Mihaela Miron-Fulea[1]

VERB SUB-CLASSIFICATION: COPULAR VS. NON-COPULAR

Abstract: *Unlike in traditional grammar, where the copula (or linking verb) is denied the syntactic role of predicate*[2] *("the copula cannot act syntactically as a predicate on its own, but only alongside a subject complement, with which it forms not a verbal but a nominal predicate" – Grammar of the Romanian Academy, 1966), in modern grammar, both the copular and the non-copular verb – when used in personal moods – are regarded as predicate heads (which actualize the syntactic role of predicate).*

Key-words: *syntactic predicate, verbal predicate, nominal predicate, copular verb, predicative clause, subject complement, attributive statement, identity statement.*

1. **The copular verb: syntactic role**

1.1. If we accepted the existence of two types of syntactic predicates (viz. verbal predicate vs. nominal predicate), then we would reach the undesirable conclusion that the syntactic role of nominal predicate could be held by a copular verb and a predicative clause, given that – in traditional terms – what corresponds to the subject complement at sentence level is the predicative clause. The theoretical and practical impossibility of regarding the phrastic correspondent (viz. the clause actualization) of the subject complement as a component of the syntactic role of nominal predicate is demonstrated by a sentence like the following:

Ea este / cum o ştii /
She is[1] */ as you know*[2] *her /.*

copular verb — relative adverb — verbal predicate

where "*este*"/"*is*" is a copula and implicitly cannot stand alone (according to traditional grammar) as a syntactic predicate. Thus, we would have to accept that here we were dealing with a nominal predicate consisting of the copula "*este*"/ "*is*" and the subject complement "*cum o ştii*"/ "as you know her," which, at sentence level, could be parsed as a syntactic role realized by a copular verb and a predicative clause.

To conclude, as long as the subject complement can correspond on a superior level to a predicative clause whose syntactic role cannot be denied, then it follows that the subject complement cannot be denied its syntactic role either. However, for the sake of consistency with traditional approaches, we would have to admit that in a sentence like *Ea este veselă* ("*She is cheerful*") we had a complex syntactic role: "este veselă" / "is cheerful" (nominal predicate), consisting of the copula "este"/"is" and the subject complement "veselă"/"cheerful," the latter having a syntactic role, which is obviously quite problematic.

1.2. If we accepted that the copula cannot have a syntactic role on its own and that, when it is in a personal mood, it forms a nominal predicate in conjunction with the subject complement, then the question arises: what about copular verbs in a non-personal mood, according to traditional approaches?

---

[1] Ovidius University, Constanța.

[2] We use "predicate" in English in the modern sense derived from Gottlob Frege, viz. as the main verb and any auxiliary verbs it may take, i.e. what has more recently been dubbed *predicator* so as to avoid confusion.

BDD-A3737 © 2013 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:56:03 UTC)

Obviously, as copular verbs, they can have a syntactic role not on their own (in accordance with the traditional definition) but only in conjunction with a subject complement. However, given that they are in a non-personal mood, such copular verbs together with the subject complement cannot have the syntactic role of a nominal predicate. By way of consequence, we could only regard this as yet another instance of a complex syntactic role, if here of the adverbial type, which is again a fallacy. Thus, in the sentence:

Fiind bolnavă, nu a putut veni / Being ill, she couldn't come.
fiind bolnavă / being ill would be an adverbial of cause consisting of the copula *fiind* / *being* and the subject complement *bolnavă / ill.*
Likewise, in the sentence:
Fiind /cum nu se putea mai rău/, nu a putut veni / Being / as she was worse than ever /, she couldn't come.

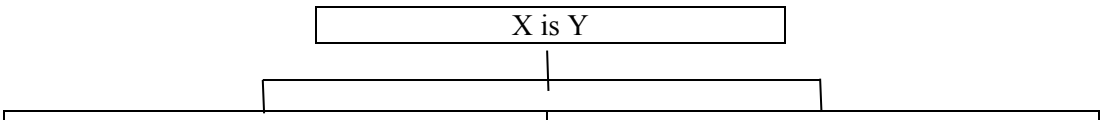
we would have to admit the existence of an adverbial of cause consisting of the copula *fiind* / *being* and a predicative clause, which is patently false.
We will reach, therefore, the unavoidable conclusion that the copula + subject complement structure is no longer specific to the nominal predicate, recurring as it does also in the adverbial paradigm.

