

The English Inverse Copular Construction Revisited: Pragmatic Ambiguity and Dual Syntactic Positions

Lorie Heggie & Eiichi Iwasaki^{*}

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Abstract:

In this article, we re-examine the landing-site issue of the inverse copular construction exemplified by *the best linguist is Noam*, which has essentially the base structure of *Noam is the best linguist*, with the underlying assumption that the NP *the best linguist* undergoes movement. The central issue here is where this NP moves to: either Spec,CP or Spec,TP. Since the widely-cited work by Heggie (1988a), there has been an extensive amount of debate revolving around this issue. The general perspective toward this debate is rather critical of the original proposal by Heggie (1988a) that the landing site in consideration is Spec,CP. The major objective of this paper is to re-examine the position by Heggie (1998), in defence of Heggie's Spec,CP hypothesis. The principal goal of this research direction is to argue that such a Spec,CP hypothesis is indeed theoretically viable on the grounds of a number of empirical advantages that are to be closely examined and elucidated. We consider apparent counterevidence against Heggie's position (cf. Mikkelsen 2005) and argue that such apparent counterevidence comes from semantic ambiguities inherent to specificational sentences. Following the analysis by Nishiyama (2003) of the two readings in Japanese specificational sentences, we argue that English specificational sentences also have two readings, which accounts for the debate in the landing sites of inverse nominals in these sentences.

1. Introduction

Since the widely-cited work on inverse copular structures by Heggie (1988a), there has been considerable controversy on the structure. Among the remarks in this debate, the most prominent critique is that the landing site of the inverse NP must be some location other than Spec,CP; in particular, see Moro (1997), Mikkelsen (2005) along with the cited literature therein. In reply, this paper attempts to reappraise the merits of the Spec,CP hypothesis. We will argue that certain ambiguities of specificational sentences influence the syntactic landing sites of inverse nominals.

The often-made criticism toward Heggie's (1988a) analysis is concerned with the following data in (1) below. The problem is that if *the best man* were in Spec,CP in (1), both sentences should be ungrammatical due to the requisite syntactic positions of *is* and *that*.

- (1) (a) Is [the best man] John?
(b) I know that [the best man] is John.

As we will see in section 2, *the best man* is in fact semantically ambiguous, having two possible readings and, accordingly, may occupy either Spec,CP or Spec,TP in (2) below.

- (2) The best man is John.

In this paper, we argue that the sentences in (1) are the result of the case where *the best man* is in Spec,TP. Below, we will consider the readings of the sentence in (2) that influence the syntactic positions of *the best man*: either Spec,CP or Spec,TP, relying upon an original insight by Nishiyama (2003; 2009), whose analysis is for counterpart sentences in Japanese.

2. The Two Readings of Nishiyama (2003)

Nishiyama (2003: 354-355) explains that inverse copular structures in Japanese, in general, are designated by the form ‘[_{Clause} ...] na no wa [_{NP} ...] da’, exemplified by the following.¹

- (3) Shyopan konkuuru de yuushoo-shi-ta no wa ano otoko da
Chopin concurs at win-do-PAST COMP/Formal NP TOP that man COP
‘The winner of the Chopin concurs is that man.’²

Putting aside the possible predication reading of “[_{Clause} ...] na no wa [_{NP} ...] da” (Nishiyama Ibid: 181, fn. 13), we will concentrate our discussion on the specificational interpretation attributed to these inverse structures, which can be classified into two readings.

The first is the concealed question reading, “who won the Chopin concurs? Answer: X did”. This reading would correspond to den Dikken et al.’s (2000) question-answer pair list reading for specificational pseudoclefts (SPC), Type A in their terminology.³ Nishiyama (ibid: p. 354-355) suggests that, on this reading, *no* is a complementiser and that there is a subject-predicate relation between *yuushoo-suru* and *ano otoko* (i.e. across *no*).

The second reading identified by Nishiyama is when *no* is identified as a formal nominal. This reading is paraphrased as follows, following a suggestion of Nishiyama.

- (4) Shyopan konkuuru de yuushoo-shi-ta mono/yatsu/hito wa ano otoko da
Chopin concour at win-do-PAST person/bloke/person TOP that man COP

Thus, as Nishiyama suggests, in (4) above, the subject-predicate relation this time is not between *yuushoo-suru* and *ano otoko* but between *yuushoo-suru* and *mono/yatsu/hito*. Given the exchangeability of *mono/yatsu/hito* with *no* here, we surmise that Nishiyama posits the

same predication relation in (3) as well. On our understanding, there is a ban on the subject-predicate relation across a formal noun, in contrast to the complementiser.⁴

Nishiyama observes that although the specificational reading of “[_{Clause} ...] na no wa [_{NP} ...] da” is ambiguous between the two readings above, there is little substantial difference in meaning between them and they “seem to be equivalent at least in terms of truth conditions” (Nishiyama 2003: 355). This point captures the well-known fact that utterances may be propositionally equivalent but informationally or pragmatically distinct. Consider the clear contrast below.

- (5) (a) Claudia baked Andrew an apple pie.
(b) For Andrew, Claudia baked an apple pie.

The two sentences share the same truth conditions but (5a) does not necessarily entail the meaning that Claudia baked an apple pie especially for Andrew, whereas (5b) does.

With Nishiyama’s two interpretations in mind, the first reading of the sentence in (3) is the one that results in the exploitation of the Spec,CP position for the inverted NP. This reading accesses the concealed question reading of Nishiyama, “who is the best man?—the best man is...”. In this approach, *the best man* indicates the interpretation [for x: the best man (x)] whose variable X is to be satisfied by *John* (cf. Nishiyama 2003). In this case, the pre-copular and post-copular constituents are in a very close relation and are not the result of entirely separated parts incidentally combined by the copula (cf. Nishiyama 2003). For current purposes, we will call this reading the “Discourse reading”, or “D-reading”, since it includes discourse factors in its heuristics; i.e., the D-reading suggests a discourse topic that corresponds to the question-answer⁵.

The second reading of (3) is the one that results in the inverted NP landing in the

Spec,TP position. This reading is specificational like the D-reading, but the difference lies in the meaning of the precopular NP, which is “the person who is the best man is X”, following Nishiyama’s (2003; 2009) suggestion based on Japanese specificational sentences. Since “the person who is the best man is X” contains a relative clause, we will call this reading the “Relative reading”, or “R-reading”.

Adopting Nishiyama’s (2003) framework, we argue that in both D- and R- readings, *the best man* is non-referential by the definition of NP Involving Variables (NPIV) (Nishiyama 2003), and that *the best man* in both D- and R-readings has a variable (e.g. [for X: the best man (X)]) whose variables are to be satisfied by referential NPs in post-copular positions (i.e. *John*).⁶ This definition requires then, that, whereas *the thing* is indeed referential, the NPIV *the thing that is X*, is not referential by definition of the NPIV. Parallel to the treatment of Japanese counterpart sentences in Nishiyama (2003), the D- and R-readings share the same truth conditions, but are nevertheless sufficiently different to create ambiguity in the interpretation of the sentences in (2).

In the present paper, we argue that this particular ambiguity results in two possible landing sites, Spec,CP and Spec,TP. By definition then, the sentences in (1) must both represent R-readings, such that the inverted NPs are in Spec,TP, allowing Subject-Auxiliary Inversion and sentential embedding.

The question of whether the Japanese structure and the English counterpart above are genuine syntactic counterparts remains, but the point we wish to make here is that the ambiguity that Nishiyama (ibid.) raises is real for native speakers of Japanese, and that this kind of ambiguity is worth exploring in English inverse copular structures. Thus, if the tentative proposal regarding the syntactic correspondence between Japanese and English should turn out to be incorrect, there is still an interesting argument to be made. The syntactic correspondence between the two languages is a tentative working hypothesis, as the focus

here is on the semantic/pragmatic ambiguity of the sentence.

Turning now to more specific data, we will explore the repercussions of this hypothesis.

3. Tag Questions and D-Readings

Hatakeyama's (1997) proposal captures inverse copular constructions in the following manner, *the culprit* being the "predicate nominal" and *John*, the "subject nominal".

(6) (a) John is the culprit.

(b) The culprit is John.

