

# Specification under discussion

Line Mikkelsen, UC Berkeley

The UC Santa Cruz Linguistics Alumni Conference  
September 12, 2008

## 1 Introduction

Specificational copular clauses have distinctive information structure:

- (1) [The lead actress in that movie]<sub>TOPIC</sub> is [Ingrid Bergman]<sub>FOCUS</sub>.

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]<sub>FOCUS</sub> [ate bagels]<sub>TOPIC</sub>.

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

**IS1.** Who ate what?

**a.** Who ate bagels?

**a<sub>i</sub>.** Did Hilary eat bagels?

*Yes.*

**a<sub>ii</sub>.** Did Robin eat bagels?

*No.*

**b.** Who ate tofu?

**b<sub>i</sub>.** Did Hilary eat tofu?

*Yes.*

**b<sub>ii</sub>.** 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  $\beta$  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)  
 $\beta$  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):<sup>1</sup>

- $\|A1\| = \|A2\| = \{\text{Sharon is the chair, Eve is the chair, ...}\} = \|Qiv\|$
- 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

---

<sup>1</sup>I 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]<sub><e,t></sub> is Sharon. [Mikkelsen 2004]

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

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

- The corresponding predicational clause is (doubly) unmarked:

(22) Sharon is [the CHAIR]<sub><e,t></sub>. [=(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<sub>TOPIC</sub> be NP<sub>FOCUS</sub>.
- 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.

## References

- Birner, Betty J. (1996). *The Discourse Function of Inversion in English*. New York: Garland.
- Büring, Daniel (2003). “On D-Trees, Beans, and B-Accents.” *Linguistics and Philosophy* 26(5):511–545.
- Halliday, M.A.K. (1967). “Notes on transitivity and theme in English (Part 2).” *Journal of Linguistics* 3(2):199–244.
- Jackendoff, Ray S. (1972). *Semantic Interpretation in Generative Grammar*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Kiefer, Ferenc (1980). “Yes-No Questions as Wh-Questions.” In John R. Searle, Ferenc Kiefer, and Manfred Bierwisch, eds., *Speech Act Theory and Pragmatics*, 97–119. Dordrecht: D. Reidel.
- Mikkelsen, Line (2004). *Specifying Who: On the Structure, Meaning, and Use of Specificational Copular Clauses*. Ph.D. thesis, University of California, Santa Cruz.
- Mikkelsen, Line (2007). “On so-called truncated clefts.” In Ljudmila Geist and Bjørn Rothstein, eds., *Kopulaverben und Kopulasätze: Intersprachliche und Intrasprachliche Aspekte*, 47–68. Tübingen: Niemeyer Verlag.
- Pierrehumbert, Janet (1980). *The Phonology and Phonetics of English Intonation*. Ph.D. thesis, MIT.
- Roberts, Craige (1996). “Informative structure in discourse: Towards an integrated formal theory of pragmatics.” In J.H. Yoon and A. Kathol, eds., *OSU Working Papers in Linguistics 49: Papers in Semantics*. Columbus, OH: Ohio State University.
- Wunderlich, Dieter (1981). “Questions about Questions.” In Wolfgang Klein and Willem Levelt, eds., *Crossing the Boundaries in Linguistics*, 131–176. Dordrecht: D. Reidel.
- Yadugiri, M. A. (1986). “Some pragmatic implications of the use of *yes* and *no* in response to *yes–no* questions.” *Journal of Pragmatics* 10:199–210.

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