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Argument alternation in (copular) predication*

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1. Introduction

Discussion of argument-taking is, naturally, focused on verbs. But English, like many other languages, includes constructions where it seems that the predicate is headed by some other category, including nouns. This is the category I will be concentrating on in this paper. Thus in (1a,b) the interpretation suggests that at least in semantic terms the predicate is the Adjective Phrase *clever*, the PP *at the height of her fame*, or the nominal[1] *the source of the rumor*, with the subject *Ayano* as its external argument.

(1) a. Ayano is {clever / at the height of her fame / the source of the rumor}.
b. Everyone considers [Ayano {clever / at the height of her fame / the source of the rumor}].

Of course, in (1a) the copula *be* is required, but it is generally assumed that this verbal element is required to satisfy morphosyntactic constraints. One classic argument for this is the possibility of the same items (*clever, at the height of her fame,* etc.) combining with their external argument in the absence of the copula, as in (1b).

If we then consider what kind of argument alternation could occur here, the most striking candidate is the possibility for some binominal copular clauses—those where the head of the predicate, as well as of the subject, is a noun—to allow the two nominals to appear in the opposite order.

(2) a. {*Guilty / The source of the rumor} is Ayano.
b. Everyone considers [{*guilty / *the source of the rumor} Ayano].
c. If we've ruled out all the other alternatives, that would make [{*guilty / the source of the rumor} Ayano].

Questions arise immediately. First: Is this really *argument* alternation? That is, if *the source of the rumor* in (1a,b) is a predicate, then there is only one argument in the clause, the other element involved in the reordering is the predicate. A second question that is

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[1] I will generally use the term "nominal" to refer to the maximal nominal projection, as for most of the discussion in this short paper the question of whether this is an NP, a DP, or some other category is not explored.

very much entwined with the first is what exactly any nominals in a copular clause are arguments *of*.

In this paper I will briefly outline two lines of analysis that have been pursued on these questions. I will then argue that while both of these approaches have greatly improved our understanding of nominal predication and the observed alternations, both underplay the variety of ways that nominals can function as (part of) predicates in copular constructions. I advocate instead for differentiating between cases where one nominal gets a predicative interpretation, and others where both are arguments.

2. Line 1: All binominal copular clauses have one predicative nominal

2.1. The proposal in rough summary

In a sequence of influential works dating back to the 90s, Andrea Moro, following Longobardi (1985), has argued for the strong position that in a binominal copular clause one nominal 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: 8)

Thus, in (3b), *Vina* is an argument of the predicate *a/the victor*, just as it is an argument of the AP *victorious* in (3a).

(3) a. Vina was victorious.
b. Vina was a/the victor.

In fact the structure is a little more complex, in that predication is established in a "small clause" complement to the copula, with the subject subsequently raising above the copula where that appears, as in (4a). Alternatively, it may be the nominal predicate that moves to the higher subject position, as in (4b).

(4) a. Vina was [<~~Vina~~> the victor]
b. The victor was [Vina <~~the victor~~>]

Thus the alternation in order illustrated in (2) and (4) involves only one argument; the alternation is in the order of this argument and the predicate: "predicate inversion".

A classic apparent counterexample to the claim that all binominal copular clause must feature one predicative nominal involves "equatives," where both nominals appear to be referential:

(5) a. Hesperus is Phosphorus. / Phosphorus is Hesperus.
b. The Morning Star is the Evening Star. / The Evening Star is the Morning Star

Moro argues, however, that such examples also involve one predicative nominal. The primary evidence he gives in Moro 2006 comes from a particular case of pronominal obviation (obligatory non-coreference). As had been discussed in earlier literature, a pronominal possessor of a predicative noun phrase in English, or Italian, cannot co-refer

with the subject, unless *own* is added, which is typically assumed (without a great deal of discussion) to combine with the pronominal possessor to form some kind of anaphor. Thus, without *own*, (6a) cannot be interpreted to mean that Omer cooks for himself. In contrast, coreference with the unmodified pronoun is perfectly possible when a possessed noun phrase occurs in an argument position (6b).

