Specificational Copular Sentences: the Case of Hebrew Cleftoids

I. The Problem: Specificational copular sentences (Higgins 1973) are a topic of much debate in the literature. On the one hand, they are analyzed as inverse predicational (Heggie 1988, Williams 1983, 1984, Partee 1986, 1998, Moro 1990, 1997, Den Dikken 2006), while others assimilate them to equatives (Heycock and Kroch 1998, 1999, Sharvit 1999, Heller 2002). Roughly, these represent a syntactic vs. a semantic approach. The issue has repercussions for the nature of the copula in general; the semantic approach assumes be of predication distinct from be of equation (albeit with additional type shift operations), whereas the syntactic approach denies the ambiguity of the copula and only assumes be of predication. The goal of this paper is to present evidence from Hebrew Specificational Cleftoids (1) in favor of the syntactic approach, by showing that these are instances of predication, not equation, with some of them are ‘canonical’ (1a) and some ‘inverse’ (1b), i.e. undergone Predicate Inversion (2). This is not to say that the equation relation does not exist at all, but rather not in specificational cleftoids. Moreover, these will be argued to be different from Hebrew specificational pseudoclefts and to constitute an independent type of construction, previously not discussed in the literature.

II. Cleftoids are not clefts nor pseudoclefts: Despite apparent resemblance, it will be argued that cleftoids are different from clefts (3) and pseudoclefts (4) in several respects, e.g. in not showing the connectivity and predicational/specificational distinction found in pseudoclefts. Cleftoids are always specificational, irrespective of the PronZ/PronH copula (Doron 1983, Sichel 1997) available to them.

III. Cleftoids are not equatives: The evidence from Hebrew cleftoids supports Moro’s and Den Dikken’s findings with respect to asymmetries in A-bar extraction (5) vs (6), and additional asymmetries (embedding under consider type verbs, modification by NRRC, etc.).

IV. Support from Information structure: Finally, the suggested analysis is supported by information structure asymmetries. While canonical cleftoids show contrastive and exhaustive focus (7), inverse cleftoids exhibit new information focus (8), supporting the inversion analysis: in canonical cleftoids, the subject, being contrastive, checks its exhaustivity feature against Exhaustivity head in the left periphery by Agree (Horvath 2010) or moves there covertly from Spec IP. However, in inverted cleftoids, after predicate inversion took place, the subject remains frozen in place (Den Dikken 2006). As such, it cannot be moved or check its features against some functional head in the left periphery. Suddenly, inversion creates a new focus option, otherwise unavailable – information focus.

(1)  a. AVIV hu ze Se ohev lir’ot hisardut canonical
    Aviv PronH the-one that likes to-watch Survivor
    b. ze Se ohev lir’ot hisardut hu AVIV inverse
    the-one that likes to-watch Survivor PronH Aviv

(2)  [IP[ze Se ohev lir’ot hisardut], hu [RelPSC [Aviv] Rel0 [t1]]]

(3)  ze AVIV Se ohev lir’ot hisardut
    it Aviv that likes to-watch Survivor

(4)  a. mi Se ohev lir’ot hisardut hu/ze Aviv
    who that likes to-watch Survivor PronH/PronZ Aviv
    b. Aviv hu/ze mi Se ohev lir’ot hisardut
    Aviv PronH/PronZ who that likes to-watch Survivor
(5) dina hayta zot  Se  lavSa et  taxposet ha-xatul be purim  
Dina was  the-one that wore  acc. costume the-cat  in Purim

  a. ?mi_i  ata xoSev Se  dina hayta t_i  ? (-zot  Se  lavSa et  taxposet ha-xatul)  
     who you think  that Dina was  (the-one that wore acc. costume the-cat)
  b. mi_i  ata xoSev Se  t_i  hayta zot  Se  lavSa et  taxposet ha-xatul? (-dina)  
     who you think  that was  the-one that wore acc. costume the-cat  (Dina)

(6) ha-de’a  Seli al  london hayta ha-de’a  Selxal  pariz  
the-opinion my about London was  the-opinion your about Paris

  a. *eyze  de’a_i  ata xoSev Se  ha-de’a  Seli al  london hayta t_i  
     which opinion you think  that the-opinion my about London was
  b. *eyze  de’a_i  ata xoSev Se  t_i  hayta ha-de’a  Selxal  pariz?  
     which opinion you think  that was  the-opinion your about Paris

(7) a. #Aviv hu  ze  Se  higi’a  la-Si’ur,  ve  ulay gam  Smulik  
   Aviv PronH the-one that arrived to-the-class, and maybe also Shmulik
  b. ze  Se  higi’a  laSiur  hu  Aviv  ve  ulay  gam  Smulik

(8) mi (hu)  ze  Se  higi’a  la-Siur?  
who (PronH) the-one that arrived to-the-class?
  a. ze  Se  higi’a  la-Si’ur  hu  Aviv  
     the-one that arrived to-the-class PronH Aviv
  b. #Aviv hu  ze  Se  higi’a  la-Si’ur

Selected References: