

Specification under discussion

Line Mikkelsen, UC Berkeley

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1 Introduction

Specificational copular clauses have distinctive information structure:

- (1) [The lead actress in that movie]_{TOPIC} is [Ingrid Bergman]_{FOCUS}.

Predicational copular clauses do not:

- (2) Ingrid Bergman is the lead actress in that movie.

Mikkelsen (2004): *topic* = relatively Discourse-old and topic-marking on definite description drives specificational syntax (a special case of Birner's (1996) discourse-conditioned inversion). Says nothing about focus.

Aissen (public comment, May 17 2004): what does the Question under Discussion framework (QUD; Roberts 1996, Büring 2003) have to offer the analysis of (specificational) copular clauses?

Mikkelsen (public answer, May 17, 2004): Uh, I don't know.

Mikkelsen (today):

- QUD cannot explain **why** specificational clauses have fixed topic-focus structure, but can draw principled connection between two kinds of data from the literature on specificational clauses.
- There **is** information structure at the sentence-level in the sense of restrictions on information structure that cannot be explained by looking at the larger context of utterance.
- Specificational clauses have a fixed information structure because their syntax-semantics mapping is marked.

2 Question under discussion

2.1 Information structure

- information structure of sentences vs. information structure of contexts (Roberts 1996:91-2)
- information structure of sentences = partitioning of sentences:

(3) [Hilary]_{FOCUS} [ate bagels]_{TOPIC}.

- information structure of contexts = structure on inquiry pursued in discourse:

IS1. Who ate what?

a. Who ate bagels?

a_i. Did Hilary eat bagels?

Yes.

a_{ii}. Did Robin eat bagels?

No.

b. Who ate tofu?

b_i. Did Hilary eat tofu?

Yes.

b_{ii}. Did Robin eat tofu?

Yes.

- Roberts (1996): prosodic focus in English expresses presuppositions about structure of current discourse; specifically the Question under Discussion.
- (3), with prosodic focus on *Hilary*, presupposes a QUD like IS1a.

2.2 Congruence

The constituent in the answer that corresponds to the *wh*-phrase in the question is the focus (Halliday 1967). Caps indicate focus prosody (= Jackendoff's Accent A = Pierrehumbert's H*)

(4) Qi: Who ate bagels?

A1: HILARY ate bagels.

A2: #Hilary ate BAGELS.

(5) **Congruence** = Move β is congruent to a question $? \alpha$ iff its focal alternatives $\| \beta \|$ are the Q-alternatives determined by $? \alpha$, i.e. iff $\| \beta \| = \text{Q-alt}(\alpha)$. (Roberts 1996:111)

(6) **Focal alternatives** \approx the set of propositions obtained by replacing the focussed constituent(s) with type-matching alternatives. (Roberts 1996:112)

- (7) **Q-alternatives** \approx the set of propositions obtained by replacing the wh-phrase(s) with type-matching alternatives. (Roberts 1996:96–97)

A1 is congruent in (4), because $\|A1\| = \{\text{Hilary ate bagels, Robin ate bagels}\} = \text{Q-alt}(Q_i)$

A2 is incongruent in (4), because $\|A2\| = \{\text{Hilary ate bagels, Hilary ate tofu}\} \neq \text{Q-alt}(Q_i)$

QUD framework: (Roberts 1996, Büring 2003)

- generalizes to “answers” without explicit questions:

- (8) **Presupposition of prosodic focus in an utterance** $*\beta$ (Roberts 1996:112)
 β is congruent to the question under discussion at the time of utterance.

- A1 presupposes the QUD ‘Who ate bagels?’ (\rightarrow IS1).
- A2 presupposes the QUD ‘What did Hilary eat?’ (not \rightarrow IS1).

- generalizes to non-declaratives ($*$ in (8) ranges over declaratives and interrogatives):

- *Did HILARY eat bagels?* presupposes the QUD ‘Who ate bagels?’.
- *Did Hilary eat BAGELS?* presupposes the QUD ‘What did Hilary eat?’.

- distinguishes between coherence (content) and congruence (form):

- (9) Qi: Who ate bagels?
 A2: #Hilary ate BAGELS.
 A3: #Hilary took the keys.

A2 is incongruent, A3 is incoherent.

3 Congruence in copular exchanges

- (10) PREDICATIONAL
 Sharon is the chair. [name be description]

- (11) SPECIFICATIONAL
 The chair is Sharon. [description be name]

- truth-conditionally equivalent \rightarrow same content \rightarrow same coherence conditions
- different syntactic form (\rightarrow different prosody) \rightarrow congruent to different QUDs

3.1 Copular constituent questions

- (12) Qii: Who is the chair?
A1: SHARON is the chair. [predicational]
A2: The chair is SHARON. [specificational]

A1 and A2 are both congruent

- Halliday: in both A1 and A2 *Sharon* corresponds to *who* in Qii and in both it is focus.
- Roberts: $\|A1\| = \|A2\| = \{\text{Sharon is the chair, Eve is the chair, ...}\} = \text{Q-alt}(Qii)$

- (13) Qiii: Who/What is Sharon?
A3: Sharon is the CHAIR. [predicational]
A4: #The CHAIR is Sharon. [specificational]

A3 and A4 are both congruent

- Halliday: in both A3 and A4 *the chair* corresponds to *who/what* in Qiii and in both it is focus.
- Roberts: $\|A3\| = \|A4\| = \{\text{Sharon is the chair, Sharon is the graduate advisor, ...}\} = \text{Q-alt}(Qiii)$

Why is A4 ill-formed?