(6) a. Omer$_i$ is his$_i$ *(own) cook.
c. Omer$_i$ met his$_i$ cook.

Importantly this holds also for cases that look perhaps more similar to the putative equative sentences in (5) above:

(7) a. [The morning star]$_i$ is its$_i$ *(own) source of energy.
b. [The morning star]$_i$ lost its$_i$ source of energy.

The obviation effect in (6a, 7a), then, is given as evidence that it is not possible for both of the nominals in the sentence to be referring arguments; one must always be predicative.

2.2. A problem

A first concern with the strong claim that in a binominal copular clause one of the nominals has to be predicative is that some diagnostics point in the other direction. For example, argumental definites, but not predicates, can be modified by non-restrictive relative clauses introduced by *who* (Rothstein 1995). But in some copular clauses, *both* noun phrases can be modified in this way, suggesting then that neither one is being interpreted predicatively:

(8) The duty nurse, who as you have noted is very efficient, is Rina, who I am very fond of.

Even more telling is the argument made most extensively in Fiorin and Delfitto 2025 concerning Moro's diagnostic of obviation illustrated by (6a,7a). As these authors show, there are other examples where the coreference is fully acceptable. (9a) is from Hoeksema and Napoli (1990), (9b) is from Hartmann et al. (2024).

(9) a. [Don't talk to John! Talk to his boss!] John$_i$ is not his$_i$ boss!
b. Omer's cook produces delicious food. But unfortunately, today Omer himself is cooking for us. And as you can tell, Omer$_i$ is not his$_i$ cook

Moro's own logic then leads to the conclusion that in such examples the postcopular nominal is *not* in fact a predicate.

3. Line 2: Noun phrases are never themselves predicates

3.1. The proposal

We have just seen evidence that it is possible to have a binominal copular clause where neither nominal is predicative. Fiorin and Delfitto (2025) Fiorin and Delfitto (2025) go further, arguing that binominal copular clauses *never* involve nominals with a predicative interpretation. Instead, they propose that at least all definites (including possessed

nominals like *his boss*) are always referential (type *e*). At the same time, they wish to maintain the position that the copula itself takes a small clause as its argument. So they propose that this small clause may be headed by a functional category H, which combines with two referential phrases (is of type <e,<e,t>>) and expresses "asymmetric identification".[2]

(10) [[H]] := $\lambda y \lambda x(\forall P \forall s(\text{Ascribe}(s,P,y) \rightarrow \text{Ascribe}(s,P,x)))$

They describe the denotation of H as "a transitive relation between two arguments y and x that is true iff for all properties P and cognitive agents s involved in the conversational exchange at stake, if P is relevant to s for identifying object y, then P is also relevant to s for identifying object x." (Fiorin and Delfitto 2025: 10–11).

This then gives them a natural account of examples like (11).

(11) *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.'

They further argue that this yields the correct meaning for examples like (12a–c).

(12) a. *Tiepolo$_i$ è i suoi$_i$ cieli.* [Italian]
Tiepolo is the his skies
Possible interpretation: 'The beauty of Tiepolo's painting resides in the skies he painted'

b. *Una star$_i$ (non) è il suo pubblico*. [Italian]
a star (not) is the her/his audience
`A star is (not) her/his audience.'

c. John$_i$ is not his$_i$ father.

Note that in all these cited cases there is coreference between the subject and the possessor of the postcopular nominal, just as in (9a,b) above.

But if *all* binominal copular clauses involve H combining with two referential nominals, which like any other referential nominal can include a possessor that is coreferential with another argument (as in (7b) above), how are we to account for examples like (6a/7a), where such coreference is impossible? The proposal in Fiorin and Delfitto 2025 is as follows:

First, the one-way implication at the heart of "asymmetrical identification" may become a symmetric biconditional by a process of "pragmatic strengthening." Given a statement of asymmetric identification of the form *DP^1 is DP^2*, where *DP^1* refers to object *a* and *DP^2* to object b, its meaning can be represented as in (13a). Then pragmatic strengthening applies to yield the biconditional in (13b). Fiorin and Delfitto argue that this strengthening is an instance of the pragmatic process of "conditional perfection," whereby a conditional like *If you mow the lawn I'll give you $5* invites the further inference that if you don't mow the lawn, I won't give you $5 (and so is interpreted as a

