Equative and Predicational Copulas in Thai

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A controversy has arisen as to whether languages exhibit a distinctive equative copular base used in specificational sentences, or whether specificational and predicational copular sentences derive from the same base. We present evidence from Thai that supports the former approach. For terminology, we follow Higgins 1973, who distinguished predicational (*Susan is a doctor*), specificational (*The winner is Susan*), identity (*She is Susan*) and identificational (*That woman is Susan*) uses of copular sentences—the examples are from Mikkelsen 2005.

Recently, several analysts adopt the "inverse" approach to copular sentences, whereby specificational sentences in a variety of languages are derived via "inversion" from a predicational small clause base (e.g. Williams 1983, Moro 1997, Adger and Ramchand 2003, Mikkelsen 2005, den Dikken 2006), with some authors also positing an equative analysis for identity sentences. We argue here for the alternative approach (e.g. Zaring 1996, Heycock and Kroch 1999), which collapses Higgins' last three categories, and distinguishes irreversible predicational copular sentences from generally reversible equative ones. In a language with two copulas, the inverse approach predicts that one copula would be used for predicational and specificational sentences and one copula for identity sentences, whereas the equative approach predicts that the latter two would be expressed with the same copula.

Crucially, Thai exhibits two lexical copulas. We interpret Kuno and Wongkhomthong 1981 as proposing that *bpen* sentences are predicational, and *kheuu* sentences are equative. We conducted an acceptability judgment task to investigate the Thai copular system, comparing four sentence contexts as outlined in (1). We hypothesized that (a) in specificational contexts, *kheuu* would be judged more acceptable than *bpen*, (b) in identity contexts, *kheuu* would be more acceptable than *bpen*, and (c) in predicational contexts, *bpen* would be more acceptable than *kheuu*. Predicational (ii) was included in order to complete the sentence schema paradigm. 48 university students in Thailand judged the acceptability of 120 target sentences and 120 fillers.

(1)   Sentence Context   Sentence Schema
  1. Specificational   [Definite Description] + *bpen/kheuu* + [Proper Name]
  2. Identity   [Pronoun] + *bpen/kheuu* + [Proper Name]
  3. Predicational (i)   [Pronoun] + *bpen/kheuu* + [Adjectival Free Relative]
  4. Predicational (ii)   [Definite Description] + *bpen/kheuu* + [Adjectival Free Relative]

The results supported our hypotheses, but differences were small (less than 1 point on a 7 point scale). We suspected that the small differences were due to type shifting, so interviews were conducted with five native Thai speakers, in which contextualizing scenarios disambiguated the semantic types of subjects and complements. A fifth context was also included, which reversed the sentence schema of the specificational context (i.e. [Proper Name] + *bpen/kheuu* + [Definite Description]). We found that adjectival free relatives in Thai can be interpreted as referential (type e) as well as predicative (type <e,t>), and definite descriptions can be referential, predicative or have a higher semantic type, which we posit to be that of generalized quantifiers (<<e,t>,t>). *Bpen* was favored when the complement adjectival free relative was interpreted as predicative; whereas *kheuu* was favored when it was type shifted to referential. In the reversed specificational contexts, *bpen* was preferred when the complement was interpreted as predicative, but *kheuu* was preferred when it was interpreted as a generalized quantifier.

Thai thus confirms the predictions of the equative approach: one copula (*bpen*) is used in predicational sentences (e + <e,t>), and a second one (*kheuu*) is used in reversible specificational sentences (<<e,t>,t> + e) and in identity sentences (e + e).

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