

Copula constructions in Mande – an overview¹

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1. Introduction

The expression of non-verbal predication by a range of different copula constructions is a common characteristic in Mande, as in many other Atlantic, Gur and Kwa languages in the West African linguistic area. Non-verbal predication is also an issue properly described for many Mande languages. The issue of copula clauses is often raised in connection with simple sentence structures in grammatical descriptions following the structuralist approach. In spite of the commons, however such structures differ also in the Mande family with regard to form, semantic functions and basic syntactic structure. A comparative approach to non-verbal predication has not been undertaken so far and a first step in this direction is intended here. The aim of this paper is to survey the occurring non-verbal predications in the Mande languages. These constructions are examined from a typological and comparative perspectives in order to get some idea of the distribution of pertinent features within the language family as a whole and to disclose possible areal influence.

In the first section of the paper a general typology and a brief discussion of the attempts of Hengeveld (1992) of non-verbal classification is presented. In the second section the diverse types of copula constructions of the Mande languages in concern are presented. Finally the suitability and the results of the chosen approach are discussed. The issue of language contact is very briefly raised.

1.1 The sample languages and data

A typological study presupposes a balanced sampling of languages and depends heavily on language documentation, as a detailed description of specific properties is needed. The sample is limited to Mande languages in general, but it takes languages from different branches and areas into account. For the purpose

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of this study, the following languages and corresponding descriptions and publications have been consulted:

<i>Language</i>	<i>Source</i>
Bambara	Dumestre 2003
Mandinka	Creissels 1983
Koranko	Kastenholz 1987
Looma	Prost 1967
Tigemaxo	Blecke 1996
Soninke	Diagana 1994, Girier 1996
Bobo	Le Bris & Prost 1981
Gouro	Benoist 1970
Boko	Jones 1996
Bisa (Barka)	Prost 1950, field notes
Samo (Toma)	Platiel 1971, field notes

Table 1: The language sample.

The level of description of non-verbal predication varies among the presentations. It must be mentioned that especially the respective semantic functions of the different types of copula constructions depend in some cases on my interpretation of the given examples and are not provided by the authors themselves. Fortunately, some semantic distinctions are expressed explicitly or correspond to the ones in French (like ‘c’est’ or ‘il y a’), and can be thus derived from literal translations.

1.2 Typologies of non-verbal predication

Non-verbal predication refers to any kind of full sentence constructions in which predication is expressed without the use of lexical items pertaining to the class of full verbs in the respective language. In many cases such expressions require “copula support” (Dik 1989:165). Copulae are considered as semantically empty, not adding any semantic content to the predication². These predicators may be considered as a part of speech on their own or a subclass of verbs — depending on the language. In many languages copulae appear in the same syntactic position like verbs but in others they occur with their own syntactic

² For an overview see (Pustet 2005:5-7).

pattern. In another language like Bambara both types are found, verb-like as well as monovalent predicators.

Phrases of the non-verbal predication type express semantically an aspect of the concept existence and correspond to Standard European “to be”.³ Nominal, copula, locative, existential and possessive constructions are thus considered to pertain to the same class of linguistic structures. The basic pattern of those constructions is formulated by Hengeveld (1992, 1) as follows (disregarding the order of constituents):

1) Argument (copula) Predicate

Non-verbal predicates are also highlighted as the most basic predicate types in functional grammar (Dik 1989). They have been investigated from a general typological perspective recently as far as the semantic functions are concerned. A comprehensive typology of non-verbal predication is, for example, presented in Hengeveld (1992) and recently Pustet (2005). Other approaches concentrate on certain features or subsets of non-verbal predication, but do not offer a detailed typology like Declerck (1988) and Schachter (1985). Most of the proposed features and subcategories have been motivated on a purely (functional) semantic basis by means of criteria, which are not necessarily reflected morphologically in a language like English. These do occur however as distinct categories in most of the Mande languages for example. It seems therefore suitable to consider these and to include them in the set of features under investigation.

