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# The prosody of specification: Discourse intonational cues to setting up a variable

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## ABSTRACT

While much research exists on specificational clauses, this paper is the first to systematically use real corpus examples to examine the meaning potential of prosody in signalling informational value in specificational clauses. Carefully distinguishing between two senses of information structure – the relational and the referential – we show that the interplay of prosody and specificational clause, reversed and non-reversed, is far from random. In the majority of non-reversed clauses, we found that the value and variable were realised in different tone units. Thus, claims that the value will receive the focal accent were found to be overly simplistic. Instead, where the variable and value were realised across different tone units the prosodic choice was motivated by the variable's discourse status and relative unpredictability. Rising tones presented the value as non-exhaustive, allowing for multiple values for a single variable. This re-enforced the projected lack of epistemic certainty. As expected, reversed specificationals were found to be produced mostly as single tone units; contrary to expectation, their focal accent was often on the variable. This, we noted, was likely due to the high incidence of demonstrative values in subject position. To conclude, our innovative approach demonstrates the importance of examining the interplay between syntax, discourse and prosody in explicating the meaning potential of constructions such as specificational clauses.

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## 1. Introduction

Specificational copular clauses, first introduced (in those terms) by Akmaijan (1979), have been a rewarding subject for discussion for many years. Their function is to specify a value, e.g. *Darryl Wakelin* in (1), for a variable, e.g. *the winner*.

(1) The envelope please ... and the winner is ... Darryl Wakelin. (WB<sup>1</sup>)

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<sup>1</sup> Examples followed by (WB) were extracted from WordbanksOnline and are reproduced here with the permission of HarperCollins. Examples followed by (LLC) are from the London Lund Corpus of Spoken English.

The variable presupposes the existence of a specific instance, whose identity is revealed by the value. The variable itself is not sufficiently informative to enable the hearer to identify a concrete spatio-temporal instance: it merely gives a generalised description that outlines the contextually relevant features to which the specific value must conform.<sup>2</sup> In (1), for instance, the variable establishes that there is a winner but does not tell the hearer who the winner is. As such, it has 'variable' reference, implicitly evoking a list of *potential* referents (i.e. 'competitor values'), from among which the value picks out one – e.g. *Darryl Wakelin* – as being the *actual* referent satisfying the variable. If the variable is definite as in (1), the value is specified as the only one corresponding to the variable. If the variable is indefinite as in (2), the speaker allows for the possibility that multiple values correspond to the same variable: in (2), for instance, the speaker asserts the existence of an indefinite number of 'codes that have to be followed', of which *s/he* specifies two, e.g. *you do not kill* and *that you do not take drugs in sport*.

- (2) There are codes that have to be followed. One is you do not kill. Another is that you do not take drugs in sport. (WB)

A characteristic of specificational clauses is that they are reversible, i.e. that they allow for a subject-complement switch (Huddleston and Pullum, 2002). In unmarked non-reversed specificationals, the value (in bold) is construed as complement, e.g. (3a); in reversed specificationals, by contrast, the value functions as subject, e.g. (3b).

- (3) a. The President of the United States is **Donald Trump**. (*The Independent*)  
b. Not Hilary Clinton, but **Donald Trump** is the President of the United States.<sup>3</sup>

The possibility to assign the functions of subject and complement in the reverse way is particularly clear when the value is expressed by a pronoun, which takes the oblique case in non-reversed clauses like *him* in (4a), but the nominative case like *he* in (4b).

- (4) a. Paul Burrell says he's afraid of snakes, but I think the biggest snake in the "I'm a celebrity" jungle is him. (WB)  
b. ... I think he is the biggest snake in the "I'm a celebrity" jungle.

The construal of the typically discourse-new value as subject preceding the pragmatically presupposed variable lends added prominence to the value, for instance to express contrastiveness between the actual value *Donald Trump* vs. competitor value *Hilary Clinton* in (3b).

An important criterion in recognising specificational clauses is their typical information structure. As reported by Gundel (1988), two dimensions of information structure can be distinguished: a relational and a referential one. The *relational* dimension is concerned with the clause-internal relation between the variable and the value, interpreted in terms of a contrast between presupposition and focus (e.g. Declerck, 1988; Lambrecht, 1994; Keizer, 1997). The variable being presupposed is to be taken for granted or at least treated as common ground (Stalnaker, 2002: 701). The value conversely is the focus of the sentence (Declerck, 1988: 12) and thus expresses the most important and salient information in the given communicative setting. By marking the value as focal, the speaker presents it as vital for the hearer to add to his/her pragmatic knowledge (Dik, 1997: 326), as with *heterosexual intercourse* in (5).

- (5) The major route of transmission of HIV is **heterosexual intercourse**. (WB)

The value being focal is reflected by the fact that specificational clauses can be probed by interrogatives that explicitly enquire after the value, as in (5').

- (5') **What/which** is the major route of transmission of HIV?

This is crucial, as well, for the interpretation of reversed clauses as specificational (Patten, 2012: 80). If, for instance, in (6), *the most likely target* were focal, the resulting interpretation would be of a predicational clause that gives a description of *central London* (cf. 'what is central London like?'), rather than of a specificational clause that reveals what the most likely target of a terrorist attack in Britain is (cf. 'what would be the most likely target?').

<sup>2</sup> Our use of the terms 'variable' and 'value' is different from (Halliday, 1967b), where both the identified – e.g. *the winner* in (1) – and the identifier – e.g. *Darryl Wakelin* – in his 'equative' clauses can be variable or value. For him, the distinction hinges on two dimensions, firstly whether the identification is 'encoding' or 'decoding', and secondly whether the identifier specifies the function or form of the identified. In this paper, however, we focus solely on specificational clauses (a subtype of Halliday's equatives), so that the terms 'variable' and 'value' consistently refer to the identified and the identifier respectively (in line with other studies of specificational clauses, e.g. Declerck, 1988; den Dikken, 2006; Mikkelsen, 2005; Patten, 2016, 2012; Van Praet and Davidse, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> The example (3b) is made up, to illustrate as clearly as possible the difference between non-reversed (3a) and reversed (3b) specificational clauses.

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