On a contrast between English and German copular sentences

Carsten Breul

Abstract: English and German show a contrast in subject-verb agreement in copular sentences of the type *The winner is me / Der Gewinner bin ich*. The paper presents an analysis of this contrast and suggests ingredients of an explanation for it. The key assumption is that the syntactic subject function is conversely realized by the pre- and postcopular DPs in English as opposed to German sentences of this type. The account of how this difference in the realization of the subject function comes about makes crucial use of considerations concerning grammatical case and inflectional morphology. Information structural aspects are taken into account in order to come to terms with the constituent order peculiarities displayed by copular sentences.

1. Introduction

The present paper is an example of a contrastive analysis that assumes a microscopic perspective on a contrast between English and German.* It takes an approach which conforms to what the editors of the present Special Issue consider a characteristic of contrastive linguistics as opposed to language typology among the comparative branches of linguistics, namely that "contrastive linguistics is concerned with the more fine-grained aspects of cross-linguistic comparison and also focuses on dependencies between grammatical subsystems (e.g. morphology, syntax)" (Gast & König this issue: ***). The domain where the contrast to be discussed shows itself is the manifestation of grammatical person and number of the finite verb in copular sentences, a domain whose analysis involves morphology and syntax as well as information structural considerations.

Apart from the implications for applied purposes, such as in language teaching and learning or translation, the concern, typical of contrastive linguistics, for the fine-grained aspects of, especially, differences between languages is also important in the following respect: It provides data that are potentially challenging for theories or analyses which aim at detecting universal principles or patterns, as in generative grammar and language typology. That is, contrastive linguistics may be considered the linguistic discipline that is concerned with revealing linguistic phenomena which are potentially usable in attempts at falsifying claims for universality. Falsifiability being a basic criterion for a valid scientific theory (see e.g. Popper 1972/1984), the provision of data that has the potential to falsify a universalist claim is what may trigger improvements in the construction of universalist theories. This implies, of course, that practicing contrastive linguistics and believing in the existence of universal principles or patterns underlying languages is no contradiction.

The present paper intends to exemplify this function of contrastive linguistics with respect to one particular analysis of copular sentences couched in the universalist framework of generative grammar. It may thus make a small contribution to triggering further endeavours to improve the already highly insightful theories and analyses that aim at the discovery of universal linguistic principles.

2. Types of copular sentences in a nutshell

Copular sentences are often distinguished as to whether they are predicational, specificational, or equative. Mikkelsen (2005), for instance, starts her discussion of copular sentences by giving the examples in (1) and by commenting on them as follows.[1]

(1) a. Ingrid Bergman is the lead actress in that movie.   (predicational)
     b. The lead actress in that movie is Ingrid Bergman.   (specificational)
     c. She is Ingrid Bergman.   (equative)

---

[1] Note that the way in which the semantic difference between predicational and specificational copular sentences is described here does not match Mikkelsen's own conclusions at the end of her discussion.

Informally, specificational clauses can be distinguished from predicational and equative clauses in the following way. Predicational clauses are similar to non-copular clauses like [*Chris ran a marathon in 3 hours 27 minutes*] in that the VP expresses a property (being the lead actress in a certain movie, having run a marathon within a certain amount of time) which is asserted to hold of the individual denoted by the subject […] Predicational clauses […] thus tell us something **about** the referent of the subject. In contrast […], the VP of a specificational clause does not predicate a property of the subject referent; rather, the subject introduces a variable (in [(1b)] the x such that x is the lead actress in that movie), and the post-copular expression serves to provide a value for that variable […] we can say that a specificational clause does not tell us something **about** the referent of the subject NP, instead it says **who** or **what** the referent is. (Mikkelsen 2005: 1f.)

In contrast to both predicational and specificational copular sentences, equatives are said to involve two expressions denoting the same individual, and the function of the copular sentence is to equate the referents of the two expressions. (Mikkelsen 2005: 1f.)

The distinction between predicational and specificational copular sentences may also show up as ambiguity, as in (2a,b) (from Dikken 2006b: 196, 312).

(2) a.   His supper is food for the dog.
     b.   John's contribution to the conference was his best speech ever.

In the predicational interpretation of (2a), "*food for the dog* […] predicates a property of *his supper*" while in the specificational interpretation "*food for the dog* specifies what *his supper* consists of" (Dikken 2006b: 296). (2b) allows "a reading for *his best speech ever* according to which it predicates a property of the pre-copular constituent alongside a specificational reading which says that John contributed his best speech ever to the conference." (Ibid.: 312)

The literature on the syntax and semantics of copular sentences is rich and inconclusive, and the question of whether the distinction between the predicational, specificational and equative types (or any other typology, for that matter) is justified has not yet been definitely settled.[2] For Maienborn (2003: 20ff.), for instance, while (3a) is a German predicational copular sentence, (3b) is an equative one.

(3) a.   Die Gewinnerin des Jackpots ist überglücklich.
     b.   Die Gewinnerin des Jackpots ist Andrea Schopp.

That is, Maienborn is in line with those researchers who subsume the specificational type of copular sentences under the equative type.

Contrastive analyses have the capacity to reveal cross-linguistic differences in the 'behaviour' of copular sentences that constitute empirical problems for otherwise coherent theories, as will be exemplified below. The contrast between English and German that I would like to draw attention to here concerns person and number agreement of the finite copula in what Mikkelsen (2005) considers to be specificational copular sentences.

