The information structure of copular clauses: Can the prosody-grammar interface tell us something about copular typology?

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In the typology of copular clauses, the most basic distinction, we have argued (Van Praet & Davidse 2015), is the one between specificational (1) and ascriptive (2) clauses.

(1) the ^one !qu\ality I`ve g/ot# for ^being a polit/ician# is that ^I !sleep the :whole night :thr/ough# (LLC)

(2) I am the sh\op ass/istant # Matthew </name#> you're the person coming into the sh\op# (LLC)

Specificational clauses, like (1), set up a pragmatically presupposed variable (e.g. *the one quality I've got for being a politician*), to which the speaker assigns a specific value (e.g. *that I sleep the whole night through*). Ascriptive clauses like (2), on the other hand, ascribe a description (e.g. *being the shop assistant*) to a typically familiar entity (e.g. *I, you*).

This paper sets out to investigate whether and how the functional difference between the two clause types is reflected in their respective information structures. Our particular concern is to check the traditional assumption (e.g. Halliday 1994, Huddleston & Pullum 2002) that the specificational-ascriptive distinction is rooted in a difference in focus assignment, with the focus typically falling on the value in the former and on the description in the latter. To do so, we compiled a set of prosodically transcribed data from the London Lund Corpus, 500 specificational and 500 ascriptive clauses.

The results, we argue, show that, while there is a basic truth to this view of specificational vs. ascriptive information structure, it needs to be nuanced to provide replicable recognition criteria. Ascriptive clauses, mostly realized on one tone unit or even only part of a tone unit , do have as their default the assumed dichotomy between an element that has low communicative dynamism (CD) and one high in CD, which is most often the ascriptive complement, as in (2). Specificational clauses, which are not uncommonly spread over several tone units with a corresponding plurality of intonational peaks, as in (1), require a more nuanced formulation of their informational principles. Esser & Polomski's (1988) proposal that a hierarchy of foci be recognized may have to be developed for them (p.c. O'Grady). In addition, examples such as (1) and (2) suggest that it is worth considering Esser's (1983) idea that the contrast less vs. more foregroundworthy should be distinguished from that between non-final and final. In the first contrast, the nuclearity of the tonic syllable as such marks the most newsworthy element, or the focus. (Non-)finality, on the other hand, is said to be signalled by pitch change, with a rise conveying non-finality (see also Kimps 2016), as illustrated in both (1) and (2).

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