

Equating sentences: A type-shifting operation on propositions
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This paper analyzes the semantics of a previously understudied but stable sentence type, the copular amalgam, which is used colloquially by many speakers of American English. Examples are given in (1)–(2) below.¹

- (1) [S₁ That's what she ate] is [S₂ she ate a bagel].
(2) [S₁ She should eat that] is [S₂ she should eat a bagel].

In a copular amalgam, the copula relates two sentences, S₁ and S₂, where S₁ contains an indexical with a discourse antecedent (the **variable**) and S₂ contains an expression that is coreferential with the variable (the **value**). A semantic account of copular amalgams must address (i) the relationship between S₁ and S₂, (ii) the interpretation of the variable with respect to the value, and (iii) the contribution of the copula to the meaning of the sentence. The present paper does so by positing a type-shifting operation that applies to S₂, turning it into an identity function over propositions.

Copular amalgams have peculiar properties compared to other, better-studied copular sentence types. Most of the previous literature on copular sentences examines sentence types in which the copula relates an entity-denoting expression and a predicate, as in (3), or two entity-denoting expressions, as in the equative example in (4). Also well studied are specificational copular sentences, as in (5), where the first expression includes a variable, and the second provides the value for that variable.

- (3) Cicero is a great writer. (predicational)
(4) Cicero is Tully. (equative)
(5) The teacher is John. (specificational)

Copular amalgams differ from these in that the two expressions related by the copula are propositions: neither has an <e>-type or <et>-type interpretation and they do not distribute syntactically like the subject and predicate of a clause. Neither S₁ nor S₂ can be pronominalized by *it* or *that*, pro-forms that can replace clauses as long as they have <e> or <et>-type readings, respectively. S₁ and S₂ cannot be embedded in a small clause under *consider*, so they are not generated in the same subject and predicate positions as their counterparts in canonical copular sentences. The variable and the value are not directly related in the syntax via the copula, unlike in (5). In addition, the copula in an amalgam is morpho-syntactically constrained, occurring only as *is* or *was*: it cannot host plural phi-features, modals, auxiliaries, or negation. These syntactic facts lead to the conclusion that the copula in an amalgam spells out a simple functional head, a species of conjunction, relating two root sentences.

While a conjunction like *and* can relate sentence with wildly different meanings, the meanings of S₁ and S₂ are not independent. In fact, S₁ and S₂ have the same truth conditions:

- (6) [[copular amalgam sentence]] = [{w': [[S₁]] in w'} = {w'': [[S₂]] in w''}]

The answer to the first component of the analysis is that the relationship between S₁ and S₂ is one of equation. The two sentences are very close to content-synonymous on their surfaces, but there is one mismatch: S₁ contains a variable that is coindexed with a discourse antecedent, and S₂ contains a referring expression in place of the variable. This brings us to the second component of the analysis: there is no direct syntactic or semantic relationship between the variable and the value; rather, the copular amalgam identifies the variable with the value by equating the truth conditions of the propositions in which they are embedded. The specificational interpretation of the copular amalgam thus comes about indirectly.

The final question then arises as to the source of the equative meaning: either the copula means identity, or identity is encoded elsewhere. The present paper takes the latter course, following Partee (1986), den Dikken (2006), Geist (2007), and others, in maintaining that there is only one *be*-the vacuous copula of predication, and that type-shifting operations give rise to equative semantics. I propose that alongside Partee's **ident**, which maps entities onto predicates, there is a type-shifting operation **ident_p**,

¹ This paper only discusses deictic copular amalgams; I address *wh*-amalgam pseudoclefts like *what she should do is she should eat a bagel* and reverse *wh*-amalgam pseudoclefts in previous work.

which takes a proposition of type $\langle s,t \rangle$ and returns a set of propositions of type $\langle \langle s,t \rangle, \langle s,t \rangle \rangle$. In copular amalgams, it applies to the intension of S2, taking the set of worlds where its denotation is true, and returning the singleton set containing that set of worlds:

$$(7) \quad \mathbf{ident}_p(p) = \lambda q[q=p]$$

The meaning returned by \mathbf{ident}_p can be paraphrased: ‘have the same truth conditions as p .’ The raised version of S2 is then applied to S1 via the copula, which is a semantically vacuous mediator of predication. A copular amalgam sentence is true if the intension of S1 is the unique member of the set denoted by S2.

The present paper argues that an identity relation such as this, mediated by the copula, does not require a copula imbued with equative semantics, either by the lexicon or by a type-shift applied to the copula itself (contra Schlenker 2003; Geist 2007, respectively). One reason for this is that the copula of an amalgam is optional. Even when it is not present, the interpretation of the relationship between S1 and S2 remains the same:

- (8) SPEAKER A: I’ve really been missing the outdoors lately. We should do something to enjoy the nice weather, like maybe camping or hiking or something.
a. SPEAKER B: That’s what we should do, (is) we should go camping.
b. SPEAKER B: #That’s what we should do, (is) we should stay inside.

The sentence in (8b), even without the copula, is infelicitous, since it indirectly identifies *that* with *stay inside*, even though *go to the mall* is not among the possible discourse antecedents for *that*. The copula is thus not essential to the equative interpretation.

This paper provides new empirical support for the ‘one-be’ polymorphic approach to the copula (e.g., Partee 1989). By extending the domain of the natural type-shifting operation \mathbf{ident} to propositions (\mathbf{ident}_p), this paper captures the equative relationship between S1 and S2 in a copular amalgam and the specificational character of the relationship between the variable and the value, and predicts that the copula itself makes no semantic contribution to the sentence.

References

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