My title is the title of this paper

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We have analyzed predicational copular sentences such as (1a) as having a semantically vacuous copula. The subject then combines directly with the predicate via functional application. Specificational and equative copular sentences (as in (1b,c)) obviously cannot be analyzed this way, indeed the copula in these cases is often treated as an equals sign[1].

(1)   a. John is a cat. (predicational)
        b. John is the winner. (specificational)
        c. John is the guy over there. (equative/identity)

An equals-sign analysis predicts that the copula should be symmetric in these cases. In other words, if we take two entities a and b, a *is* b should have the same truth conditions as b *is* a. This prediction seems to be born out much of the time. For example, (2a-b) intuitively have the same truth conditions, as do (2c-d).

(2)   a. John is the guy over there/winner.
        b. The winner/guy over there is John.
        c. The morning star is the evening star.
        d. The evening star is the morning star.

There are however, other cases that do not have this symmetry. Imagine a conversation between two colleagues, Bill and John, who have different work environment preferences. Bill prefers to work in the office, while John always works at home (assume they both have homes and they both have offices that are distinct). Imagine Bill wants to visit John at his office and asks him where is office is. John replies,

(3)   My home is my office.

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[1] I am using terminology from Higgins 1973 and Partee 1986/2010. I think some people treat specificational and equative as the same. The distinction doesn't matter much for the purposes of this paper.

A symmetrical analysis of the copula predicts only that *my home* and *my office* pick out the same location. It makes no predictions about which location that is. However, we have a strong intuition that we are talking about John's home, not his office. In particular, we get a reading where John works at home, but we don't get a reading where John lives in his office[2]. Furthermore, if we reverse the entities we get a different reading.

(4)   My office is my home.

Unless John focuses *my home*, this intuitively has the opposite meaning from (3), namely that John lives in his office. This asymmetry becomes clearer in (5). In this case, I have replaced *my home* with *my car*. Pragmatically, it seems natural to work in a car, but not to drive an office. This is reflected in (5), as (5a) seems natural, while (5b) sounds strange[3].

(5)   a. My car is my office. (= I work in my car.)
      b. # My office is my car. (= I drive my office.)

Turning one side of the copula into coordinated entities also feeds into the generalization. We conclude that for any sentence *my a is my b*, we get a reading that *my a* somehow or other plays the role of a *b*.

(6)   a. My home is my office and my closet. (= I work and keep clothes in my home/*I live in my office and I live in my closet)
      b. My home and my office are my closet. (= I keep clothes in my home and in my office/*I live and work in my closet)

To capture this, I think we have to either posit another version of the copula or a new composition rule for combining two entities. It is my hope that we can find an analysis that captures both the symmetric examples in (2) as well as the asymmetric examples in (3-6). At this point, I think we need some new terminology. From now on the symmetric examples will be called specificational while the asymmetric ones will be called pseudo-predicational.

I think there are two promising ways of thinking about the pseudo-predicational examples. One way is to view the second entity as a one-place predicate (Williams 1983 and Partee 1986 say something similar for specificational sentences, though Partee later argues against this analysis for English). *My home is my office* in this sense

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[2]Yadav pointed out to me that focusing *my office* can reverse the reading of the sentence to one in which John lives in his office. Other people seem to vary on this, but I think a simple movement analysis of focus would make this consistent with the generalization that *my a is my b* conveys information about *my a*.

[3](5b) becomes more natural in a context where John's car is somehow an intrinsic component of his work, like a traveling salesman. However, it is odd on the reading *my office functions as my car*.

means *my home is in the set of things that serve as an office for me*. If we adopt this view (from now on referred to as *the predicational view*), we need some way of converting *my office* from something of type e to something of type $<e,t>$ with lexical semantics:

⟦**my office**⟧ $= \lambda x.x$ functions as my office.

Alternatively, I think we can view the copula as a sort of modal here (from now on referred to as *the modal view*). To me, it feels as though copula is mapping a thing in the actual world to something in the world of the speaker's habits. *My home is my office* in this sense means something like *the phrase "my home" picks out my home in the actual world but picks out my office in my habitual world.*

Keny mentioned some interesting data to me that might bear on this. He first notes that this asymmetry is also reflected in embedded structures without an overt copula.

(7) a. I consider my car my home.
     b. # I consider my home my car.

Second, he mentioned another pseudo-predicational example that doesn't involve possessive pronouns.

