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Really Intriguing, that Pred NP!

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REALLY INTRIGUING, THAT PRED NP![*]

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1.   Introduction

In this paper, we investigate apparently non-sentential examples such as those in (1).[1]

(1)   a.   Smart woman, your mother.
            [http://www.rooftopsessions.com/Rumors1.htm]
       b.   Always praising her kids, Mary.
       c.   Never on time, that guy.
       d.   Sings like an angel Molly Parton.
            [SCOSE, Part III, Jokes "Red Adair"]

In these examples, the initial XP (*smart woman* in (1a)) is a predicate and the second XP (*your mother* in (1a)) is a DP that is interpreted as the subject of this predicate. For ease of reference, we will refer to the two parts as the predicate and the subject, and we will call this class of examples Pred NP (following Shopen 1972).

Pred NP utterances have not received much attention in the literature, aside from some initial observations in Shopen (1972) and a brief discussion in Culicover and Jackendoff (2005) (see Vinet 1991 for an analysis of similar data in French). Looking at these examples, we are interested in their syntactic structure because on the surface they appear to be smaller than a sentence. In particular, we would like to determine whether or not they are sentences, either syntactically or semantically. That is, are they a projection of T? Are they interpreted as something of Montagovian type <t>?

This paper first explores the nature of Pred NP examples, such as the restrictions on the predicate and the subject, intonation and information structure. In section 3, we posit four possible analyses and evaluate them with respect to the characteristics noted in section 2. Although an analysis involving right dislocation and ellipsis fares the best, none of the proposed solutions accounts for all the properties of these examples. Section 4 concludes.

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[1] These examples are clearly only possible in spoken English. We have tried to find corpus examples, without much success. For this reason, grammaticality judgements of many of the examples can be delicate. We report what is acceptable for the English speakers we have talked with.

2.   General characteristics

As noted above, in Pred NP examples, the first XP is a predicate and can be of any category (NP/DP, VP, AP, PP). The second XP is a DP that corresponds to the subject of this predicate. In fact, the DP cannot be the object.

(2)   *Sandy sure likes, your mom.

We now explore some properties of these examples.

2.1   Distributional restrictions

2.1.1   The predicate

Although all categories of predicate are possible, the predicate must be stative. As noted by Shopen, in (3) the missing verb is 'is' not 'is being':

(3)   An ass, that guy at the next table.

At this point, we are not certain about the precise semantic characterization, but it is not a stage/individual level distinction because both kinds of predicates are possible:

(4)   a.   Really smart, your mom.   (individual-level)
       b.   Really drunk, that guy.   (stage-level)

Although in general the missing verb is some form of 'be', 'have' is possible, too.

(5)   Big nose, that politician.

Moreover, in certain cases, there is no missing verb at all, but this is only possible with modals (6a) or full verbs (1d). It is not possible, for example, to have an overt form of 'be'.

(6)   a.   Might be a good linguist, your sister.
       b. * Is a smart woman, your mom.

Finally, sentential adverbs are permitted, but only in initial position.

(7)   a.   Definitely/probably a smart woman, your mom.
       b. * Smart woman, probably, your mom.
       c. * Smart woman, your mom, probably.

2.1.2 The subject

As with the predicate, there are certain restrictions on the subject. For example, it cannot be a nonspecific indefinite (8a,b). Generics, however, are fine (8c).

(8)   a. * Always digging up my yard, a dog.
         b. * Great cook, some mom.
         c.   Man's best friend, a dog.

In general, we find examples degraded when the subject is a quantificational DP.

(9)   a. * Really bright, every math student.
         b. * Always talking, most students.

Nevertheless, if we modify these DPs, the resulting sentence is improved.[2]

(10)   a.   Really bright, every math student over there.
         b.   Always talking, most of my students.

We take this improvement effect as showing that the subject must be salient in the discourse (see section 2.4 for more discussion).

As a final property of the subject, it appears to be marked with nominative case. Note that English examples with pronouns are not possible for many speakers (probably because of the discourse status of the subject – see section 2.4), but we found the following two examples:

(11)   a.   Our captain's daughter she. [Gilbert and Sullivan, HMS Pinafore]
         b.   No paucity of merit, he.
              [Rick Mercer report, April 11, 2006 "Ignatieff, man of the people"]

Clearer instances of nominative case come from languages that mark case overtly on DPs, as in the Serbian example in (12) (Ljiljana Progovac, p.c.).

(12)   Fina zena,   tvoja   majka.
        nice lady   your.NOM   mother.NOM
        'Nice lady, your mom.'

2.2   Structure

Having looked at the predicate and the subject, we can now ask what kind of structural relationship (if any) holds between the two. In particular, we can test for c-command.

