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A grammar of Nchane: A Bantoid (Beboid) language of Cameroon

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Chapter 10

Nonverbal predicates and copulas

This chapter is about clauses that lack a lexical verb. All of these involve a copular verb, of which Nchane has two. Because of the importance of the copulas to nonverbal predicate constructions, I begin this chapter with their descriptions (§10.1). The remaining sections (10.2-10.6) present various kinds of nonverbal predicate constructions. Throughout this chapter, the predicates in examples are given in brackets, while copulas are bolded.

10.1 Copulas

Nchane has two copulas: **lé** ‘COP’ and **ɲù(mɛ)** ‘COP(N)’.⁷² These are referred to as “copula” and “n-copula” respectively. Both of these copulas generally serve as a link between the subject and a predicative expression. A number of different grammatical constituents may serve as the predicate element, including such items as nouns or

⁷² The Nchane copula **lé** is cognate with the Chungmboko copula **la**, which is relatively distant from Nchane geographically. Meanwhile, the n-copula is cognate with the Noni copula **nú**, the only copula observed in that language (Hyman 1981: 88). No other Beoid language has been reported as having two copulas, as far as I am aware, although most of these languages are in the early stages of linguistic research and such a discovery might simply not yet have been published.

noun phrases, prepositional phrases and adjectives. See §§10.2-10.6 for examples of each type.

The copula appears in the data about four times as often as the n-copula and is considered the “basic” type. While Nchane has two copulas, it does not appear that they are distinguished by introducing predicates of different constituent categories, as is the case in some languages. Nor is the difference between the two associated with the expression of different copular clause types, although identification of such differentiation can be difficult to obtain, as observed by Mikkelsen (2005). Nevertheless, examples (10.1) and (10.2) demonstrate that the same copula is used in what I designate as predicational and identificational copular clauses respectively.

- (10.1) Ø-nā wú-nē lé [wū-jùŋ]
c1-cow c1-PROX COP c1-old

‘This cow is old.’

- (10.2) Ø-nā w-àŋ lé [wú-nē]
c1-cow c1-1SG.POSS COP c1-PROX

‘My cow is this one.’

The fundamental difference between the two copulas appears to be a tendency related to the type of state being expressed—fixed or static state versus dynamic state. Examples (10.3) and (10.4) are given to illustrate this distinction. An equative relationship is expressed in (10.3) and the truthfulness of the statement is fixed; it is a fact that “these things” equal “things that God gave me”. The state in example (10.4) is expressed within the context of the speaker’s perception from a helicopter high above the scene. The state expressed, “that people are small”, is context-dependent and would be false in a different context, for example, if the speaker saw the people from a much lower height. In contrast, the statement in (10.3) is true in any possible context.

- (10.3) mw-ē: mū-nē lé [mw-ē: mù Ø-jò
c18a-thing c18a-PROX COP c18a-thing c18aREL c1-god

já mē yú],
give 1SG.PRO on.it

‘...these things are things that God gave me...’

Fire.32

- (10.4) mē ĩ̃-gē yēn-é bà-mì lē fè-kū, b5
 1SG.PRO 1SG-P3 see-PROG c2-person APPL c16-down 3PL
- jùmè** [shēgē shēgē]
 COP(N) small small

'I was seeing people on the earth looking very small.' Training.1.16

Some formal tendencies between the two copulas are also observed. For example, the n-copula is relatively more common in backgrounded constructions, such as **lē** setting clauses (appearing more than twice as often in these as the copula). In addition, the n-copula functions secondarily as a focus marker (see §16.3.4), contrasting its complement with an alternative, usually expected or desired, complement.

The observations made to this point might suggest that the difference between the two copula types has to do with semantic-pragmatic concerns. An alternative hypothesis is that the difference involves a modality component, with the n-copula being associated with Irrealis or Irrealis-like expression. Dynamic states are viewed as less *real* than static ones. Support clauses (e.g., Setting clauses) do not necessarily encode Irrealis predications; but they do communicate background, rather than mainline information, and therefore the information is less relevant and salient. And the contrastive focus constructions presume an alternative reality.

Ultimately, the difference between the two copulas remains obscure for now, awaiting more intensive research. The remainder of this section looks more closely at the formal properties of the two copulas, first **lé** 'COP', followed by **jù** 'COP(N)'.