[2] The formulation in (10) is not exactly as given in either of Delfitto and Fiorin's two papers, but I think that it matches the intention as described in the texts. For the authors' definitions, see Delfitto and Fiorin, example (35) and Fiorin and Delfitto (2025: 10).

biconditional). The biconditional in (13b) now states that the referents of the two nominal arguments share all (relevant) properties. Leibniz's principle of the identity of indiscernibles (if two entities share all their properties, they are identical; i.e. they cannot be distinct objects) then entails that the two arguments refer to the same entity, i.e. the sentence is now interpreted as the claim of identity in (13c).

(13) a. ∀P∀s(Ascribe(s,P,b) → Ascribe(s,P,a)))
pragmatically strengthened (by Conditional Perfection) to
b. ∀P∀s(Ascribe(s,P,b) ↔ Ascribe(s,P,a)))
entailing (by Leibniz's principle of the identity of indiscernibles)
c. a = b

In all cases where coreference is impossible, as in (6a/7a), this chain of inferencing sparked by pragmatic strengthening is argued to have taken place. But why should this lead to the failure of coreference? Fiorin and Delfitto (2025):14 point out that if this process has applied to a copular clause like *Omer$_i$ is his$_i$ cook*, one consequence of arriving at an identity statement will be that *his* and *his cook* will refer to the same person (*Omer$_i$ is [his$_i$ cook]$_i$*). Assuming that *cook* denotes a function which combines with an argument *x* (the possessor) to return the person who cooks for *x*, in this case the value of the function is the same as its input. This situation—a kind of "i-within-i configuration"—they argue to be strongly disfavored.

This then is the explanation for the ungrammaticality of coreference in examples like (6a/7a/14a). Moro had attributed this to the predicative status of *his cook*, but Fiorin and Delfitto (2025) stress that in their account such phrases are uniformly referring expressions.

(14) a. A: Omer doesn't cook for himself, right?
B: Yeah exactly. *Omer$_i$ isn't his$_i$ cook.
b. A: We're going to eat well at Omer's, right? I hear he has a great cook!
B: Well, sadly today Omer himself is cooking. And as will be all too clear, Omer$_i$ isn't his$_i$ cook.

What about the grammaticality of (11/12a,b,c/14b)? The proposal is that here pragmatic strengthening has *not* applied. That is, the chain of inferences outlined above in (13) that would lead to these being (the negation of) claims of identity has not taken place.

3.2. The problem of negation

There is however a serious problem for the account given for ungrammatical cases like (14a). Specifically, the pragmatic process sketched out in (13) should not be possible with a negated example like (14a). In uttering the negated sentence *Omer$_i$ isn't his$_i$ cook*, the speaker has, under the proposed analysis, specifically denied that Omer has all the relevant properties of his cook. Leibniz's principle of identity of indiscernibles then cannot apply, so *cook* in this context will clearly not wind up as an identity function, and no version of the "i-within-i" constraint will apply. In consequence, the analysis predicts that while coreference will be impossible in a positive example like (15a) if *own* is not included, it will be fully acceptable in its negated counterpart (15b).

(15) A: Does Omer cook for himself?
a. B: Yes, Omer$_i$ is his$_i$ *(own) cook!
b. B: No, Omer$_i$ isn't his$_i$ *(own) cook!

However, in my judgment, which I think is uncontroversial, (15a) and (15b) have exactly the same status: the coreference is essentially unavailable in this context.

4. More than one way to get a predicate from a nominal.

4.1. Interim summary

So far we have seen two different attempts to give a unified account of the underlying structure of a binominal copular clause, which rely on different claims about the possible interpretation of definite noun phrases. We can abstract a common schematic structure for a copular clause, where F is a functional head of some kind.

