A constructional approach to specificational meaning

Amanda Patten
Northumbria University

This paper reexamines the concept of specificational meaning from a constructional perspective. On many formal accounts, specificational sentences are provided with an *inverse* analysis. From this perspective, pairs of copular sentences like (1) and (2) derive from the same underlying structure, in which a predicative, property-denoting NP (*the thoracic surgeon*) combines with a referring expression (*John McIntyre*). Their realization depends upon which NP undergoes movement to subject position. If the referential NP is raised, a *predicational* sentence is obtained. In contrast, *specificational* sentences result from raising the predicative NP (Moro 1997; Mikkelsen 2005).

(1)   *John McIntyre is the thoracic surgeon*   [predicational]
(2)   *The thoracic surgeon is John McIntyre*   [specificational]

However, it is well known that some predicational copular sentences *resist* inversion. For example, indefinite NP predicates cannot typically occur in precopular position, shown in (4).

(3)   *John McIntyre is a surgeon*   [predicational]
(4)   *#A surgeon is John McIntyre*   [specificational]

Likewise, not all sentences containing property-denoting definite NPs can be inverted, shown in (6).

(5)   *John is the one thing I have always wanted a man to be (that is, he's honest)*
(6)   **The one thing I have always wanted a man to be is John*
                                              (examples from Heycock and Kroch 1999: 379–380)

Mikkelsen (2005) offers an explanation for such restrictions. She suggests that only *discourse-old* predicates undergo raising, due to the preference for topics to be in subject position; since indefinite NPs typically introduce *new* entities into the discourse, they rarely meet the criterion for a verified topic. Nevertheless, while inversion is clearly sensitive to discourse-status (Birner 1994), Mikkelsen (2005) concedes that it cannot fully explain the facts surrounding indefinite specificational subjects. Furthermore, discourse considerations have little bearing on the unacceptability of (6), which contains a definite NP predicate. For Heller (2005) and Heycock and Kroch (1999), such examples represent a particular problem for inverse accounts.

Here, I reexamine this "difficult" data from a cognitive/constructional perspective. Rather than proposing constraints affecting movement operations, I focus on the concept of specificational meaning and its association with the NP inversion *construction*. While formal accounts treat nominal predication (and thus specification) as an interaction between expressions of type e and <e,t>, functional frameworks offer a more nuanced characterization of nominal predication, as expressions of identity, class inclusion, naming or individualizing (see Croft 1991; Bolinger 1980). I provide evidence that the meaning relation involved in acts of specification is *class inclusion*, "the relation of token to its subsuming type" (Croft 1991: 69). In such sentences, class inclusion serves to specify the membership of a category, rather than ascribing a property to a referent. This corresponds with Higgins' (1979) characterization of specificational sentences as functioning like lists.

On this account, we do not expect (6) to form an acceptable specificational sentence, since (5) is *individualizing* rather than *classifying*; that is, "the predicated noun characterizes the subject without subsuming it" (Croft 1991: 70). In (7), however, the property *honest* (unlike the individual *John*) can be properly classified as an inanimate *thing*. Thus, (8) is an acceptable specificational sentence.

(7)   *Honest is the one thing I have always wanted a man to be*
(8)   *The one thing I have always wanted a man to be is honest*   (Heycock and Kroch 1999: 379)

Based on a corpus of attested examples collected from a range of electronic and other sources, I show that NP inversion further specifies for *a particular kind* of class inclusion relation, whereby the class (or type) is restricted (or specified) to such a degree that the referent is taken to form a representative list of entities that satisfy the description given. It follows that indefinite NPs will be better suited to the specifying function if they contain lots of modifying information and/or their modifiers lexically imply uniqueness. This explains the gradient acceptability of examples such as (9) and (10).

(9)   *There are several psychologists at St Eligius. An especially talented psychologist is Dr Hugh Beale.*
(10)   *There are several psychologists at St Eligius. ?A talented psychologist is Dr Hugh Beale.*