3. The contrast

In what follows, my observations will be restricted to simple copular sentences in the sense of finite, non-embedded copular clauses where there is a nominal phrase, a DP in the terminology of current generative syntax, to the left of the copula and another DP to its right. The reference to these DPs in terms of their linear sequence in relation to the copula rather than to their syntactic function (such as 'subject' and 'predicative nominal') is necessary at the present stage as the question of which of them actually is the subject is not immediately obvious.

---

[2]   A recent survey article by one of the prominent researchers into copular sentences concludes: "copular sentences still constitute an open field of discussion and one that has very intricate relations with many other domains of grammar." (Moro 2006: 19) Another prominent researcher into copular constructions concludes on a similar note in his recent book on the topic when he says that it contains "neither the first nor the last words written on predication" (Dikken 2006a: 249). See the references in Dikken (2006a, 2006b), Maienborn (2003), Mikkelsen (2005), Moro (2006) for a fairly comprehensive and almost up-to-date bibliography of studies into copular sentences. Many intriguing characteristics of English copular sentences are discussed by Declerck (1988).

3.1 The basic observation and some analytical implications

While in English specificational copular sentences the finite copula, or the finite element of the verbal forms that accompany the copula,[3] agrees in person and number with the DP to its left, their German equivalents show person and number agreement with the DP to the right of the copula. This is shown in (4), while (5) presents one of the relevant sentences as an attested example in context.[4]

(4) a.   The winner is {John / him / her}
     a'. Der Gewinner ist {Hans / er / sie$_{singular}$}.
     b.   The winner is me.
     b'. Der Gewinner {bin / *ist} ich.
     c.   The winner is you.
     c'. Der Gewinner {bist / *ist} du.
     d.   The winner is {us / them}.
     d'   Der Gewinner {sind wir / sind sie$_{plural}$ / *ist wir / *ist sie$_{plural}$ }.

(5) a.   Well, finally, now that Time Magazine has gone public on this they have told me that I can finally go public on the true winner of this prestigious award. *The winner is me.*
          (from http://www.funjunkie.co.uk/news_archive.cfm/date=0802, accessed 25/04/2008)
     b.   Eine Vorauswahl fand durch brevetierte Taucher statt. Die 10 besten Fotos aus der Vorentscheidung wurden durch die Expertenjury bewertet und der Gewinner ermittelt. *und* [sic] *der Gewinner bin ich*
          (from http://www.jost-web.de/fotowettbewerb.htm, accessed 25/04/2008)

There is also the case contrast, requiring both DPs to be nominative in German (cf. *Der Gewinner {ist ihn / bin mich / ist mich}*) while requiring the DP to the right of the copula to be accusative ('objective') in English.[5] There is good reason to suspect that the person and number contrast and the case contrast are connected. But for the moment, the important point to acknowledge is that the person and number contrast rather than the case difference has implications for the question of which of the DPs is the syntactic subject in the corresponding sentences in English and German. If the notion of syntactic subject is crucially tied to the idea that it is the syntactic subject which determines person and number agreement of the finite verb, then the conclusion must be that in English-German sentence pairs like those in (4) the distribution of the subject function is reversed. That is, in such sentences, the syntactic subject is the DP to the left of the copula in English and the DP to the right of the copula in German. Moreover, if the question of what is the syntactic subject has semantic implications in such sentences, then the observation of this reversal turns out to be essential for almost all analytical approaches to copular sentences. For all of them are crucially concerned with the problem of the mapping between the semantically characterized role of the respective DP and its syntactic function. I will now exemplify this concern and the problem the contrast between English and German just pointed out raises in this connection on the basis of Mikkelsen (2005).

Consider again examples like those in (6).

(6) a.   John is the winner.   (predicational)
     b.   The winner is John.   (specificational)

---

[3] This clumsy phrasing caters for the fact that we are potentially also talking about sentences like *The winner will be John* or *Der Gewinner wird Hans sein*, where the copula is a participle accompanied by an auxiliary as the finite verb form. In the following I will avoid this clumsy phrasing and will simply use *copula* for *the finite copula or the finite element of the verbal forms that accompany the copula.*

[4] König & Gast (2007: 165) also mention this contrast, giving the examples *The problem **is** the students* vs. *Das Problem **sind** die Studenten*. Fergal Treanor (p.c.) pointed out to me the contrast between *40 euros **is** a lot of money* vs. *40 Euro **sind** viel Geld*. This is a difference in the number agreement 'behaviour' of English and German measure DPs. These and similar differences have been studied by Berg (1998). The phenomena and contrasts of this kind are orthogonal to the contrast dealt with in the present paper. Note also that *40 Euro ist viel Geld* is also acceptable.

[5] a. Despite the well-known reasons not to apply the traditional case terminology (nominative, accusative, dative, etc.) to English, where maximally two morphologically different cases governed by verbs can be distinguished, I will stick to this terminology here. The reason is that a distinction between only two cases will be relevant in the present paper, one of which will be said to be required by an abstract phrasal head T for the DP in its specifier position in both languages ('nominative') so that the name for the other case ('accusative') is nothing but a convenient label with no theoretical implications relevant for the purposes of this paper.
b. According to Sobin (1997: 334), "the copular verb be normally assigns/checks an objective Case, as [the sentence *The person in the purple shirt is me/*I*] illustrates."

