THE COMPLEXITIES OF THE WELSH COPULA

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1. Introduction

It is a feature of many languages that the copula is more complex in various ways than standard verbs. In Welsh, the copula has a complex set of forms reflecting agreement, tense, polarity, the distinction between main and complement clauses, the presence of a gap as subject or complement, and the contrast between predicative and equative interpretations. The full set of complexities can be accommodated within HPSG given two ideas assumed in Bonami, Borsley and Tallerman (2016): (i) a principle of blocking, whereby if the antecedents of two constraints stand in a subsumption relation, only the more specific constraint may apply, and (ii) a distinction between two sets of morphosyntactic features, one relevant to syntax and another relevant to morphology.

2. Some basic facts

Like the copula in English and many other languages, the Welsh copula allows a number of different complements. There are four main possibilities: (i) a PP, (ii) a Perfect Phrase (PerfP), consisting of the perfective particle wedi and a non-finite VP, (iii) a Progressive Phrase (ProgP), consisting of the progressive particle yn and a VP, and (iv) a Predicative Phrase (PredP), consisting of the predicative particle yn and an AP or NP. (Unlike progressive yn, predicative yn triggers what is known as soft mutation.) As with be, coordinations of different phrase types suggests that there is a single verb here. The facts can be handled, like similar facts elsewhere, by assuming that the Welsh copula takes a [PRED +] complement and that all these phrase types are [PRED +].

Unlike the English copula, but like standard Welsh verbs, the copula shows agreement with a pronominal subject, but what is often called a third person singular form appears with a non-pronominal subject, singular or plural. Given the principle of blocking, this situation can be handled by assuming that the apparent third person singular form is actually a default form.

Unlike standard verbs, which have three tenses: past, future, and conditional, the copula has five tenses, these three and two more: present and imperfect. To accommodate this, we can distinguish between regular and special values for the feature TENSE and require standard verbs but not the copula to be [TENSE regular] with the following constraint:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{LID standard - verb} & \\
\text{VFORM fin} & \\
\rightarrow & \\
\text{[TENSE regular]}
\end{align*}
\]

Here, following a variety of earlier work, I assume a feature LID, whose value is unique to each distinct lexeme, the words that realise it, and the phrases that they head. I assume standard-verb is a supertype of the LID values of all standard verbs.

3. Polarity and main–complement distinction

Further complexities arise in the third person present tense. This shows distinct forms for affirmative declarative clauses, negative declarative clauses, and interrogative and conditional clauses. The following examples, which also show that Welsh is a VSO language, illustrate:
(2) **Mae** Gwyn **yn yr ardd.**
be.PRES Gwyn in the garden
‘Gwyn is in the garden.’

(3) **Dydy** Gwyn **ddim yn yr ardd.**
be.PRES Gwyn NEG in the garden
‘Gwyn is not in the garden.’

(4) a. **Ydy** Gwyn **yn yr ardd?**
be.PRES Gwyn in the garden
‘Is Gwyn in the garden?’

b. os **ydy** Gwyn **yn yr ardd**
if be.PRES Gwyn in the garden
‘if Gwyn is in the garden’

These forms can be accommodated with a POL(ARITY) feature with the values *pos(itive)*, *neg(ative)*, and *interrogative-cond(itional)*.

The form of the copula is also affected by whether it is in a main or a complement clause. As discussed in Bonami, Borsley and Tallerman (2016), present forms and, for some speakers, imperfect forms too are ungrammatical in complement clauses, and what looks like the non-finite form *bod* appears instead.

(5) **Dyweddodd** Megan [*mae / bod Gwyn yn yr ardd].
say.PRES Megan be.PRES be.INF Gwyn in the garden
‘Megan said Gwyn is in the garden.’

Bonami *et al.* (2016) present evidence that these clauses are syntactically finite. Thus, they seem to involve a form of the copula which is syntactically finite but morphologically non-finite. As Bonami *et al.* (2016) show, it is easy to accommodate the facts given a distinction between morphosyntactic features relevant to syntax (the value of HEAD) and morphosyntactic features relevant to morphology (the value of INFL). By default, HEAD and INFL will have the same value, but in [ROOT –] clauses, the present and, for some speakers, the imperfect forms of the copula as well will be [HEAD [VFORM fin]] but [INFL [VFORM inf]].

Certain pre-verbal particles also distinguish between main and complement clauses. In affirmative main clauses, the copula, like standard verbs, may be preceded by a particle, *mi* in North Wales or *fe* in South Wales.

(6) **Mi/Fe** fydd Gwyn **yn yr ardd.**
AFF be.FUT Gwyn in the garden
‘Gwyn will be in the garden.’

In negative complement clauses, verbs may be preceded by a particle *na* (*nad* before a vowel).

(7) **Dyweddodd** Megan [na fydd ddim Gwyn yn yr ardd].
say.PAST Megan NEG be.FUT NEG Gwyn in the garden
‘Megan said Gwyn will not be in the garden.’

It is not clear whether these particles are separate words or prefixes, but there is evidence that they form a constituent with the following verb, and much the same analytic issues arise on either assumption. The facts can be handled by labelling bare verbs as [MARKING unmarked] and particle + verb combinations as [MARKING marked]. *Mi/Fe* will combine with an
unmarked form which is [POL pos, ROOT +] and na(d) will combine with an unmarked form which is [POL neg, ROOT –].

For some speakers, milfe only occurs with past, future, and conditional forms of the copula, and not with the present and imperfect forms. For such speakers, we can say that the particles only combine with [TENSE regular] forms. Other speakers allow milfe with present and imperfect forms of bod but not with the third person present tense forms. For these speakers, we can assume that milfe combines with any [MARKING unmarked] form but that third person present tense forms are [MARKING marked].