2.2.1 Connectivity

For the purposes of binding theory (e.g. principles A and B), the subject appears to c-command elements in the predicate phrase. Thus the subject can antecede a reflexive in (13a) and induces a principle B violation in (13b).

(13)   a.   Always praising herself$_i$, your sister$_i$.
         b. * Very proud of him$_i$, John$_i$.

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[2] Certain quantifiers, e.g. *each*, seem to be impossible, however.

These data suggest some kind of connectivity between the subject and the predicate, but once we turn to other tests for c-command, the results are not so clear.

2.2.2 Anti-connectivity

As shown in (14), a negative subject does not license an negative polarity item in the predicate phrase.

(14)   a.   *   Ever on time, no one in my class.
         b.   *   Reads anything anymore, nobody.

Moreover, as seen in (15), an idiom chunk cannot be broken up between the predicate phrase and the subject.

(15)   a.   *   About to hit the fan, the shit.
         b.   *   Out of the bag, the cat.

We note, however, that idioms are perfectly grammatical inside the predicate phrase itself, so it is not a general restriction on idioms that rules out (15).

(16)   a.   Almost let the cat out of the bag, that guy.
         b.   About to kick the bucket, my cat.

The above data suggest that in fact the subject does not c-command the predicate.

2.2.3 Other

The word order of these examples is fixed: the predicate and the subject must appear in that order.

(17)   *Your mom, smart woman.

Finally, these examples can't be embedded.

(18)   *I think [smart woman, your mom].

Note that many other kinds of non-sentential speech (or "fragments") also cannot be embedded. See Culicover and Jackendoff (2005) for discussion.

2.3   Intonation

As noted by Shopen (1972), the predicate must receive the most prominent stress ("tag intonation").

(19)   a.   A good TALKER, your friend Bill.
         b.   *   A good talker, your friend BILL.

The subject, in fact, can't be stressed, as indicated by the impossibility of (19b).

2.4   Information structure

As we have already hinted at, the examples under discussion have a fixed information structure: the predicate presents new information (focus) and the subject is old information ("antitopic") and must be salient. The topic status of the subject may explain why indefinite nonspecific DPs and parts of idioms are excluded from the subject position. Moreover, the improving effect that we noted with certain subjects (by adding *over there* or other deictics), relates directly to saliency: the subject must be linked to the context. Note that this information structure is strikingly parallel to right dislocation. Right dislocated DPs must be salient and discourse-old (Lambrecht 1981; Davison 1984; Ward and Birner 1996). We provide a typical example in (20) which illustrates these observations: the right dislocated DP is old information and is marked with a demonstrative; the predicate provides new information, as marked by the stress on *enormous*.

(20)   They really were ENORMOUS, those pipes.
                        [R. Dahl, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*]

Note that Ward and Birner (1996) link the topicality of the right-dislocated DP to its anaphoric link with a pronoun; however, no such pronoun is present in the examples we are interested in.

2.5   Force/type

As noted by Shopen (1972) and illustrated in (21), Pred NP examples appear similar to exclamatives.

(21)   a.   A good talker, your friend Bill.
        b.   What a good talker, your friend Bill!

The similarities, however, only extend to the use of Pred NP; their syntax and semantics are quite different. For example, wh-exclamatives require a scale, ruling out (22b). The equivalent Pred NP, as shown in (22a), is grammatical.

(22)   a.   The best coffee in the world, that Maxwell House.
        b.   * What the best coffee in the world, that Maxwell House!

Thus while both Pred NP and exclamatives are used to express an evaluation, only the latter are associated with a scalar implicature: the proposition they denote lies at the extreme end of some scale (Zanuttini and Portner 2003).
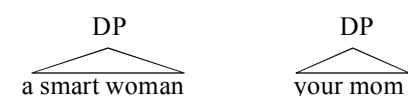
3.   Possible analyses

Having explored some of the properties of the Pred NP examples, we now explore some possible syntactic analyses. As we will show, although some fare better than others, none of these analyses accounts for all the above properties.

3.1 Two independent phrases

As is well known, speakers routinely produce non-sentential utterances. That is, they produce utterances that are apparently smaller than a sentence (these are sometimes called "fragments" in the literature).

(23) a. A cup of coffee.
     b. To San Francisco.
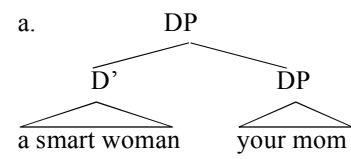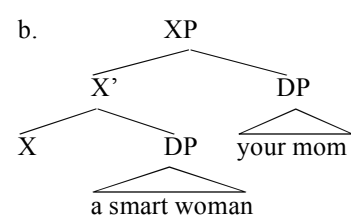   c. Beautiful!   [Shopen 1971: (1a, b, g)]

Stainton (forthcoming) argues that non-sentential utterances are in fact just that: phrases of categories other than TP. So (23a) is simply a DP, (23b) is a PP and (23c) is an AP (or perhaps just an A). If we assume this analysis and apply it to Pred NP examples, we could say that in these cases, we simply have two syntactically disconnected XPs, two "fragments" pronounced one after the other.