Making use of ideas current in generative syntax, Mikkelsen (2005) suggests that the DP *John* of both (6a) and (6b) starts off in the syntactic position marked "DP*ref*" and the DP *the winner* of both (6a) and (6b) starts off in the syntactic position marked "DP*pred*" in the syntactic structure given in (7).

(7) (from Mikkelsen 2005: 168)
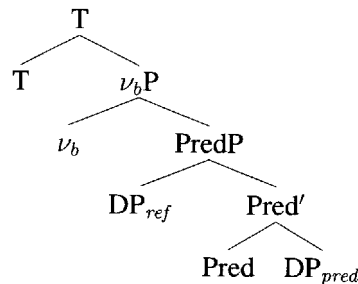
The difference between "DP*ref*" and "DP*pred*", independently of the way in which they are actually filled with lexical material, is semantic, and this semantic difference is connected to the way in which they relate differently to the abstract head Pred of PredP. To put it in more traditional terms, for Mikkelsen the DP *the winner* is a predicative expression in both (6a) and (6b) and the DP *John* is the referential expression about which something is predicated. The syntactic difference between (6a) and (6b) is due to the fact that in the former the DP *John* moves to become the specifier of T (spec-T), while in the latter the DP *the winner* does.[6] The DP that fills the position spec-T is the syntactic subject, and it is the syntactic subject that enters the agreement relation with the copula: "The T-v_b complex is spelled out as one of the present tense copula forms *am*, *are*, or *is*. Which one depends on how the ϕ-features are valued on T (by the DP in Spec-TP)."[7] (Mikkelsen 2005: 168) According to Mikkelsen (2005: 171ff.), movement of the "DP*pred*" to spec-T (i.e. the case of specificational copular sentences) occurs if the "DP*pred*", but not the "DP*ref*", carries an interpretable topic feature that has to check, and thereby to delete, an uninterpretable topic feature in T.[8] All other distributions of topic features that are syntactically licit (i.e. where no uninterpretable topic feature on T remains unchecked) result in predicational sentences, where it is the "DP*ref*" that moves to spec-T, thus becoming syntactic subject and determining person and number agreement with the finite verb.

   The problem with this account when it comes to German is that in specificational copular sentences of this language, such as those in (8) below, the correlation between "DP*pred*" and the capacity to determine person and number agreement in the copula is not given.[9] This is shown by (8b,c), suggesting that also in (8a) the phrase that determines person and number of the copula may not be *der Gewinner* but *Hans*, i.e. the post-copular DP.

(8) a.   Der Gewinner ist Hans.
     b.   Der Gewinner {bin / *ist} ich.
     c.   Der Gewinner {bist / *ist} du.

It is true, Mikkelsen (2005) looks especially at English, Danish and Swedish, and with these languages the problem just pointed out does not arise. However, as Mikkelsen's account is set within a generative framework, i.e. one whose syntactic derivations are supposed to operate by

6   The specifier of T in (7) (= 'spec-T' or 'spec-TP', a notational difference between which no distinction is made in the present paper) is the position of sister of the higher T. If a phrase occupies spec-T, then its mother node is TP and its sister node T'.
7   The term 'ϕ-features' refers to person, number and gender features. When Mikkelsen says "the ϕ-features are valued on T (by the DP in Spec-TP)", she uses a current generative conception of the morpho-phonological realisation of syntactic features according to which some features enter the syntactic derivation unvalued and become valued in certain syntactic relations (here the specifier-head relation) with another matching phrase (here the DP in spec-T(P)).
8   Uninterpretable features have to be deleted in the course of a syntactic derivation. A topic feature on the functional head T is uninterpretable; a topic feature on any of the two DPs is interpretable.
9   There is another, not empirical, but conceptual, problem of Mikkelsen's (2005) analysis: T may or may not have the uninterpretable topic feature, apparently optionally (cf. ibid.: 176f.). It is not clear how this optionally present uninterpretable feature could be motivated independently of the purpose for which it is used by Mikkelsen, namely the distinction between *JOHN is the winner* and *The winner is JOHN* as replies to a context question like *Who is the winner?* (small capitals signalling the position of the main sentence accent here).

universal principles, it is not only in order but even necessary to point out contrasts with respect to which a given account does not work without modification. As pointed out in the introduction, contrastive analyses provide data that a given generative account needs to deal with in order to support the (explicit or implicit) claim to universality.

3.2 A note on comparability

One component of the *tertium comparationis* of the person and number contrast in English and German specificational copular sentences of the type *The winner is me* vs. *Der Gewinner bin ich* is the assumption of the translational equivalence of utterances in which these sentences are used in a paradigm of relevant contexts. Another component is the fact that these sentences involve lexical items (a determiner, a noun, the copula, a pronoun) that appear to function in the same way in the relevant semantic and grammatical respects apart from those grammatical respects that are to do with the contrast itself.[10] Moreover, as pointed out by Ekkehard König (p.c.), they are information structurally equivalent. The contrastive observation is thus based on the assumption that differences which certainly exist between, for instance, the semantic/pragmatic and grammatical properties of the definite determiner in English and German or the differences pertaining to social deixis between the pronouns *you* and *du* are irrelevant for the contrast in question. An additional assumption is that the contrastive observation can be generalized over a class of similar sentences that vary only in the lexical make-up of the definite DP – *the first man on the moon* or *the most intelligent girl in the class* instead of *the winner*, for instance – where this variation is again irrelevant for the contrast in question. In other words, the particular observation concerns an instance of a paradigm of cases. This is an assumption which, if correct, lends relevance to the particular observation for the grammatical system in general. That these are assumptions which do not bias the observation or any approach to its analysis *a priori* and unduly is nothing but another assumption based on intuitions by competent speakers of the languages involved and on certain preconceptions derived from familiarity with theories of grammatical analysis. Whether these assumptions are correct is an empirical question open to challenge.

