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Copula Constructions in Gokana

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ABSTRACT

The copula construction is a recurrent syntactic structure in the descriptive domain of natural language discourse structure. This paper analysed copula constructions in Gokana within a formal linguistic framework. The paper found that the Gokana copula verb is highly irregular with multiple morphological forms triggered by accountable grammatical features. The paper identified the attested copula constructions in the language and objectively described the basic morphological and syntactic features of these constructions. The study showed that the canonical clausal elements of the Gokana copula constructions: the subject, copula verb and complement have an underlying SVC linear word order and noted that only the suppletive copula construction can license an alternation in this basic word order. The paper noted that complements of the copula verb express predicative, equative, existential, locative, and ascriptive notions. And recommended a morphosyntactic probe of the variant forms of the Gokana copula verb to determine and document the accountable grammatical features that underlie these forms.

KEYWORDS: Gokana, Copula, Construction, Complement and Predicate

Introduction

This paper provides an objective and principled analysis of the grammatical features of copula constructions in Gokana within a formal linguistic framework. Gokana is spoken by approximately 200,000 people in Gokana, a local government area in Rivers State, Nigeria. It is closely related to Baan, Eleme, Tee, and Kana. These languages form a genetic unity and Williamson and Blench (2000:33) classify them in Delta-Cross of Cross-River within Bantoid-Cross of the East Benue-Congo branch of Benue-Congo.

Defining Copula Constructions

A copula construction is any sentence which contains a copula verb as the head element of its verb phrase. Crystal (1997:93) explains the concept of the copula as:

> "… a verb which has little independent meaning and whose main function is to relate other elements of clause structure especially subject and complement. In English, the main copulative verb is **be**, e.g. she **is** a doctor, and the term is often restricted to this verb; but there are many others which have a similar function, e.g. she **feels** angry, that **looks** nice, he **fell** ill".

Crystal's (1997) description of the copula construction showed that the categorial status of the head of a copula verb phrase (henceforth VP) is a verb. A number of studies (e.g. Pustet, 2003; Givon, 1993; Stassen, 1997; Butler, 2003; Pulleyblank, 1995; Moro,

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2018) agree that the categorial structure of a copula head is a verb. The studies, however, admit that the copula verb is traditionally irregular in form. They distinguished types of copula constructions as predicative, equative, inverse and zero copula constructions. These distinctions are based on the relationship between the subject and the complement of the copula verb.

Huddleston (1988: 182) identifies the functions of copula constructions to include the expression of existential propositions and thematic use in cleft structures where the copula construction occurs as one of the two parts of the cleft structure. He argued that the highlighted part is a copula construction while the other part is a relative clause.

It is also acknowledged in the linguistic literature that copula constructions can be expressed within structural forms lacking a substantive subject such as imperative structures, infinitive structures and the null subject (pro-drop) construction. Crystal (1997: 94) identifies the basic elements of the copula construction as the subject, copula verb and complement. The idiosyncratic features, morphological and syntactic irregularities of the copula verb in some languages have made the concept of copula constructions an attractive research domain. Thus, the present study attempts a description of the grammar of copula constructions in Gokana.

Methodology

The researcher collected data from fluent native speakers of Gokana with the help of field assistants. The researcher also relied on his intuition as a native speaker of the language but where any given set of data contradicted his intuition, direct oral interview was used to elicit comparative data from other native speakers of the language. Secondary sources of data such as texts and library materials were also utilized.

Analyzing Gokana Copula Constructions

A description of the copula construction in Gokana must include an analysis of the categorial status, morphological forms and features of the copula element. The analysis must also include a principled description of the types and functions of copula constructions identified in the language. Given the idiosyncratic features of copula constructions attested in other languages of the world, the description of this phenomenon in Gokana must account for any idiosyncracies that occur, including an objective account of the basic syntactic features of the copula constructions that are language specific. In what follows, we describe each of these details:

A.   Categorization of the Copula Element

The Gokana copula element is a verb because it can be preceded by tense and aspect markers (henceforth TAM) as other verbs that occur in the language. Consider this data:

1a)   Ledum   dú   kà   ẹẹ   nen
PN   be   very   white   person
"Ledum is a very fair person"

1b)   Ledum   **beè**   dú   kà   ẹẹ   nen
PN   PST   be   very   white   person
"Ledum was a very fair person"

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1c)   Ledum   **gé**   dú   kà   ẹẹ   nen
        PN   DR   be   very   white   person
        "Ledum is becoming a fair person"