(7) $[_{CP} \text{The culprit}_i [_{C'} \text{is}_j [_{TP} \text{John}_k [_{T'} t_j [_{VP} t_k [_{V'} t_j t_i]]]]]]]$

On his hypothesis, the predicate nominal moves from a VP-internal position to Spec,CP, the copula moves to C^0 and the subject nominal moves to Spec,IP (Spec,TP above), an analysis parallel to Heggie (1988a) in the landing sites for inverse and subject NPs, although Hatakeyama (ibid.) does not cite Heggie (ibid.). One particularly useful piece of data in Hatakeyama (1997: 45), ascribed to an anonymous reviewer, is in (8).

(8) (a) How often is John the problem?

(b) *How often is the problem John? [(a), (b): from Hatakeyama (1997)]

(c) *How often is the problem the man with a mustache? [(c): our sentence]

These data can be given a straightforward account if the predicate nominal *the problem* is located in Spec,CP, the syntactic location for the D-reading. In the context of (8b, c), it is reasonable to suppose that, due to the temporal adverb, *the problem* here refers to a discourse topic encompassing several recurrent problems in differing circumstances, as in *what is the*

problem?, and not *the thing/person that is the problem*. Thus, if only the D-reading is available for this sentence, we can posit further support for this analysis.

Further syntactic evidence can be found in the following contrast, discussed in Moro (1994) and Hatakeyama (1997).

- (9) (a) Which picture do you think is the cause of the problem?
 (b) *Which picture do you think the cause of the problem is?

Consider first the following data where the pronoun of the tag question helps to disambiguate the various readings.

- (10) (a) Mary_i is [the cause of the problem]_j, isn't she_i/*isn't it_j?
 (b) [The cause of the problem]_i is Mary_j, isn't it_i/*isn't she_j?

Whereas (10a) shows that the animate pronoun is usually associated with the referential NP, in (10b), *The cause of the problem* is non-referential because of its status as an NP_{IV}, and thus corresponds to *it*. In (10b), we have a specificational sentence with potential D- or R-readings, asking *what is the cause of the problem?* or *the person/thing that is the cause*. If we adopt the D-reading, on our analysis, the ungrammaticality of (9b) is accounted for in the following way.

- (11) (a) [_{CP} [Which picture]_i [_C do] you think [_{CP} [_C is] [_{TP} the cause of the problem t_i?]]]
 (b) [_{CP} *[Which picture]_i [_C do] you think [_{CP} the cause of the problem [_C \emptyset][_{TP} is t_i?]]

In (11b), we can see that, on the D-reading, *the cause of the problem* acts as an island,

preventing A'-movement of *which picture*. Logically, the R-reading should be possible but is not. One theoretical possibility is that the *wh*-question triggers only the D-reading, as we will see later, in the case of ambiguous sentences. This may exclude the possibility of the R-reading. The same would hold for (8b) and (8c).

Turning more specifically to the nature of tag questions in this context, we focus upon defending the Spec,CP-landing-site hypothesis by raising some additional pieces of empirical evidence to Heggie (1988a) and Hatakeyama (1997). It is generally accepted that, although tag questions most often target the matrix verb and its subject, they may at times reflect a verb that is syntactically embedded (Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 893). For example, it is possible to interpret *isn't he* in (12b) below as reflecting the verb *is* within the embedded clause.

- (12) (a) We all know that John is a criminal , don't we?
 (b) We all know that John is a criminal , isn't he?

With this in mind, let us consider the contrast in (13) below and the subsequent data in (14).⁷

- (13) (a) John_i is [the culprit]_j, {isn't he_i/*isn't it_j}?
 (b) [The culprit]_j is John_i, {*isn't he_i/isn't it_j}?

Note that in (13a), *John* is referential and requires a referential tag with *he*. When the reading of *the culprit* is non-referential and an NPiv, the sentence in (13b) is grammatical only with *isn't it*, and not with *isn't he*. By way of contrast, the following data provides an interesting implication.

- (14) (a) We_k all know that [John_j is [the culprit]_i, {*isn't it_i/isn't he_j/don't we_k}]?

(b) We_k all know that [[the culprit]_i is John_j, { *?isn't it_i/*isn't he_j/don't we_k }]?

