

Predicational vs. specificational copular sentences: Evidence from Tsova-Tush

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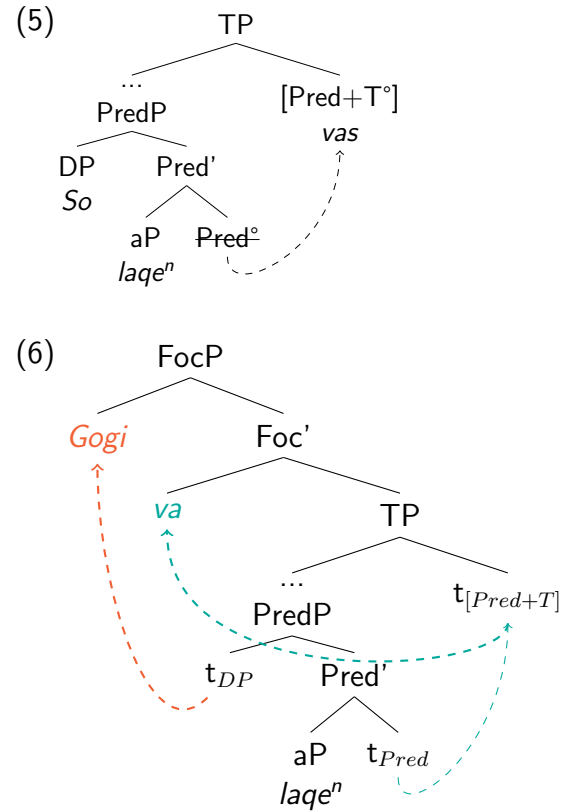
1 Introduction: Tsova-Tush (aka Tush or Batsbi) is a severely endangered Northeast Caucasian language spoken in Georgia (approx. 300 speakers). Tsova-Tush exhibits a default SOV order, although (discourse-conditioned) variation is reported in existing literature as ‘common and flexible’ in main clauses (Hauk and Harris (2025), p. 34). The goal of this paper is to investigate this claim in copular constructions (CCs). We argue that whereas predicational CCs display the flexibility of verbal predications, specificational CCs (Higgins (1979)) are more rigid. We account for their differences with a combined study of their syntactic, contextual, and intonational patterns.

2 Predicational CCs: Our fieldwork (in Zemo-Alvani, Georgia, summer 2024 and 2025, with 6 male and female consultants, aged between 55 and 80) uncovered four word-orders for predicational CC. The neutral order is in (1). The translations in (2) and (3) are accompanied by the questions they answer, and that in (4) by a previous statement that it rebuts:

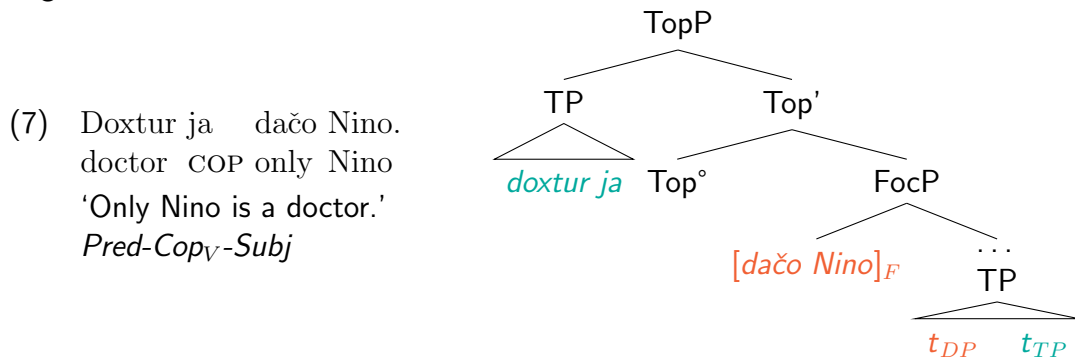
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|---|--|
| (1) So laqe ⁿ vas. (Subj-Pred-Cop _V)
I tall COP
‘I am tall’ | (3) Laqe ⁿ so vas. (Pred-Subj-Cop _V)
tall I COP
‘I am tall’ (Who is the tall one?) |
| (2) Gogi va laqe ⁿ . (Sub-Cop _V -Pred)
Gogi COP tall
‘Gogi is tall’. (Who is tall?) | (4) Laqe ⁿ vas so. (Pred-Cop _V -Subj)
tall COP I
‘I am tall’ (You are average height!) |