1d)   Ledum   **a**   dú   kà   ẹẹ   nen
        PN   PERF   be   very   white   person
        "Ledum has become a very fair person"

Observe that in (1a), the copula verb occurs alone in the sentence, but in (1b-d), the copula element is preceded by certain tense and aspect markers. This shows that the copula element **dú** is a verb since it can be preceded by TAM features like other verbs in Gokana as in (2a-c):

2a)   Ledum   **beè**   **dé**   gyãá
        PN   PST   eat   food
        "Ledum ate the food"

2b)   Ledum   **gé**   **tú**   gyãá
        PN   DR   take   food
        "Ledum is taking the food"

2c)   Ledum   **a**   **mon**   gyãá
        PN   PERF   see   food
        "Ledum has seen the food"

These constructions show that TAM are inflectional features of verbs in Gokana. The dynamic verbs **dé** 'eat', **tú** 'take' and **mon** 'see' in (2a-c) all respond to the the semantic notions expressed by the respective markers. By contrast, while the TAM **gé** and **a** give an inchoative interpretation with the stative copula verb; they provide a durative and perfect meaning with dynamic verbs.

B.   Morphological Forms of the Copula Element

Traditionally, the copula is a highly irregular verb form even in English (e.g be, am, is, are, was, were etc.). Apart from the irregular morphological realizations, it is obvious in the linguistic literature that some copula verbs lack overt forms, while others may occur as affixes or clitics that can attach to any verb class in some languages. In Gokana, the following morphological forms of the Copula verb are attested.

i.   Overt Copula

Two overt copula verbs are attested in the language. These are **dú** 'be' and **di** 'be'. The copula verb **dú** is found in predicative constructions while **di** is found in existential and locative constructions. Examples:

3)   Ledum   dú   nen   mene
        PN   be   person   rich
        "Ledum is a wealthy person"

4)   Bari   di
        God   be
        "God exists"

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5) Bẹrè di boo kpòté
Bag be on chair
"The bag is on the chair"

Observe that the copula construction in (3) is predictive while the construction in (4) is existential and (5) is a locative construction. It is in striking to note that in Gokana, the existential copula does not necessarily require a complement. An existential construction is a grammatically distinct construction that is concerned with "the expression of existential propositions-propositions that such-and-such exists" (Huddleston 1988:182).

ii.   Unspecified- V/C Copula

The copula verb can occur as an unspecified vowel or consonant clitic that gets attached to the subject of the construction in Gokana.

Examples:

6a)   Gbara dú   nenzib
PN   be   Person steal
"Gbara is a theif"

6b)   Gbara-à   nenzib
PN CLT   person steal
"Gbara is a theif"

6c)   *Gbara- nenzib
PN   person steal

7a)   Ledum   dú   ẹé
PN   be   white
"Ledum is fair"

7b)   Ledum-m   ẹé
PN   CLT   white
"Ledum is fair"

7c)   *Ledum-   ẹé
PN   white

Observe that in the (a) examples in (6) and (7), there is the overt predicative copula **dú,** but in the (b) examples, the copula **dú** changes its surface form into an enclitic that gets attached to the subject. Notice that in the (c) examples, the copula is missing in surface syntax, it is not also realized on the subject, hence the constructions are ungrammatical. Thus, our argument is that if the absence of **dú** were a case of deletion, then the (c) examples in which the copula is deleted, from the position indicated with a dash, should be grammatical constructions; but this is not the case, as **dú** must resurface as the additional element on the subject, (see the (b) examples) for the constructions to be grammatical.

Based on our data, the analysis that describes the **dú** copula as either a free or bound morpheme is superior to one that argues that **dú** is deleted in the surface structure

because the latter cannot give a principled account of the compensatory lengthening of the final segment of the subject of a 'missing' copula in Gokana. It is also important to point out that when the subject ends in an obstruent (stop), the obstruent is also lengthened. Most speakers prefer to add the vowel [a] to the lengthened obstruent in order to make the second obstruent pronounceable.

iii.   Null Copula

The null copula occurs in Gokana when the subject of a copula verb is a pleonastic element. The reason is that in such circumstances, the copula lacks a full-fledged Noun Phrase (NP henceforth) to which to attach itself, and since it cannot float, it gets deleted in surface syntax. The copula verb in focus constructions is a good example of the deleted or null copula in Gokana. In focus structures, the substantive subject NP occurs in object position and the element **a** 'it' in subject position is merely a place holder and so cannot host the copula verb.

