

Mistaken Identities

Caroline Heycock, University of Edinburgh
caroline.heycock@ed.ac.uk

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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 Rotterdam.
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 Dani represent himself in this case?
A: Yes! In fact Dani_i is already 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 predicative status.

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; DP₂ is predicative.
- Some binominal copular clauses have two arguments: DP₂ has to combine with a functional head to yield a predicate.
- An obviation effect on the possessor of DP₂ is an indicator of lack of existence presupposition for DP₂

2 All copular clauses have exactly one argument?**2.1 Binominal copular clauses as invariably predicational**

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. 08)

- (4)
- a. Louise was [_{PredP} <Louise> [_{Pred'} Pred⁰ lost]].
 - b. Louise was [_{PredP} <Louise> [_{Pred'} Pred⁰ [a loser]]].
 - c. Louise was [_{PredP} <Louise> [_{Pred'} Pred⁰ [the loser]]].
 - d. We considered [_{PredP} Louise [_{Pred'} Pred⁰ [lost/a loser/the loser]]].
 - e. The loser was [_{PredP} Louise [_{Pred'} Pred⁰ <the loser>]].

Economical/simple: if we assume that all of these sentences have at their base a small clause with a Pred⁰ head, we only need one such head, which combines with a predicate to yield a predicate: <<e,t>, <e,t>>

The classic counterargument: what about 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 noun phrase *can* function as a referring expression, that doesn't mean that it *must* function as a referring expression.

Evidence: an unmodified possessive pronoun as the possessor of a predicative noun phrase in English cannot co-refer with the subject. Thus (7a) cannot be interpreted to mean that Dani cooks for himself. (To express this, the addition of *own* is obligatory, as in (7b). 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 as Moro points out, this holds also for cases that look perhaps more similar to the putative equative sentences in (5) and (6) above:

- (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.

In consequence, the alternation that we see a pair like (9)—which in the terminology of Higgins 1973 correspond to PREDICATIONAL (9a) and SPECIFICATIONAL (9b) types of copular clause—involves alternation in the ordering of the subject and predicate of the small clause complement to a single, essentially meaningless copula:

- (9) a. Wanda was [~~Wanda~~> the winner of the race].
- b. The winner of the race was [Wanda <~~the winner of the race~~>]

To summarise: a claim that goes back to Longobardi 1983, 1985, Moro 1997:

- The copula itself is essentially meaningless. It takes a small clause as its complement; the function of any noun phrases in the sentence is determined within this small clause
- Binominal copular constructions always feature one predicative noun phrase; the subject is its argument
- Specificational sentences involve raising of the predicative noun phrase past the underlying subject noun phrase (“inversion”)

A necessary corollary:

- definite noun phrases can have both a referential and a predicative interpretation

2.2 But lets cast the net wider

Can we really generalise from (10a) to (10b), and from there to every binominal copular clause?

- (10) a. The morning star is the source of its own energy.
- b. Hesperus is Phosphorus.

Rothstein 1995: argumental definites, but not predicates, can be modified by non-restrictive relative clauses introduced by *who*.

- (11) a. The (best) duty nurse, who is very efficient, just left.
- b. *I consider Rina the best duty nurse, who is very efficient.

But in some copular clauses, **both** noun phrases can be modified in this way:

- (12) a. The duty nurse, who is very efficient, is Rina, who I am very fond of.
 b. Hesperus and Phosphorus are not distinct stars!
 Hesperus, which you see in the evening, IS Phosphorus, which you see in the morning.

Perhaps even more tellingly:

Remember the diagnostic of obviation (failure of co-reference) between the subject and the possessor of DP₂, as illustrated by examples like (7a) and (8a), repeated here as (13a,b)

- (13) a. Dani_i is his*_i cook.
 b. [The morning star]_i is its*_i source of energy.

But then what about (14)?

- (14) 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 same logic then leads to the conclusion that in this case (and similar) the postcopular nominal is **not** a predicate (Fiorin & Delfitto 2025, Hoeksema & Napoli 1990).

Summary:

- *Contra* the previous claims, in some copular clauses **both** noun phrases are argumental/referring.
- Thus, the “inversion” orders in copular sentences may indeed be an alternation between arguments.

3 Copular clauses containing two arguments

3.1 Identity/equation

The example (14) *Dani is not his cook* could be understood as a denial of identity between the referents of the two noun phrases *Dani* and *his cook*.

Semantic symmetry: If it's true that Dani is not his cook, it must also be true that Dani's cook is not Dani. Although *some* kind of asymmetry also holds, I would judge this to be a matter of Information Structure

- (15) Dani's cook produces delicious food. But unfortunately, today Dani himself is cooking for us. And as you can tell, ...
 a. Dani is not his cook!
 b. #Dani's cook is not Dani!

