

Coping With the Copula: II

That Is A ...

Lesson Plan Overview

First, a few notes about how we'll be tackling the copula.

- ◆ It will take us a couple of months to work through this topic, in part because
- ◆ the copula is a bit confusing, and has quite a few uses and variations, and
- ◆ I'm trying to break this whole topic down into bite-sized morsels, so we will nibble our way through this concept rather slowly.

I'm counting on getting each "morsel" pretty firmly understood and ready to use before moving onto the next one. When you look up the copula in a grammar book, you get the whole thing in all its weirdness in a few pages. I hope to focus on just one feature at a time (sort of Suzuki music style!), so we can build up our "copula performance" and not slide back when we introduce additional aspects.

How many morsels? I haven't even been able to figure it out yet, but consider that we will deal with:

- ◆ two different noun constructions, depending on whether or not the "information" part of the sentence is definite or indefinite;
- ◆ the usual statement and question forms, and then the relative or clausal forms;
- ◆ some commonly used forms that don't follow the Official Standard;
- ◆ the two tenses, present/future, and past/conditional;
- ◆ uses with adjectives and to express emphasis ("fronting");
- ◆ uses in a wide range of idioms, starting with the familiar *Is maith liom X*.

The short range plan is

1. Deal with statements and questions in the present, first. Within that, we'll start with indefinite noun constructions first, and then move to the ones with two definite nouns.
2. When we're making good statements and answering basic questions, we'll move to the past/conditional.
3. All of the preceding will stick close to the Official Standard forms. Then it will be time to deal with some of the variations, especially in Conamara.
4. After that, we'll tackle clauses, and
5. Clean up with idioms, adjectives, and all that jazz. The plan could easily have changed by the time we get this far.

Along the way, in keeping with our other theme, we'll do a lot of question-and-answer work, and we'll be listening for increasing use of copula statements in our Irish conversation.

ABAIRTÍ AICME (CLASSIFICATION SENTENCES)

Aicme can be translated "class," and is used to describe the taxonomic classes of plants and animals, and other kinds of separation into categories. One of the main uses of the copula is to express items like the following:

That is a dog. Joe is a fool. She is a nun They are soldiers.
 I am a nice person. He is a small boy.

In Irish, these are the sentences you recognized in last week's handout, a list of copula examples, as having the copula **directly** followed by **an indefinite noun**, and **not** by a pronoun (é, í, etc.). The basic construction of an affirmative statement of this kind is:

Is + indefinite noun + definite subject of the sentence.

That means that we get Irish statements like these (using our examples above):

Is madra é sin. Is amadán é Joe. Is bean rialta í. Is saighdiúirí iad.
Is duine deas mé (mise). Is buachaill beag é.

The indefinite part is the classification -- as a dog, a small boy, etc. -- and will not have an article, of course. **The definite part is the subject of the sentence.** We consider the following things definite:

1. Any of the personal pronouns: sí, é, mé, and so on.
2. A proper noun or name, which includes
3. Phrases of the sort, *teach an tsagart*, "the priest's house." Basically, when the phrase includes a noun in the genitive, it becomes definite.
4. Any noun preceded by the definite articles *an* or *na*, including those that involve *seo*, *sin*, etc.
5. Any noun preceded by the possessive: *mo mhadra*, *ár gcarr*.

Careful! Tá vs. Is Contrast

Although we will get to other uses later, at this stage of the process we can think of the copula as something that is needed to deal with "to be" sentences that involve more than one *thing*, that is, more than one noun or pronoun. So there has to be a noun or pronoun following the copula someplace, for these basic statements.

This can get confusing when we use the copula in descriptive ways. We can certainly say:

Tá Seán go deas.

or we can say:

Is duine deas é Seán.

As you can see, we have **two** nouns referenced in the copula sentence. It is the difference between saying "Sean is nice" and "Sean is a nice person," and that contrast nicely illustrates the difference in using these two forms of "to be."

é? é?

No, we're not learning to speak Canadian.

You may have noticed there are too many "things" in a sentence like:

Is amadán é Joe.

This seems to say, "Is a fool him Joe," with "him" and "Joe" being redundant. But that's not what's really going on.

This extra pronoun is one of those cases where we see a pattern, and we describe it with a grammar rule, but the extra word does not get translated into English. The general rule we're seeing here goes something like this:

In a copula sentence, a definite noun is preceded by the corresponding pronoun, and the two of them form a unit.

