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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 *-ró* 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 *ká* (in affirmation).

- (2) míkádé **ká** mí-wòŋ. (*míkádé **ká** Ø wòŋ.)
rope:DEF:DEM KA rope-long
'This rope is long.' (literally: 'This rope is a long rope.')

The central discussion will concern the elements *ká* 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) nípōōmá mééná **ká** wà=lèēbà.
woman:PL:DEF all KA 3s.CL=daughter:PL
'All the women are his daughters.'
- (4) mí yúé **lē** Awenate.
1s name LE A.
'My name is Awenate.'

It will be demonstrated that both constructions (N_1 *ká* N_2 , N_1 *lē* N_2) are structurally quite different. For example, in the *ká*-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 *ká*-type equation serves the addition of informational content provided by N_2 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, specificational, 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 *ká* nor *lē*. Both also occur regularly with verbal predicates, where they distinguish between categorical andthetic statements (Sasse 1987, 1995).

- (5) ò=**bò** **kà** dɛ́lá.
 3s.CL=loc.be KA here:DET
 ‘He is here.’
 (categorical statement)
- (6) véntá **lē** **bò** bìikā pō.
 Lüge:PL LE loc.be speech:DEF in
 ‘There is a lie in the speech.’
 (thetic statement: identifying a discourse-relevant entity)

I will conclude with some suggestions for the etymology of *ká* and *lē* and a discussion of their potential to develop into real copulas.

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