

Variability and variation in agreement in copular clauses: evidence from Faroese

Caroline Heycock

Linguistics & English Language
University of Edinburgh

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Outline

- 1 Specification and Concealed Questions
- 2 Agreement and inversion
 - Agreement
 - Focus
 - Inversion as scrambling
- 3 Agreement in specificational sentences under the lens
 - Back to F
 - Consistent agreement: German and English
 - Variable agreement: Faroese
- 4 Conclusion

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Some subtypes of copular sentences

- Predicational

- (1)
 - a. Su is efficient
 - b. Su is an efficient woman.
 - c. Su is the most efficient woman in the room.

- Equative(?)

- (2)
 - a. What you see is what you get.
 - b. Gold is gold.
 - c. Peace is War.

- Specificational

- (3)
 - a. The winner is Laura.
 - b. The most efficient woman in the room is Su.
 - c. One murderer turned out to be someone I knew.

Specificational subjects are not predicates

- (4) a. Ahab is the best man for the job, isn't he/*it?
 b. The best man for the job is Ahab, isn't *he/it?
- (5) a. *Yesterday Rina was the night nurse on duty, but tonight Hannah will be her.
 b. ?*Tonight the night nurse on duty will be Rina, won't she?
- (6) A: Sarah and Justin are her greatest friends, aren't they?
 B: That/*those they are.
 B': They are that/*those.
- (7) They are greatest friends, even though they don't look {it/*them}.
- (8) a. *Her greatest friends are Justin and Sarah, {isn't/aren't} it?
 b. Her greatest friends are Justin and Sarah, aren't they?

Equation and intensionality

Specificational subjects denote *intensional objects*, of the same kind as are found in concealed questions (Romero 2005):

- (9) a. The knew/guessed the winner.
 b. The winner was Julia.
- (10) a. John guessed the winner of the Oscar for best actress before I guessed it/*her.
 b. John guessed the winners before I guessed *it/them.

Romero posits an “asymmetric” equative *be* (actually she posits a pair; here I ignore this point):

$$(11) \quad [[be_{spec}]]: \lambda x_{\langle e \rangle} \lambda y_{\langle s, e \rangle} \lambda w_s. \underline{y}(w) = x$$

We can instead take this to be the semantics of a functional head *F* projecting a SC complement to the copula.

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NP2 agreement (Romance)

Italian:

- (12) Il colpevole sono/*è io/*me.
 the culprit am/*is I/*me
 The culprit is me.

Catalan:

- (13) El seu fort són/*és les matemàtiques.
 the his strong point(s) are/*is the mathematics(PL)
 His strong point is mathematics.

Portuguese:

- (14) O problema são/*é os teus pais.
 the problem are/*is the your parents
 The problem is your parents.

NP2 agreement (German, Dutch, Faroese)

- (15) Das eigentliche Problem sind/*ist deine Eltern.
 the real problem are/*is your parents
 The real problem is your parents.
- (16) %De brandoorzaak waren de brandenden kaarsen in de
 the cause of the fire were the burning candles in the
 woonkamer.
 living room
 The cause of the fire was the burning candles in the living room.
- (17) %Orsøkin til eldin vóru tey brennandi kertiljósini í stovuni.
 cause-DEF to fire-DEF were the burning candles-DEF in room-DEF
 The cause of the fire was the burning candles in the living room.

NP1 agreement: English, French

- (18) a. The culprit is me
b. The real problem is/*are your parents.
- (19) a. L'état, c'est moi.
the state it is me
The state is me.
b. *L'état, ce suis je/moi.
the state it am I/me

Not just agreement with the most specified ϕ -features

Readings of “assumed identity”:

- (20)
- a. If I were you, I would leave now.
 - b. If you were me, what would you do?
 - c. I would love to be you!
 - d. In that game, I was you and you were me.

In some languages (e.g. Dutch) such sentences require accusative on the postcopular NP, even though in a specificational sentence the postcopular NP is instead nominative. In such languages, unsurprisingly, agreement in just these cases is with the first noun phrase, as in English.

However, in some languages the postcopular NP is always nominative—but the **agreement** differs.

Not just agreement with the most specified ϕ -features

German:

And Poirot pointed at the Major and said “For a long time now we have been trying to establish the identity of the murderer. But now I know . . .

- (21) Der Mörder bist du!
 the murderer are[2SG] you[NOM]
 The murderer is you!

We are both prison psychologists, and I am telling you about the strange dreams that two inmates that we are both familiar with have reported to me. One is an arsonist, and one is a murderer. In their dreams, both dreamed that they were other people. These were their dream identities . . .

- (22) Der Brandstifter war Jesus und der Mörder war du.
 the arsonist was Jesus and the murderer was[3SG] you[NOM]
 The arsonist was Jesus and the murderer was you.