Non-verbal predication can be generally classified with regard to:

- a) the type of the copula
- b) the type of the predicate
- c) the type of the argument
- d) the semantic and pragmatic function expressed
- e) structural types,

and semantic functions:

Predicational

Existential: there is (a).

Locative: there is a ... (here, at ...).

Possessive: there is a ... at (under his control).

³ Expressions like *voilà* (French), *haayi* (Soninke) *akwai* (Hausa) are not considered as copulae here. Semi- and pseudo-copulae like *make* are also ignored.

Specificational

Identificational / topic marking (this/he/ the mentioned is a, he is a kind of).

Deictic (this/he/ the mentioned, it is a / the) “C'est un/une”, “It is a ...”

2 The applied typology and Mande specific features

As for the majority of Mande languages, a basic distinction of predicational vs. specificational is reflected morphologically (table 1, table 2 below). This distinction corresponds to the one proposed by Declerck (1988). Specificational non-verbal predications involve the specification of a linguistic variable by use of an overt, or even covert, referring element in order to identify the argument. In specificational constructions something is said “about something” or in syntactic/pragmatic terms: it is given some information on the argument, which is relevant to the context. The major criterion is the obligatory occurrence of a deictic referring expression. In predicational constructions a referring expression is not obligatory.

Apart from the general typological perspective, some features are of interest also because of their distribution patterns. These features play a role for the interpretation of possible areal influence concerning copula constructions. In Boko for example, a separate verb expressing possession is found, a feature that does not usually occur in Mande languages. The obligatory focus marking in copula sentences in Mandinka is as well a marked feature in the sample. Other properties are of interest with regard to language history.⁴

a) Copula types

Copulae are generally grammaticalised forms of lexical sources and the properties are related to the corresponding sources. In many cases, the copula is derived from a verb or auxiliary denoting local existence or likewise. But the source has not necessarily to be a verb. Curnow (2000) distinguishes verbal, particle, inflectional and zero copulae. Postpositions can also be a source for copulae as argued by Kastenholz (2003). In most of the cases, copulae develop further into auxiliaries denoting TAM.

Some of the distinctions in Curnow (2003) are not adequate for Mande as they refer to morphological properties like INFLECTIONAL, which are generally

⁴ For a discussion of the implications on the TAM auxiliaries see Tröbs (2003) and Kastenholz (2003).

non-existent or of minor importance in Mande. The major issue here is the distinction of a verbal or non-verbal copula. As this distinction cannot be made on the basis of inflectional properties, a morphosyntactic criterion is involved. Verbs in Mande are generally such lexical items which can occur in the syntactic V-slot in the S-AUX–O–V–X pattern and are tense-marked by a split predicative construction.⁵ By this definition, copulae are non-verbal. They occur like auxiliaries in the AUX-slot as argued by Creissels (1983:31). This would be, however, the only case of sentences with empty V-slots. Therefore, they cannot occur with TAM morphemes in contrast to full verbs. In Bambara, for example, copulae can only be marked with regard to tense and aspect by *tùn*, the “inactual marker”.⁶ The term “verbal copula” in Mande is thus somehow misleading. Copulae of this type like Bissa-Barka *ti*, Gouro *a* or Mandinka *bé* have specific tense/aspect markers different from full verbs. They should be therefore not considered as verbs but moreover as sub-class of predicate markers. It would be also possible to propose a specific sentence type for copulae instead being distinct from the canonical S-AUX–O–V–X pattern. Such a NP-COP–NP–X structure is, however, not commonly accepted as a distinct clause type.

b) Predicate and argument type

Hengeveld (1992) refers in his typology to different kinds of predicates. The classification is based on the type of element occurring in the Y_{Pred} position of a X_{Arg} COP Y_{Pred} structure. The predicate element can be an adjective, adverb, a noun phrase, or a postpositional phrase. In some languages the choice of a copula is motivated by the kind of Y_{Pred} . In his typology, a distinction is made between bare predicates, referential predicates and relational predicates. The notion of bare predicates refers to a category in inflectional languages and is not discussed here. Referential predicates are characterized as “terms” in the functional framework and involve referring nouns, pronouns or demonstratives. Relational predicates are those in which a postpositional phrase is involved, “to be at”, “to be in”, or which involve existence or location in general.

The distinction of referential and relational is to some extent reflected by different copulae in most of the languages in the sample. Referential predicates are used in identificational or equative contexts and expressed by the copula chain patterns (4) or are simply distinguished by the copula.

⁵ This view is adapted from Kastenholz (1987: 121).

⁶ See Dumestre (2003: 215) for example.

BISA

2) *Zibergaren mun on.*
 Worker 1Sg COP
 ‘I am a worker’.

3) *A ti hin.*
 3Sg COP water
 ‘He is in the water’ (Prost 1950: 41).

SONINKE

4) *Denba ni soxaana yi.*
 Demba COP farmer COP
 ‘Demba is (a) farmer’ (Girier 1996: 97).

It seems that in most of the languages in the sample the predicate type is pertinent to the choice of the copula.

	<i>Predicational</i>			
	Existential	Attributive	Locative	Possessive
Bambara		(verb)	<i>bé</i> LOC / <i>bé</i> PP	<i>bé ... fè</i>
Mandinka	<i>bé</i>	(verb)	<i>bé</i> LOC / PP	<i>bé ... búlú</i>
Koranko	<i>bé/yé</i>	(verb)	<i>bé/yé</i> LOC / PP	<i>yé ... la</i>
Looma	<i>ka/gha</i>	(verb)	<i>ka/gha</i> LOC / PP	<i>ka/gha</i>
Tigemaxo	<i>ga</i>	<i>n</i> Adj	<i>ga/xai</i> LOC / PP	<i>ga</i> PP
Soninke		Adj <i>ni</i>	<i>wa</i> LOC / PP	
Bobo	<i>ti</i>	<i>ti</i> (/verb)	<i>ti</i> LOC / PP	<i>ti ... ta/ko</i>
Gouro	<i>a</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>a</i> LOC / PP	<i>a ... lèè</i>
Boko	<i>ku</i>	(verb)	<i>ku</i> LOC / PP	<i>dε ... ù</i>
Bisa (Barka)	<i>ti</i>	<i>ti</i>	<i>ti</i> LOC / PP	<i>ti ... hú</i>
Samo (Toma)	<i>ta</i>	<i>nε / ta</i>	<i>nε / ta</i>	<i>ta</i>

Table 2

Copula constructions in Mande

	Specificational	
	Identificational/topic	non-topic
Bambara	<i>yé ... yé</i>	<i>dòn</i>
Mandinka	<i>lé mú</i>	<i>lé mú</i>
Koranko	<i>lé ... lá</i>	<i>lè</i>
Looma	<i>ka/gha. (ke ??)</i>	<i>ve/be</i>
Tigemaxo	<i>ga ... ni</i>	<i>ni</i>
Soninke	<i>ni ... yi</i>	<i>ni</i>
Bobo	<i>ne/tà</i>	3.Pron: <i>à /yé</i>
Gouro	<i>le (... nyã)</i>	<i>le</i>
Boko	<i>á ... nè, ne</i>	<i>ne</i>
Bisa (Barka)	<i>... bi/n</i>	<i>ne</i>
Samo (Toma)	<i>á/n ... á</i>	<i>ne</i>

Table 3

Copula constructions may also be classified according to their arguments. The major distinction made in Hengeveld (1992) are the semantic features definite vs. indefinite. Unfortunately, this feature is not suitable to explain the different types of copula constructions in Mande (see Bambara in Hengeveld 1992: 215). Arguments in non-verbal predications are in most of the cases specific and specificity does not correspond directly to definiteness. In languages with such kind of morphologically marked distinction, non-specific arguments occur only in such cases of general existence, but exclusively with predicate copulae.

