

Specificational sentences are identity sentences: New evidence from Muong

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Introduction: Copular clauses such as the ones shown in (1) are categorized as “specificational” according to Higgins (1979). In these clauses, the post-copula phrase refers to an identifiable unique individual, whereas the pre-copula phrase does not. When uttering these clauses, the speaker does not assume that the addressee can identify the referent of the first phrase without the information provided by the second phrase.

- (1) My favourite actor is Stephen. (2) The murderer is William.

A body of literature questions whether specificational copular clause is a category in its own right. Some (e.g. Moro 1997, Mikkelsen 2005 and Shlonsky & Rizzi 2018) argue that specificational clauses are “inverse” predication clauses; the initial phrase denotes a property, and the post-copular phrase is the subject of the property. Other theories (e.g. Heycock 2012 and Arregi et. al. 2021) argue that specificational clauses are a subtype of identity sentences, which indicate an identity relation between the extensions of the two phrases.

In this paper, I present data on Muong [ISO 639-3 mtq], an understudied Austroasiatic language spoken in Vietnam. I argue that analysing Muong specificational sentences as a subtype of identity sentence can better account for the facts.

The data: Like a number of European languages (e.g. den Dikken 2017), specificational clauses in Muong require the post-copular phrase to be the focus, i.e. corresponding to the wh- element in the QUD (e.g. Rooth 1992, Beaver et. al. 2017). For instance, (3) is felicitous as a response to the question ‘Who does Lien like?’, where the post-copular phrase, *Hằng* corresponds to the wh- element in the question. On the other hand, (3) is not felicitous as a response to the request ‘Can you tell me something about Hang?’, where ‘Hang’ is the QUD.

- (3) *mỗi mà Liên ưa là Hằng*
person REL Lien like COP Hang
‘The/One person that Lien likes is Hang. Lien likes Bao too.’

While English relative phrases are specified for definiteness, Muong relative phrases are not. The initial phrase of (3) is not morphologically marked as definite, nor is it semantically definite, i.e. presuppose uniqueness (e.g. Coppock & Beaver 2015). Both (3) and (4), which is the “inverse” of (3), can be continued with the utterance ‘Lien likes Bao too’. This suggests that the phrase *mỗi mà Liên ưa* does not presuppose the uniqueness of the individual whom Lien likes, regardless of whether it occurs in the initial or post-copular position.

- (4) *Hằng là mỗi mà Liên ưa*
Hang COP person REL Lien like
‘Hang is a person that Lien likes.’

The fact that the initial phrase of (3) can be interpreted as indefinite does not necessarily imply that a property-denoting phrase can occur in the initial position of a Muong copular clause, since some indefinite phrases can refer to an individual (Fodor & Sag 1982). There is evidence against analysing the initial phrase of a Muong specificational sentence as a property-denoting phrase. First, adjectival predicates cannot occur in the initial position in Muong. For instance, while the adjective *khôn* ‘clever’ can be predicative (5), it cannot occur in the initial position (7). Only when the noun *mỗi* is present, (7) is acceptable. Assuming that a nominal phrase can either refer to an individual or denote a property, while an adjective always denotes a property,

the fact that an adjective cannot occur in the initial position is not in favour of the claim that a property-denoting phrase can occur in the initial position.

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| <p>(5) Lien khôn
 Lien clever
 ‘Lien is clever.’</p> | <p>(6) Lien là mỗl khôn
 Lien COP person clever
 ‘Lien is a clever person.’</p> |
| <p>(7) *(mỗl) khôn là Lien</p> | |

Further, only a subset of indefinite nominal phrases can occur in the initial position. For instance, although (8) is well-formed, it is infelicitous in the context stated. Since the post-copular phrase in (8) is the focus, the infelicity is unlikely due to information structure.

- (8) CONTEXT: Hang and Bao are playing football in the playground after school. Hang kicks the ball very high and it is stuck on a tree branch. Hang says, ‘We should find a tall person to help us get the ball down. But who is tall among the people in our school?’ Bao replies:

#mỗl dẫl là Vinh
 person tall COP Vinh
 Intended: ‘Vinh is a tall person.’

The context of (8) favours interpreting the initial phrase as denoting a property that describes Vinh, rather than referring to an individual. Hence, although (3) suggests that an indefinite phrase can occur in the initial position of a Muong specificational sentence, (8) suggests that the kind of indefinite phrase that occur in the initial positions is the kind that refers to an individual, rather than denotes a property. In this paper, I will show that an indefinite phrase that cannot occur in the initial position of a specificational sentence does not have the specific indefinite interpretation, i.e. cannot be used to refer to an individual, when it occurs in an argument position. This further suggests that a property-denoting indefinite phrase cannot occur in the initial position of a specificational sentence.

Analysis & Conclusion: Given that the predicate-inversion analysis (e.g. Mikkelsen 2005, Shlonsky & Rizzi 2018) predicts that any predicate can occur in the initial position, it over-generalizes in Muong. Based on this, I argue that both phrases of a Muong specificational sentence, regardless of in/definiteness, refer to an individual, and the sentence asserts that the referents of the two phrases are identical. Muong specificational sentences, like specificational sentences of a number of other languages, require the post-copular phrase to be the focus. I draw on Shlonsky (2024) to account for this property. Therefore, although Muong does not mark definiteness like English, specificational sentences of the languages share similar properties. The Muong data provides evidence that analysing a specificational sentence as a subtype of identity sentence has merits over the competing analysis.

References: Arregi, Francez & Martinovic (2021) Three arguments for an individual concept analysis • Beaver, Roberts, Simons & Tonhauser (2017) Questions under discussion • Coppock & Beaver (2015) Definiteness and determinancy • Den Dikken (2017) Pseudoclefts and other specificational copular sentences • Fodor & Sag (1982) Referential and quantificational and indefinites • Heycock (2012) Specification, equation and agreement in copular sentences • Higgins (1979) The pseudo-cleft construction in English • Mikkelsen (2005) *Copular clauses: specification, predication and equation* • Moro (1997) *The raising of predicates* • Shlonsky & Rizzi (2018) Criterial Freezing in small clauses and the cartography of copular constructions • Shlonsky (2024) From Bantu subject-object reversal to inverted copular sentences