4. Some ingredients of an analysis of the contrast

In what follows, I would like to propose some ingredients of an explanatory approach to the contrast which differs from Mikkelsen's account of copular sentences. The proposal does not constitute a full-fledged analysis of copular sentences and thus carries all the weaknesses that less than full-fledged analyses of a phenomenon generally entail, especially the risk of leaving implicit aspects that may turn out to be crucial. My sole purpose is to point out analytical ideas that, as far as I know, have not yet been taken into consideration (in this way) in analyses of copular sentences. The proposal also uses grammatical machinery borrowed from generative grammar. Thus it also comes with an implicit claim of universality that can be falsified by taking other languages into account.

4.1 Theoretical premises

My starting point is the strict commitment to four, more or less traditional ideas in generative syntax, namely

- that the syntactic subject is the phrasal constituent that agrees with the finite verb in person and number;
- that it is in the position spec-T where the syntactic subject determines person and number agreement with the finite verb in English and German;
- that the copula is positioned in the T-head position in both languages when the agreement operation is carried out;
- that the position spec-T is crucially involved in the fact that syntactic subject DPs have to carry nominative case in English and German; let us simply say, without commitment to

---

[10] In other words, the contrastive observation is based on the assumption of translational as well as semanto-syntactic equivalence as *tertium comparationis*. On these notions see Krzeszowski (1990: 15ff., 147ff.) and the authors mentioned there.

how exactly this may be technically implemented, that nominative case on a DP in spec-T is a necessary requirement for the syntactic structure to be grammatical.

This means that the syntactic subject is *the winner* in (9a) whereas it is *ich* or *du* respectively in (9b).

(9) a.   The winner is {me / you}.
      b.   Der Gewinner {bin ich / bist du}.

What could be the reason behind this contrast? As we will see, the following observations concerning the equipment of DPs and copula with person and number features in German are relevant for an answer to this question.

If one assumes a theory of feature specification that strives for maximal economy in the postulation of features, German pronominal and non-pronominal DPs can be shown to be most economically specified for person and number by the features [first person] or [second person] and [singular] or [plural] – to be abbreviated [1st], [2nd], [sg], [pl] – as in (10) below, where only nominative DPs are given to instantiate the paradigm (cf. Sternefeld 2006, Vol. 1: 151):

(10) *DP*   *person and number specification*
      wir   [1st],[pl]
      ihr   [2nd],[pl]
      ich   [1st]
      du   [2nd]
      sie$_1$, *DPs such as* die Gewinner   [pl]
      er, sie$_2$, es, *DPs such as* der Gewinner   ——————— (= ∅)

Note that traditionally so-called third person singular DPs are characterized by the absence of any of the features [1st], [2nd], [sg], [pl], so-called third person plural DPs are characterized by the absence of [1st] and [2nd] and the presence of [pl]. Finite German verbs, including the copula, are specified for the uninterpretable person and number agreement features [*sg*], [*pl*], [*1st*], [*2nd*] as shown in (11), where the present and preterite forms of the copula are given to instantiate the paradigm (cf. Sternefeld 2006, Vol. 1: 87, 166.)

(11) *copula forms*   *person and number specification*
      sind$_1$, waren$_1$ [*1st*],[*pl*]
      seid, wart   [*2nd*],[*pl*]
      bin, war$_1$ [*1st*]
      bist, warst   [*2nd*]
      sind$_2$, waren$_2$ [*pl*]
      ist, war$_2$ ——————— (= ∅)

In the terminology borrowed from generative syntax, each of the person and number agreement features on the finite verb of the form [*α*] (a '*-feature') has to be checked against a corresponding feature of the form [α] on a DP. Checked *-features get deleted. None of the *-features may 'survive' (i.e. may not get deleted) for the syntactic derivation to result in a grammatical sentence. In copular sentences, the checking of these features takes place in the specifier-head relation that is given when the copula is in the T-head position and the syntactic subject is in the spec-T position. This accounts for grammatical German sentences such as those in (12a) below. In all of them the copula can be argued to occupy the T-head position with a nominative DP (*ich*, *du*, etc.) in spec-T that checks all its person and number *-features. The structure is indicated in (12b), where the label 'xP' refers to the phrasal structure dominated by the sister of the T-head, whose nature is left implicit. The DP *der Gewinner* is located somewhere within xP, and the fact that the syntactic subject and the copula have moved from some position within xP is indicated by the two *t*s co-subscripted with the subject and the copula respectively.

(12) a.   {Ich bin / Du bist / Wir sind / Ihr seid / Sie sind} der Gewinner.
      b.   [$_{TP}$ ich$_j$ [$_{T'}$ bin$_i$ [$_{xP}$ t$_j$ t$_i$ [der Gewinner]]]]^{11}

A similar account could be given for English person and number feature checking, whose details, however, play no role in what follows. What has to be kept in mind, though, is that person and

---

11   Here and below the linear order of the constituents and traces within xP is not to suggest a commitment to any particular proposal for the structure and nature of xP.

number feature checking takes place between a DP in spec-T and the copula in the T-head position in English as well.