In non-embedded circumstances, *isn't it*, as in (13b), is possible, but in (14b), when the tag is associated with an embedded, specificational subject, it is not. Also, the predicational-reading does not seem possible because of the ungrammaticality of *isn't he* in (14b). In contrast, the sentence in (14a) is grammatical with *isn't he*, associated with *John*, and the tag *isn't it* in (14b) is ungrammatical, or at best marginal, in this embedded context. One of the many possibilities of accounting for this last fact in (14b) — although not entirely conclusive — is that *the culprit* is in Spec,CP and therefore clashes with the ordering of the complementiser *that*. If this analysis is correct, the D-reading seems to not be available in embedded contexts.

One potential counterargument against the hypothesis that D-readings are impossible due to the unavailability of the Spec,CP for *the culprit* is found in embedded contexts where, assuming the existence of CP-Rursion (cf. Watanabe 1992) or the Split-CP analysis (cf. Rizzi 1997), Spec,CP should indeed be available for the D-reading.⁸ For instance, the following sentence is grammatical with focalisation in the embedded sentence.

(15) I think that at no time would she have considered doing anything like that.

(Anonymous reviewer in Abeille & Borsley 2008: 1143, fn.4)

The problem is that, on the assumption that *the culprit* in (14b) is in Spec,CP, the marginality of (14b) with *isn't it* (i.e. *?We all know that the culprit is John, isn't it) indicates that CP-recursion cannot save the sentence.⁹ If CP-recursion were a viable structure, this sentence should be (to some extent or fully) grammatical, just like its non-embedded counterpart in (13b).¹⁰ The same logic holds for the Split-CP hypothesis.

A similar situation holds for R-readings: if the R-reading (*the culprit* in Spec,TP) were

possible in (14b), the sentence should be grammatical insofar as this sentence is concerned. However, this does not mean that we extend this analysis to a general ban on tag questions with R-readings. It is possible to make a tag question where the R-reading is available.

(16) (a) [The man who reviewed this paper]_i was John, wasn't it_i?

(b) [What is in the box] is an apple.

(c) [The thing that is in the box] is an apple.

These sentences are unambiguous, only allowing the R-reading automatically, presumably because the syntactic structure of *the thing/man... is...* forces the sentences to have only Readings. That is, there is no possibility of a D-reading for these sentences. In contrast, regarding the earlier sentence in (13b), the D-reading seems to take priority because (13b) is an ambiguous sentence with the possibilities of a D-reading and an R-reading, with the tag question creating a self-confirmation, i.e. question-answer information structure. In (16), which is not ambiguous by virtue of the R-reading structure of *the person who ...*, the D-reading cannot take priority. In sum, a question-answer information structure creates the D-reading only when a sentence is ambiguous; a structurally disambiguated sentence like (16) only has one of the two readings. That is, information structure helps one reading take priority over the other only in ambiguous sentences without changing the truth conditions being held for the two readings.

Notice that, regarding (14b), the tag question seems to give priority to the D-reading over the R-reading in this context. A possible explanation is the following. We could hypothesize that, because of the information structure introduced by the tag question, the D-reading takes priority over the R-reading before *the culprit is John, isn't it* is embedded. The D-reading is then barred due to the syntactic implausibility of the embedding, i.e., *the culprit* in Spec,CP,

and that in C^0 .

The possibility that *the culprit* in (14b) with *isn't it?* is in Spec,CP is enhanced by the parallelism with other structures. As suggested in section 2, our D-reading specificational sentence seems to be parallel to den Dikken et al.'s (2000) 'Type A' specificational Pseudocleft, if we assume that the inverse copular structure is a reduced specificational sentence with a *wh*-phrase phonologically deleted (cf. den Dikken 2006). Den Dikken (2006: 158) also suggests that "sentences such as *a big problem is the fascist propaganda* are like 'Type A' SPCs"[italics in the original], which we will discuss subsequently. The embedded 'Type A' Specificational Pseudocleft, of den Dikken et al. (2000) is argued to be marginal "in non-bridge contexts" (see den Dikken's 2006: 157). The marginality of (14b) with *isn't it* suggests a parallelism among (A) our D-reading specificational sentence, (B) den Dikken et al.'s 'Type A' Specificational Pseudocleft, and (C) sentences like *A big problem is the fascist propaganda*. Two independent questions regarding (i) why (A), (B), and (C), are marginal and (ii) why they are marginal only in "non-bridge contexts" remain open questions. Den Dikken et al. (2000) and den Dikken (2006) offer no immediate solution but the parallelism across (A)-(C) is robust. The parallelism of (C) with (A) and (B) raises the plausibility that *the culprit* in (14b) with *isn't it* is in Spec,CP, or perhaps even Spec,TopP.

