

Context-Dependent Interpretations and Case in Copular Sentences

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1. Introduction. This paper presents new data in support of an approach to *unagi*-sentences.

2. Challenges to the inference approach. Example (1) without *-o 2-kan* is a typical *unagi*-sentence allowing context-dependent interpretations. One analysis treats such meanings as inferences, assuming no non-copular verb (e.g., *ordered*) is present at any stage (e.g., Obana 2001). However, this approach faces a previously unnoticed problem: it cannot straightforwardly explain case assignment in XP2. Accusative appears in (1) with *-o 2-kan*, and other cases are also possible in XP2 depending on the context. ((1) is ill-formed with *-o* but without *2-kan*, but it's compatible with our analysis; see Koizumi 1995.)

(1) [boku-wa]_{XP1} [unagi(-o 2-kan)]_{XP2}-desu.

I-TOP eel-ACC 2-CLF-COP

‘(lit.) I’m (2 pieces of) eel sushi.’/‘(At a restaurant): I **ordered** (2 pieces of) eel sushi.’

Another problem emerges from (2)-(3). In Japanese, the PP *konshuuchuuni* adjoins to clauses, not nominals. Thus, unless XP2 in Ito’s utterance in (2) contains a VP headed by a non-copular verb, it is unclear why the PP is licensed there. The approach also struggles to account for the infelicity of (3). Although Ito’s utterance is superficially identical to that in (2), in (3) *ninensei-ni konshuuchuuni* and *senkoutodoke-o 2-mai-zutsu* are interpreted as belonging to different clauses. The resulting infelicity can be analyzed as a violation of a clausemate condition. Such a constraint is difficult to capture under an analysis that denies silent clausal structure within XP2.

(2) [Context: Two high school homeroom teachers coordinate grade-level tasks. This week they must distribute two copies of a major declaration form to each sophomore.]

Eto: nanika haifubutsu arimashitakke? (‘Was there any handout?’)

Ito: etto, [ninensei-ni konshuuchuuni senkoutodoke-o 2-mai-zutsu]_{XP2}-desu
well sophomore-DAT this.week major.form-ACC 2-CLF-each-COP

‘(Intended) Well, we’re to give two copies of a major form to each sophomore this week.’

(3) [Context: Same as (2), except the task is to announce next week’s distribution.]

Eto: What was the announcement about next week’s handout again?

Ito: # <Same utterance as Ito’s in (2).>

‘(Intended) Well, we’re to inform **the sophomores this week** [that we will give **two copies of a major declaration form next week**].’

Another problem arises in (4). (4B) is well-formed when *graduate* is overt or omitted. When *desu* replaces it, however, (4B) is forced to be interpreted as answering a contextually salient question (e.g., *which university are you graduating from?*); without such a question, it is infelicitous, and sounds like bragging about graduating from a US university. The inference approach cannot straightforwardly explain how the copular version of (4B) triggers the Q&A implicature.

(4) A: kotoshi sotsugyooshimasu-ka. (‘Are you going to graduate this year?’)

B: hai, amerika-no daigaku {✓-o (sotsugyooshimasu), #desu}.

yes US-Gen university Acc graduate COP

‘(Intended) Yes, I’m going to graduate from a university in the US.’

3. Challenges to the substitution approach. Another analysis posits that *unagi*-sentences initially contain a non-copular verb, later replaced by the copula as a pro-form (e.g., Okutsu 1978). This view also faces previously unnoticed problems, which reduce to a general issue: substitution fails to preserve the syntactic and semantic properties of the original non-copular sentence. First, it does not straightforwardly explain why *graduate* in (4B) cannot be replaced by the copula, nor why such substitution induces a meaning shift, unlike ordinary pro-form substitution. That is, there is a mismatch before and after substitution in terms of Q&A implications. Second, *unagi*-sentences often contain the non-past copula *desu* even when describing past events, as

in (1), creating a tense mismatch between the original and substituted forms. Third, exhaustivity interpretations diverge. In response to *nani-o tabemashita-ka* ‘What did you eat?’, the non-copular sentence in (5a) is acceptable, but its *unagi*-sentence counterpart in (5b) is not; (5b) carries an exhaustivity implicature, forcing the interpretation that my meal is a single entity that is both eel and conger—an implausible result. By contrast, (5c) is well-formed: each meal is interpreted as a single entity (mine as eel, Taku’s as conger), so no contradiction arises.

(5) a. *unagi-o tabete, anago-mo tabemashita.*

eel-ACC ate conger-also ate

‘I ate an eel and I also ate a conger.’

b. **unagi-de anago(-mo)-desu.*

eel-COP conger(-also)-COP

‘I am an eel, and I am also a conger.’

c. *boku-wa unagi-de Taku-wa anago-desu.*

I-TOP eel-COP Taku-TOP conger-COP

‘I am an eel, and Taku is a conger.’

Thus, the substitution approach must tolerate mismatches in Q&A implications, tense, and exhaustivity. More broadly, it fails to capture the close kinship between *unagi*-sentences and specificational pseudocleft/copular sentences, which exhibit the same properties with respect to tense (Declerck 1988), Q&A implications (Higgins 1979), and exhaustivity (Declerck 1988).

4. The ellipsis approach. On the ellipsis approach, *unagi*-sentences are elliptical (pseudo)clefts (e.g., Kitahara 1984). Following ellipsis-based accounts of pseudoclefts (e.g., Schlenker 2003), we assume XP2 is underlyingly clausal, as sketched in (6) for (1).

(6) *boku-wa [pro]_{XP1} [unagi-o 2-kan **tanonda-n**]_{XP2} desu.*

I-TOP

eel-ACC 2-CLF ordered-COMP COP

‘As for me, the strongest true answer to “what did you order?” is “I ordered two eels”.’ Under an ellipsis-based analysis of pseudoclefts such as *[what he ordered]_{XP1} is [eel]_{XP2}*, XP1 denotes a question and XP2 a proposition answering it. Crucially, the question-denoting XP1 licenses ellipsis in XP2: *[he ordered eel]_{XP2}* (e.g., Weir 2014), which is obligatory as in some types of ellipsis (e.g., Merchant 2004). Using Dayal’s (1996) Answer operator, which maps a question meaning of XP1 to its strongest true answer, and assuming that the copula equates this answer with XP2 (e.g., Sharvit 1999), we derive the interpretation: the strongest true answer to “What did he order?” is “He ordered eel.” We extend this to *unagi*-sentences, where XP1 is a question-denoting pro (Harada 2019) unlike in pseudoclefts whose XP1 is an overt question-denoting clause. This immediately addresses the earlier challenges: (i) case is assigned by an elided predicate, (ii) clause-adjoining material can appear in XP2 because XP2 is clausal, (iii) clausemate effects follow as in Japanese (pseudo)clefts (e.g., Koizumi 1995), and (iv) Q&A implications, tense mismatch, and exhaustivity are properties of specificational (pseudo)clefts.

5. Conclusion. The ellipsis approach is required: context dependency is grammatically encoded and does not always arise through inference. While there is a slight difference in case licensing between Japanese and Korean copular sentences, our consultants confirm that the Korean counterparts of (1)–(5) pattern with the corresponding Japanese data, and that Harada’s (2019) argument for a question-denoting pro in Japanese is also replicable in Korean. At the conference, we will present Korean data and consider comparable copular constructions in other languages. We will further demonstrate that the challenges to the inference/pragmatic approach also extend to ‘semantic approaches’ to fragments (e.g., Ginzburg & Sag 2000) when applied to *unagi*-sentences.

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