10.1.1 lé 'COP'

As stated in the introduction, the copula is generally used to link a subject with a predicative expression, as in (10.3) above. Examples (10.5) and (10.6) further illustrate this function. Additionally, example (10.6) shows that the copula has the alternate form **bé** 'COP' for past tense expressions, also appearing with P3, which is common in the text data.

- (10.5) j̃jì **lé** [Ø-mwā y-āŋ]
 N. COP c1-child c1-1SG.POSS

'Nji is my son.'

- (10.6) b5 gè **bé** [ńsàŋ]
 3PL P3 ^PCOP c9.friend

'They were friends.'

Greedy Friends.1.2

The copula may occur with no overt subject in clauses where other languages require a dummy subject. An example of this is the cleft construction, as illustrated in (10.7) and (10.8), which again shows the past tense form of the copula. See §16.3.2 for a fuller description of cleft constructions.

- (10.7) **lé** [Ø-nlò wù bɔ̃: bā-ā jí]
 COP c1-poison c1REL c2.child c2-ANA1 eat
'...it is POISON that those children had eaten.' What-goes-around.9.7

- (10.8) chí **bé** [jìjì wú chí nà m-bvũ: tádà lē]
 P2 ^PCOP N. c1REL P2 give c6a-wine T. APPL
'It was NJI who gave wine to Tada.'

The copula may also precede the main verb (i.e., as an auxiliary verb in the preverbal slot). In this position it functions either in expressing Future tense or Perfect aspect. See §§9.3.1 and 9.3.2 respectively for more details.

10.1.2 **nù** 'COP(N)'

Clauses with the n-copula often appear to have predicates that express temporary states or those that are in some way context dependent, as illustrated in (10.4) above. The n-copula has short and long forms (**nù** and **nùmè**), for which no satisfactory explanation is available other than possibly representing different stages of grammaticalization. The short form is much more prevalent. In most cases it appears that there is a preference for one over the other.

Unlike the copula, clear occurrences of the n-copula in clauses with a tense marker have not been observed. However, examples (10.9) and (10.10) show it co-occurring with the aspectual auxiliaries **bá** 'still' and **dó** 'ST' respectively. Note that the n-copula does not elicit a subject agreement element in (10.9), indicating that it is less verb-like than common verbs, at least in this context.

- (10.9) wū tú wū kēn-è à-kfúŋ,
 3SG return 3SG stir-PROG c18-outside
 wù bá **nù** [yē yī nàŋ]
 3SG still COP(N) c9.body c9AM c9.animal
'She remained going around outside, still being an animal.'
 Two Wives.4.10

- (10.10) lē dós **pù** [kī-fē kī b̥z: bā Ø-ŋwà
 SET SIT COP(N) c7-time c7REL c2.child c2AM c1-book
 tós b̥s jí mw-ē:]
 come 3PL eat c18a-thing

‘When it was time that school children come to eat something...’

What-goes-around.7.1

The n-copula also functions as a constituent focus marker as described in §16.3.4. It is not always easy to discern when it is acting to express focus versus as a copula. But it is certain to be outside the verbal core when bringing focus. In example (10.11), the n-copula is modifying the postverbal object **bvùl-ē**: ‘food’, which is in the form of flour before being cooked. Object focus is called for because the daughter in the story has not taken corn to be ground into flour, and she believes that her mother is boiling the unground corn rather than the flour.

- (10.11) wù jó **pù** bvùl-ē: bw-ē:, wù chú wáà, à
 3SG take COP(N) c14-food c14-ANA1 3SG pour IDEO in
 jò lē, wū tú wū kēnè wū kēnè wū kēnè
 c9.water APPL 3SG then 3SG stir 3SG stir 3SG stir

‘She took the FLOUR, poured [it], pssss, into the water, and stirred and stirred.’

Disobedient Child.1.10

10.2 Nominal predicates

Nouns may serve as predicate expressions and as such are linked to the subject by the copula as illustrated in (10.12) and (10.13).

- (10.12) j̄-já ñ-gē: Ø-sùkū,
 1SG-leave 1SG-go c1-school
 j̄jē mē **lé** [Ø-mù j̄-yēyē]
 reason 1SG.PRO COP c1-person NMZR-teach

‘I left and went to school, because I am a teacher.’

Fire.1.6

- (10.13) b̥s gè **bé** [ńsàŋ]
 3PL P3 ¹COP c9.friend

‘They were friends.’