3 Analysis: Following Roy (2013); Roy (2025), we propose that Tsova-Tush neutral predicational CCs have the structure in (5) with a head-final realization. Moreover, we show that information structure directly determines the word order alternatives to (1). Specifically, and in line with what has been proposed in a number of languages (e.g. Shlonsky and Bocci (2019); Rizzi (2024)), we propose that foci in Tsova-Tush undergo **focus-movement** to the specifier of a left-periphrastic Focus Phrase. In predicational CC either the subject or the predicate may be focus-moved. This movement is accompanied by head **T-to-C movement**, rendering what Rizzi (1996) terms a ‘residual V2’ (i.e., an immediately postfocal position for the verb or copula). It is this operation that underlies constructions like (2) (i.e., subject focus, which is shown in (6)) and (4) (i.e., predicate focus).

In addition, this basic focus syntax can also be accompanied by topicalization displacements to a higher TopP layer. This further movement, we propose, is at play in (3). It may also be involved in (1), when uttered preceded by, e.g., a negation as a rebuttal to the statement ‘You are average height’.



4 Focus final word orders: Besides the preverbal focus patterns above, Tsova-Tush also exhibits sentence-final focus (7). We argue that this order is derived by remnant movement of the rest of the clause into a higher givenness/topic projection, after focus movement has taken place, in line with what has been proposed for a number of languages and constructions including Bellunese (Munaro, Poletto, and Pollock (2001)), Basque (Ortiz de Urbina (2002)), Spanish (Uribe-Etxebarria (2003); Etxepare and Uribe-Etxebarria (2005)), as well as Hebrew (Shlonsky and Rizzi (2018)) and French (Roy and Shlonsky (2019)). This combination of operations generates structures like (7) below, where the focal element surfaces in the clause-final position, preceded by given material in the neutral word order (*Pred-Cop* in (7)). In contrast to ‘normal’ focus constructions, in these we will not observe a postfocal position for the copula, since head-movement is taken to be a PF phenomenon (Chomsky (1995), *et seq.*), and having been displaced higher up along with the remnant, the copula does not find the configuration for T-to-C movement:



These structures are typically accompanied by a continuation rise ($\approx$ Topical) intonational contour associated to the right edge of the topicalized element (the copula).

5 Specificational sentences: Specificational CCs are more rigid than predicationals ones, and allow only for a subset of the orders discussed above: they can surface with a neutral $DP1_{indiv-concept}-Cop-DP2_{ref}$ order (8), or with its mirror image (9). The neutral order in (8) results from the focalization of $DP2$ (i.e., the referential expression *Gogi*), as commonly assumed for specificational sentences in many languages (a.o., Heycock and Kroch (2002); Mikkelsen (2005)), and following the basic focus syntax of Tsova-Tush (6), together with remnant movement of the rest of the clause to a high Top position. The order in (9) then results from the same movement combinations but with focalization of $DP1$ (i.e., the superlative *hamaxe? žanliⁿ Alvani*, which expresses an individual concept).

- (8) hamaxe? laqeⁿ va Gogi (9) Gogi va hamaxe? žanli Alvani
 most tall COP Gogi Gogi COP most strong alvani.IN
 ‘The tallest one is Gogi.’ ‘Gogi is the strongest one in Alvani.’

Specificational CCs make use of focus and topic movement combinations otherwise available in the grammar of Tsova-Tush. They are not special in the type of focus-final structure they involve, as given in (7), but rather in the fact that they cannot involve e.g., simple focus or simple topic, which is available to predicationals CCs.

6 Cross-linguistic perspective: Interestingly, the proposed analysis for Tsova-Tush specificational CCs (7) corresponds precisely to the analysis of specificational CCs proposed by Shlonsky and Rizzi (2018) for Hebrew and Roy and Shlonsky (2019) for French (with remnant movement to a high Subject position rather than Topic), two languages with (more) rigid word-orders. What Tsova-Tush provides, however, is overt syntactic evidence for this analysis.