Why aren't you your (own) cook? What pronominal binding does and doesn't tell us about nominal predication.

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1 Roadmap

A salient issue for the syntax-semantics mapping: how can definites appear in what look like predicative positions, when their typical interpretation is as individuals?

(1) a. I am not your servant!
b. They considered Jess the best candidate for the job.

A related question: if examples like (1) show us that definites (including possessed DPs) can somehow get predicative interpretations, what do we do with "equative" examples like (2)?

(2) a. Edinburgh is not Philadelphia.
b. Hesperus is Phosphorus.

A claim: the obviation effect observed in examples like (3), can be used to diagnose the predicative status of the postcopular DP (DP_2).

(3) Q: Can Amadou represent himself in this case?
A: Yes! Amadou$_i$ is now his$_i$ *(own) lawyer.

Position/Reduction 1:

- All these copular clauses involve exactly one argument/referential DP

  (Longobardi 1983, Moro 1997, 2017)
- In a binominal copular clause, one of the DPs is the predicate
- The obviation effect on the possessor of DP_2 is an indicator of a predicative status for DP_2.

Position/Reduction 2:

- All these copular clauses involve two arguments/referential DPs

(Delfitto & Fiorin 2025, Fiorin & Delfitto 2025)

- In a binominal copular clause, neither of the DPs is the predicate
- An obviation effect on the possessor of DP_2 is an indicator of a pragmatically derived symmetric identity interpretation

Position to be argued for here:

- Some binominal copular clauses have one argument; DP_2 is predicative.
- Some binominal copular clauses have two arguments: DP_2 has to combine with a functional head to yield a predicate.
- An obviation effect on the possessor of DP_2 is an indicator of lack of existence presupposition for DP_2

2 Reduction 1: All nominal predications involve a predicative DP

2.1 The proposal

A strong position: in a copular clause with two noun phrases, one is always interpreted as a predicate:

> What must be affirmed here is that identity is not predicated by the copula or equivalently that one of the two noun phrases involved in a copular sentence always plays the role of a predicate. (Moro 2006: p. 8)

(4) a. Louise was [$_{PredP}$ <~~Louise~~> [$_{Pred'}$ Pred^0 lost]].
b. Louise was [$_{PredP}$ <~~Louise~~> [$_{Pred'}$ Pred^0 [a loser]]].
c. Louise was [$_{PredP}$ <~~Louise~~> [$_{Pred'}$ Pred^0 [the loser]]].
d. We considered [$_{PredP}$ Louise [$_{Pred'}$ Pred^0 [lost/a loser/the loser]]].
e. The loser was [$_{PredP}$ Louise [$_{Pred'}$ Pred^0 <~~the loser~~>]].

Economical/simple: if we assume that all of these sentences have at their base a small clause with a Pred^0 head, we only need one such head, which combines with a predicate to yield a predicate: <<e,t>,<e,t>>

But what about cases where **both** DPs seem to be referring expressions? I.e. EQUATIVES?

(5) a. Hesperus is Phosphorus.
b. Phosphorus is Hesperus.

(6) a. The star you see just before dawn is the star you see just after dusk.
b. The star you see just after dusk is the star you see just before dawn.

Moro's argument: you are misled by appearances. Just because a given DP *can* function as a referring expression, that doesn't mean that it *must* function as a referring expression.

(So although we only need Pred^0 to correspond to a single type, we need DPs to be either of type e or of type <e,t>), although this could relate to different "sizes" of DP (Cheng, Heycock & Zamparelli 2017)).

2.2 An argument from obviation

Evidence: without *own*, an possessive pronoun as the possessor of a predicative noun phrase in English cannot co-refer with the subject. In contrast, when a possessed noun phrase occurs in an argument position, coreference is perfectly possible (7c):

(7) a. Dani$_i$ is his$_{*i}$ cook.
b. Dani$_i$ is his$_i$ own cook.
c. Dani$_i$ met his$_i$ (own) cook.

And this holds also for cases that look perhaps more similar to the Hesperus/Phosphorus "equatives:"

(8) a. [The morning star]$_i$ is its$_{*i}$ source of energy.
b. [The morning star]$_i$ is its$_i$ own source of energy.
c. [The morning star]$_i$ lost its$_i$ source of energy.

Background assumption: when used as a predicate, DP_2 does not constitute a complete binding domain, hence the (a) examples with *his/its* are Condition B violations. POSS+*own* is an anaphor.

2.3 Counterevidence

There are various arguments suggesting that in some cases both DPs are referential. Here's the argument from those obviation effects (repeated here as (9a) and (9b)):

(9) a. Dani$_i$ is his$_{*i}$ cook.
b. [The morning star]$_i$ is its$_{*i}$ source of energy.

Problem: this obviation effect does not always obtain! What about (10)?