4.2 Deriving the contrast

(12b) may also be argued to represent an intermediate stage in the syntactic derivation of the sentences in (12a), with further movement of the syntactic subject into some higher specifier position and, potentially, further movement of the copula into some higher head position, as in (13) below, where these higher specifier and head positions are indicated as constituting a TopP.

(13) [$_{TopP}$ ich$_j$ [$_{Top'}$ bin$_i$ [$_{TP}$ t_j [$_{T'}$ t_i [$_{xP}$ t_j t_i [der Gewinner]]]]]]

A TopP is assumed to be a clausal phrase whose specifier position is the target for the movement of a phrase that is a topic expression.[12] Movements of a topic expression into spec-Top and of the copula into the Top-head position do not affect the person and number agreement relation as established by the specifier-head relation in TP. Moreover the assumption of the existence of clausal phrase structure above TP, such as TopP, allows us to assume that not only the syntactic subject but, alternatively, also the other DP in a copular sentence may move into the additional specifier position with or without attendant movement of the copula into the corresponding head position. This gives us the possibility to derive the sentences in (14a), whose structure is indicated in (14b).

(14) a. Der Gewinner {bin ich / bist du / ist er / sind wir / seid ihr / sind sie}.
　　　b. [$_{TopP}$ [der Gewinner]$_j$ [$_{Top'}$ bin$_i$ [$_{TP}$ ich$_k$ [$_{T'}$ t_i [$_{xP}$ t_k t_i t_j]]]]]

Under this analysis the pronominal constituents *ich*, *du* etc. in (14a) are the syntactic subjects which agree in person and number with the finite copula although they appear to the right of the copula on the syntactic surface. The structure of the English sentence corresponding to the first option of (14a), i.e. (15a), is given in (15b).

(15) a. The winner is me.
　　　b. [$_{TopP}$ [the winner]$_j$ [$_{Top'}$ [$_{TP}$ t_j [$_{T'}$ is$_i$ [$_{xP}$ t_j t_i me]]]]]

Apart from the differences between the English and the German structures that are in focus in the present paper, namely the identity of the syntactic subject, the person and number specification of the copula and the case of the DP that is not the syntactic subject, there is another difference: While the German copula moves into the Top-head position when a DP moves into spec-Top, the English copula does not. This is not an assumption which has to be made specifically for the analysis of copular sentences. Rather, this is what one expects generally from the finite verb second property of German as opposed to the lack of this property in English. I will come back to this point in section 5, and will now turn to the differences related to the agreement contrast.

　　Let us assume that at the point of the syntactic derivation where one of the two relevant DPs are to move to spec-T it has already been determined that one of the DPs is nominative and the other accusative in English whereas both of the two DPs are nominative in German. For the sake of concreteness I propose to say that this is due to a grammatical operation which ultimately originates in a lexical and thus arbitrary difference between English and German and which takes place within the phrasal domain that I have called xP above. Perhaps it is a lexical difference attached to the copula itself (cf. footnote 5b). If we now take the nominative case requirement for a DP in spec-T into account (see above), it follows that there is only one DP which is licensed by this requirement to move to spec-T in English whereas there are two DPs which are licensed by this requirement to move to spec-T in German. In other words, there is no competition for DP movement to spec-T in English, while there *is* such a competition in German. This account explains why we may have both (16a,b) in English.

(16) a. I am the winner.
　　　a'. [$_{TopP}$ I$_j$ [$_{Top'}$ [$_{TP}$ t_j [$_{T'}$ am$_i$ [$_{xP}$ t_j t_i [the winner]]]]]]

---

[12] As to the assumption that sentences in languages such as English and German provide for phrasal structure hosting information structurally designated constituents above TP, such as topic and focus expressions, see e.g. Breul (2004, 2007) and the literature mentioned there. In the terminology of Breul (2004, 2007), the functional phrase on top of TP is a FocP and the topic expression is a phrase that carries the feature [-foc].

    b.   The winner is me.

    b'. [$_{TopP}$ [the winner]$_j$ [$_{Top'}$ [$_{TP}$ t_j [$_{T'}$ is$_i$ [$_{xP}$ t_j t_i me]]]]]

For the pronominal DP *I* can be argued to be the nominative phrase licensed to move to spec-T in (16a,a'), the DP *the winner* being accusative and thus not licensed to move. In (16b,b'), the DP *the winner* is nominative and licensed to move to spec-T, the DP *me* being accusative and thus not licensed to move. (In (16a',b') the subject DP has been represented to move further on from its position in spec-T to spec-Top.) The account also explains the grammaticality of (17a) below. It does not yet explain, however, why (17b) is ungrammatical.

