When Optional Copula Deletion Isn’t
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We are all indebted to Bertrand Russell for having pointed out (in 1905) the ambiguity of sentences of the type:

(1) I thought your yacht was larger than it is.

What has not been previously noticed is that for the wide-scope interpretation to be possible the otherwise optional rule that deletes the copula in the remnant of the comparative clause must not be applied. Applying the rule to the structure underlying (1) results in a sentence in which only the narrow-scope (contradictory) reading is possible:

(2) I thought your yacht was larger than itself.

To see that this fact has nothing to do with reflexivization, consider:

(3) John, thinks that his older sister is younger than he is.

(4) John, thinks that his older sister is younger than him.

Keeping his older sister constantly within the scope of think, we see that (3) is ambiguous and (4) is not, exactly parallel with (1) and (2). Thus, suppose that John is 80, that his older sister is 82, and that John thinks that his older sister is 78. The wide-scope interpretation of (3) correctly describes this situation; in a Russell-type paraphrase, it is rendered:

(5) The age that John, thinks his older sister has is less than the age that he has.

But such an interpretation for (4) is not possible; it has only the narrow-scope reading.

How are we to describe this situation in the grammar of English? It would appear that at the point at which the rule of copula deletion is applicable, one has to know whether the element that had followed the copula in a more remote representation was inside or outside the scope of a higher verb. This suggests a derivational constraint that mentions three disjoint points in a derivation: semantic representation, the point at which the adjective (?) in the comparative clause is deleted, and the point at which the copula may be deleted.