(10) Dani's cook produces delicious food. But unfortunately, today Dani himself is cooking for us. And as you can tell, ...
Dani$_i$ is not his$_i$ cook!

The original logic leads to the conclusion that in such cases DP_2 is **not** a predicate (Hoeksema & Napoli 1990).

3 Reduction 2: No nominal predications involve a predicative DP

3.1 The proposal

So do we now have to conceded that definite DPs can be either predicative or referential?

Delfitto & Fiorin 2025, Fiorin & Delfitto 2025: **No**.

> DPs are uniformly interpreted as referential. (Delfitto & Fiorin 2025: p. 1)

Their proposal:

- (At least) all definite nominals are referential (type e), **never** predicative (type <e,t>)
- In binominal copular sentences the two noun phrases are arguments of a head H, whose maximal projection is the complement of a meaningless copula
- H expresses ASYMMETRIC IDENTIFICATION:[1]

(11) $[\![H]\!] := \lambda y \lambda x(\forall P \forall s(\text{Ascribe}(s,P,y) \rightarrow \text{Ascribe}(s,P,x)))$

3.2 Reversing the argument from obviation

But then what about cases where the coreference is *not* possible? The cases that Moro (and others) have used as evidence that at least here DP_2 is being intepreted as a predicate?

(12) Dani_i is his_{*i} cook
Unacceptable with the reading 'Dani cooks for himself'

The proposal from Fiorin & Delfitto 2025:

- By a process of "pragmatic strengthening" (argued to be a subcase of CONDITIONAL PERFECTION), in some cases the one-way implication at the heart of 'asymmetrical identification' becomes a symmetric biconditional:

(13) a. $[\![H]\!] := \lambda y \lambda x(\forall P \forall s(\text{Ascribe}(s,P,y) \rightarrow \text{Ascribe}(s,P,x)))$
strengthened to
b. $[\![H]\!] := \lambda y \lambda x(\forall P \forall s(\text{Ascribe}(s,P,y) \leftrightarrow \text{Ascribe}(s,P,x)))$

And then, if x and y share all their properties, by LEIBNIZ'S IDENTITY OF INDISCERNIBLES:

(14) $x = y$

[1] This formula is not exactly as represented in either of the two papers cited, but I think it captures the proposal.

- If pragmatic strengthening + application of Leibniz's law apply, the two DPs in a binominal copular clause will corefer:

  (15) Dani$_i$ is [my$_j$ cook]$_i$

  But if the second DP has a possessor that also co-refers with the subject, the result will be an "i-within-i" configuration, and coreference will be strongly dispreferred:

  (16) *Dani$_i$ is [his$_i$ cook]$_i$

  Why? In its relational use, the noun *cook* takes one argument (the person for whom cooking is done, expressed as the possessor) and gives as a value the person who does the cooking for them (the meaning of the entire DP). The claim here is that there is a presumption against the argument and the value referring to the same individual (that is, against a noun like *cook* being—in the case at hand—an IDENTITY FUNCTION).

- How does *own* overcome the "i-within-i" effect? It "creates the supportive context required to license the identity function."

Note (because this can be quite confusing): under this account the answer in (17) is not an equative, but the answer in (18) is.

(17) Q: Are the people in the pictures, who you described as 'Dani' and 'Dani's cook' respectively, actually one and the same person? Because I've never seen them together...
A: No, of course they're not! Dani$_i$ is not his$_i$ cook! Look, here'a a picture of them together.

(18) Q: Tell me something about Dani. Is he confident and successful?
A: To be honest, Dani$_i$ is his$_i$ *(own) worst enemy, and rarely at ease.

4 A problem for the revised explanation of obviation

Lets look again at a contrast between a context where coreference is possible (19a) and one where it's not (19b). Can we now predict the distinction?

(19) a. Dani's cook produces delicious food. But unfortunately, today Dani himself is cooking for us. And as you can tell, ...
Dani$_i$ isn't his$_i$ cook!
b. A: Dani doesn't cook for himself, right?
B: Yeah, exactly. Dani$_i$ isn't his$_{*i}$ cook.

For examples like (19a), the idea is that this is *not* a case where pragmatic strengthening applies. For a similar example *John is not his father* they say:

> ... we are clearly not expressing the truism that John and his father are not the same person, but we are rather denying that John resembles his father with

> reference to a set of contextually relevant properties. (Fiorin & Delfitto 2025: 11)

But: we can use truisms to convey meaning! Specifically, note that (20), which really does seem to be a statement about (non)-identity, also seems felicitous in the context of (19a):

(20) . . . And as you can tell, Dani$_i$ and his$_i$ cook are not the same person!

For (19b) (*Does Dani cook for himself? No, *Dani isn't his cook*) there is a more serious problem with the explanation

By hypothesis, the speaker is precisely claiming that Dani does **not** have all the properties of his cook (since the example is negated)

(21) a. $\neg\forall$P(Ascribe(s,P,his_cook)$\rightarrow$ Ascribe(s,P,Dani))

So then to the extent that we want to invoke Leibniz's law of the identity of indiscernibles, it tells us that they are distinct individuals.