Another possible case, without negation:

- (16) You say Richard Bachman is a very talented writer, but Stephen King is a lousy one?
But ...
- a. Richard Bachman IS Stephen King!
 - b. Stephen King IS Richard Bachman!

An old idea: the copula *be* is ambiguous; there is a be_{eq} that has two arguments:

- (17) $[[be_{eq}]] = \lambda y. \lambda x. x = y$

But there are a lot of well-known reasons not to adopt this. Lets pursue other avenues first.

3.2 Mistaken Identity

A different type of “identity” sentence: **mistaken** identity (Cumming 2008, Percus & Sharvit 2024, Shaw 2015).

- (18) Scenario: Me and my sister Susannah are throwing a party for my mother Matilda’s 90th birthday. One guest is a long-lost cousin Jean, who has never met anyone in my immediate family. When she comes in, she goes up to my sister Susannah, gives her a bunch of flowers, and congratulates her on looking so young. Evidently she has mistaken her for my mother. My husband could report this later:
- a. Jean thought your sister was your mother!
 - b. Jean thought Susannah was Matilda!
 - c. <Speaking to Susannah> He thought you were your mother!

Asymmetric!

In the same scenario, the following may be false:

- (19) Jean thought my mother was my sister.

Percus & Sharvit 2024: these cases involve a small clause with a head (which they call **VAL**) that selects for **two arguments**, neither of which is a predicate.

The first argument (which will correspond to the complement of the head, i.e. the final noun phrase in the small clause) is of type $\langle s,e \rangle$, a function from worlds to individuals (an “individual concept”).

The second argument (which will correspond to the subject of the small clause) is of type *e* (an individual).

- (20) $[[VAL]]^i = \lambda k_{\langle s,e \rangle}: i \in \text{dom}(k). \lambda x_e. x = k(i)$

- For a definite description like *my mother*: its denotation as an individual concept will be a function that picks out, in every world, the unique individual who is the speaker’s mother in that world.

- For a name for any individual x : the corresponding individual concept is constrained to pick out an individual with properties that x is presupposed to have uniquely.

So:

- *be* continues to be analysed as an essentially meaningless element
- one possible head for a small clause is *VAL*, which takes two arguments, an internal one of type $\langle s, e \rangle$ and an external one of type $\langle e \rangle$ (neither is a predicate: *VAL'* is the predicate!)
- *VAL* asserts that its external argument = the individual that has the properties uniquely associated with the “internal” argument (semantic asymmetry)

4 All binominal copular clauses have two arguments?

4.1 Generalizing the account: Delfitto & Fiorin

Delfitto & Fiorin 2025, Fiorin & Delfitto 2025: not only the type of “mistaken identity” copular sentences involve two referential arguments (rather than one argument and a predicate); this is the case for **all** binominal copular constructions.

Their proposal:

- (at least) all definite nominals are referential (type e), never predicative (type $\langle e, t \rangle$)
- in binominal copular sentences the two noun phrases are arguments of a head *H* (so *H* is the head of a small clause complement to a meaningless copula, just as *VAL* is for Percus & Sharvit)
- *H* expresses “asymmetric identification”:¹

$$(21) \quad [[H]] := \lambda y \lambda x (\forall P \forall s (Ascribe(s, P, y) \rightarrow Ascribe(s, P, x)))$$

This then gives them a natural account of examples like the following:

- (22) Anna_i è tutta sua_i madre. [Italian]
 Anna is all her mother
 ‘Anna is entirely her mother / is like her mother in every way.’

And, they argue, also examples like (23):

- (23) a. Tiepolo_i è i suoi_i cieli. [Italian]
 Tiepolo is the his skies
 Possible interpretation: The beauty of Tiepolos painting resides in the skies he painted.
- b. Una star_i (non) è il suo_i pubblico. [Italian]
 a star (not) is the her/his audience
 ‘A star is not her/his audience.’

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

- c. Un popolo_i (non) è la sua_i storia [Italian]
 A people (not) is the its history
 'A people is (not) its history.'

Note the coreference!

4.2 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 DP₂ is being interpreted as a predicate?

- (24) 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:

- (25) 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:

- (26) $x = y$

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

- (27) 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:

- (28) *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 (29) is not an equative, but the answer in (30) is.

- (29) 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’s a picture of them together.
- (30) 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.

4.3 A problem for the revised explanation of obviation

Lets look again at a contrast between a context where coreference is possible (31a) and one where it’s not (31b). Can we now predict the distinction?

- (31) 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 (31a), 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 (32), which really does seem to be a statement about (non)-identity, also seems felicitous in the context of (31a):

- (32) . . . And as you can tell, Dani_i and his_i cook are not the same person!

For (31b) (*Dani doesn’t cook for himself, right? — Yeah, exactly, *Dani isn’t his cook*) there is another 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)

- (33) a. $\neg\forall P(\text{Ascribe}(s,P,\text{his_cook})\rightarrow \text{Ascribe}(s,P,\text{Dani}))$

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.

