

A typology of copular sentences: response to Declerck (1991)*

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In this short article I will avail myself of the opportunity to react to Declerck's rather huffy reply to my largely laudatory review of his book *Studies on Copular Sentences, Clefts and Pseudo-clefts* (1988). I hardly think that my review warrants such a response, since all I have done is indicate a number of what I called 'inconsistencies' in Declerck's account; a term I still consider justified, irrespective of whether these inconsistencies result from 'not always choosing the most accurate formulations' or actually constitute weaknesses in Declerck's taxonomy. If it turns out that the former is the case, so much the better. I still maintain, however, that the inconsistencies I noted are at best misleading and likely to cause confusion on the part of the reader. The following example will illustrate my point.

In my review I observed that although, according to the initial definition (Declerck 1988: 96–97), proper names and deictic expressions (or 'indicators') cannot function as the identifying NP in a descr. identifying sentence, Declerck himself gives a number of examples of descr. identifying sentences in which they do. With regard to proper names Declerck (1988: 130–131) subsequently makes the (by all means plausible) distinction between proper names presupposing 'acquaintance' and what might be called nonfamiliar uses of proper names, the former of which are typically unmodified (*John, Smith*),¹ the latter typically modified (*Colonel Brandon, (a) Mr Smith*).² This distinction does not, however, apply to deictic expressions and therefore does not explain the occasional use of these expressions in descr. identifying sentences. As appears from the additional information provided by Declerck in his response (this issue), however, we are to distinguish between deictic expressions that are indicators (and which serve to enable the hearer to pick out a referent from a set; see example [1]) and those that are used as descriptions (relating the referent to the immediate situation; see example [2]).

- (1) A: Who won the first prize?
 B: John did (spec.).
 A: Who's John?
 B: John's *that man over there* (spec.) (Declerck 1988: 97).
- (2) A: Bill? Who's Bill?
 B: He's *that man over there* (descr. identifying) (Declerck 1988: 107; Keizer 1990: 1053; Declerck this issue).

Apart from the fact that this distinction does not follow from Declerck (1988), it shows that Declerck's original statement is simply incorrect, and therefore misleading.

I will not, however, discuss all of Declerck's points in detail but will leave it to the reader to decide on the validity of the arguments I put forward in my review and those used by Declerck in his reply. Instead I will devote the rest of this short article to defending my own, two-layered, typology of copular sentences (Keizer 1990: 1056ff.).

Declerck's criticism of my proposal consists in five points, each of which, I hope to show, is unjustified.

1. Declerck's first objection to my taxonomy is that it does not include definitions. The reason for this exclusion is simply that I do not regard definitions as a major copular sentence type,³ but instead as a subtype of what I called 'purely predicational' (Declerck's predicational) sentences. Thus they share all the features of these sentences, but at the same time have some idiosyncratic properties, namely that their subjects are generic NPs (that is, REFER to a class), and the properties attributed to this generic NP are the most typical of the prototype (Declerck 1988: 114).⁴

2. The next two points of criticism mentioned by Declerck result, as far as I can see, from certain differences in terminology. The first of these points concerns the fact that, according to Declerck, I do not distinguish between (his) pred. type and the more inclusive category of 'property-expressing' sentences, but that I redefine the former as the latter (this issue note 4). This is clearly a misunderstanding, as I explicitly (Keizer 1990: 1056–1057) state that as long as we recognize that Declerck's four major types are situated at the second (nonbasic) level, they can (must, even) be regarded as separate types.⁵ This cannot but mean that I redefine Declerck's pred. sentences not as my pred. sentences, but as my 'purely pred.' sentences. Nor does it seem to be the case that my pred. sentences are what Declerck calls property-expressing sentences. Thus my pred. sentences are property-assigning:⁶ they combine a referring subject with a nonreferring element (possibly, though not necessarily, an NP), with the nonreferring element assigning a property to the referent of the subject.

Declerck's property-expressing sentences, on the other hand, are simply sentences containing an element expressing (that is, denoting) a property. These elements can, however, be used referentially, as is shown by Declerck's examples (5) and (7A) (this issue), here repeated as (3) and (4):

- (3) What you must never become is stingy.
 (4) A niggard IS a miser.

Sentence (3) combines two referring elements, *what you must never become* and *stingy*, the first of which is weakly referring (a variable). Note that *stingy* here expresses a property but does not assign this property to the subject; instead it specifies the referent of the subject by equating this referent with the property it denotes (that is, 'stingy').⁷ The same applies to sentence (4), where both elements are referring and equated with each other (though to a different purpose, namely that of correcting the hearer's assumption that the two descriptions apply to different referents).⁸ The reason that I do not distinguish between property-expressing sentences and (purely) pred. sentences in my taxonomy is simply that, as far as I can see, there is no linguistic evidence whatsoever justifying the distinction of a separate class of property-expressing sentences. I do, however, distinguish between property-assigning (pred.) sentences and purely pred. (Declerck's pred.) sentences.

3. The third point of criticism, consisting in Declerck's rejection of the property-expressing/identifying distinction as irrelevant, is also the result of terminological confusion. Thus Declerck's property-expressing/identifying distinction does not correspond to the basic distinction between pred. (property-assigning) and identifying sentences I make in my review. First of all, as is shown under (2) above, Declerck's property-expressing sentences are different from my pred. sentences. In addition, his use of the term 'identifying' is different. Thus, traditionally, identifying (or equative) sentences (see Bolinger 1972; Dik 1980; Gundel 1977; Halliday 1985; Lyons 1977; McCawley 1981) are sentences in which two referents are equated (hence the term 'equative'). Declerck, however, uses the term in three different senses. In defining descr. identifying sentences, he uses the term in its more or less everyday meaning of providing information which may lead to further identification of a referent. In his characterization of spec. sentences the term 'identifying' is used in the sense of 'enabling the hearer to pick out a referent from a set', that is, of specifying a value for a variable. In the case of identity statements identification involves the equation of two descriptions which the hearer wrongly assumed to apply to two different referents. Only in the last case does the term 'identifying' necessarily involve equation; in the first two

cases identification may be achieved either through the equation of two referents, or by means of assigning a property to a referent.