NP2 agreement is independent of V2

German:

I have been wondering for a long time about the identity of my mother, from whom I was taken away at birth. Then, looking at you ...

- (23) Schließl**ich** wird mir klar, dass meine echte Mutter du
 in the end becomes me clear that my real mother you[NOM]
bist.
 are[2SG]
 Finally I realise that my real mother is YOU.

Dutch:

- (24) Als het eniger slachtoffer hierin jij bent ...
 if the only victim herein you[NOM] are
 If the only victim in this is you ...

Agreement: summary

- In NP2 agreement languages, NP2 agreement goes with specificational semantics.
- This is consistent with specificational sentences being “inverted” (NP2 is the subject).
- Inversion is not just V2.

NP2 must be in focus

- (25) A: Who was the culprit? (John or Bill?)
B: JOHN was the culprit.
- (26) A: What was John? (Was John the culprit or the victim?) *or*
A' Tell me something about my cousin John and his role in the crime.
B: John/he was the CULPRIT.
- (27) A: Who was the culprit? (John or Bill?)
B: The culprit was JOHN.
- (28) A: What was John? (Was John the culprit or the victim?) *or*
A' Tell me something about my cousin John and his role in the crime.
B: *The CULPRIT was John/him.

NP2 must be in focus

There may be no (easily) detectable phonological prominence for NP2—

- (29) Bill is convinced that the culprit in that old mystery was Duchamp.
But I personally think that the VICTIM was Duchamp, while the
culprit was some other guy entirely.

—but, as in cases of “second occurrence focus,” a pronominal in this position
can be destressed, but not completely reduced:

- (30) A: Was Jill the first woman to get to Mars?
B1: No, but the first woman to come BACK was {her/*'er}.
B2: No, they wouldn't TAKE {her/'er}.

Further, Mikkelsen 2010 notes that in Danish, even though there may be no
perceptible stress on the final pronoun, it cannot undergo object shift.

Scrambling

Don't scramble focus!

- (31) a. Wem hat Peter das Futter gegeben?
 who[DAT] has Peter the food given
 Who has Peter given the food?
- b. Was hat Peter der Katze gegeben?
 what has Peter the[DAT] cat given
 What has Peter given the cat?
- (32) a. Peter hat der Katze das Futter gegeben.
 Peter has the[DAT] cat the food given.
 Peter has given the cat the food. (*Answers (a) or (b)*)
- b. Peter hat das Futter der Katze gegeben.
 Peter has the food the[DAT] cat given.
 Peter has given the food (to) the cat. (*Answers only (a)*)

Scrambling

Only scramble **strong** indefinites.

- (33) I had been struggling with a complicated set of data ...
- ?*A problem was particularly hard.
 - One problem was particularly hard.
 - {?A/one} problem that I came across right at the beginning was particularly hard.
 - One of the problems was particularly hard.

Replicated in restrictions on subjects of specificational sentences:

- (34)
- ?*A problem was that we didn't understand all the parameters.
 - One problem was that we didn't understand all the parameters.
 - {A/one} problem that I came across right at the beginning was that we didn't understand all the parameters.
 - One of the problems was that we didn't understand all the parameters.

Consistency of NP2 agreement in German

Berg 1998: Fill-in-the-blanks production study (root clauses only)

Table: Summary of agreement in German from Berg's study

	Plural
what interests me...	100% (45/45)
all I could see...	98% (45/46)
the cause of the accident...	88% (41/46)
a case in point...	100% (46/46)
another example	100% (45/45)

Consistency of NP2 agreement in German

Fischer 2003: Agreement in both root and subordinate clauses in German

Table: Summary of agreement in German from Fischer's study

Clause type and order	Plural
Main: Sing-Pl	89% (287/319)
Subordinate: Sing-Pl	94% (303/321)
Total	92% (590/640)

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Reversing the semantics of F

We saw above Romero's semantics for specification:

$$(35) \quad [[be_{spec}]]: \lambda x_{\langle e \rangle} \lambda y_{\langle s, e \rangle} \lambda w_s. \underline{y}(w) = x$$

We now see that we have to reverse the arguments. Since we have evidence that specificational sentences are inverted, F must take its arguments in the other order (first the intensional argument that will wind up as NP1, and then the extensional argument that will wind up as NP2):

$$(36) \quad [[F_{spec}]]: \lambda x_{\langle s, e \rangle} \lambda y_{\langle e \rangle} \lambda w_s. \underline{x}(w) = y$$

English

In German, scrambling is all we need to derive specificational sentences. But how does the complement to F get to move to the left of its specifier, in a language like English which does not otherwise have scrambling?

Proposal: F moves to be , rendering its specifier and complement “equidistant.” (cf. den Dikken 2006).

