

Specificational sentences, scrambling, and special nouns

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Particularly since the seminal work of Higgins (1973), we have an embarrassment of types of copular sentences, all apparently expressing different types of predication, with only minimal differences in the strings: predicative, equative, identificational, specificational. There have been at least two approaches (each with a number of variants) to reducing the “specificational” category to another type: either it has been treated as a type of predication, but with the “inverse” order, or it has been treated as a species of equative. In previous joint work with Anthony Kroch we have argued for the latter approach, one of the strongest reasons being the otherwise mysterious failure of clear predicates to invert, in contrast to cases that can plausibly be given an equative interpretation, as illustrated by the minimal contrast in (1)–(2):

- (1) a. John is the one thing that I want a man to be (he’s honest).
b. *The one thing I want a man to be is John.
- (2) a. Honest is the one thing I want a man to be.
b. The one thing I want a man to be is honest.

In this talk I will argue, however, that a more detailed look at the evidence from agreement patterns, in particular, bears out Moro’s claim (a claim also found in the work of Heggie and Williams, and refined and defended in work by many other authors) that specificational sentences are best understood as inverted predications. I will further argue that Mikkelsen is correct in relating the inversion to the particular information structure that is a hallmark of specificational sentences, and that in fact the “inversion” that they exhibit is parasitic on other strategies that these languages make use of for lining up constituents with the “default” position for focus.

Finally, I will return to the most problematic case for an inversion analysis—the ungrammaticality of (1b)—and suggest that it may fall out from an appropriate syntactic analysis of Partee’s “attribute” / Moltmann’s “special” nouns.