational]

### Cross-linguistic variation

- Cross-linguistic variation as c-selectional differences
- absence of copula<sup>14</sup> in languages like Hebrew, Irish, Scots Gaelic, Polish, Russian, Arabic, Zapotec can perhaps be understood as T c-selecting PredP?

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<sup>13</sup>Some speakers preferred (61a-b) without the initial *with*, hence the parentheses. All 15 speakers confirmed the key contrast between (61b) and (62b). One speaker did not accept (62a) or (62b), so for his dialect the hypothesis cannot be tested.

<sup>14</sup>In some tenses under certain circumstances, see e.g. Doron (1983), Rapoport (1987), Rothstein (2001:chapter 8), Adger and Ramchand (2003), and Geist (1999) for data, discussion and further references

## 5 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.

This proposal can be implemented in a minimalist framework, if we allow the syntax to manipulate discourse-related features like [topic] via uninterpretable versions of these on functional heads.

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