- (37) [be+ F [$_{FP}$ Laura t_F [the winner]]]
- [Laura _{i} F +be [$_{FP}$ t_i t_F [the winner]]]
 - [the winner _{i} F +be [$_{FP}$ Laura t_F t_i]]]

The noun phrase that reaches the specifier position of be is now the closest to the T head, with which it enters an Agree relation that triggers morphological agreement, and the noun phrase then moves to Spec,T:

- (38) a. [$_{TP}$ Laura _{i} [F +be+T [t_i t_{be} [[$_{FP}$ t_i t_F [the winner]]]]]]]
- b. [$_{TP}$ the winner _{i} [F +be+T [t_i t_{be} [[$_{FP}$ Laura t_F t_i]]]]]

Faroese

But what about Faroese, which as we have seen displays NP2 agreement, but is like English and not German in not having scrambling?

It turns out that the agreement pattern in Faroese is actually rather interesting.

Investigation of agreement in Faroese

August 2008, as part of a NORMS (Nordic Centre of Excellence in Microcomparative Syntax) fieldwork trip to the Faroes, with assistance from Victoria Absalonsen, Zakaris Svabo Hansen, and Jógvan í Lon Jacobsen.

51 subjects, from four different localities, ages 20–73, median age 49.

6 structures tested, with 6 different lexicalisations, in a Latin square design.

NP1 is always singular, and NP2 plural.

- ① Main clause: NP1 ___ NP2
- ② Main clause, intervening adverb: NP1 ___ Adv NP2
- ③ Main clause, Topic (Adjunct) Initial: Adjunct ___ NP1 NP2
- ④ Main clause, modal: NP1 ___ be.INF NP2
- ⑤ Embedded question: ... whether NP1 ___ NP2
- ⑥ Embedded question, modal: ... whether NP1 ___ be NP2.

Examples

- (39) a. Orsøkin til eldin ___ tey brennandi kertiljósini í
 cause.DEF of fire.DEF the burning candles.DEF in
 stovuni.
 room.DEF
 The cause of the fire ___ the burning candles in the living room.
- b. Besti partur av framførsluni ___ kanska dansararnir.
 best part of performance.DEF perhaps dancers.DEF
 The best part of the performance ___ perhaps the dancers.
- c. Eftir mínari meining ___ orsøkin til at hon flutti teir
 after my opinion cause.DEF of that she moved the
 larmandi grannarnir
 noisy neighbours.DEF
 In my opinion, the reason that she left ___ the noisy neighbours

Examples (contd)

- d. Vinningurin ___ hava verið tveir ferðaseðlar til
 prize.DEF have.INF been two tickets to
 Keypmannahavnar.
 Copenhagen
 The prize ___ have been two tickets to Copenhagen.
- e. Hon spurdi, um hansara veikleiki ___ skjótir bilar.
 she asked if his weakness fast cars
 She asked if his weakness ___ fast cars.
- f. Sálarfrøðingurin spurdi, um trupulleikin ___ hava verið
 psychologist.DEF asked if problem.DEF have.INF been
 foreldrini.
 parents.DEF
 The psychologist asked if the problem ___ have been the parents.

Results

Table: Agreement with NP1 or NP2: variable speakers, Lex. 4 excluded

Structure	NP1	NP2	% NP2
Main clause: NP be NP	12	32	73%
Main clause: NP be Adv NP	8	14	64%
Main clause: Adjunct be NP NP	33	1	3%
Main clause: NP Modal be NP	20	1	5%
<i>Wh</i> -clause: ... if NP be NP	11	17	61%
<i>Wh</i> -clause: ... if NP Modal be NP	22	1	4%
Total	106	66	38%

12 speakers were invariant (always using NP1 agreement) and are excluded from this table. One lexicalisation almost categorically favoured NP1 agreement, and is also excluded here.

How can we account for NP2 agreement?

NP2 agreement was favoured in the pattern NP1–*be*–(Adv)–NP2, in both root and embedded clauses.

Let us assume that the copula can lexicalize not just *v* (or some other verbal head), but finite **T**. So the structure of a simple copular sentence can be schematized as (40b), rather than (40a):

- (40) a. $[_{TP} T [_{VP} be [_{FP} XP F YP]]]$
 b. $[_{TP} be [_{FP} XP F YP]]]$

Assuming that morphological agreement is established in a **strictly local** relation between a head and the closest element in its c-command domain, agreement can only be between T and the specifier of *FP* (NP2 agreement), even if the complement of *F* moves to Spec,TP:

- (41) $[_{TP} YP_i F+be(T)_\phi [_{FP} XP_\phi t_F t_i]]]$

Why Faroese but not English?