KORANKO

5) *Sàlamãnu bé.*

catfish COP

‘There is catfish’ (Kastenholz 1987: 100).

c) Semantic and pragmatic functions

Semantic features are not investigated here from a purely semantic view to explain different readings but with regard to the different copula structures and morphemes in the Mande languages. It will be argued that the proposed semantic features are not fully able to explain the distinctions reflected in the morphology of the Mande languages and some modification and revisions are necessary. It is

argued that pragmatic features come into play in specificational copula constructions. Monovalent copulae or predicators (see Schachter 1985: 55) are predominantly distinguished from specificational and predicational copulae by pragmatic functions. They are regarded here as specificational and non-topic, in contrast to specificational topic. The choice of *don* and *yé ... yé* in Bambara is therefore interpreted as pragmatic and not as purely semantic.

With regard to monovalent predicators in Bambara, another type with the predicational copula *bé* appears also. In contrast to *dòn*, *bé* is used as monovalent predicator inthetic statements expressing a predication without an assignment of a certain value or property to an NP (Blecke 1996: 212).

BAMBARA (examples from Koopmann 1992: 574; orthography preserved)

- 6) *Tàbali dòn.*
table COP
'It is a table'.
- 7) *Bala dòn.*
Bala COP
'It is Bala'.
- 8) *Hére bé.*
peace COP
'There is peace'.

d) Structural types

The following patterns of copula constructions are attested in the sample. NP_{Pred} and NP_{Arg} are generalizations, indicating the semantic function linked to a slot. In an NP position, all kinds of nominal elements and referring expressions like nouns, pronouns, demonstratives, etc. can occur.⁷ While the patterns 2-4a are common in all languages of the sample, 1, 4b, and 5 do only occur in some languages showing a specific distribution pattern.

- 1) NP_{Arg} COP
- 2) NP_{Arg} COP NP_{Pred}
- 3) NP_{Arg} COP PP_{Pred}
- 4a) NP_{Arg} COP NP_{Pred} COP / "Chain pattern"
- 4b) NP_{Pred} COP NP_{Arg} COP / "Chain pattern"
- 5) NP_{Arg} NP_{Pred} COP

⁷ Nominal is defined in syntactic terms here as any element that can appear as a head of a NP slot.

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In some languages like Bambara a specific pattern is exclusively linked to a copula while in others like Samo both copulae can occur with nearly all kind of patterns.

SAMO

COP *nɛ*: type 1,2,3,4

ta: type 1,2,3,4, 5

BAMBARA

COP *dòn*: 1, 3⁸

yé: 4

bé: 1,3

Monovalent NP_{Arg} COP constructions occur most likely with specificational copulae and the use of this pattern with predicational copulae is very limited (Tigemaxo). It seems that the chain pattern expressing identification is also a characteristic of the Greater Manding⁹ linguistic area.

	NP _{Arg} COP	NP _{Arg} COP NP _{Pred}	NP _{Arg} COP PP _{Pred}
Bambara	+ / <i>dòn</i>	+ / <i>bé</i> , LOC	+ / <i>bé</i> , <i>dòn</i>
Mandinka	+ / <i>mú</i>	+ / <i>bé</i> , LOC	+ / <i>bé</i> , <i>mú</i>
Koranko	+ / <i>bé</i> , <i>lè</i>	+ / <i>bé</i> , LOC	+ / <i>bé</i> , <i>lè</i>
Looma	+ / <i>be/ve</i> , <i>ka/gha</i>	+ / <i>ka/gha</i>	+ / <i>ka/gha</i>
Tigemaxo	+ / <i>ni</i>	+ / <i>n</i> , ADJ	+ / <i>ga</i> , <i>xai</i>
Soninke	+ / <i>ni</i>	+ / <i>wa</i> , LOC	+ / <i>wa</i> , <i>ni</i>
Bobo	+ / <i>ti</i>	+ / <i>ti</i> , POSS	+ / <i>ti</i>
Gouro	+ / <i>le</i>	+ / <i>a</i> , ADJ	+ / <i>a</i> , <i>le</i>
Boko	+ / <i>nɛ</i>	+ / <i>kú</i> , LOC <i>nɛ</i> , ID	+ / <i>kú</i> , <i>dɛ</i>
Bisa (Barka)	+ / <i>nɛ</i>	+ / <i>ti</i> , ADJ, LOC	+ / <i>ti</i>
Samo (Toma)	+ / <i>nɛ</i> , <i>ta</i>	+ / <i>nɛ</i> , <i>ta</i>	+ / <i>nɛ</i> , <i>ta</i>