(This may remind you of the funny way that *an* is automatically added to words followed by *seo*, *sin*, etc.. We say, *an madra sin*, "that dog", but it would literally translate "the that dog.")

Now, this rule is strong in Conamara, but it is understood everywhere. And there are some learning advantages to getting used to it now, that will help us when we get to other kinds of copula statements involving more than one definite noun.

So I'll recommend adopting this practice while we study the copula. As I say, it doesn't sound really strange to speakers anywhere, I don't think, and it simplifies some things for us.

Statement/Question Forms

We'll work with the standard forms, and worry about dialect variations later.

Fortunately, the basic forms are very familiar to you already, being:

<i>Is</i>	<i>Is madra é.</i>	<i>Is éin iad.</i>
<i>Ní</i>	<i>Ní madra é.</i>	<i>Ní éin iad.</i>
<i>An</i>	<i>An madra é?</i>	<i>An éin iad?</i>
<i>Nach</i>	<i>Nach madra é?</i>	<i>Nach éin iad?</i>

In other words, outside of *is*, the other forms are identical to the negation and question particles you already use all the time for all the tenses except the past.

Special Answer Form: ea

When we are dealing with these indefinite nouns as the "information" (*faisnéis*) we are providing about the subject, we use the special pronoun *ea* (which is actually an old neuter pronoun) in the answer. In fact, there are only two possible answers to a simple question of the form, *An/Nach X é/í etc.:*

<i>Is ea.</i>	(Note: said, and sometimes written, ' <i>Sea</i> , not as two separate words)
<i>Ní hea.</i>	(Note: <i>Ní</i> puts an <i>h</i> before pronouns starting with a vowel, but not most nouns.)

Remember last week's patterns? It is fairly easy to remember that any question (or statement) in which the copula is **NOT** followed by a pronoun gets this indefinite, *ea* answer. As you will see in the coming weeks, copula forms followed by pronouns get answered with pronouns, and we'll learn how to deal with adjectives and other constructions, but copula forms followed directly by an indefinite noun are always answered with either '*Sea* or *Ní hea*.

PRACTICE WITH ABAIRTÍ AICME

Pattern A

We'll work, in pairs or trios, through a simple three-step conversation that goes like this:

1. One person states a name, all by itself: "**Barrack Obama**".
2. Next person responds with a question or statement:
An polaiteoir é? Is rincoir é. Nach aisteoir é? Ní sagart é.
3. The process is completed by the appropriate answer/agreement/disagreement, **which means ONLY one of the following two responses:**
'Sea Ní hea.

Vocabulary to get started is provided below. You can be flexible about people who *used* to be a thing.

Important Tips for Optimal Results!

- Do Not Get Creative!!! Please, stick to the format at least until you have used every single item **multiple times**. Just pull off a noun and a person at random and slam them together somehow. *If you find yourself pausing several seconds to think of a new name or career, you are interrupting the drill and reducing the benefit.*
- You will reach a point where this is very easy. That's when you get bored, get creative, and fail to *consolidate* the pattern. When you get bored, you need to continue for 5-10 minutes more.
- Speed is your measure of success. When you can quickly pick a couple of items at random, connect them with the copula, and respond, all in a few seconds, you're getting there.

Pattern B

If we have time, and you are really ripping along, you can modify the pattern to include the name of the subject. That means, instead of saying *An uachtarán é?*, you would say, *An uachtarán é Obama?* or *Ní aisteoir í Sarah Palin*. Just plug in the proper name directly behind the pronoun!

This is good practice in getting that *pronoun + definite noun* unit working. Just remember that the *answers* are still limited to *'Sea* and *Ní hea*, you can't put a pronoun or the name in the answer.

aisteoir	fear	Al Franken	Ginger Rogers
amadán	gadaí	Amy Klobuchar	Katie Couric
amhránaí	lúthchleasaí	Barbara Streisand	Lindsey Vonn
bean	polaiteoir	Barrack Obama	Mark Dayton
ceoltoir	rincoir	Bernie Madoff	Michael Jordan
craoltóir	scribhneoir	Bill Gates	Michelle Bachmann
duine glic	seanadóir	Brett Favre	Mikhail Baryshnikov
duine olc	uachtarán	Bristol Palin	Paul McCartney
duine saibhir		Denny Hecker	Sarah Palin
		Don Shelby	Sheryl Crow