

## Copula as a Nominative Case Marker

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**1 Introduction:** Copulas are known to be realized in a variety of grammatical categories, including verb, pronominal, and preposition (Rapoport 1991, van Gelderen 2011, Puset 2003). I claim that the copula in Korean is a nominative Case marker. This claim raises the following question: how can the nominals in copular constructions bear a  $\theta$ -relation without a predicate? In order to resolve this problem, I propose that even referential NPs can assign a  $\theta$ -role.

**2 Copula as a Nominative Case Marker:** In Korean every nominal can be marked by an overt Case marker. The question is whether predicate nominals are also Case-marked. I propose that the answer is positive, and the copula is a nominative Case marker. I claim that the Korean copula *-i* is a nominative Case marker on following grounds. First, the copula was phonologically identical with the nominative Case marker in middle Korean. Second, it can be attached to NP only, but not to AP or PP: AP and PP are not compatible with the copula. Third, in the negative counterpart of (1) the copula disappears and the predicate nominal is marked by a nominative Case marker. This is not surprising if the copula is a nominative Case marker. In both positive and negative sentences the predicate nominal is assigned nominative Case, and in the positive sentence the nominative Case is attached by tense, whereas in the negative sentence it is not. In short, (1) and (2) are represented as (3a-b), respectively.

- |     |                                   |                    |                                   |                        |
|-----|-----------------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------|
| (1) | Tom-un/i                          |                    | haksayng-i- $\Phi$ -ta.           | (Predicational)        |
|     | Tom-Topic/nominative              |                    | student-Copula-Present-Ind        | 'Tom is a student'     |
| (2) | Tom-i                             | haksayng-i         | ani-*(i)- $\Phi$ -ta.             |                        |
|     | Tom-nom                           | student-nominative | not-*(copula)-Pres-Ind            | 'Tom is not a student' |
| (3) | a. Positive Copular Construction: | [Nominal-nom       | Nominal-nom]-tense-indicative     |                        |
|     | b. Negative Copular Construction: | [Nominal-nom       | Nominal-nom] Not-tense-indicative |                        |

One potential problem with the view 'copula as a nominative Case marker' arises from the fact that in modern Korean, the nominative Case marker and the copula are slightly different in their phonetic realization. The nominative Case marker is pronounced as either [i] or [ka], depending on whether the preceding sound is a consonant or a vowel, but the copula is pronounced as [i], regardless of whether the preceding sound is a consonant or not. I propose that this phenomenon is related with the fact that the nominative Case marker for the predicate nominal must be attached by tense and mood. The nominative Case marker for arguments occurs in word-final position, but the one for the predicate nominals do not; it must be attached by tense and mood markers. So we can generalize as follows: the nominative Case marker morpheme /I/ is pronounced as [i] (i) when it is attached by another morpheme or (ii) when it occurs in word final-position and is preceded by a consonant, and it is phonetically realized as [ka] if it occurs in word final-position and is preceded by a vowel. To conclude, the copula is nominative Case marker attached by tense.

- (4) a. /I/  $\rightarrow$  [i]/ { \_\_\_\_\_ +, Consonant \_\_\_\_\_ ##}      b. /I/  $\rightarrow$  [ka]/Vowel \_\_\_\_\_ ##

**3 A Theta-Role Based Analysis of Copular Constructions:** According to Higgins (1973), copular constructions can be divided into four types: Predicational, Specificational, Identificational, and Equative. If the copula is a nominative Case marker, it cannot be a  $\theta$ -role assignor. Then, the question is how the two referential nominals bear an identity relation in (7).

- (5) Ce salam-i Tom-i-Φ-ta  
That man-nominative Tom-copula-Present-Ind ‘That man is Tom’ (Identificational)
- (6) Tom-i i pan-eyse ceil khun haksayng-i-Φ-ta .  
Tom-nom this class-in most tall person-copula-Present-Ind  
‘The tallest student in this class is Tom’ (Specificational)
- (7) Saypyek pyel-i cenyek pyel-i-Φ-ta  
Morning star-nominative evening star-copula-Present-ind  
‘The morning star is the evening star’ (Equative)

It is well-known that the predicate nominal can assign a  $\theta$ -role. The predicate nominal *a student*, just like the predicate *tall*, assigns a theme role to its argument. In (1) *Tom* is the argument of the predicate *haksayng*. By contrast, in (5-7) both nominals can be potentially referential. I propose that a referential expression can be ambiguous: it can denote the extra-linguistic object it refers to or the referent of that expression. For instance, *Tom* is ambiguous between the person whose name is Tom and the referent of the name *Tom*. *Tom*<sub>2</sub>, which denotes the referent of *Tom*, can assign a reference role to *that guy*, and if so, (5) is interpreted as ‘that guy is the referent of the name *Tom*’, as shown in (9c).

- (8) a. [ $\tau$  Tom<sub>1</sub>] = Tom                                      b. [ $\tau$  Tom<sub>2</sub>] = the referent of the name *Tom*
- (9) a. that guy<sub>1</sub> Tom<sub>2(R)</sub>: Theta-Role Assignment                      b. that guy<sub>1R</sub> Tom<sub>2(R)</sub>  
c. [ $\tau$  9b] = that guy is the referent of *Tom*
- (10) a. [ $\tau$  the tallest student in this class<sub>1</sub>] = the tallest student in this class  
b. [ $\tau$  the tallest student in this class<sub>2</sub>] = the referent of the descriptive nominal
- (11) a. Tom<sub>1</sub> the tallest student in this class<sub>2(R)</sub>: Theta-Role Assignment  
b. Tom<sub>1R</sub> the tallest student in this class<sub>2(R)</sub>  
c. [ $\tau$  11b] = Tom is the referent of *the tallest student in this class*

*The tallest student in this class* is also ambiguous in the same fashion, and when the reference role of *the tallest student in this class*<sub>2</sub> is assigned to *Tom*<sub>1</sub> in (6), its referent is specified by Tom. In both (5) and (6) one nominal assigns a reference role and the other nominal determines the value of the reference role. However, there are differences between them. One of them is that only in the specificational type can the predicate be marked by a neutral topic marker and occupies the sentence-initial position; the descriptive nominal *the tallest student in this class* provides old information. Let us now turn to the equative sentence. In the construction, just like the identificational and specificational constructions, *the evening star*<sub>2</sub>, which denotes the referent of the name *the evening star*, is used as a predicate. However, it differs from the other two constructions in that it is used when the referent of *the evening star* is known to the hearer. So the argument nominal does not have to identify or specify the referent of the predicate nominal. For instance, in (7) the referent of the evening star is already known to the hearer. Accordingly, there is no need to specify or identify the referent, and so the predicate nominal takes as its argument the type 2 nominal—the nominal denoting its referent. When the reference role is assigned to the nominal, we get the reading that the two nominals have the same referent, as shown in (13). To conclude, the copula is a nominative Case marker and the two nominals can bear a  $\theta$ -relation without an extra-predicate.

- (12) a. [ $\tau$  the evening star<sub>1</sub>] = the planet that appears in the west after sunset  
b. [ $\tau$  the evening star<sub>2</sub>] = the referent of the name *the evening star*
- (13) a. the morning star<sub>2</sub> the evening star<sub>2(R)</sub>: Theta-Role Assignment  
b. the morning star<sub>2R</sub> the evening star<sub>2(R)</sub>  
c. [ $\tau$  13b] = [the referent of *the morning star* = the referent of *the evening star*]