(24)

         DP   DP
   a smart woman   your mom

Clearly under this analysis a Pred NP utterance is made up of two independent constituents.

3.2 Small clause

Another initially appealing approach is to claim that the predicate and the subject form a syntactic constituent: a small clause with a rightward subject. We give two possible small clause structures below. In (25a), the subject is the specifier of a DP small clause (à la Stowell 1981). In (25b), on the other hand, the small clause is a projection of a special head, $X°$, that relates the two DPs (den Dikken 2006 calls this head "relator").

(25) a.

              DP
     D'   DP
 a smart woman   your mom

     b.

             XP
   X'   DP
 X   DP your mom
   a smart woman

Unlike the analysis in (24), the small clause approach claims that the predicate and the subject together form a single constituent.
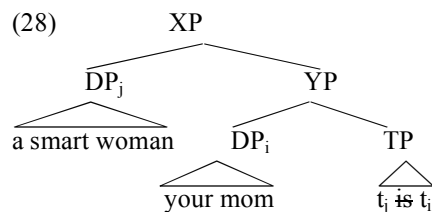
3.3   Movement plus deletion

Recently Merchant (2004) has proposed that fragments are derived by fronting the apparent fragment, followed by deletion (ellipsis). For instance, a non-sentential utterance like (26a) would have a derivation along the lines of (26b).

(26) a.   A cup of coffee.
      b.   [$_{FP}$[a cup of coffee]$_i$ [$_{TP}$ ~~I'd like~~ t$_i$]]

If we adapt Merchant's analysis to the Pred NP examples, there are (at least) two possible derivations. For the first, the subject is right-adjoined to the TP (e.g. via rightward topicalization) and the verb is elided.

(27)   TP
        ┌────────┴────────┐
       TP   DP$_i$
   ╱──────╲   ╱──────╲
t$_i$ ~~is~~ a smart woman   your mom
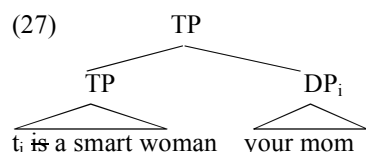
In the second possible derivation, both the predicate and the subject have been fronted, followed by (TP) ellipsis.

(28)   XP
        ┌───────┴───────┐
      DP$_j$ YP
   ╱─────╲   ┌─────┴─────┐
a smart woman   DP$_i$ TP
              ╱────╲   ╱──╲
           your mom   t$_j$ ~~is~~ t$_i$

One of the goals of Merchant's analysis is to avoid non-constituent ellipsis, a problem with earlier analyses of fragments and a problem we will also encounter with Pred NP examples.

3.4   Right dislocation plus deletion

The fourth analysis of the Pred NP examples takes as its starting point the parallel noted in section 2.4 between Pred NP and right dislocation. If we assume that Pred NP involves underlying right dislocation, we have the following structure.

(29)   TP
        ┌────────┴────────┐
       TP   DP
   ╱──────╲   ╱──────╲
~~she is~~ a smart woman   your mom
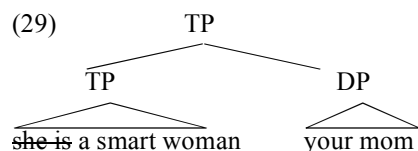
In the tree in (29), the subject is base generated adjoined to TP (or perhaps a higher functional category in the CP domain). The subject and the verb undergo ellipsis (note that this is ellipsis of a non-constituent).

3.5   How do they rank?

Now that we have outlined four possible structural analyses of the Pred NP examples, we are in a position to evaluate them. In particular, we can ask if these analyses account for the properties outlined in section 2. In the following subsections, we consider some of the properties.

3.5.1 Sentential adverbs

Recall that sentential adverbs are possible, but must occur before the predicate.

(30)   a.   Definitely/probably a smart woman, your mom.
      b. * Smart woman, probably, your mom.
      c. * Smart woman, your mom, probably.

Under the two phrases analysis, we expect sentential adverbs because they are possible with non-sentential utterances in general.

(31)   Definitely your mom.

Note, however, that this analysis incorrectly predicts (30b) to be grammatical: since adverbs are possible with fragments and Pred NP is made up of two fragments, we expect two positions for adverbs.
      Turning to the other analyses, the small clause structure incorrectly predicts sentential adverbs to be altogether excluded, given their impossibility in small clauses such as (32).