1.3. All the above-mentioned arguments plead that the copular and non-copular verb should be treated syntactically in a unitary fashion as regards their capacity to actualize the syntactic role of predicate: the copular verb in a personal mood has the syntactic role of predicate, while in a non-personal mood it can have any syntactic role except the predicate.

According to this modern approach, we can notice that the nominal predicate notion is no longer operational syntactically, but at best only logico-semantically. In the latter case the structure consists of the logical copula *a fi* / *to be* and the logical attribute supplied by the subject complement.

1.4. Characteristic to copular verbs (whose prototypical representative is the verb *a fi* / *to be*), from a logico-semantic perspective, is the fact that they imply the occurrence of a three-fold structure of the type: *logical subject – copula – logical attribute*, where the logical subject is attributed (is predicated) a certain feature, conveyed semantically by the logical attribute with the aid of the copula. Thus, in the sentence: *Ea este veselă / She is cheerful*, the feature conveyed by the adjective *veselă / cheerful* is predicated (attributed semantically) to the referent of the personal pronoun *ea / she*, with the aid of the copula *a fi/ to be*. In this connection, it is perhaps enlightening to recall that the Stoics (starting with Plato and Aristotle) argued that fundamental to each verb is the logical copula "*to be*".
Furthermore, we should clearly distinguish between attributive statements where "a fi"/ "to be" is a copula and identity statements which lack this value, since the latter type features the following logico-semantic structure: *logical subject – verb of identity – logical subject*. In other words, both items placed before and after "a fi"/ "to be" are utilized referentially (i.e. they refer respectively to entities X and Y, which are identical).
We should bear in mind that sentences with the *X a fi Y* / *X to be Y* structure can be interpreted, depending on the value of the *a fi / to be* operator, as either attributive statements or statements of referential identity. To the syntactic role of subject complement corresponds at a logico-syntactic level either a logical attribute (in attributive/predicative statements), or a logical subject (in identity statements). From a syntactic point of view, the subject complement represents a syntactic role which is characteristically realized by an adjective with double dependency, on the one hand, on the copulative verb head, which imposes on it the Nominative case and, on the other hand, on the subject pronominal head, which imposes on it the gender and number through concord.

BDD-A3737 © 2013 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:56:03 UTC)



Attributive statement X = logical subject (referential value) Y = logical attribute (attributive/predicative value)	**Identity statement** X = logical subject (referential/non-predicative value) Y = logical subject (referential/non-predicative value) X = Y (co-referential)
Dan Barbilian este un celebru matematician. *Dan Barbilian is a famous mathematician.*	*Dan Barbilian este Ion Barbu.* *Dan Barbilian is Ion Barbu.*

2. Criteria for distinguishing copular from non-copular verbs (in text parsing)
In Romanian, the only verb which is always copular is *A DEVENI (TO BECOME)*; all the other copular verbs can also have non-copular valences. Accordingly, in order to distinguish between the copular and non-copular uses, in all practical cases of parsing we will resort to the criterion of actualized syntactic structure, namely:

2.1.

SOMEONE / SOMETHING + TO BE + SOMEWHERE / AT SOME TIME
Subject + non-copular TO BE + adverbial of place / adverbial of time

E.g.: *Ea este acolo* / *She is there* (someone is somewhere).
Cartea este aici / *The book is here* (something is somewhere).
Întâlnirea este mâine la Bucureşti / *The meeting is in Bucharest tomorrow* (something is at some time).

2.2.

SOMEONE / SOMETHING + TO BE + SOMEHOW / SOMETHING
Subject + copular TO BE + subject complement

E.g.: *Ea este frumoasă* / *She is beautiful.*
Cartea este interesantă / *The book is interesting.*
Maria este doctoriţă / *Maria is a physician.*

2.3.

