

Location and the semantics of Bantu copula systems

Work on the meaning of copular predicates—and in fact on semantics more generally—is limited for the Bantu languages. In fact, the only work looking explicitly at meaning and copulas in a Bantu language is McWhorter (1992), who analyzes the copula *ni* in Swahili as a reanalysis of a focus particle.¹ His work, however, does not explicitly discuss the synchronic meaning of the various copulas in Swahili, let alone Bantu more generally.

In this paper, I aim to both describe and analyze the synchronic semantic nature of the copular system in Kinyarwanda (a Bantu language spoken in Rwanda), which makes use of two copulas: *ni* and *-ri*.² I show that these copulas are restricted to two domains: individual-level predicates and physical locations, respectively. The data in (1) and (2) illustrate these two forms, and, crucially, the choice of copula is not interchangeable.

- (1) Yohani ni mu-nini.
John COP CL1-big
'Johni is big.'
- (2) Yohani a-ri mu rugo.
John CL1S-COP in house
'John is at home.'

This division contrasts with previously described typologies in other multi-copular languages, which often distinguish between stage-level and individual-level predicates (Carlson 1977, Fernald 2000, Pustet 2003, Bochnak et al. 2011, Deo 2011).

Interestingly, the contrast described above is neutralized in certain predictable cases. One such case is with the form *-ri* being used across the board for first- and second-person, regardless of whether the predicate is individual-level or a location:

- (3) N-ri mu-nini / umuzungu / mu rugo.
1SG-COP CL1-big foreigner in house
'I am big / a foreigner / at home.'

I argue that the importance of having a unique copula for describing the location of an entity is lost when the location is known. Essentially, the more removed from the present discourse an entity is, the less important it is to mark its location with a distinct form. For first- and second-person (i.e. speaker and hearer), the location defaults to the location of discourse.

This analysis predicts that the distinction will also be neutralized in non-present tenses, which are metaphorically removed from the immediate discourse location. This prediction is borne out; in (4), both locations and individual-level predicates use the *-ri* copula in the past tense. Crucially, *ni* is ungrammatical in both of these cases.

- (4) Yohani y-a-ri umwarimu / mu rugo.
John CL1-PST-be teacher at home
'John was a teacher / at home.'

In short, I argue that the two copulas in Kinyarwanda encode either individual-level predicates or locations, but that defining a location is only relevant when discussing elements outside the immediate discourse, such as third-person nominals in the present. Although this study focuses mostly on Kinyarwanda, I show that other Bantu languages share this pattern.

¹See also Wald (1973) for a brief descriptive discussion of copulas in Lacustrine Bantu languages.

²*ni* does not inflect for tense, aspect, or person, while *-ri* marks person, and sometimes tense.

References

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