(16) [be [$_{FP}$ DP^A [$_{F'}$ F DP^B]]]

For Longobardi and Moro (and many others) DP^B is always a predicate (type $\langle e,t \rangle$) and DP^A is its single argument.[3] A referential nominal may occur in postcopular position only if predicate inversion has taken place, moving the predicative nominal above *be*.

For Fiorin and Delfitto, on the other hand, DP^B is always a referring expression (type *e*). It does not take the other nominal as its argument; rather, both nominals are the arguments to the functional head F, which corresponds to H in their analysis—the head expressing asymmetric identification. Alternations can arise in either of two ways:

- The head H can take any referring expression x as an argument and return a predicate with the meaning "is ascribed all the relevant properties of x". Thus a referring expression is free to occur either as first (lowest) or the second ("subject") argument to H.
- Moro-style inversion is also possible; that is, either argument of H can become the subject of the clause (or, possibly, H+DP^B can move past DP^A as a unit).

We saw that there are convincing arguments in Fiorin and Delfitto's papers against the claim that DP^B is uniformly predicative—and see also the analysis of statements of mistaken identity in Percus and Sharvit 2024. Fiorin and Delfitto (2025) go further and argue for a different but also unified account, namely that DP^B is uniformly arugmental/non-predicative.

In what follows I will argue that this second attempt at unification across all binominal copular cluses is also untenable. Rather, while some definite nominals are themselves predicative (*contra* Fiorin and Delfitto), others are arguments to a functional head within the small clause, as argued in Heycock (2012), Percus and Sharvit (2024), Delfitto and Fiorin (2025), Fiorin and Delfitto (2025). I will further suggest that at least in some languages, only in the latter case is "inversion" possible.

[3] Given this semantic type, semantic considerations alone do not require the presence of the functional head F/Pr/Pred, and indeed a number of authors (including Moro and more recently, for very different reasons, Matushansky 2019) have argued that a binominal small clause consists only of the predicative nominal DP^B and its argument DP^A.

4.2. Evidence for definites as predicates

A number of linguists have made arguments that definite nominals can get predicative interpretations (for a useful summary see Coppock and Beaver 2015) Some of these arguments are not in fact telling against Fiorin and Delfitto's proposal, in which definites are always of type *e* but can combine with the small clause head H to yield a derived predicate. However, some arguments that definites can themselves get a predicative interpretation cannot be easily deflected.

One such case involves appositional conjunction (Hoeksema 1988, Winter 2001, Coppock and Beaver 2015).

(17) 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 would be unexpected for the conjunction of type *e* categories. Winter (2001) argues that cases like (17) are possible because they indeed 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). Note that an analysis invoking Fiorin and Delfitto's head H to convert a referential nominal to a predicate would fail to predict that while definites (including possessives) can participate in appositional conjunction, proper names cannot.

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

Another piece of evidence in the same direction comes from the possible lack of existential presupposition for definites in predicate position. The sentence in (19) is ambiguous; on the interpretation in (19b) there is no presupposition of the prior existence of *the cleverest woman in the world*.

(19) With a wave 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, it is very hard to see how we could account for this ambiguity. On the other hand, if definites can get predicative as well as referential interpretations, the ambiguity in (19) can be explained.

4.3. Two routes for nominals in predication

To summarize: the recent work by Fiorin and Delfitto, (and also Percus and Sharvit 2024, which unfortunately I do not have space to discuss here), has provided convincing evidence that we require a functional head that can create a predicate from a referring expression (Fiorin and Delfitto's head H; Percus and Sharvit's head VAL, Heycock (2012)'s F). Instances would include those in (20)

(20) a. With a wave of the magician's wand, I became Amanda K, the woman I had been introduced to and the cleverest woman in the world.
b. My sister Su would have been able to help you, but unfortunately for you, I am not my sister.
c. In the dark, for I moment I thought that you were your sister Kaori.

At the same time, there is evidence that not only indefinite but also definite nominals can function semantically and syntactically as predicates. Given the existence of copular clauses and small clauses with other predicative categories (most obviously, Adjective Phrases), it is therefore predicted that definites can also appear in such clauses.

