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.