Faroese, but not English, allows Spec,TP to remain empty / contain a null expletive in certain contexts:

- (42)
- a. Er (tað) skilagott at koyra við summardekkum um veturin?
is (it) sensible to drive with summer tyres in winter.DEF
Is it sensible to use summer tyres in the winter?
 - b. Í gjárkvøldið bleiv (tað) dansað í havanum.
last night became (it) danced in garden.DEF
Last night there was dancing in the garden.
 - c. Eru (tað) komnir nakrir gestir úr Íslandi?
are (it) come any guests from Iceland?
Have any guests come from Iceland?

Why Faroese but not English?

Stylistic fronting is possible, showing that Spec,TP can be occupied by an element that is not the target of agreement:

- (43) a. Eg eti ikki kjøtin, um *(nakrantíð) hava verið mýs í
 I eat not meat.DEF if ever have been mice in
 hjallinum.
 storeroom.DEF
 I won't eat the meat if there have ever been mice in the
 storeroom.
- b. Prestur harmaðist, um farið varð í dans hvørt
 minister.DEF regretted if gone was to dance every
 leygarkvøld.
 Saturday night
 The minister was sorry if people went out dancing every
 Saturday night.

Why Faroese but not English?

Hence we have multiple reasons to conclude that, in the terms of Holmberg 2009, in Faroese T's EPP feature is ϕ -**independent**.

But in English T probes for a noun phrase with ϕ -features and this noun phrase has to move to Spec,TP (in English T's EPP feature is ϕ -**dependent**).

This will then rule out in English the kind of configuration that allows NP2 agreement in Faroese:

(44) $[_{TP} YP_i F+be(T)_\phi [_{FP} XP_\phi t_F t_i]]$

Why can the modal not show NP2 agreement?

Faroese must also allow the copula to lexicalise a lower head than T, since it can also occur below a modal. Observe, however, that in this case the “inverse,” specificational order will again require that the complement to *F* move first to Spec,VP:

- (45) a. [_{TP} the burning candles_i may [_{VP} t_i *F*+be [_{FP} t_i t_F [the cause of the fire]]]]
 b. [_{TP} [the cause of the fire]_i may [_{VP} t_i *F*+be [_{FP} the burning candles t_F t_i]]]]

In this case the NP that T locally c-commands is the moved complement of *F*. Thus we correctly derive that in this case Faroese also requires NP1 agreement.

- (46) [_{TP} [the cause]_φ may_φ [_{VP} t_φ *F*+be [_{FP} the burning candles t_F t_φ]]]]

If we don't get NP2 agreement, we get NP1 agreement, not a default

There is evidence that what we are seeing in these cases is indeed agreement with NP1, and not just some default singular agreement. As we've just seen, when the copula occurs below a modal, agreement with NP2 is blocked. Nevertheless, in sentences like (47) the modal has to take plural agreement:

- (47) Hann spurdi meg, um hennara yndishøvundar
 he asked me if her favourite authors
 {*mundi/mundu} vera Heinesen og Kamban.
 {*might[SG]/might[PL]} be Heinesen and Kamban
 He asked me if her favourite authors might be Heinesen and Kamban.

Thus when NP2 agreement does not occur in Faroese, what we get instead is agreement with the first noun phrase, just as we find throughout in English.

The variable nature of NP2 agreement in Faroese

It is known that the availability of Spec,TP for stylistic fronting in Faroese, as well as the possibility of this position remaining “empty,” is one of the aspects of Faroese syntax that is undergoing a diachronic change. Given that under the analysis proposed here, the possibility of NP2 agreement in Faroese is tied to the availability of Spec,TP for elements with which the verb shows no agreement, we can see the less than 100% production of NP2 agreement even in the favouring environments as a reflex of this same change—as well as the behaviour of the speakers who never produced NP2 agreement at all.

Agreement from the head of a chain

One last case that has to be accounted for is the virtually categorical NP1 agreement when the finite copula has moved to C:

- (48) Eftir mínari meining ___ orsøkin til at hon flutti grannarnir
 after my opinion cause.DEF of that she moved neighbours.
 In my opinion, the reason that she left ___ neighbours.DEF

When the finite verb moves from T, it establishes agreement from its highest position: the morphology on the verb here does not reflect agreement between T and the closest noun phrase c-commanded by T in its position of first merge (NP2 agreement), but rather between T and the noun phrase in Spec,TP:

- (49) $[_{CP} ZP F+be(T)_\phi [_{TP} YP_\phi t_T [_{FP} XP t_F t_\phi]]]$

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To sum up:

- Specificational sentences are inverted equatives, with an asymmetry in the intensionality of the two “equated” noun phrases.
- Within Germanic, specificational structures can be achieved by scrambling in languages that allow scrambling; in other languages we have to allow reordering via equidistance.
- *Be* may lexicalize different heads even within a single language.
- The variability in agreement in specificational sentences in Faroese is a reflex of the same change that is leading to the loss of stylistic fronting and “empty” subject positions.