SOMEONE / SOMETHING + TO BE + SOMEHOW / SOMETHING + SOMEWHERE / AT SOME TIME
Subject + copular TO BE + subject complement + adverbial of place / adverbial of time

E.g.: *Ea este singură acolo* / *She is alone there* (someone is somehow somewhere).

2.4. The only instance where we resort to synonyms occurs where the verb "a fi" / "to be" is synonymous with *"a se întâmpla* (*to happen*) */ a fi pe cale să* (*to be on the verge of*)"; here "*a fi*" / "*to be*" is non-copular.
E.g.: *Era prin martie* (se întâmpla) / *It was around March* (it happened),

BDD-A3737 © 2013 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:56:03 UTC)

Era să cad (a fi pe cale să) / *I was about to fall down* (to be on the verge of).

From the non-derivative (base) structures of the type *a fi / to be + subjective clause* ("*era*[1]*/ ca eu să cad* " [2]/) (* "[it] *was about* [1]*/ that I fell down* [2]"), through a transformation wherein the subject of the subordinate clause is taken over in the main clause, yet without syntactic integration of the item thus moved into its new surroundings, we get derivative structures of the type "*eu (I)* [1a]*/ era (was about)*[2]*/ să cad (to fall down)*" [1b]/. Subsequently, through a transformation wherein the subject of the subordinate clause is taken over in the main clause, with complete syntactic integration of the item thus moved into its new surroundings (where it has the syntactic role of a subject, as the concord indicates), we get derivative structures of the type: *eu eram (I was about)* [1] */ să cad* (*to fall down*) [2]/. In the latter type of derivative structures (although recommended to be avoided in formal language), "*eu*"/ "I" becomes the subject of the verb "a fi" / "to be", and thereby *a fi / to be* turns from an impersonal base verb (in the non-derivative structure "era ca eu să cad" / (* "[it] was about that I fell down") into a personal verb. As to the subordinate "*să cad"/ "to fall down" ("eu eram să cad*"/ "*I was about to fall down*"), given, on the one hand, that it is doubly dependent on the verb head "eram"/ "was" and on the pronominal head subject "eu"/ "I" and, on the other hand, that it occurs in a derivative structure, it will therefore act syntactically in Romanian as object complement realized as a clause (viz. object complement clause).

REFERENCES

Bidu-Vrănceanu, Angela, Călăraşu, Cristina, Ionescu Ruxăndoiu, Liliana, Mancaş, Mihaela, Pană Dindelegan, Gabriela. *Dicţionar general de ştiinţe - ştiinţe ale limbii* (DSL). Bucureşti: Editura Ştiinţifică, 1997. Second edition: Bucureşti: Editura Nemira, 2001.

Coteanu, Ion (coord.). *Limba română contemporană*. Vol. I. Second edition. Bucureşti: EDP, 1985.

Gramatica limbii române. Vol. I-II. Bucureşti: Editura Academiei , 1963.

Guţu Romalo, V. (coord.). *Gramatica limbii române*. Vol I-II. Bucureşti: Editura Academiei, 2005.

Guţu-Romalo, Valeria. *Sintaxa limbii române. Probleme şi interpretări*. Bucureşti: EDP, 1973.

Guţu-Romalo,Valeria. *Sintaxa limbii române. Probleme şi interpretări*. Bucureşti.EDP, 1973.

Miron-Fulea, Mihaela. *Numele proprii. Interfaţa semantică-sintaxă*. Bucureşti: Editura Universităţii din Bucureşti, 2005.

Pană Dindelegan, Gabriela. *Elemente de gramatică. Dificultăţi, controverse, noi interpretări*, Bucureşti: Humanitas Educaţional, 2003.

Pană Dindelegan, Gabriela. *Sintaxa grupului verbal*. Braşov: Aula, 1999.

Pană Dindelegan, Gabriela. *Teorie şi analiză gramaticală*. Bucureşti: Editura Coresi, 1992.

BDD-A3737 © 2013 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:56:03 UTC)