(17) a.   Ich bin der Gewinner.

     a'. [$_{TopP}$ Ich$_j$ [$_{Top'}$ bin$_i$ [$_{TP}$ t_j [$_{T'}$ t_i [$_{xP}$ t_j t_i [der Gewinner]]]]]]

     b.   *Der Gewinner ist ich.

     b'. *[$_{TopP}$ [der Gewinner]$_j$ [$_{Top'}$ ist$_i$ [$_{TP}$ t_j [$_{T'}$ t_i [$_{xP}$ ich t_i t_j]]]]]

In order to rule out such sentences, we have to make use of a theoretical concept that is needed anyway in a theory that works with a maximally economical set of features (i.e. with feature underspecification), as is assumed here by the feature specification tables given in (10) and (11). This is the mechanism of blocking, which says, in the words of Sternefeld (2006, Vol. 1: 167): "Wenn zwei Strukturen A und B sich höchstens in den Flexiven und ihren Merkmalen unterscheiden, ist A blockiert, wenn A weniger Merkmale benötigt als B." (In my translation: If two structures A and B differ at most in the inflections involved and their features, then A is blocked if B needs fewer features than A.)[13] I would like to propose that the syntactic derivation in (17b'), which does not involve any uninterpretable person and/or number agreement features on the copula (*ist*), is blocked by the competing derivation where there is the uninterpretable person agreement feature [*1st*] on the copula (*bin*) and where it is the the nominative pronominal DP *ich* which moves to spec-T. The same reasoning applies to the ungrammatical sentences in (18a), and it is compatible with the grammaticality of the sentences in (18b).

(18) a.   *Der Gewinner ist {du / wir / ihr / sie$_{plural}$}

     b.   Der Gewinner ist {er / Hans}.

In sum, the fact that both relevant DPs in copular sentences have to be nominative in German in connection with the mechanism of blocking have been argued to be crucial in an explanation of the person and number agreement contrast that German so-called specificational copular sentences show in comparison to their English counterparts.

4.3 The contrast and extraction from subject phenomena

As we have seen, one crucial structural difference between English specificational copular sentences of the type *The winner is John* and their German counterparts of the type *Der Gewinner ist Hans* is the fact that the DP *the winner* is syntactic subject in the English sentence whereas the corresponding DP *der Gewinner* is not the syntactic subject in the German sentence, where 'being the syntactic subject' means 'having checked its person and number agreement features against those of the finite verb while being located in spec-T'. This seems to be confirmed by constructions in which a phrase is extracted from such DPs. (19a,a') and (19b) below, for instance, display *wh*-phrase extraction from the DPs that correspond to the sentence-initial DPs in copular sentences of the type *The driver of the red car is me* / *Der Fahrer von dem roten Auto bin ich*. Extraction is unacceptable in English – although not straighforwardly so in the case where the preposition is not left stranded – but fine in German.[14]

---

[13] That we need blocking if we assume a feature specification as in (10) and (11) becomes clear if we consider that, otherwise, strings like *Ihr {rennen / rennst}* would be grammatical since all *-features could be checked – the single [*pl*] of rennen by the [pl] of *ihr* and the single [*2nd*] of *rennst* by the [2nd] of *ihr*. Cf. Sternefeld (2006, Vol. 1, 166f.): "Wie bei jeder Art von Unterspezifizierung müssen wir auf einen zusätzlichen Mechanismus zurückgreifen, der ungrammatische Strukturen blockiert. Es ist klar, dass die Merkmale in [*Ihr rennt*] zum Subjekt 'besser passen' (spezifischer sind) als die in [z.B. *Ihr {rennen / rennst}*]. Um diese zu verhindern, greifen wir wie immer bei Unterspezifikation auf die Methode des Blocking zurück". (In my translation: As with all kinds of underspecification, we have to make use of an additional mechanism which blocks ungrammatical structures. It is clear that the features in [*Ihr rennt*] 'match the subject better' (are more specific) than those in [e.g. *Ihr {rennen / rennst}*]. In order to prevent them, we employ the method of Blocking, as always in cases of underspecification.)

[14] The essential aspects of the derivational stage preceding extraction from DP can be represented as in (i) and (ii):

(19) a.   *?Of which car is the driver me?
    a.'   *Which car is the driver of me?
    b.   Von welchem Auto bin ich der Fahrer?

Such differences in acceptability resulting from movements out of DPs have a long tradition in the generative literature, especially on English, of being considered indicative of subject status (see e.g. Culicover 1997: 192ff., 228ff., Stepanov 2007 and the authors mentioned there): Roughly speaking, subject DPs do not allow such extractions, non-subject argument DPs do allow them.[15] Consequently, the data in (19) seem to support the assumption that the sentence-initial DP in an English copular sentence of the type *The winner is {me / John}* is the syntactic subject whereas the sentence-initial DP in a German copular sentence of the type *Der Gewinner {bin ich / ist Hans}* is not the syntactic subject. There are, however, several problems with this argument. First, substitution of the pronominal DP of (19a) by a heavier (third person) DP leads to a significant improvement. Consider (20).

(20) (?)Of which car is the driver a certain Mr. Shreck?

It would have to be investigated what exactly this kind of substitution means for the syntax of the construction, a task that cannot be undertaken within the confines of the present paper. Second, it is not obvious that the prohibition against extraction from subjects is operative in German to the same extent as in English. Consider (21), where the DPs from which the *wh*-phrase has been extracted (*the driver of which car / der Fahrer von welchem Auto*) certainly are subjects (see also Sternefeld 2006, Vol. 2: 526f. and the literature mentioned there).

(21) a.   *Of which car is the driver very rich?
        *Which car is the driver of very rich?
    b.   ??Von welchem Auto ist der Fahrer sehr reich?

But note also that the declarative counterparts of these interrogative sentences are predicational rather than specificational copular sentences. Third, as exemplified by (22), some speakers judge extraction from the subject of English passive sentences to be acceptable.