Examples:

8)	à	dú	Leesi	ní (e)	a	zárí	gyãá	ã	é
	It	COP	PN	FOC RCM	S/he	buy	yam	the	EM

"It is Leesi that bought the yam"

The data in (8) shows a full cleft construction. The first section contains the copula verb **dú,** the focused constituent and the focus marker, while the second contains a relative clause. Each section has its own verb. The copula construction **à dú** is simply used for clefting. It is not the focus marker.

The form **à dú** is a combination of the pleonastic element **à** 'it' (a mere place holder and not a subject) with the copula verb **dú** which glosses as 'it is' (a copula construction). But speakers prefer to delete the copula verb **dú** in surface syntax for economy in speech. When the copula is deleted, the pleonastic subject **à** is unable to host it (as seen earlier in (6b) and (7b)) because it is not a substantive NP. Thus, as the place holder (pleonastic subject **à** 'it') crashes, the **dú** copula becomes null in surface syntax and the resultant construction is realized as (9):

9)	Leesi	ní (e)	a	zárí	gyãá	ã	é
	PN	FOC RCM	S/he	buy	yam	the	EM

"It is Leesi that bought the yam"

Thus, the deletion results in a reduced cleft construction in surface syntax, as in (9). But (8) is understood to be the full form of (9). This accounts for why the English gloss of (8) and (9) are the same. The argument we present here is that (8) remains the underlying form of (9). Thus, although the copula verb is not in surface syntax (as in (9)), it is recoverable from the deep structure in (8). Hence (8) and (9) have the same meaning and they are stylistic variants of the same construction.

What, however, interests us in this analysis is that it shows that the copula verb in Gokana can also have a null morphological realization in overt syntax under certain grammatical circumstances just as different grammatical features may license different morphological forms for the English copula verbs (**be, am, is, are, was, were etc.**).

iv.   Pseudo Copula

Gokana can sometimes adopt stative verbs such as **béré** 'resembles', **ié** 'have', **nyimá** 'know' and **gbẹá** 'remain' in copula function since stative verbs are also ascriptive.

According to Emananjo (1978), a stative verb is a "verb used for expressing qualities and states as well as existential notions of being…a stative verb refers not to an activity but to a state, quality, condition…". There is no overt action involved in the meaning of stative verbs. Thus, when stative verbs enter into copulative functions, they are regarded as pseudo copula verbs or semi copula verbs in Gokana.

C.   Types of Copula Constructions

A number of copula constructions are distinguished in the linguistic literature, but those extantly characterized in the grammar of Gokana are analyzed in what follows.

i.   Predicative Copula Constructions

In Gokana, the predicative copula construction performs a descriptive function. The complement of the construction ascribes some quality to the subject. There is no object in a predicative copula sentence. Whenever an NP occurs as complement of the copula, such as NP only describes the subject. The construction lacks an agent or patient theta role. Compare (10) and (11).

10)   Ledum   dú   nvín   á [V NP]
       PN   be   child the
       "Ledum is the child"

11)   Ledum   fé   nvín   á [V NP]
       PN   kill   child the
       "Ledum killed the child"

Observe that in (10), the NP **nvín á** 'the child' is simply a complement which describes the subject. It has no theta role. On the other hand in (11), the NP **nvín á** 'the child' is a direct object because it has the theta role of patient. Thus, whereas the NP in (10) occurs in a copula construction, the NP in (11) does not.

The predicative copula construction usually takes the adjectival phrase as its conical complement, as in (12)

12)   Ledum   dú   kà   lé
       PN   be   good
       "Ledum is very handsome"

Thus, the predicative copula construction is generally an ascriptive construction in which the subject of the sentence is linked to the complement through the verb for the description or overt identification of the subject. Gokana has no significant distinction between predicative copula constructions and equative copula constructions.

ii.   Null Copula Constructions

The null copula is attested in Gokana as the deleted copula that occurs in the first clause of a focus cleft construction, as in (14) and not (13):

13) [à   dú   John] ní   (e)   a   bee   dé   gyãá é
    It   be   PN   FOC   RCM   S/he   PST   eat   food EM
    "It was John that ate the food"

14) [John]   ní   (e)   a   bee   dé   gyãá é
    PN   FOC   RCM   S/he   PST   eat   food EM
    "It was John that ate the food"

Observe that although the copula verb is omitted in (14), the bracketed copula construction **à dú** John 'It is John' in (13) is still understood to be present in (14). This explains why (13) and (14) have the same interpretation. Thus, the copula verb is null in overt syntax but underlyingly present in the deep structure.

iii.   Suppletive Copula Constructions

In Gokana, this is attested as copula constructions where the subject is linked to the complement without an overt copula in the normal verb slot. But, the copula changes its form and is realized as a compensatory vowel or consonant length on the subject which is treated as an unspecified V or C clitic, as in (15) and (16).