- infelicity of A2 in (4) (= 14) is context dependent:

- (14) Qi: Who ate bagels? (15) Qi': What did Hilary eat?
A2: #Hilary ate BAGELS. A2: Hilary ate BAGELS.

- problem with A4 is sentence-internal: specificational clauses do not allow subject focus.
- Specificational clauses cannot “answer” QUD [Who is ‘name’?].
- They can only “answer” QUD [Who is ‘description’?].
- But “answer” is not part of the QUD framework → Infelicity of A4 remains unexplained.

3.2 Polar copular questions

Beyond Halliday's notion of congruence (no *wh*-phrase in polar Qs)

- (16) Qiv: Is EVE the chair?
 A1: No, SHARON is the chair. [predicational]
 A2: No, the chair is SHARON. [specificational]

Roberts (1996) (+ Wunderlich 1981, Kiefer 1980, Yadugiri 1986):¹

- $\|A1\| = \|A2\| = \{\text{Sharon is the chair, Eve is the chair, ...}\} = \|Qiv\|$
- Qiv-A1 is well-formed because the QUD presupposed by A1 ('Who is the chair?') is presupposed by Qv itself and hence, if Qv is felicitous in a given context, so is A1.
- Qiv-A2 is well-formed, because the QUD presupposed by A2 ('Who is the chair?') is presupposed by Qv itself and hence, if Qv is felicitous in a given context, so is A2.

- (17) Qv: Is Sharon THE GRADUATE ADVISOR?
 A3: No, Sharon is the CHAIR. [predicational]
 A4: #No, the CHAIR is Sharon. [specificational]

- $\|A3\| = \|A4\| = \{\text{Sharon is the chair, Sharon is the graduate advisor, ...}\} = \|Qv\|$
- Qv-A3 is well-formed because the QUD presupposed by A3 ('Who is Sharon?') is presupposed by Qv itself and hence, if Qv is felicitous in a given context, so is A3.
- Qv-A4 should be well-formed because the QUD presupposed by A4 ('Who is Sharon?') is presupposed by Qv itself and hence, since Qv is felicitous in (17), A4 should be as well.

So why is A4 #? in (17) and in (13) (= 18)

- (18) Q: Who/What is Sharon?
 A4: #The CHAIR is Sharon. [specificational]

- both are bad because specificational clauses cannot presuppose QUDs of the form 'Who is 'name'?' OR
- both are bad because they are specificational clauses with subject focus

¹I am also grateful to Maziar Toosarvandani for insisting on the importance of the prosody of the question in exchanges like (16).

4 A possible explanation

Specificational clauses with subject focus are doubly marked and that's the source of their ill-formedness (Daniel Büring, public comment, February 10, 2008):

- The unmarked domain of focus in English is the VP, hence subject focus involves a marked mapping between syntax and information structure.
- The unmarked realization of the predicative element in a clause is also the VP, hence predicational subjects represent a marked syntax-semantics mapping.
- The grammar of English allows these marked mappings:

(19) [HILARY] ate bagels . [=(4A1)]

(20) [The chair]_{<e,t>} is Sharon. [Mikkelsen 2004]

- It does not, however, allow both at once:

(21) *[The CHAIR]_{<e,t>} is Sharon. [=(13A4)/(17A4)]

- The corresponding predicational clause is (doubly) unmarked:

(22) Sharon is [the CHAIR]_{<e,t>}. [=(13A3)/(17A3)]

Is (21) absolutely ill-formed or suboptimal given (22)? (Data in (23) from Bill Ladusaw)

(23) Is that Sharon?

a. No, THAT's Sharon. [specificational (Mikkelsen 2007)]

b. *No, Sharon's THAT. [predicational]

5 Conclusion

- QUD framework does not explain why specificational clauses invariably have the form NP_{TOPIC} be NP_{FOCUS}.
- It does connect two sets of data — restrictions on specificational answers to constituent questions and restrictions on specificational answers to polar questions — by way of a generalized congruence condition on prosodic focus.
- Specificational clauses with subject focus are doubly marked (focus outside VP, predicative element outside VP) and that is the source of their ill-formedness.

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Line Mikkelsen
Department of Linguistics
University of California, Berkeley
1203 Dwinelle Hall, CA 94720-2650
mikkelsen@berkeley.edu
<http://socrates.berkeley.edu/~mikkelse/>