In this section, we have remained suggestive about two points: in a main clause like (13b), a tag question associated with the D-reading of the NPIV is possible, but it is not available in an embedded clause, such as in (14b). If this suggestion can be upheld, the presence of a tag question (by virtue of the information structure that it creates) appears to collapse the ambiguous readings into one reading: the D-reading, in this case.

4. Mikkelsen (2005) and R-Readings

Mikkelsen (2005) distinguishes two types of inverse copular sentences: specificational, where

the precopular noun is in Spec,TP, and predicate topicalisation, where the inverted noun phrase is in Spec,CP. She claims that Heggie's (1988b) analysis of inverse copular sentences is appropriate only to the latter sentence-type. Mikkelsen's claim is based on her assumption that the following in (17) has only one reading, specificational.

(17) Den højeste spiller på holdet er Minna

the tallest player on team-DEF is Minna

'The tallest player on the team is Minna.' (Mikkelsen 2005: 10-11)

Mikkelsen's claim is that *Den højeste spiller* is in Spec,TP (Spec,IP), *er* in T^0 (I^0), and *Minna* is within the VP.

However, if specificational sentences in fact have two readings, the D-reading and the R-reading, then Mikkelsen's syntactic analysis of (17) above as a specificational sentence may only represent the R-reading.

Our remark above is supported by the following negated sentence that Mikkelsen provides (Ibid: p. 23):

(18) Den højeste spiller på holdet er ikke {hun/*hende}.

the tallest player on team-DEF is not she/her

'The tallest player on team-DEF isn't her.'

As den Dikken et al. (2000) argue, SPC Type A sentences, with their Topic-Comment type structure, contain concealed questions, and therefore, the matrix copula cannot be negated, or in general modified by an adverb: cf. their (19) as below.

- (19) (a) What John isn't is angry with himself.
 (b) *What John is isn't angry with himself.

The fact that Mikkelsen's sentence allows negation suggests that her sentence is different from den Dikken et al.'s concealed question type, which parallels the D-reading.

In addition, Mikkelsen's (p. 37) matrix question data below also reveals that her terminology for specificational sentences seems to essentially refer to something different from the D-reading in which the pre-copular nominal embodies a question-answer.

- (20) Er den højeste spiller på holdet ikke Minna
 is the tallest player on team-DEF not Minna
 'Isn't it the tallest player on the team Minna?'

That is, a question-answer pair should not be able to be embedded in the matrix question because it would trigger a contradiction in information structure. This state of affairs would result in [Question [Question and Answer]] where the sentence is informationally contradictory because the question-answer pair is embedded in the question.¹¹ It seems then that Mikkelsen's specificational sentences must be targeting the R-reading.

5. Distinguishing D-Readings from R-Readings

So far, we have argued that the inverted NP in copular sentences has two specificational readings: either a D-reading or an R-reading. As long as we limit ourselves to a discussion of the definite NP, we cannot generally avoid this ambiguity. However, there are cases where only one reading is transparently possible.

Let us look at another case where the ambiguity of D- and R-readings does not arise. Den

Dikken (2006: Chapter 4 Appendix) suggests that certain specificational sentences have indefinite pre-copular nominals like the following.^{1 2}

(21) (a) An excellent doctor is Brian.

(b) Examples of this are the Vietnam War and the Gulf War. (den Dikken, 2006:91)

Den Dikken (ibid) places the pre-copular indefinite nominal in (21) in Spec,TopP, while in definite-inverted-NP copular structures like (21), he places the inverted NP in Spec,TP (cf. fn.3). Den Dikken (ibid) suggests that the sentences in (21) are parallel to SPC ‘Type A’ sentences in their syntactic behavior regarding the impossibility of negation and SAI. The sentences in (21) are thus unambiguous, allowing only the D-reading; the R-reading is not possible because it is contradictory to posit an indefinite value for the variable of x in ‘the thing which is x’, given the semantic requirements of the definite descriptor. This state of affairs would result in the ungrammatical ‘*the thing which is {a cause of .../a best ...}.’