15) lenu-u   lé   [COP is unspecified V].
    PN COP   good
    "Lenu is beautiful"

16) Ledum-m   lé   [COP is unspecified C].
    PN   COP   good]
    "Ledum is handsome"

By contrast, compare this data:

17) *Lenu   lé
    PN   good

18) *Ledum   lé
    PN   good

Observe that (17) and (18) are ungrammatical because there is no compensatory lengthening of the final vowel or consonant of the subject which represents the suppletive form of the copula. This shows that the copula verb overtly occurs in the form of a suppletive clitic morpheme.

iv.   Inverse Copula Constructions

This is a type of copula construction that reverses the canonical word order of the copula construction. The normal word order of the copula construction in Gokana is: Subject + copula+ complement. Consider this data:

19) Ledum-m   dombie
    PN   COP   husband medicine
    "Ledum is the doctor"

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20)	Dombie-e				Ledum
	husband medicine COP				PN
	"The doctor is Ledum"				

It is striking to notice that in Gokana only the suppletive copula construction permits an alternation in word order that generates the inverse copula construction. Also other forms of inversion like the subject-verb inversion that derives simple yes/no questions is not possible in Gokana.

v.   Locative Copula Constructions

There is only one locative copula verb **di** 'be' (somewhere). It is used to express a locative meaning. The locative copula normally takes a locative prepositional phrase as complement, as in (21):

21)	nnom	á	di	mm	kpó	á
	Bird	the	COP	in	box	the
	"The bird is in the cage"					

Ikoro (1996: 141) reports that a large number of Niger-Congo languages including Yoruba, Ewe and languages belonging to the Kru family, may have a locative verb in the progressive aspect.

What interests us about the Gokana locative copula is that it is functionally distinct from stative verbs. While stative verbs in Gokana can occur in the progressive aspect, Gokana locative copula cannot occur in the progressive aspect. It is precisely this aspectual restriction that justifies the recognition of the locative as a distinct class of copula constructions.

vi.   Existential Copula Constructions

The existential copula construction ascribes existential meaning to the subject. The peculiar feature of the existential construction is that it occurs without a complement, yet it is grammatical.

There is similarity in form between the existential copula verb and the locative copula; but although they are similar they are not the same. Thus, only one copula verb **di** 'be' is attested in Gokana as the existential copula verb. This verb ascribes the notion of existence to its subject, as in (22):

22)	nnom	á	dì
	Bird	the	be
	"The bird exists/is alive".		

D.   Syntactic Features of Copula Constructions

The copula element and construction attested in the grammar of Gokana show the following syntactic features:

a)   They basically have an SVC underlying form.

b)   Their clause structure elements are the subject, copula and complement.

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c)   The copula element is highly irregular in form.

d)   The copula element can occur in constructions without an overt subject such as the imperative, and the non-finite clause.

e)   It is the only verb that takes either an NP or adjectival phrase as complement.

f)   It does not have an independent meaning. The semantic content of the head of a copula VP lies in the complement.

g)   It functions as a link between the subject and the complement.

h)   The copula verb cannot assign a double theta role.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have described copula constructions in Gokana. The paper analyzed the copula morpheme as a verb since it can be preceded by tense and aspect markers like other substantive verbs in the language. The study investigated the different morphological forms of the copula verb and distinguished such forms as the overt copula, the unspecified vowel/consonant clitic, the null copula and pseudo copula as copula forms in the language.

The paper identified the predicative copula construction, the null copula construction, the suppletive copula construction, the inverse copula construction, the locative copula construction, and existential copula construction as the attested copula constructions in the language. And objectively described the basic morphological and syntactic features of these constructions.

The paper noted that the Gokana copula can co- occur with complements that express predicative, equative, existential, and locative notions. We noted that only the suppletive copula construction can permit an alternation in the basic word order of Gokana copula constructions. And the alternation generates the inverse copula construction.

The study found that the canonical clausal elements of Gokana copula constructions are the subject, copula verb and complement and acknowledged that the copula verb is the most irregular verb in the grammatical structure of the language.

Recommendation

Given the multiple irregular realizations of the copula morpheme, the paper recommended a specific detailed study of the morphosyntactic structure of the copula verb in order to determine and document the accountable grammatical features underlying the different forms.

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