Who do you think is John Smith?

Copular questions and perceptual grounding

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This talk addresses a puzzle first described by Percus (2002): embedded copular questions with post-copular names require different answers than questions with pre-copular names, as shown in (1-2).

(1) Who do you think is __ John Smith?
   a. That guy.
   b. The guy on the left.

(2) Who do you think John Smith is __?
   a. The violinist.
   b. The oldest member of the trio.

We argue that copular questions with post-copular names like (1) require their answers to be perceptually grounded: when interpreting the answer, the addressee must incorporate information derived from his or her perceptions of the physical surroundings. We analyze perceptually grounded expressions as directly referential, and show that the constraint on possible answers to (1) follows naturally from the independently motivated assumption that proper names express principles of transworld identity.