(32) *I consider definitely her a good friend.

The movement plus deletion analysis, on the other hand, correctly predicts the possibility of sentential adverbs, but the position of the adverbs is not clear under the double-fronting approach. In particular, if sentential adverbs are adjoined to TP, they would follow the fronted subject, as in the ungrammatical (30c). Finally, the right dislocation analysis correctly predicts both the presence and position of sentential adverbs.

3.5.2 Connectivity

We saw earlier that the subject apparently c-commands elements in the predicate for the purposes of binding theory. The two phrases analysis, despite initial appearances to the contrary, accounts for these data. As shown in (33), binding conditions appear to be met in fragments even with no antecedent.

(33)   Always looking at himself in the mirror.

The other three analyses can account for binding in a more standard way because the subject in these structures c-commands the predicate.

3.5.3 Anti-connectivity

As shown in (14), repeated in (34), Pred NP examples do not seem to allow NPI licensing.

(34)   a.   *   Ever on time, no one in my class.
       b.   *   Reads anything anymore, nobody.

These data are accounted for by the two phrases analysis because unlike anaphors, NPIs really do require c-command. The small clause analysis, however, incorrectly predicts (34) to be grammatical. As for movement plus deletion, it is possible to capture the anti-connectivity effects if we claim that the movement of the subject is topicalization. As is well known, quantificational DPs can't be topicalized (Rizzi 1997):

(35)   *Nessuno, lo ho visto.
       'No one, I saw him'

Finally, if Pred NP involves right dislocation, the ungrammaticality of (34) falls out directly: negative elements can't be right dislocated (again, this likely relates to their topicality).

(36)   *He reads anything, no one.

3.5.4 Summary

In the table below, we summarize the various characteristics of the Pred NP examples and whether each analysis is able to capture the facts.

(37)

	two phrases	move + delete	RD	small clause
stativity restriction	✗	✗	✗	✗
sentential adverbs	✗	?	✓	✗
restrictions on subject	✗	✓	✓	✗
binding	✓	✓	✓	✓
anti-connectivity	✓	✓	✓	✗
irreversibility	✗	?	✓	✗
no embedding	✓	✗	✗	✗
intonation	✗	✗	✓	✗

Two things stand out in this table. First, the stativity restriction is not captured by any of the analyses. Second, none of the analyses account for all of the properties, though the right dislocation analysis fares better than the other two.

We note here a final consideration. When we look at a broad range of examples, we see that the ellipsis necessary for both the movement plus deletion and the right dislocation analyses is of non-constituents.

(38)   ~~She is a~~ smart woman, your mom.

In (38), not only the verb (and maybe the subject) is deleted, but also the determiner. One possible (but not ideal) solution to this problem is to follow Napoli (1982) and claim that this kind of ellipsis is phonological rather than syntactic (unstressed elements in initial position are deleted) and is therefore not sensitive to syntactic constituency.

4.   Conclusion

We conclude with some remarks about the future direction of our research. As just noted, the right dislocation analysis of Pred NP fares the best of the four and therefore strikes us as one to pursue. In particular, Pred NP shares with right dislocation both the marked intonation and information structure. But there remain some questions (setting aside the issue of non-constituent deletion for the moment). First, as we saw in section 2, the NP in Pred NP must be the subject. But right dislocation is possible with objects.

(39)   I don't like them at all, the cops.   [Grosz and Ziv 1998: (2)]

Second, right dislocation is not sensitive to stativity. Thus although (40a) is well formed, (40b) cannot be derived from an underlying structure similar to (40a), because the meaning is different.

(40)   a.   He's being an ass, that guy at the next table.
       b.   An ass, that guy at the next table.

Third, right dislocation, unlike Pred NP, can be embedded.

(41)   a.   I think that he's being an ass, that guy at the next table.
       b.   * I think (that) an ass, that guy at the next table.

In order to argue for a right dislocation analysis, we would need to come up with an account of these differences.

     Another possibility is to pursue an analysis proposed by Vinet (1991), who considers French examples similar to our Pred NP cases and argues that they involve predicate fronting. Although we disagree with some of the details of her account (for example, we claim that Pred NP is not exclamative – see section 2.5), predicate fronting provides an attractive alternative analysis.

     Finally, we attempt to answer our initial question: is Pred NP a sentence? The answer to this question depends on which account turns out to be correct, as the following table shows.

(42)

	two phrases	movement + deletion	RD	small clause
syntactic sentence?	no	yes	yes	no
semantic sentence?	no	yes	yes	yes

In particular, if we were to pursue the right dislocation analysis, we would claim that Pred NP is both a syntactic and a semantic sentence, despite appearances to the contrary.

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