Greedy Friends.1.2

Certain locational nouns, such as ‘house’ and possibly ‘school’, are routinely used in locative expressions without a preposition, which is usually associated with locative expressions. Thus, the predicate nominal in (10.14) gives the location of the subject, and is linked by the copula.

- (10.14) Ø-mwā bē Ø-bwê: gē **bē** [yē]
 c1-child with c1-mother P3 ^PCOP c9.house

‘A child and her mother were in their house.’ Disobedient Child.1.1

Existentials usually involve a copula linking a subject with the locative pronoun **yú** ‘on.it’. This locative pronoun is coreferential with **yè** ‘on’ prepositional phrases, as well as with Comitative Objects marked with **bē** ‘with’. This type of construction is illustrated in (10.15).

- (10.15) Ø-kwēsé wú-mù gē **bē** [yú] wú gē
 c1-woman c1-some P3 ^PCOP on.it c1REL P3

káŋ-é màŋ-kàlà Ø-htë wè lē
 fry-PROG c6a-cassava.puff c1-quarter up APPL

‘There was a woman who was frying cassava puff in that quarter.’
 What-goes-around.1.4

This presentational strategy is very common in the text data, frequently observed in the setting sections of stories where the major participants are introduced. The precise antecedent of the locative pronoun is unknown, resulting in some interpretational ambiguity. In other words, it is not known whether the pronoun is coreferential with a Locative Oblique or with a Comitative Oblique. The “existential” interpretation is reflected in the translation, which is always “there was x”. See §7.2 for more details.

A less common syntactic construction type involving the copula is the cleft construction, where the predicate nominal follows a copula with no argument in the subject position. Example (10.16) demonstrates that the cleft construction represents a second strategy for expressing existentials.

- (10.16) kī-lūŋ kī-mí, gē **bē** [Ø-jwènsè wū-mū bē
 c7-year c7-some P3 ^PCOP c1-man c1-some with

Ø-kwê: wú-mū bō kōŋ-ē yé bá:ŋ]
 c1-woman.3SG.POSS c1-some 3PL.REL love-PROG c10.body much

‘Some years ago, there was a man and wife who loved each other very much.’
 Jealous Husband.1.1

Example (10.17) is another case of a cleft construction with a predicate nominal. In this instance, the predicate expresses a time reference, establishing the temporal setting for the text.

- (10.17) gè **bé** [ā-jū yūfē ñchò bvūsōfwî,
P3 ^PCOP c6-day ten plus seven

yē kwī wū bō: tó bō lēg-è yú]
on c3.moon c3REL c2.child HAB 3PL run-PROG on.it

'It was the 17th of February (lit. the month in which children used to run)...'
Fire.1.1

The adverbial pronoun **nō** 'like.that' can serve as a predicate in similitive expressions. In (10.18), where **nō** follows the n-copula, the subject is the empty class 19 pronoun, which refers generally to the situation described earlier, that her children have eaten poisoned food intended for an annoying blind beggar.

- (10.18) lē fí dó fí **pùmè** [nō:],
SET c19 SIT c19 COP(N) like.that

Ø-kwēsé wē-è m̃bū: b́é kwè, wù bēd-è
c1-woman c1-ANA1 burst with c9.death 3SG cry-PROG

'As it was so, that woman started crying and crying.'
What-goes-around.9.11

As was stated in §10.1.2, the longer n-copula form seen in this example is thought to represent an older form of the stem.

10.3 Comitative predicates

Predicates marked with the comitative conjunction/preposition are treated in much the same way as nominal predicates. The subject is linked to the comitative predicate via the copula, establishing a comitative relation between the two nouns. Examples (10.19)-(10.21) are given to illustrate.

- (10.19) j̃chég:, mē **lé** [bé j̃chè yí yū bī-kfūnè]
true 1SG.PRO COP with c9.medicine c9.REL kill c8-rat

'In fact (or truly), I have medicine that kills rats.'
What-goes-around.3.2

- (10.20) w⁵ l^é [b^é m-bà:] lā
 2SG COP with c6a-soup CE

'So, do you have soup?'