Table 4

⁸ The occurrence of *dòn* with a postpositional phrase seems to be rare in Bambara. Nevertheless, some examples are given by Dumestre (2003, p. 34): *né jìgi sèmenen dòn í lá* ‘My hope rests on you’.

⁹ See also Kastenholz 2003.

	NP _{Arg} COP NP _{Pred} COP	NP _{Arg} NP _{Pred} COP
Bambara	+ / <i>yé</i> ... <i>yé</i>	--
Mandinka	--	--
Koranko	+ / <i>lé</i> ... <i>lá</i>	--
Looma	--	+ / <i>ka/gha</i>
Tigemaxo	+ / <i>ga</i> ... <i>ni</i>	--
Soninke	+ / <i>ni</i> ... <i>yi</i>	+ / <i>ni</i> , ADJ
Bobo	--	--
Gouro	+ / <i>le</i> (... <i>nyã</i>)	+ / <i>a</i>
Boko	+ / <i>á</i> ... <i>nè</i>	(+) / (<i>á</i>) ... <i>nè</i>
Bisa (Barka)	--	+ / <i>nɛ</i> , ID
Samo (Toma)	+ / <i>á/n</i> ... <i>á</i>	+ / <i>ta</i>

Table 5

In Bambara in which the focus marker is not obligatory as in Mandinka, the order of NP_{Arg} and NP_{Pred} presupposes different readings. The main question here concerns the status of the second element like *lá* (Koranko), *ni* (Tigemaxo). With regard to *yé* in Bambara, the second *yé* in identificational predications has been referred to as a postposition (Bird & Kendall, 1986) or as a grammaticalised form of the verb “to see” (Creissells 1997). It is argued here that two copulae are involved in this construction, and not one copula and a postposition. In languages with a predicational / specificational distinction postpositions occur predominantly with predicational and not with specificational copulae. On the other hand, specificational and not predicational copulae are used throughout in cleft sentences involving topicalisation. However, it seems that the emphasis is expressed by the second and not by the first copula *yé* in the chain as indicated by the following Bambara examples (Dumestre 2003: 34).¹⁰

¹⁰ The interpretation of the synchronic underlying representation and function of what is classified as COP in such identificational chains may be questionable. An alternative would be the interpretation of the second element as a postposition as it is the canonical view for Bambara. It is claimed here in short, that although the source may be certainly a postposition, these former postpositions have been grammaticalized and function synchronically as copulae.

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9) *Né yé kàramɔɔ yé.*
 1Sg COP teacher COP
 ‘I am the teacher’.

10) *Kàramɔɔ yé né yé.*
 teacher COP 1Sg COP
 ‘It is me, the teacher’.

	Copula in cleft / left dislocation	Argument inversion	focus marker	Obligatory focus marking
Bambara	-	+	<i>de</i>	-
Mandinka	-	--	<i>le</i>	+
Koranko	- / <i>do</i>	?	<i>lé</i>	-
Looma	+ / <i>ka, gha</i>	?	-	-
Tigemaxo	- / <i>ye</i>	?	<i>rɔ/nɔ</i>	-
Soninke	? / <i>na</i>	--	<i>na</i>	-
Bobo	- / <i>òn</i>	--	-?	-
Gouro	+ / <i>le</i>	+	-?	-
Boko	+ / <i>nɛ</i>	+	<i>mɛ</i>	-
Bisa (Barka)	+ / <i>nɛ</i>	--	<i>é</i>	-
Samo (Toma)	+ / <i>nɛ</i>	--	<i>dɛ</i>	-