(22) Of which car was the driver awarded a prize? (from Chomsky 2008; see Truswell 2007: 220 for further references; see also Stepanov 2007)

However, Chomsky's (2008) point in giving this example is not that there is no restriction on extraction from subjects in English (cf. his example (ii) in footnote 14). It is rather that the syntactic configuration for the standard cases where extraction from subject is ruled out is different from that where the subjects of passives are concerned. Roughly speaking, and transposing Chomsky's point from its avantgarde grammatical framework to the more conservative one used in the present paper, extraction from subject in passive sentences happens before the subject DP checks person and number features while in spec-T (see also Stepanov 2007).

    In sum, although extraction from subject phenomena have turned out to raise a number of questions for which answers are not readily available, it may still be possible to argue that the contrast displayed by (19) above is relevant for the purposes of the present paper. It shows, irrespective of the complications just referred to, that the syntactic status of an English DP like *the winner* in a specificational copular sentence like *The winner is {John / me}* is different from the syntactic status of a corresponding German DP like *der Gewinner* in a specificational copular sentence like *Der Gewinner {ist Hans / bin ich}*. My claim is that this difference is due to the fact that in the English case the respective DP is a syntactic subject checking person and number

---

(i)   [$_{TP}$ [$_{DP}$ the driver of which car] is me]
(ii)   [$_{TP}$ ich bin [$_{DP}$ der Fahrer von welchem Auto]]

(19) then results from *wh*-phrase extraction from DP to the specifier position of a phrase on top of TP in connection with movement of the finite verbs *is* and *bin* respectively to the head position of that phrase.
15   Some relevant judgements from the literature are the following:
(i)   *Who would a funny picture of surprise Susan? (from Culicover 1997: 197; cf.: *Who did Susan see a funny picture of?*)
(ii)   *Of which car did the driver cause a scandal (from Chomsky 2008)
(iii)   *Who is a description of in the book? (from Adger 2003: 398; cf. from ibid.: *Who is there a description of in the book?* suggesting that *there* occupies spec-T)

features while in spec-T whereas the corresponding German DP is not a syntactic subject so understood. And this point seems to stand independently of the complications just mentioned.

5. Some (more) loose ends (partly tied up)

In my discussion of English copular sentences such as *I am the winner* and *The winner is me* I have suggested analyses according to which the specifier position in a functional phrase above TP, i.e. TopP, is occupied by the syntactic subject (cf. (16)). For German I have postulated movement into spec-Top by the non-subject DP in order to derive sentences such as *Der Gewinner bin ich* (cf. (14)). This raises the question of whether movement into spec-Top by the non-subject DP is also possible in English. Examples like (23a,b) suggest that the answer to this question is not straightforward.

(23) a.   (?)The winner I am.
     b.   *Me the winner is.

There are contexts in which a sentence like (23a) can be felicitously used, such as in (24), where the small capitals indicate the word that carries the primary sentence accent in a spoken utterance of that sentence.

(24) John told me that I would be the winner, and *the winner I AM*.

Thus, while sentences like (23a) need very specific contexts in order to be felicitously used, they are nevertheless grammatical. Moreover, if we consider also copular sentences in which the functional phrase above TP is not TopP but FocP, i.e. a phrase whose specifier position does not host a topic expression but a focus expression,[16] it is easier to find relevant examples and contexts. The following occurrence of *The biggest Grade of all he was* from the *British National Corpus* (BNC)[17] is a case in point.

(25) He remembers clubs and halls, the £1,500 a week he was paid when that would have bought half a street; and then he remembers Leslie Grade. 'The biggest Grade of all he was, and the only one not made a Sir. …
     (BNC AJ8 336)

Here the most natural interpretation goes along with an intonation in which the main sentence accent is located on the last word of the fronted DP *the biggest Grade of all*. In the framework of Breul (2004, 2007) this intonational signal is interpreted to mean that this phrase is an identificational focus phrase located in spec-Foc. The confines of the present paper do not allow me to discuss what kind of copular sentence this is (specificational, predicational, equative, or none of them). My point is just that there do not seem to exist any purely syntactic constraints that prevent movement of the non-subject into the specifier position of a functional phrase on top of a copular TP like that in (26a) – nor, by analogy, (26b).[18]

(26) a.   [$_{TP}$ he$_j$ [$_{T'}$ was$_i$ [$_{xP}$ t_j t_i [the biggest Grade of all]]]]
     b.   [$_{TP}$ I$_j$ [$_{T'}$ am$_i$ [$_{xP}$ t_j t_i [the winner]]]]

The situation with strings like (23b) is harder to come to terms with. In (27), however, a sentence structurally similar to (23b) appears in a context which makes its utterance acceptable.

(27) John told me that the winner would be me, and *me it IS*.

Just as with (24) the context has been constructed here in such a way that the non-subject DP of the copular clause can be felicitously used as topic expression while the assertion of the utterance targets the polarity of the clause, i.e. the fact that its truth is asserted in a context in which the

---

16   In the framework of Breul (2004, 2007), the specifier of FocP hosts an identificational focus expressions, i.e. a phrase which carries the feature [+foc]; cf. footnote 12.

17   The BNC is a computerised corpus of contemporary written and spoken British English of roughly 100 million words (ca. 90 % written, 10 % spoken material). For more information on the BNC see the website at http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/.

18   In Breul (2007) I argued that object fronting is more severely constrained in English than in German for reasons of syntactic processing and that for the same reasons the canonical constituent order is favoured in constructions with fronted objects in English. What holds for objects can be assumed to hold for the non-subject DP in copular sentences as well.