(22) Dani$_i$ is not [his$_i$ cook]$_j$

But then the function λx.cook(x) is **not** an identity function, so the coreference between subject and possessive should be fine. But it's not.

5 What might be going on with *own*?

Something that's missing from the description of the interpretations so far (but was to some extent implicit in the earlier claim that the use of *own* arose just when the second DP was interpreted as a predicate): a difference in **presuppositions of existence**.

(23) a. I am not my own cousin! (Don't you understand how kinship works?).
No presupposition of existence: consistent with me having no cousins
b. I am not my cousin! (So I can't help, sorry!)
Presupposes existence of (one) salient cousin

Unsurprising if the obligatory use of *own* to allow coreference correlates with a predicative interpretation of the containing DP, given that a typical assumption about **predicate** nominals is that they do not presuppose existence, even when definite.

Unexplained if in both cases the postcopular DP is getting a referential interpretation (a central plank of the proposal in Fiorin & Delfitto 2025).

Can we say anything more about where and why *own* is obligatory?

Some uses of POSS+*own* have no strict locality restriction, and have the usual existence/maximality presuppositions of the possessive on its own (sorry!) See Charnavel 2012 for classification and analysis of similar examples for French *propre*:

(24) a. I can't believe that woman$_i$ demanded that they incarcerate her$_i$ own CHILD!
(POSSESSUM *own*: contrast with alternatives to entire DP)
b. Your children are impossible. My OWN children would never behave like that.
(POSSESSOR *own*: contrast with alternatives to the possessor)

Note that in these case the use of *own* is not obligatory.

In the rather different use in (25) which I'm going to call SUBJECT *own*, we find the strong locality constraint typical of an anaphor:

(25) Please [you] bus your (own) tray.
(SUBJECT *own*: Contrast with alternatives to the subject (You, not someone else, should bus your tray))

(26) Please [you] get your friends$_i$ PRO$_i$ to bus your (??own) tray.

This looks much closer in meaning to what we have in an example like *Dani is his own cook* (Dani, not someone else, cooks for Dani): but still, *own* is not obligatory.

If however the verb **precludes a presupposition of existence** for the object, the use of *own* becomes obligatory with the possessor if there is a local subject:

(27) a. Wow! My kids$_i$ have just invented their$_i$ #(own) language!
b. Just as I feared. Ishbel$_i$ has caused her$_i$ #(own) downfall.

Generalization:

- POSS+*own* has a reading as local anaphor
- As an anaphor, POSS+*own* must be bound within the minimal clause containing it
- A referential DP constitutes a binding domain for a possessive pronoun
- A nonreferential DP (DP with no existential presupposition) does not constitute a binding domain for a possessive pronoun.

(28) She$_i$ is her$_i$ *(own) {cook/worst enemy/cousin}.

6 You say simplification, I say . . .

So now we have to allow something like *her cousin/my mother* (and presumably also definites like *the winner/the fastest skier in the world*) to appear in postcopular position *either* with a predicative interpretation, *or* a referential interpretation.

This doesn't require an "equative copula:" one possiblity is that there are at least two distinct small clause heads: one is an identity function on predicates (essentially Bowers' Pr[ed]), the other could be the F head proposed in Heycock 2012 that combines with an INDIVIDUAL CONCEPT, and then the subject (and see also the VAL head of Percus & Sharvit 2024):

(29) a. Oedipus was [<~~Oedipus~~> [Pred [his own stepfather]]].
b. My mother would have helped you without complaint, but unfortunately I am not [<~~I~~> [H [my mother]]].

Isn't this very uneconomical? Now we have two interpretations for possessed nominals (and definites), **and** two distinct small clause heads.

Maybe, but

- There's other evidence out there that we need at least two different interpretations for possessed nominals and other definite descriptions;

  (30) a. My great opponent and the hero of my youth has passed away.
  b. The hero of the siege and the only man I have ever loved has passed away.

  (31) Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde have/*has passed away.

- It has already been argued that both possessors and articles (including *the*) may instantiate lower heads within the DP, and in such positions do not generate existence presuppositions (Cheng, Heycock & Zamparelli 2017)
- Even Fiorin & Delfitto need an additional small clause head that combines with predicates, given examples with AP or PP predicates:

  (32) Oedipus was [<~~Oedipus~~> [Pred [unhappy/in despair]]].

7 Conclusions/further work

- A postcopular definite DP in English can be predicative in type (no presupposition of existence; no presupposition of maximality for a possessive; no closing off of a binding domain)
- A postcopular definite DP in English can be referential in type (presupposition of existence; presupposition of maximality; complete binding domain)
- Open question: What exactly is the internal syntax of the DPs in these two cases?

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