(21) a. On the departure of his brother, Zaid became the last man in the village.
b. A: Is Charlie related to you? Or don't you have any living relatives?
B: Charlie is my cousin! And so is Liz.
c. A: Does Kyoko really look after her health entirely on her own?
B: Yes! She is her *(own) doctor.

In some cases—such as these—some aspect of the context or the interpretation makes it clear whether the definite is interpreted as a predicate (21) or only as a subpart of a larger predicate (20). But in many cases there will be ambiguity. Exactly this conclusion has been argued for on the basis of evidence from Thai (Kuno and Wongkhomthong 1981; Hedberg and Potter 2010) and more recently French (Roy 2022). Thus for example in Thai there are two copulas that can both appear in binominal copular clauses: *bpen* and *kheuu*. In unambiguously predicative cases, only *bpen* is grammatical, but in cases where the non-subject nominal gets a definite interpretation, either copula is possible (examples from Kuno and Wongkhomthong 1981):

(22) a. *yîpùn pen/*khɨ: pràthêːd ùdsăː hàkam*. [Thai]
Japan is/is country industry
'Japan is an industrial country.'
b. *cɔːn pen/khɨ khon thîː chán rág.*
John is/is person that I love
'John is the person that I love.'

Kuno and Wongkhomthong state that the interpretation of (22b) is subtly different depending on the choice of copula:

> [(22b)]for example, can be interpreted either as a sentence that presents one of the characteristics that John has, or as a sentence which states that John and the person that the speaker loves are one and the same person. The characterizational [=predicational] copula *pen* is used for the former interpretation, and the identificational [=specificational] copula *khɨː* is used for the latter interpretation. (Kuno and Wongkhomthong 1981, p. 69)

We can therefore hypothesize that *kheuu* combines with small clauses headed by some variant of the F/VAL head proposed in Heycock (2012), Percus and Sharvit (2024), while *bpen* combines with small clauses headed by whatever functional head takes predicative phrases as its complement. The possibility of both occurring in

examples like (22b) arises because the final noun phrase can receive either a predicative or an argumental interpretation, and so can combine with either.

5. Alternation and inversion

Finally, let us return to the issue of alternation. We have just seen that in Thai, the sentence that translates *John is the person that I love* can appear with either one of the two copulas. This is at least indirect support for the hypothesis proposed here that in English *John is the person that I love* is potentially ambiguous, with *the person that I love* getting either a predicative or an argumental interpretation. Strikingly, as in English, alternation in the order of the two nominals is possible; but in the "inverted" order only *kheuu* can occur.

(23) *khon thîː chán rág *pen/khɨ̄ cɔ:n.* [Thai]
person that I love is/is John
'The person that I love is John.'

A similar pattern is observed in French, where the issue is the presence or absence of *ce* (Roy 2022): two possibilities when the order is as in (22b) but only one when it is as in (23). As argued by Hedberg and Potter on the basis of the Thai data, this supports a specific view of the alternation with the "inverted" order in examples like (23/2a,c/4b). Namely, rather than being predicate inversion, this inversion is in fact not possible for predicative nominals (any more than it is possible with APs), but is possible when the predicate in the small clause is constructed from an argumental nominal combining with F/VAL/H.

6. Conclusions and open questions

In this paper I have discussed alternation in the order of nominals occurring in binominal copular clauses in English (with some data also from other languages), an alternation that is often referred to, following Moro 1997, as predicate inversion. I have examined two lines of analysis that have been proposed to give a unitary analysis of the type of nominals that can occur in binominal copular clauses, and argued that neither reduction can capture all the data. Rather, we need to allow for the coexistence of two different ways of obtaining a predicate from a nominal. Once we have made this move, we arrive at the hypothesis that the observed alternation occurs only when the "fronted" nominal is not itself predicative

This brief paper leaves open many issues that remain to be resolved. To mention just two among them: First, is there a difference in the internal structure of predicative vs. argumental definites (Zamparelli 1996; Cheng et al. 2017)? Second: why is it that "inversion" is possible only in one of the two structures at issue, and what exactly is the nature of this derivation? There are always more questions, but as the eminent linguist Bill Labov used to say: The more you know, the more you can find out.

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