- (34) Dani_i is not [his_i cook]_j

But then the function $\lambda x.\text{cook}(x)$ is **not** an identity function, so the coreference between subject and possessive should be fine. But it's not.

4.4 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**.

- (35) 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*:

- (36) 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 (37) which I'm going to call SUBJECT *own*, we find the strong locality constraint typical of an anaphor:

- (37) Sign in a cafe:
Please [you] bus your own tray
 (SUBJECT *own*: Contrast with alternatives to the subject. You, not someone else, should bus your tray)

- (38) 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:

- (39) 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:

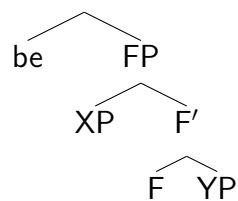
- POSS+*own* has a reading as local anaphor
- As an anaphor, POSS+*own* must be bound within the minimal clause containing it
- A referential DP constitutes a binding domain for a possessive pronoun
- A nonreferential DP (DP with no existential presupposition) does **not** constitute a binding domain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

- (40) She_i is her_i *(own) {cook/worst enemy/cousin}.

5 More ways than one to get a predicate from a nominal

So now we have two very different takes on the components of the small clause (FP) that occurs in binominal copular structures:

(41)



- Longobardi & Moro (and many others): YP is always a predicate
- Delfitto & Fiorin: YP is always a referring expression acting as an argument of F

Claim here:

- we have evidence that we want to distinguish between (at least) two different interpretations of definite “noun phrases”
- **one** of those interpretations is predicative ($\langle e, t \rangle$); it can itself function as the predicate in a small clause (possibly with a semantically vacuous Pred head)
- **another** interpretation is argumental ($\langle s, e \rangle$): it can be the argument to a functional head that returns a predicate ($\langle e, t \rangle$) along the lines of Percus & Sharvit 2024, Heycock 2012 and similar to Delfitto & Fiorin 2025

Other evidence for definites as predicates

Coordination

An old observation: possible to conjoin nominal and adjectival predicates:

(42) Masha is brilliant and the probable future winner of a Nobel prize!

But as long as we allow coordination of constituents of different categories provided they are of the right semantic type, this could be coordination of the adjectival predicate with the projection of F&D's H that **contains** *the probable future winner of a Nobel prize* but is itself a predicate.

More revealing: appositional conjunction (Coppock & Beaver 2015, Hoeksema 1988, Winter 2001)

- (43) 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.

Note the interpretation (and the agreement): the reference in each case is to a single individual who satisfies both properties. This is expected if predicates are conjoined:

- (44) a. He is heroic and loveable.
b. He is a hero and a loveable man.
c. He is the hero of the siege and only man I have ever loved.

Winter 2001: cases like (43) are possible because they too involve conjunction of **predicates** (with subsequent type-shifting to get the argumental reading—this could involve a silent functional head above the level of the conjunction).

Notably, while definites (including possessives) can participate in appositional conjunction, proper names cannot:

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

→ Definites (including possessives) can get a predicative reading (as evidenced by appositional conjunction) even when not in a small clause; proper names cannot.

Existence presuppositions

Definites in predicate position retain uniqueness presuppositions, but can lack existence presuppositions (see in particular Coppock & Beaver 2015):

(46) He isn't the only fish in the sea.

- (47) a. She isn't the queen of the world.
b. Seven is not the largest prime number.

(48) I don't think that Janna is the last woman in Paris.

- a. Scenario 1: There is a single woman remaining in Paris. The speaker believes that that the identity of that last woman is not Janna (but maybe her cousin Jeanne).
b. Scenario 2: The speaker believes that there are more women than just Janna in Paris. That is, there is no individual who can be identified as *the last woman in Paris*.

- (49) With a stroke of the magician's wand, I became the cleverest woman in the world.
- a. Scenario 1: The cleverest woman in the world is Amanda K. The magician transformed me into Amanda K.
 - b. Scenario 2: The magician endowed me with the property of being cleverer than any other woman in the world.

→ If every binominal copular structure with a definite involved a referential use, how could we account for the availability of readings with no existential presupposition, as in (46), (47), (48b), (49b)?

Summary:

- Some definite noun phrases constitute predicates. In this case they lack existential presuppositions.
- Some definite noun phrases refer. They can however be part of the predicate in a small clause if they are the argument to a suitable functional head.

6 Conclusions/directions

- There is more than one way to build a predicate from a nominal.
- Some definite noun phrases constitute predicates. In this case they lack existential presuppositions.
- Some definite noun phrases refer. They can however be part of the predicate in a small clause if they are the argument to a suitable functional head.
- In non-verbal predications, different languages may have different inventories of functional heads and/or morphological realization of functional heads.

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