(implicit) question of its truth has just been raised. From a purely syntactic point of view it can be argued that this example is sufficient to show that movement to spec-Top of the non-subject DP from the TP given in (28) below is possible. Moreover, given that the pronominal phrase *it* is co-denotational with *the winner* in (27), there should be no purely syntactic reason to rule out the same movement in cases where the position of pronominal *it* is occupied by other, non-pronominal phrases.

(28) [$_{TP}$ it$_j$ [$_{T'}$ is$_i$ [$_{xP}$ t_j t_i me]]]]]

Yet, there seems to be no context in which (23b) would be appropriate. I would argue that the reason for this is not a syntactic one. Rather, it involves syntactic processing factors as discussed in Breul (2007) (cf. footnote 18). The rough line of argumentation is this: In English, sentences in which a non-subject argument is fronted are always disfavoured in terms of syntactic processing in comparison to corresponding sentences with the canonical constituent order;[19] the larger the subject, the larger the disadvantage; the disadvantage can only be overridden if information structurally relevant factors (see Lambrecht 1994) would make the canonical constituent order inappropriate; there do not seem to exist any contexts in which information structurally relevant factors would rule out *I am the winner* to the benefit of **Me the winner is*; this is because the respective pronouns are either topic or identificational focus expressions with the same denotation in both sentences while the respective rest of the constructions has no potential of making a semantic and/or information structural difference between them.

6. Conclusion

The contrastive observation presented in the present paper has led to an explanatory approach in terms of a grammatical framework, generative syntax, which emphasizes commonalities between languages. This procedure allows us to see more clearly what it is that makes the difference between the languages, since the difference is projected against a background of what is (assumed to be) common to them. To the degree that one believes in the validity of these commonalities – universal grammatical principles in generative grammar – they can be taken as derived theoretical *tertia comparationis* (TCs) by the analyst. However, I believe that it is beneficial for the (contrastive) study of language(s) if the analytical procedure that starts off from these derived theoretical TCs is complemented by a procedure that takes as its starting point more easily falsifiable (in principle) TCs – such as the non-derived one based on the observation that sentences like *The winner is me* and *Der Gewinner bin ich* are considered to be equivalent by competent speakers of English and German at least in some contexts that are considered equivalent in turn.

References

Adger, David (2003). *Core Syntax: A Minimalist Approach.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Berg, Thomas (1998). 'The resolution of number conflicts in English and German agreement patterns.' *Linguistics* 36.1: 41–70.

Breul, Carsten (2004). *Focus Structure in Generative Grammar: An Integrated Syntactic, Semantic and Intonational Approach.* Amsterdam: Benjamins.

Breul, Carsten (2007). 'Focus structure, movement to spec-Foc and syntactic processing.' In Kerstin Schwabe & Susanne Winkler (eds.), *On Information Structure, Meaning and Form: Generalizations Across Languages*, 255–274. Amsterdam: Benjamins.

Chomsky, Noam (2008). 'On phases.' In Robert Freidin, Carlos P. Otero & Maria Luisa Zubizarreta (eds.), *Foundational Issues in Linguistic Theory: Essays in Honor of Jean-Roger Vergnaud*, 133–166. Cambridge (MA): MIT Press.

Culicover, Peter W. (1997). *Principles and Parameters: An Introduction to Syntactic Theory.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Declerck, Renaat (1988). *Studies on Copular Sentences, Clefts and Pseudo-Clefts*. Leuven: Leuven University Press.

Dikken, Marcel den (2006a). *Relators and Linkers: The Syntax of Predication, Predicate Inversion, and Copulas.* Cambridge (MA): MIT Press.

---

[19]   This does not hold for German because of its richer case morphology and its finite second property.

Dikken, Marcel den (2006b). 'Specificational copular sentences and pseudoclefts.' In Martin Everaert & Henk van Riemsdijk (eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to Syntax*, Vol. 6, 292–409. Malden (MA): Blackwell.

König, Ekkehard & Gast, Volker (2007). *Understanding English-German Contrasts.* Berlin: Erich Schmidt.

Krzeszowski, Tomasz P. (1990). *Contrasting Languages: The Scope of Contrastive Linguistics.* Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Lambrecht, Knud (1994). *Information Structure and Sentence Form: Topic, Focus and the Mental Representations of Discourse Referents.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Maienborn, Claudia (2003). *Die logische Form von Kopula-Sätzen.* Berlin: Akademie Verlag.

Mikkelsen, Line (2005). *Copular Clauses: Specification, Predication and Equation.* Amsterdam: Benjamins.

Moro, Andrea (2006). 'Copular sentences.' In Martin Everaert & Henk van Riemsdijk (eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to Syntax*, Vol. 2, 1–23. Malden (MA): Blackwell.

Popper, Karl R. (1972/1984). *Objective Knowledge: An Evolutionary Approach.* 4th edn. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Sobin, Nicholas (1997). 'Agreement, default rules, and grammatical viruses.' *Linguistic Inquiry* 28.2: 318–43.

Stepanov, Arthur (2007). 'The end of CED? Minimalism and extraction domains.' *Syntax* 10.1: 80–126.

Sternefeld, Wolfgang (2006). *Syntax: Eine morphologisch motivierte generative Beschreibung des Deutschen.* 2 vols. Tübingen: Stauffenburg.

Truswell, Robert (2007). 'Locality of *wh*-movement and the individuation of events.' *Ph.D. thesis.* University College London.