

## Demystifying Double-*is*

Teresa O'Neill // CUNY Graduate Center

This paper examines the (colloquial) English double-*is* construction, which is puzzling because it contains a string of what appear to be two finite verbs (*is* or *was*). Previous work on the double-*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-*is* sentences instantiate Topic-Comment structures, where *is*<sub>1</sub> heads TopP, and *is*<sub>2</sub> heads the Comment, a small clause whose specifier is a *pro*-predicate co-indexed with the Topic, as in (1).

(1) [<sub>TopP</sub> [<sub>DP</sub> The thing]<sub>i</sub> [<sub>Top</sub> **is**<sub>1</sub> [<sub>SC</sub> [<sub>pro</sub><sub>i</sub>] [<sub>F</sub> **is**<sub>2</sub> [<sub>S</sub> (that) we might be late]]]]]]

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

### Double-*is* and Pseudoclefts

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

(2) (That's) (what) my issue is **is** [I'm out of cash] / [\*bad (for myself)].

(3) \*What do you think (that's) (what) my issue is **is** *t*? / \*What do you think *t* is **is** I'm out of cash?

Massam (1999) proposes that *is*<sub>2</sub> is a focus marker diachronically related to the verbal copula of the SPC. Only nouns that take sentential complements (*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-*is* (4), and the irreversibility of double-*is* sentences (5):

(4) What happens **is is** they get out of the system.

(5) a. The problem **is is** we're tired.                      b. We're tired **is <\*is>** the problem <\*is>.

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

### 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 *X* and the other of type <*X*,*t*> ([10]). I propose that it is semantically and featurally so underspecified that it can realize the head of any small clause, provided its subject is licensed. In double-*is* sentences the small clause's propositional subject does not need to be licensed under Agree with 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 (<*t*,*t*>) and a finite proposition (*t*). TopP and the Comment beginning with *pro* in (6a) are two such small clauses.

(6) a. [<sub>TopP</sub>[My issue]<sub>i</sub><*t*,*t*> [**is** [<sub>pro</sub><sub>i</sub><*t*,*t*> **is** [it stinks]<sub>i</sub>]]]] b. \* [<sub>TopP</sub> [His name]<sub>i</sub><*e*,*t*> [**is** [<sub>pro</sub><sub>i</sub><*e*,*t*> **is** [John]<sub>e</sub>]<sub>i</sub>]]]]

### Topic-Comment Structures

Double-*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 *is*<sub>1</sub> as long as it takes a proposition as its argument (since the copula must relate *X* and <*X*,*t*>). Non-verbal and canonical specificational copular sentences alike are reversible—the “answer” clause can be pre- or post-copular (*is*<sub>2</sub>) and receive focus in-situ. Since it can never be Topic, however, it cannot occupy the dedicated Topic position marked by *is*<sub>1</sub>.

### Conclusion

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

## References

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