Jealous Husband.2.1

- (10.21) g^é b^ē g^ē jí mw-ē: mú j̄-jīlē g^è,
 NEG2 1PL P3 eat c18a-thing c18aAM NMZR-eat NEG2

b^ē g^ē b^é [b^é j^èŋ]
 1PL P3 ^PCOP with c9.hunger

'We did not eat food, we remained hungry.' (lit. *we were with hunger*)

Fire.1.9

10.4 Prepositional phrases as predicate

Prepositional phrases are also linked to the subject with a copula when acting as a predicate. These clauses are usually expressions of location, as illustrated in (10.22) and (10.23).

- (10.22) l^é ŋ-g^ē Ø-sùkū ā-ntānā,
 SET 1SG-go c1-school c18-morning

ŋ-g^ē jū [f^è Ø-sùkū lē], lē tó bú
 1SG-P3 COP(N) at c1-school APPL SET come arrive

Ø-jú bī-kā bī-[†]f^é: b^é bī-jchīŋ mbàŋ shè
 c5-day c8-leg c8-two with c8-?? tens three

*'As I went to school in the morning, I was at the school when it was half past two...'*⁷³

Fire.1.7

- (10.23) lē mé ŋ-g^ē m-b^é [à Ø-āfyōŋ lē],
 SET 1SG.PRO 1SG-P3 1SG-^PCOP in c1-airplane APPL

'As I was in the airplane...'

Training.1.14

⁷³ The H of the number 'two' in this example clearly appears to be downstepped, even though the context does not appear to fit that which is associated with downdrift or downstep. The pitch is considerably lower than that of the preceding noun 'day' and the same as the conjunction that follows. There is a pause after 'two', so the apparent downstep could represent a phrase-final lowering. Another possible explanation is that this time adverbial is conventionalized and doesn't present the expected surface forms. Regarding the semantics of the phrase **jú bīkā bīfē:**, the word for leg is assumed to be a metaphor for the big hand of a clock, both of which have a long, thin and straight shape.

Example (10.24) is a rare case of a prepositional phrase predicate that is expressing something other than location.

- (10.24) wù gè **bé** [yē kì-màṅè lē b'é kì-n-chēṅ fō]
 3SG P3 ^PCOP on c7-doubt APPL with c7-NMZR-spoil there
'He was confused and ill...' (lit. 'was on doubts and with spoiledness there')
 Lake.6.4

Prepositional phrases headed by the non-locational preposition **kōnē** 'about' can also serve as a predicate. Once again, the prepositional phrase is linked to the subject via a copula.

- (10.25) Ø-jì-shilè wú-yú gè **bé** [kōnē bá-mī bá
 c1-NMZR-sit c1-ANA2 P3 ^PCOP about c2-person c2REL
 Ø-ṛj-fijē jē yī Ø-nò]
 c1-NMZR-preach c9.word c9AM c1-god
'This meeting was about (or for) preachers.'
 Training.1.2

10.5 Numeral predicates

Examples (10.26) and (10.27) illustrate numbers serving as predicates. The number is marked with agreement corresponding to the class of the subject whenever appropriate (see §6.4.5 for rules regarding numbers and agreement). Example (10.26) shows the subject and number being linked by the copula, while the third-person pronoun **bó** precedes the number in (10.27). In this case, it is possible that the numeral predicate is linked to its subject through simple juxtaposition. But insufficient data does not allow for a clear analysis at this time.

- (10.26) ā-lā ká-ā á gē fyē gē **bé** [ā-fá:]
 c6-compound c6-ANA1 c6REL P3 burn P3 ^PCOP c6-two
'There were two compounds that burned (lit. those compounds that burned were two).'
 Fire.20

- (10.27) bō gē jā tīkālì, bō **jū** [bó bā-tèṅ], ṅkápí
 3PL P3 leave T. 3PL COP(N) 3PL c2-five N.
 chūṅè ṅfúmè kībó b'é bèm
 Ch. N. K. with B.

'They left Tikari, five of them: Nkanchi, Chunge, Nfume, Kibbo and Bem.'
 History.2.1

10.6 Adjectival Predicates

As observed in §6.4.6, adjectives do not appear in the text corpus. Nevertheless, elicited examples such as (10.28) and (10.29) (repeated from §6.4.6) show that adjectives may serve as predicate, following the copula.

- (10.28) *kī-bē:* **lé** [*kī-fēŋ*]
 c7-calabash COP c7-new

‘The calabash is new.’

- (10.29) *kī-tē* **lé** [*kī-kēgē*]
 c7-tree COP c7-ancient

‘The tree is ancient (or very old).’