Demystifying Double-\textit{is}

Teresa O’Neill // CUNY Graduate Center

This paper examines the (colloquial) English double-\textit{is} construction, which is puzzling because it contains a string of what appear to be two finite verbs (\textit{is} or \textit{was}). Previous work on the double-\textit{is} construction has shown that it is productive, and not merely the result of disfluency (e.g., [1]; [3]; [7]). On the basis of data from a corpus ([4]) and acceptability surveys, I argue that true double-\textit{is} sentences instantiate Topic-Comment structures, where \textit{is}_1 heads TopP, and \textit{is}_2 heads the Comment, a small clause whose specifier is a \textit{pro}-predicate co-indexed with the Topic, as in (1).

\begin{enumerate}
\item [\textit{TopP} [\textit{DP} The thing]], \textit{[Top is}_1 [\textit{SC [pro.]} [\textit{f is}_2 [\textit{s} (that we might be late)]]]]
\end{enumerate}

The derivational simplicity of (1) captures the intuition that double-\textit{is} sentences are “indiscriminate” ([7]) or constructed at the level of discourse, without removing them from the core syntax.

\textbf{Double-\textit{is} and Pseudoclefts}

Double-\textit{is} sentences bear a striking resemblance to specificational pseudoclefts (SPCs) and non-canonical copular sentences (e.g., \textit{that’s} \textit{X} \textit{is} \textit{Y}; [11]). For instance, they must receive a specificational reading, not a predicational one (2), and they are structurally frozen (3).

\begin{enumerate}
\item (That’s) (what) my issue is \textit{is} [I’m out of cash] / [\textit{*bad} (for myself)].
\item *What do you think (that’s) (what) my issue is \textit{is} \textit{it}? / *What do you think \textit{I} \textit{is} I’m out of cash.
\end{enumerate}

Massam (1999) proposes that \textit{is}_2 is a focus marker diachronically related to the verbal copula of the SPC. Only nouns that take sentential complements (\textit{the issue, my problem, etc.}) can occur in the pre-copular position. For Massam, this is because they can establish a thematic relation with their arguments in the absence of case ([13]). Her proposal falls short in two respects: it fails to explain the high frequency of SPCs with double-\textit{is} (4), and the irreversibility of double-\textit{is} sentences (5):

\begin{enumerate}
\item What happens \textit{is} they get out of the system.
\item a. The problem \textit{is} \textit{we’re} tired. b. We’re tired \textit{is \textit{<is>} the problem \textit{<is>}}.
\end{enumerate}

A closer look at the syntactic distribution of the copula and the information structure associated with SPCs and double-\textit{is} makes the structure in (1) an appealing alternative.

\textbf{Distribution of the Copula}

The English copula occurs as a predication marker in both verbal and non-verbal environments ([5]). The copula’s function is simply to relate two elements, one of type \textit{X} and the other of type \textit{<X,T>} ([10]). I propose that it is semantically and furtorially so underspecified that it can realize the head of any small clause, provided its subject is licensed. In double-\textit{is} sentences the small clause’s propositional subject does not need to be licensed under Agree with \textit{T}; as a finite clause, it also temporally anchors the whole proposition, so the copula projects no “matrix” Tense structure. The copula may thus spell out the head of any small clause relating a predicate over propositions (\textit{<t,T>}) and a finite proposition (\textit{t}). TopP and the Comment beginning with \textit{pro} in (6a) are two such small clauses.

\begin{enumerate}
\item a. [[\textit{TopP}[\textit{My issue}]\textit{<t,T> [\textit{is} [\textit{pro}_{\textit{t}, \textit{<t,T> is} [it stinks]_{\textit{t}}]]]]] b. [[\textit{TopP} [\textit{His name}]\textit{<t,T> [\textit{is} [\textit{pro}_{\textit{t}, \textit{<t,T> is} [\textit{John}]_{\textit{t}}]]]],
\end{enumerate}

\textbf{Topic-Comment Structures}

Double-\textit{is} sentences are not reversible, which follows from the fixed information structure associated with non-verbal copular sentences. The predicate in such a sentence functions semantically as an indirect or concealed question ([5]; [9]; [12]); thus, the post-copular clause provides its focused answer. In general, the predicate of a specificational copular sentence may occupy the pre-copular position provided it is interpreted as Topic ([8])—it may be explicitly marked as Topic by \textit{is}_1 as long as it takes a proposition as its argument (since the copula must relate \textit{X} and \textit{<X,T>}). Non-verbal and canonical specificational copular sentences alike are reversible—the “answer” clause can be pre- or post-copular (\textit{is}_2) and receive focus in-situ. Since it can never be Topic, however, it cannot occupy the dedicated Topic position marked by \textit{is}_1.

\textbf{Conclusion}

The present proposal situates double-\textit{is} sentences in a theory treating the English copula as an underspecified predicational relator that can head small clauses with clausal subjects. Double-\textit{is} is thus analyzed using objects and configurations that are independently available in English.
References