(8) The storming of the Bastille is the symbol of the French Revolution.

It appears that the meaning we get from (8) is, *the storming of the Bastille symbolizes the French Revolution*, and not *what the symbol of the French Revolution is is an event of storming the Bastille.* Alternatively, we see that (9) has the opposite reading.

(9) The symbol of the French Revolution is the storming of the Bastille.

We also see asymmetry in wh-extraction, compared to the specificational examples.

(10) a. Who is the guy over there/winner? (possible answer: John)
      b. Who is John? (possible answer: the guy over there/winner)
      c. # Which prison is the symbol of the French revolution the storming of?
         (Can only be (more or less): "tell me the prison such that the symbol of
         the French revolution is an event of storming that prison".)
      d. Which revolution is the storming of the Bastille the symbol of?

I think examples (8) and (9) are very mysterious in the predicational view. In (8), we get a reading that the storming of the Bastille functions as the symbol of the

French Revolution (as expected in a predicational view). However, in (9) we don't get a reading where the symbol of the French Revolution is functioning as the storming of the Bastille: the storming of the Bastille doesn't feel like something that can be turned into a predicate to me. I would say that this sentence is simply a specificational use of the copula. This leads me to believe that something very strange is going on here. How is it that we can get an identity reading when the entities are ordered one way, but a predicational reading when ordered the other way?

I suppose we could push all of these issues into the pragmatics by saying that when the second entity makes sense as a predicate, the semantics chooses that option, and otherwise leaves it as an identity statement. But if that is the case, it seems like we should have many more options for interpreting the examples we have seen thus far than we actually do. Or perhaps it actually does work out and I just don't know what such a pragmatic mechanism would look like. Either way, I think the modal view is worth looking into.

The modal view is I think a bit more forgiving, though I'm not sure how to make it precise. The idea is this: there is a mechanism that tells us the first entity in the actual world has a double life as the second entity in some other salient world. If the most salient world is the actual world, we get an identity statement. Otherwise, we get a pseudo predicational reading. If the lower entity moves out of the domain of the other salient world, and an identity statement is infelicitous, the sentence becomes infelicitous (as in (10c)).

This seems to capture the examples we have seen thus far. For the examples in (2), *the guy over there* picks out an entity in a location that is local to the speaker. The most salient world is then whatever the speaker regards as the actual world, and so we get an identity reading. The *the evening star*, like proper names, seems to transcend notions of worlds, and so we get an identity reading.

For examples (3-6), the salient world is the plurality of worlds compatible with the speaker's habits. I wager that this plurality is the only possible salient world, and is made salient by the use of possessives. Pragmatically, I don't think the actual world can be a salient world for the second entity because it seems weird for *my home* and *my office* to be able to pick out the same location. Since both *home* and *office* are introduced with *my*, we are inclined to presuppose that the speaker has a distinct home and a distinct office. This contradicts an identity reading.

Regarding example (8), the salient world could be the world of historical discourse. At this point, I have offered no precise mechanism for choosing a salient world. I also haven't made any proposals for how the second entity ends up in the domain of some (potentially) different world than the first entity. A first attempt at the latter is found

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below.

$[\![\mathbf{is}]\!]^w = \lambda x.\lambda y.\ y$ in $w = x$ in w', where w' is determined contextually.

We have reached the extent of my thoughts on the topic. I certainly do not believe I have solved the issue but I hope to have added some perspective to the conversation. It seems to me that pragmatics play a reasonably important role in interpreting these copular sentences. I have tried to fit this into a possible worlds view of the copula, though I think it might still be possible to include this intuition in a predicational view of the copula as well. I leave you now with some more data that I find interesting.

(11) a. Ignorance is bliss.
      b. Water is life.

References

[1] Higgins, Roger, *The pseudo-cleft construction in English*. MIT, 1973.

[2] Partee, Barbara, *Ambiguous Pseudoclefts with Unambiguous Be*. Proceedings of NELS 16, 1986.

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[4] Iatridou, Sabine & Varlokosta, Spyridoula, *Pseudoclefts Crosslinguistically*. Natural Language Semantics 1998, 1998.

[5] Coppock, Elizabeth & Beaver, David, *Definiteness and Determinacy*. Linguistics and Philosophy 38, 2015.

[6] Williams, Edwin, *Semantics and Syntactic Categories*. Linguistics and Philosophy 6, 1983.