The hypothesized parallelism predicts that the sentences in (21) cannot be embedded, and according to den Dikken (2006: 155-157), these sentences are indeed “marginal” except in the context of bridge verbs (e.g. *?Imogen wonders whether a fine candidate would be Brian* (ibid, p.155)). Den Dikken (ibid) does not clarify why only bridge verbs allow embedding in spite of his Spec,TopP structure. Moreover, for us (the second author’s native judgement), even under bridge contexts, embedding is marginal (e.g., *?*I think that an excellent doctor is John Smith.*)^{1 3} This result is compatible with the ungrammaticality/marginality of the D-readings discussed above.

5. Concluding Remarks

We have elucidated two possible readings for specificational sentences, following Nishiyama

(2003). These readings trigger ambiguities in inverse copular sentences, and hence in the corresponding landing site of inverse nominals: either Spec,CP or Spec,TP. We have demonstrated that any *prima facie* counterevidence against the Spec-CP hypothesis seems to derive from this tacit ambiguity that influences the syntactic position of the inverse nominal. If this approach can be upheld, Heggie's (1988a) analysis that an inverted nominal may land in Spec,CP will remain plausible.

* The authors are alphabetically ordered. The present article is dedicated to Andrew Radford on the occasion of his retirement in recognition of his outstanding contribution to the field of formal syntax.

¹ cf. Nishiyama, (2003, p. 181, fn. 13) for discussion of some exceptions as well as discussion on the properties of *wa*, where he provides strong arguments for a cleft analysis for *wa*.

² All glosses and translations for Nishiyama are provided by the authors of this paper.

³ Below is their proposed structure for Type A SPC's (Den Dikken et al., 2000).

(i) [_{TopP} [What John is] [_{Top'} [_{Top} is] important to himself]].

⁴ Nishiyama (2009: 84-86) discusses similar verb-object relations in specificational pseudoclefts in English.

⁵ Nishiyama (2003) opposes the position that the NPIV is a Topic, and thus, we are only adopting his two readings. We are in debt to den Dikken et al. (2000) for the parallelism between the question-answer pair and TopP.

⁶ cf. Nishiyama (2003: 140-141) for relevant discussion of non-referential NPs.

⁷ cf. Mikkelsen (2002: 16) for a similar analysis for tag questions in Dutch and Nishiyama (2003: 133) for the relevant discussion in Japanese. See also:

<http://oyukio.blogspot.jp/2012/10/502.html#!/2012/10/502.html>

⁸ Cf. Hatakeyama (2004: 206) and Culicover (1991) for arguments against CP-recursion.

⁹ It might be possible for marginality or awkwardness to arise even if CP-recursion or the split CP hypothesis works. However, ungrammaticality would not arise if they were operative.

¹⁰ If CP-recursion or the split CP is possible and therefore *the culprit* can be located in Spec,CP, then some other factor might trigger the sentence's ungrammaticality/marginality. One suggestion would be that tag questions associated with an inverted NP are banned in an embedded clause, regardless of the D- and R-readings. This claim seems unlikely given the fact that a tag question is possible in an embedded context (cf. (12b)) and a tag question with a specificational reading is possible in the main clause (cf. (10b)).

¹¹ cf. den Dikken et al. (2000) for the general impossibility of Subject-Aux Inversion in SPC Type A sentences.

¹² Iwasaki (2013) argues that there is a parallelism between the two readings of Japanese copular structures described in Nishiyama (2000), (but not Nishiyama (2003)) and the English specificational copular structures in den Dikken (2006) with respect to syntactic positions.

¹³ What is empirically intriguing is that even in the case of the definite inverted NP, grammaticality may degrade. Consider:

(i) I wonder whether the 'best man'/?**the best man for the job**/*an excellent doctor is John.

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Contact Information

Lorie Heggie

Associate Professor, Linguistics & French, Department of Languages, Literatures, & Cultures

Illinois State University

Email: lheggie(a)ilstu.edu

Eiichi Iwasaki

Part-time Lecturer, School of Commerce and Adjunct Researcher, Research Institute of

Business Administration, Waseda University

Email: e.iwasaki(a)aoni.waseda.jp

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