Now, on this interpretation of the term 'identifying' the property-expressing/identifying distinction is indeed irrelevant. However, the distinction between property-assigning and identifying (equative) sentences, which I make in my review, is generally acknowledged to be relevant (as is apparent from the considerable attention it receives in such diverse theoretical frameworks as, for instance, Dik's functional grammar [for example, Dik 1980, 1989], Halliday's systemic functional grammar [Halliday 1985], and GB [see Verheugd 1985]), as the two types of sentences have different functions, corresponding to a difference in meaning, or status, of the copular verb.

4. It will by now be obvious that Declerck's fourth objection to my proposal is also unfounded, as, in the light of the definitions provided in (3), the terms 'pred.' and 'descr. identifying' need not be contradictory (nor, for that matter, is the term 'identifying descr. identifying' necessarily tautological).

5. Finally, it will have become clear that, contrary to Declerck's claim, identity statements such as 'A niggard IS a miser' are not pred. (property-assigning), despite the fact that they involve two 'property NPs'. As we have seen, sentences with property NPs are only property-assigning if the property NP is nonreferring and used to assign a property to the subject of the sentence. As in identifying spec. and identifying descr. identifying sentences, however, the two elements of an identity statement, whether they denote first-, second-, or third-order entities (see Lyons 1977), or properties, are both referring. As such, neither of the two is used to assign a property to the other; instead, the two elements are equated. Thus, the sentence 'A niggard IS a miser' is an identity statement equating two properties; it is not predicational.

I wish to conclude by emphasizing that I do not reject Declerck's taxonomy, and that all I tried to do in my review, and have tried again to do in this short note, is to place this taxonomy in a wider theoretical context, hoping to solve some of the more obscure points in Declerck's account along the way. I can only repeat that, despite my critical remarks, I still regard Declerck's book as a valuable contribution to the discussion of copular sentences, and I therefore suggest that readers whose interest has been aroused by this little polemic between Declerck and myself read the book and regard my review, Declerck's reply, and this short note as (I hope) useful supplements.

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Notes

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1. With regard to my example (19) (Keizer 1990: 1053), which I took to be an example of a descr. identifying sentence with a 'familiar' proper name as identifying NP, I now accept Declerck' interpretation of this sentence as specificational.
 2. Although I agree with this distinction, I wonder to what extent the use of these nonfamiliar proper names can be considered 'identifying'. Note that these names are not even 'identifying' according to the amended version, which states that predicate nominals such as *a friend of mine* are identifying in the sense that they answer 'a request for further information which must enable the hearer to relate the friend to someone of whom he has a fuller "backing of descriptions" or at least to build up a backing of descriptions of the friend himself, so that fuller identification becomes possible' (Declerck 1988: 125). Now, it may be that a nonfamiliar proper name like *Mr. Green* helps to build up a backing of description of a particular person, but surely no more than predicational sentences (*John is absolutely brilliant*), or generic sentences like *John smokes*. The only thing that distinguishes the former from the latter is that the former are more likely to enable the hearer to identify the person in question on a subsequent occasion (since people are more commonly referred to by means of their name than by means of some property).
 3. Note that Declerck himself did not regard definitions as a major sentence type either; as a matter of fact, he was not even sure they constituted a separate type of copular sentence (see Declerck 1988: 113–115).
 4. Note that the following (Declerck 1988: 114) are not counterexamples to this categorization:
 - (i) What is a pyramid? — What you see over there is a pyramid/A pyramid is what you see over there.

As Declerck himself observes these are 'no definitions in the technical sense of the word', although they can be used to answer questions asking for definitions. However, the fact that they can be used in this way is no reason to regard them as definitions (in any sense of the word); they can simply be used in this way because the hearer can be expected to infer a definition from the information given.

5. All I have said is that it is not clear from the definitions given in the book whether Declerck's predicational is to be interpreted as property-assigning (not, it is important to realize, as property-expressing) or as predicational in a narrower sense ('purely predicational'). On rereading the relevant section (chapter 1, section 3), I still believe this point of criticism to be valid.
6. In the literature on copular sentence types various terms have been used to refer to this type of sentence, including 'characterizational', 'property-assigning', 'attributive', 'ascriptive', and 'classifying'.
7. The only nonreferring, property-assigning element in this sentence is *what*, which, in the clause *what you must never become*, is used to assign a (potential) property to the referent of *you*.
8. These observations not only show the need to distinguish between property-assigning (my predicational) and property-expressing sentences but also affect the distinction between property-assigning, (purely) predicational, and specificational sentences. Thus Declerck (1988: 55–56) argues that a sentence like

(i) John is a good student

is predicational when it is used out of context, but specificational when it serves as a reply to a question specifically asking for a specificational answer (for example, *What is John?*). In the latter case, Declerck continues, 'a good student is the value specified for the variable "what John is" and the sentence is interpreted as "John is the following: a good student"' In other words, *John is a good student* is specificational when it means *What John is is a good student*. In my view, however, these two sentences are basically different. Whereas the latter combines two referring elements (both of which express a property, without, however, assigning it to some other entity), the former contains a referring and a nonreferring NP (*John* and *a good student*, respectively), with the latter assigning a property to the former. Therefore, even if (i) is used specifically, it must at the same time be classified as property-assigning (my predicational).

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