

Copula Review

Classification Practice

We know that the copula is used to link two nouns (or a pronoun and a noun), but that said, there are a couple of ways this linking function can be used. *Classification* is one of the main uses of the copula. This refers to statements where we say, in English:

X is a Y, as in	A robin is a bird.	Elephants are mammals.
	A leak is a problem.	A heart attack is an emergency.

We're saying, "The subject of this sentence is an instance of the class Y." It is an example of an abstract class of things.

And one thing all of these examples above have in common is that the English verb "is" is directly followed by an *indefinite noun*, usually preceded by the indefinite article "a/an" in the singular, and by nothing in the plural:

a bird	mammals	a problem	an emergency
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Indefinite/definite

An indefinite noun doesn't refer to any specific, individual item or thing. It simply names the class of things in question.

In the above sentences, all the subjects were also indefinite – a robin, elephants, etc. – but we could have *definite* nouns as subjects for these sentences. Definite nouns come in several forms:

- ◆ preceded the definite article "the": the elephant.
- ◆ preceded by a demonstrative form: those elephants.
- ◆ preceded by a possessive: my elephants.
- ◆ proper nouns: Dumbo.
- ◆ pronouns are definite: "he" refers to a specific elephant, not just any elephant (although I'll admit this line is a little fuzzier than the others).

With definite subjects, these sentences become:

That feathered creature in the back yard is a bird.	Our elephants are mammals.
That is a problem.	Her heart attack is an emergency.

Of Predicates

Notice that we changed what happened *before* the "is", but the stuff *after* "is" looks exactly the same. That classification, "is a bird", part, is technically the *predicate*. It's the answer to a "what" question (not a "which" question). And, lo and behold, the English structure of a classification predicate maps to the Irish structure very well. Let's look at our original sentences again:

X is a Y	A robin is a bird .	Elephants are mammals .
Is Y X	Is éan spideog.	Is mamaigh eilifintí.
	A leak is a problem .	A heart attack is an emergency .
	Is fadhb poll.	Is éigeandáil taom croí.

The part of the English sentence comprised of the "is" ("to be") verb form and the following noun is represented in Irish by an "is" (copula) verb form and noun. Now, the wrinkle is that this classification

part comes at the *end* of an English sentence and at the *beginning* of an Irish sentence. But if you put the verb + indefinite noun together in English as a unit, it is easy to create the corresponding unit in Irish.

By elimination, the *last* thing in an Irish classification sentence is the subject, which is the *first* thing in the corresponding English sentence. In general, the Irish sentence has the form, "Is bird a robin", which kind of reminds me of how Yoda talks ...

The same applies when we have a negative classification sentence:

An elephant **is not a bird.** **Ní éan eilifint.**

Unfortunately, this reasoning does not work with questions, as English rearranges word order in its questions, but Irish doesn't. But if you mentally consider what the corresponding statement, or answer, is to an English question, you'll find the unit:

Is an elephant a bird? >> An elephant is a bird >> An éan eilifint?

Let's not worry too much about mapping questions right now. If you get a lot of practice with the statement forms, the questions will become a lot easier.

The Definite Subject and the "Extra Pronoun"

When both the subject and predicate are indefinite – Ní éan eilifint – we don't have to worry about any pronouns.

When a classification sentence has a pronoun as subject – Ní éan é – that will be the only pronoun in the sentence.

But when the subject of a classification sentence is a definite noun, not a pronoun, it *may* get an extra pronoun inserted between the predicate (the class) and that noun. So, we might say:

Is éan é an t-ainmhí sin	That animal is a bird
Is aisteoir í Helen Hunt.	Helen Hunt is an actor.

These seem like they have too many things in them: "is an actor her Helen Hunt". And not every speaker in every region will follow this pattern, but it is very, very common. It is also useful to get in the habit of putting the pronoun in front of a definite subject, as it will be helpful when we meet the other major linking function of the copula, identification.

EXERCISE & HOMEWORK

Let's just concentrate on these classification sentences for now.

In Class: Take turns making a classification sentence in English, but with Irish structure! Include the Irish pronoun where needed. This will help us with that mapping. So we might say things like:

Is bird robin. Is not bird elephant . Is singers iad The Beatles.

Homework: construct ten new classification sentences *in Irish*, using both indefinite and definite subjects. They can be negative or affirmative statements.