Constructions can encode context - the case of copular clauses

I argue that a full-coverage grammar of English must recognize not only syntactic constructions, but also the potential for constructions to encode information about the interactional contexts in which they are acceptable. I present a case study supporting this claim: two copular clause constructions dedicated to personal identification where there is no visual contact: on the telephone and at the front door. My analysis draws upon both Construction Grammar (Sag 2011) and Conversation Analysis (Schegloff 1979).

The two constructions (1,2) are subject to overlapping but distinct contextual constraints. First, this be X (TBX) can provide (1a), request (1b), or confirm (1c) identification on the telephone. TBX is unacceptable at the front door (by a visitor requesting entrance, or by the resident): the preferred expressions in that context are who’s there? and who is it? It be X (IBX) provides (2a) or requests (2b) identification, but the latter is only possible at the door. Identity confirmation is unacceptable (2c). Second, these constructions are usable only at the stage of identification expected at onset of an interaction (3) (Schegloff 1979). Finally, IBX requires that the interlocutors know each other (4).

(1) this be X
   a. This is Sue.
   b. Who is this?
   c. Is this Sue?

(2) it be X
   a. It’s Sue
   b. Who is it?
   c. #Is it Sue?

(3) When you call again, tell the receptionist we spoke. #It/#This is Sue. (cf. I’m Sue).
(4) Sue: Hello?
    Mike: Hello. This/#it is Mike. I’m with the alumni association.

The sentences in (1,2) do not exhibit these constraints when used as general-purpose truncated clefts (Is it Sue (who has it)?). I propose that TBX and IBX are licensed by constructional derivations of the equative copula, idiosyncratically associated with the above contextual requirements. The identification-related function is accounted for by tying the constructions to the presence of two open propositions (OPs) (Birner, Kaplan, and Ward 2007). At the beginning of any conversation with unconfirmed identities, the two OPs in (5) arise. TBX and IBX permit reference, via their subjects, to the variables in these OPs. It is thus unnecessary to stipulate that this or it can have human reference (contra Birner, Kaplan, and Ward). Linking the construction to the copula rules out (6a); the subject-only requirement rules out (6b). Equative status predicts compatibility with ellipsis and gapping (data omitted), a problem for specificational analyses (Mikkelsen 2005).

(5) a. The caller (hailer) is X
    b. The recipient (resident) is X
(6) a. #This just called you.
    b. #Sue is this/it.

TBX and IBX are thus not merely syntactic puzzles. Their analysis crucially refers to contextual and interactional features which are run-of-the-mill for conversation and discourse analysis, but which have yet to be seen for a syntactic pattern. While construction-based approaches to syntax have long pointed to the existence of "pragmatic" constructions (Fillmore et al 1988, Kay 2004), this has never included syntactic patterns dedicated to specific interactional needs arising in particular contexts.


