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    To be or not to be? About the copula system in Buli (Gur)

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To be or not to be? About the copula system in Buli (Gur)

This talk concerns the copula system in Buli, a Ghanaian language which has also been attested in Bahia (Rodrigues 1935, Zwernemann 1968). Special focus will be put on the categorization of two copula-reminiscent elements for which I will propose a discourse-pragmatic analysis.

First, it will be demonstrated that Buli follows a cross-linguistically well-established pattern (McWhorter 1999:134, Ellis and Boadi 1969) by providing a specialized verb for locative predication that cannot be used in equation. Corresponding to the SVO order, this verb occurs between the subject and the locative expression (here an interrogative).

(1) lééwa bò bēē.
girl:DEF loc.be where.INT
‘Where is the girl?’

I will provide evidence that bō displays verbal inflectional features and represents a full verb ‘to be around, to exist’ when the extension -rō is suffixed. It serves the formation of the Progressive and gets substituted by a suppletive verb in negation, as common in related languages (cf. Bonvini 1990:15,21 regarding Kasim).

Second, it will be indicated that – fairly expectable for a Niger-Congo language – property ascription is often achieved by verbs. If an adjective is mobilized, it cannot be used predicatively itself, but has to appear in its attribute form (i.e., within a nominal compound). Such a predicative constituent is preceded by a copula-like element kā (in affirmation).

(2) miikādē kā mi-wōŋ.
rope:DEF DEM KA rope-long
(*miikādē kā Ø wōŋ.)
‘This rope is long.’ (literally: ‘This rope is a long rope.’)

The central discussion will concern the elements kā or lē found in equation. In the absence of any indications for their verbal nature, these elements are akin to particle copulas (Stassen 1997:85).

(3) nipōomá méénā kā wā=lēēbā.
woman:PL:DEF all KA 3s.CL=daughter:PL
‘All the women are his daughters.’

(4) mí yūlé lē Awenate.
1s name LE A.
‘My name is Awenate.’

It will be demonstrated that both constructions (N₁ kā N₂, N₁ lē N₂) are structurally quite different. For example, in the kā-type equation, the initial constituent is often left unexpressed – impossible in the lē-type equation. I will suggest that such structural peculiarities correspond with a fundamental semantic-pragmatic distinction (Stassen 1997:100ff.): The kā-type equation serves the addition of informational content provided by N₂ to established information, comprising what has been labeled “predicational, classificational, characterizational” statement (Hengeveld 1992). The lē-type equation is concerned with the mental files prerequisite for information storage. It comprises “presentational” and “identity, specification, definitional” statements (Akmajian 1979, Langacker 1991). Assuming that the function of a copula is an abstract grammatical one and that a copula does not add semantic content to its predicate phrase (Pustet 2003:1-7), I will argue against a copula status of kā nor lē. Both also occur regularly with verbal predicates, where they distinguish between categorical and thetic statements (Sasse 1987, 1995).
I will conclude with some suggestions for the etymology of $ká$ and $lē$ and a discussion of their potential to develop into real copulas.

References:


