The Evaluative Copula Construction in Icelandic: its status and its origin

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The Evaluative Copula Construction (ECC) is an underdescribed feature of Icelandic grammar. Although common in evaluative statements in colloquial Icelandic, as in (1), it has so far not figured in scholarly work on this language (e.g. Thráinsson' 2007 comprehensive treatment of Icelandic syntax).

(1) a. Góður þessi bjór! b. Hetja þessi maður! good.M this.M beer.M hero.F this maður.M

'This beer is good (in my opinion)!' 'This man is a real hero (in my estimation)!'

Syntactically, the ECC is unexpected in Modern Icelandic as it involves predication but lacks an overt copula *vera* 'be'. If the *vera* is inserted, the result is an archaic-sounding utterance that does not have the same function as the ECC. A further characteristic of the ECC is the fact that *pessi* cannot be omitted (e.g. **Hetja maður* hero.F man.M, as a variant of (1b)). Finally, the ECC is restricted to evaluative statements and thus it is not fully productive. To account for the oddities of this construction, I propose that synchronically the ECC is a complete clause where *pessi* 'this' functions as a copula element, blocking the insertion of *vera* 'be'. Diachronically, the ECC is an instance of lateral grammaticalization (Simpson & Wu 2002, Börjars & Vincent 2017), where the demonstrative pronoun *pessi* is reanalyzed as a copula – a change that has been observed in a variety languages (e.g. Heine and Kuteva 2002:108–109, 235). On the account proposed here, the ECC in (1) originates historically from structures like (2), found in colloquial Icelandic. The example in (2) contains what looks like a pronoun *hann* 'he', referring cataphorically to the subject DP *pessi bjór* 'this beer', but on my analysis it involves a filler element which agrees in gender and number with the subject. Both the structures in (1) and (2) are related to the neutral statement in (3), in that they contain the same propositional content.

(2) Hann er góður þessi bjór. (3) Þessi bjór er góður. he.M is.3SG good.M this beer.M this.M beer.M is.3SG good.M

Although (1) can historically be derived from structures such as in (2) by means of ellipsis of the subject and the finite verb, synchronically it cannot be derived in such a way. The reason is that while structures as in (2) can be used as an evaluative statement, this need not be the case, as shown in (4a), involving a non-evaluative declarative clause. If (1) were synchronically derivable from (2) through ellipsis, a non-evaluative predication should also be possible in ECC-type clauses. This, however, is *not* the case, as shown in (4b).

(4) a. *Hún er nemandi þessi stelpa*. b. *Nemandi þessi stelpa. she is student.M this girl.F student.M this girl.F

To conclude, the ECC is a feature of Icelandic that has hitherto not received proper attention in the linguistic literature. I argue that it is historically derived from structures such as (2). Synchronically, however, the ECC is a complete clause where *bessi*, originally a demonstrative pronoun, functions as a copula.

Keywords: syntax, copula construction, evaluative construction, lateral grammaticalization, reanalysis

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