Table 6

Locative and zero copulae are only rarely found in the sample languages. The same holds true for the expression of the concept “have” by a verb, usually expressed by a locative expression “to be at someone”. Polarity is mostly expressed by “negative” copulae. In languages with a chain as the basic negation pattern, such negative copulae do not occur.

	zero in possessive relational nouns (Bobo)	have verb	locative copula	neutralization in negation
Bambara	-	-	-	+, <i>té</i>
Mandinka	-	-	-	+, <i>té</i>
Koranko	-	-	-	- / <i>bé-sa; lé-ma</i>
Looma	-	-	-	+, <i>la ... le</i>
Tigemaxo	-	-	-	+, <i>di</i>
Soninke	-	-	+	- / <i>wa-ni; ni-fè</i>
Bobo	+	-	-	(+), COP <i>ga</i>
Gouro	-	-	-	(+), COP <i>lo</i>
Boko	~ + / (<i>á</i>) ... <i>nè</i>	+	+	(+), COP- <i>o</i>
Bisa (Barka)	-	-	-	(+), <i>ba</i> COP
Samo (Toma)	-	-	-	(+) <i>ba</i> COP <i>wa</i>

Table 7

3. Discussion and preliminary results

The general distinction of predicational and specification non-verbal predication is reflected in many Mande languages in the sample but not in the family as a whole. It seems that the different copula constructions in Mande cannot be fully explained by the typology of Hengeveld (1992, p. 101/102). Pragmatic features have also to be taken into account. As a proposal, the features topic and non-topic are applied. Predicators like *nɛ* (Bisa, Samo, Boko) or *dòn* (Bambara) are classified as non-topic because they do refer implicitly to an element of the discourse. In constructions with topic marking, the referring element is explicitly expressed and some emphasis is implied. In a language like Bambara thus the *yé...yé* pattern appears. In the cases of topicalisation via cleft sentences, the specificational copula is used — if a general distinction between specificational and predicational exists in the language.

An additional type of non-verbal predication is found exclusively in Bobo. The pattern consists of a pronoun, a demonstrative or a referring particle/expression and a predicative NP or a numeral. No copula is expressed on the surface structure, neither in affirmative mood nor in negation. In the past

tense, only the auxiliary occurs. The zero-copula does, however, not occur with postpositions (Le Bris & Prost 1981: 51):

- 11) *à tū.*
 it mahogany
 ‘This is a mahogany tree’.
- 12) *à tū ga*
 it mahogany not
 ‘This is not a mahogany tree’.
- 13) *à mé*
 it me
 ‘This is me’.
- 14) *à àwè gá*
 it him not
 ‘This is me’.

The distribution pattern and the occurrence of *ti*, occurring in Bobo, Bisa and Vai (Tröbs 2003) and the wider distribution of *ne* suggests that the principal dichotomy of predicational and specificational may have been some kind of proto-feature. On the other hand, the copula *ka* found in the Northern branch may be connected to the *ka* in stative constructions in Manding.

The occurrence of a verb “have” and the locative copula *ku* in Boko seems to go back to language contact. Locative copulae are widespread in the neighbouring Gur languages. Copula chains do possibly also coincide with an areal distribution as Mandinka, Looma and Bisa, which may lie outside the scope of the Bambara influence, do not share this feature.

List of abbreviations

Arg	Argument, semantic function
AUX	Auxiliary slot, position
COP	Copula
NP	Noun phrase
NP _{Arg} , NP _{Pred}	Semantic function expressed by the phrase
O	Object slot, position
Pred	Predicate, semantic function
S	Subject slot, position
Sg.	Singular
V	Verb slot, position
X	Unspecified type of phrase or slot.
Y	Unspecified type of phrase or slot.

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