4. The effect of gaps

The form of the copula is also affected by the presence of an unbounded dependency gap as subject or complement. Where a gap appears in a present tense subject position, we have not the expected forms mae and dydy but sy(dd).

(8) y dyn [*mae / sy(dd) yn yr ardd]
   the man be.PRES in the garden
   ‘the man who is in the garden’

(9) y dyn [*dydy / sy(dd) ddim yn yr ardd]
   the man be.PRES NEG in the garden
   ‘the man who is not in the garden’

To accommodate such examples, we can assume that the constraints that are responsible for mae and dydy require a canonical subject and that sydd is the product of the following constraint, which requires the subject to be a gap:

(10) \[
    \begin{bmatrix}
    \text{INFL} \\
    \text{LID copula} \\
    \text{VFORM fin} \\
    \text{TENSE pres} \\
    \text{POL strong} \\
    \text{COMPS <[gap],...>}
    \end{bmatrix} \rightarrow \text{[PHON sydd]}
    \]

This assumes, following Borsley (1989), that the subject of a Welsh finite clause is a realization of the first member of the COMPS list, and, following Borsley (2009, 2013), that gaps appear in VALENCE lists and not just in ARG-ST lists.

Examples with a complement gap take the expected form if the gap is a PP, PerfP, or ProgP. Consider, however, the situation with examples with a PredP gap. Corresponding to the examples in (11), we have those in (12):

(11) a. Mae Mair bron yn barod.
    be.PRES Mair almost PRED ready
    ‘Mair is almost ready.’

b. Mae o bron yn fradychwr.
    be.PRES he almost PRED traitor
    ‘He is almost a traitor.’

    almost PRED ready be.PRES Mair
    ‘Mair is ALMOST READY.’
b. Bron yn fradychwr *mae/ydy o.  
almost PRED traitor be.PRES he  
‘He is ALMOST A TRAITOR.’

Here, we have not the form *mae, which is expected in an affirmative declarative clause, but the form *ydy, which is normally confined to interrogatives and conditionals. This seems to be a second case where HEAD and INFL have different values, in this case for the feature POL. This can be attributed to the following constraint:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{HEAD} \quad & \left[ \begin{array}{c} 
\text{LID copula} \\
\text{VFORM fin} \\
\text{TENSE pres} \\
\text{POL pos} \\
\text{COMPS < [ ], [ gap, [PredP > ] ]} 
\end{array} \right] \\
\rightarrow & \quad \text{[INFL [POL int-cond]]}
\end{align*}
\]

5. Identity interpretations

A further complication arises when the copula has an identity interpretation. The following is a typical example:

(14) Yr athro ydy Gwyn.  
the teacher be.PRES Gwyn  
‘Gwyn is the teacher.’

Here, the initial constituent is understood as a complement, and I assume there is a gap in the normal complement position, presumably an NP gap. Again, we have the form *ydy, and *mae is not possible.

(15) *Yr athro mae Gwyn.  
the teacher be.PRES Gwyn  
‘Gwyn is the teacher.’

Examples like (14) have no verb-initial counterparts. Hence, (16) is not possible with either *mae or *ydy.

(16) *Mae/ydy Gwyn yr athro.  
be.PRES Gwyn the teacher

This suggests that there is a separate identity copula with a distinctive syntax. However, all its forms are identical to forms of the predicational copula, and a satisfactory analysis needs to take account of this.

The facts can be handled by assuming that the two copulas are two forms of a single copula, i.e. by assuming an index copula with two subtypes, as follows:

\[
\text{copula} \quad \frac{\text{pred(icalational)-copula}}{\text{ident(ity)-copula}}
\]
The syntactic and semantic properties of the two subtypes can be attributed to the following constraints:

\[(18) \ [\text{LID pred-copula}] \rightarrow \begin{bmatrix}
\text{ARG - ST} & <[1], \text{SUBJ}, <[1]> \rightarrow \\
\text{HEAD} & \text{PRED +} \\
\text{CONTENT} & [2]
\end{bmatrix} \]

\[(19) \ [\text{LID ident-copula}] \rightarrow \begin{bmatrix}
\text{CAT} & \text{HEAD} \rightarrow \\
\text{POL} & \text{VFORM fin} \\
\text{POL} & \text{pos} \\
\text{CONT} & \text{ARG} [1] \\
\text{CONT} & \text{ARG} [2] \\
\text{ARG - ST} & <[\text{INDEX [1]}], [\text{gap}] > \\
\text{INDEX} & [2]
\end{bmatrix} \]

The constraint in (18) ensures that the predicational copula takes a [PRED +] complement, has a subject which is the subject of its complement, and has the same interpretation as its complement. The constraint in (19) ensures that the identity-copula has a complement which is a gap and has an identity interpretation. As for the form of the identity-copula in (14), this seems to be a third case where HEAD and INFL have different values, again in the value of POL. This can be attributed to the following constraint:

\[(20) \begin{bmatrix}
\text{HEAD} & \text{LID ident - copula} \\
\text{TENSE} & \text{pres} \\
\text{AGR} & [1] \\
\text{POL} & \text{pos}
\end{bmatrix} \rightarrow \begin{bmatrix}
\text{INFL} & \text{LID pred - copula} \\
\text{TENSE} & \text{pres} \\
\text{AGR} & [1] \\
\text{POL} & \text{int - cond}
\end{bmatrix} \]

Elsewhere, forms of the identity-copula will be identical to the corresponding forms of the predicational copula, as a result of the default requirement that HEAD and INFL have the same value.

REFERENCES


