

Coping With the Copula: VII

To é Or Not To é?

One of the distinguishing features of our copula work has been the presence or absence of *é/í* etc. We clearly know the difference between these two questions:

An aisteoir é? An é an t-aisteoir?

But, as you have noticed, things get a little more complicated, in terms of these pronouns, pretty quickly. In a statement like:

Is é Charlie Sheen an duine is múinte? (Is C.S. the most polite person?)

... we seem to be talking about three things -- *é*, C.S., and *an duine* -- but we are actually talking only about two. The *é* is just there as part of the proper noun, Charlie Sheen.

So what are the rules about this?

Not Rules, Patterns

Well, first, grammatical rules are *descriptions of patterns*, not guidelines to behavior. they summarize how the language works, rather than dictate how we speak.

Second, trying to navigate this particular minefield by going through some mental checklist of rules is just going to kill performance.

So, let's just try to gather the common patterns, and then try to duplicate them.

(Note that é, í, or iad will be used as appropriate, even if for simplicity most of our examples use é.)

A Note on the Definite Noun Convention

This "é Charlie Sheen" thing is very common, but not universal, depending on where it lands in the copula sentence. In other words, it always happens in a sentence that starts, "Is é Charlie Sheen ...", but may or may not always be used in the classification sentences, "Is aisteoir (é) Charlie Sheen."

But for our purposes, let's adopt this convention very strongly. That is, we will follow the Conamara pattern, because it is widely used even outside Conamara, it is understood everywhere, and it simplifies things for us.

The basic rule is that a definite subject, following the copula, gets the pronoun in front of it. But you have to remember that the subject comes *second* in a classification sentence, and *first* in an identification sentence. Practically speaking, if you get in the habit of plugging in pronouns before proper nouns, that will generally work.

Pattern #1: No é

Copula links two indefinites: "An X is a Y."

Is éan spideog. Is ainmhí sionnach. Is bláth rós. Is gadaí pioráid.

Pattern #2: Classification of he/she/it/they

These are classification (*aicme*) sentences with a pronoun subject. They end up with just one pronoun, the one that is the subject: "He is an X."

Is éan í. Is ainmhí é. Is saighdiúirí iad. Is gadaí é sin.

Pattern #3: Classification with Proper Noun Subject

These are like #2, but the he/she/they subject has been replaced with a definite noun. When that happens, the definite noun is preceded by a pronoun, according to the convention mentioned above, so that a sentence that says, "Charlie Sheen is an actor," ends up seeming to mean something like, "Charlie Sheen is an actor him" or "He Charlie Sheen is an actor."

That extra pronoun is just part of the definite noun when it follows the copula, and it doesn't have to be translated.

Is éan í an spideog. Is ainmhí é an sionnach. Is aisteoir é Charlie Sheen.
Is feilmeoirí iad na fir sin. Is gadaí é *mac an mhúinteora*.

Note that in the last one, the noun phrase, "son of the teacher," identifies a very specific person, so it is a definite (even a proper) noun.

Pattern #4: Identification with Two Definite Nouns

When we have two definite nouns, the one immediately following the copula will get that extra pronoun. This produces sentences much like our previous category, where we seem to have three things, but only translate two:

Is é Charlie Sheen an t-aisteoir is fearr. Is í Madonna an bhean is ciúine.
Is é an sagart an fear is craiceáilte.

Pattern #5: Identification with Definite Noun = Pronoun

HERE IS one of the patterns that causes problems. In this case, the *subject* of the sentence, as it is translated, is a pronoun, he/she/it/they. The definite noun in the copula sentence is what we are saying *about* the subject. But in the Irish version, the definite noun phrase comes first, and it *feels* like there are too many pronouns.

Is é an t-aisteoir é. Is í an t-amhránaí í. Is iad na saighdiúirí iad.

As with #4 above, the first pronoun is just the one connected to the definite noun, and the second one is the "he/she/they" of the sentence. You need both pronouns because the first one is part of that noun phrase, and will not be translated.

Pattern #6: Fronting the Adjective for Emphasis

We already know how to say, "He's a good boy": *Is buachaill maith é*. The final *é* is needed as subject, and you're already comfortable with that.

But to express "He's a *good* boy!", we say *Is maith an buachaill é*. We pull the adjective up front, and add the definite article. This is what leads to that Hiberno-English style of expression, something like, "It's the good boy he is." If we are talking about a specific person, we'll need that pronoun as part of the usual noun phrase.

Is breá an lá é. Is dorcha an oíche í. Is deas an bhean í Lady GaGa. Is mór an trua é!

Just a quick mention: a few adjectives are often used alone with the copula, like *deas*, *maith*, *fíor*, etc.

We can say: Is fíor é. Is fíor é sin. Is fíor sin.