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A grammar of Mundabli : a Bantoid (Yemne-Kimbi) language of Cameroon

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CHAPTER 13

Copulas and nonverbal predicates

This chapter deals with nonverbal predicate constructions, i.e. clauses whose predicate is not a verb but e.g., a noun, an adjective or a locative phrase. Although the predicate in these clauses is not a verb, they do frequently contain a copular verb. As copula verbs are an integral part of these constructions, the chapter starts off with a description of copula verbs (§13.1). As the use of these copula verbs is not restricted to nonverbal predicates, their functions in other constructions are presented at the end of the chapter, in §13.3. The attested types of nonverbal predicate constructions are described in turn in §13.2. and Lovegren (2013: Ch.14).

13.1 Copula verbs

Mundabli has a general copula **dĩ** ‘be’ which is used in all kinds of nonverbal predicate constructions. This copula is a fully-fledged verb, behaving like a regular verb regarding tense, mood and aspect marking (see §8.1). It belongs to verb tone class **B** (see §3.2.2.1). The copula may be omitted in presentational equative constructions (see §13.2.1), i.e. in clauses which can be translated as ‘This/that is a/the...’, and in adjectival predicates (see §13.2.2). In all other contexts, the use of the copula is obligatory. The etymology of the copula verb is unclear. It is not obviously related to a stative verb like e.g., **nĩm** ‘sit’ or **dõ** ‘stay’. The use of the copula **dĩ** is not restricted to nonverbal predicate constructions. It is also attested in a number of other constructions (see §13.3). Apart from the copula verb **dĩ**, there is at least one semi-copula, namely the verb **tsũ** ‘come, become’ (see §13.2.6).

There is another copula *gẽ* which surfaces in locative predicates in the broader sense, i.e. including existential predicates and possessive predication. In this context, it is used in exactly the same constructions as *dĩ* but, in addition to its function as a copula, it seems to be associated with simultaneity. Apart from its use as a copula, *gẽ* is also attested as a clause linker. The use of *gẽ* including its use in locative nonverbal constructions and as a conjunction for clause linking is dealt with in §13.2.5.4.

13.2 Nonverbal predicate constructions

This section describes the different types of nonverbal predicates attested in Mundabli. All non-verbal predicates in Mundabli are at least optionally, and often obligatorily, introduced by the copula verb *dĩ* ‘be’ (Class B). Locative attributes can alternatively be introduced by the particle *gẽ* (Class A). This copula is not formally a verb because, although it co-occurs with tense markers like a verb, it does not fit into any of the three verb tone classes and, its tone being constant across tenses, it does not exhibit any of the characteristic tone changes. Its use is restricted to situations in which two simultaneous events are described (see §13.2.5.4). When a clause containing a verbless predicate does not contain a copula, and is thus a true verbless clause, the predicate directly follows the subject NP. When a copular clause lacks an overt subject, a purely tonal low tone dummy subject (cf. §6.2) precedes the copula.

I describe the various constructions in turn, starting off with equative constructions (or nominal predicates) (§13.2.1), followed by adjectival predicates (§13.2.2), then similitive predicates (§13.2.3) and numeral predicates (§13.2.4). Following these, locative predicates, existentials and predicative possession are dealt with in (§13.2.5). Finally, I conclude this section with a description of the semi-copula *tʃũ* ‘become’ and the constructions it occurs in (§13.2.6). Wherever relevant, copulas are underlined and the relevant clause is enclosed in square brackets.

13.2.1 Equative constructions

Equative constructions express the identity of the referents of two noun phrases. Equative constructions are formed with the copula verb *dĩ*. The predicate is represented by a noun phrase ((534) and (536)).

- (534) *mĩ tẽm ɲũŋfũ n = dũ f-án, [n = dũ ɲkũŋ ɲdʒàn]*
 1_{SG} T. N. 1_{SG} = be(b) PROX-here 1_{SG} = be(b) CL1.chief Mundabli

‘I, Tem Nyungfu, I am here. I am the chief of Mundabli.’

- (535) *neighbour* wū kə tʃyé [ɲwóm b-én
CL1.neighbour CL1;3SG.POSS P3 know(c) CL2.children CL2-DEM.PROX
dǐ ɲwóm ní]
be(b) CL2.children CL1.mother.3POSS

‘Her neighbour knew that these children were her siblings.’

- (536) ndʒān dǐ ná áná, [ndʒān dǐ ndʒān]
Mundabli be(b) as like_that, Mundabli be(b) Mundabli

‘Mundabli is like that. Mundabli is Mundabli.’¹

Equational predicates may lack a full NP subject. However, in this case, a purely tonal low tone dummy subject (cf. §6.2) precedes the verb complex, which causes the Class B copula verb **dǐ** ‘be’ in p0 tense to be realized with a low-high rising tone, as in (537) and (538).

- (537) bǐ dzé tí yē [dǐ bēn]
CL2 say(b).IPFV surprisingly COMP DS.be(b) 2PL

‘They are [instead] saying that [it] is you!’

- (538) [dǐ tá bēn ndʒān à]
DS.be(b) only 2PL Mundabli Q

‘Is it only you Mundabli [people]?’

Mundabli does not make a formal distinction between “true equational clauses”. In other words, clauses with a referential nominal predicate, as in (534)-(536), and “clauses with true nominal predicates” (Dryer 2007a: 233), i.e. clauses with non-referential nominal predicates, as in (539)-(540), are expressed in exactly the same way.

- (539) nsōŋ wū dzé wú lā yē wà, [à dǐ
CL1.friend CL1;3SG.POSS say(b) CL1PP DAT COMP 2SG, 2SG be(b)
kpé bǐ]
CL1.woman CL1/9.bad

‘Her friend said to her: You, you are a bad woman!’

- (540) ŋ = wò mǎ yē wù dzé lǝ~lǝ bǐkǝ ŋ = kə ā
1SG = think CS.QUOT COMP CL1 say(b) lie~RED because 1SG = P3 NEG
tʃyé wǝ yē ŋwàtǝ dǐ ná, [dǐ níŋ kǝ-dzǝŋ]
know(c) NEG COMP CL7/8.book be(b) as be(b) CL7.thing CL7-good

‘So I was thinking that he was telling a lie because back then, I did not know that literacy is a good thing.’

¹This is supposed to mean that Mundabli and its people are the way they are. This cannot be changed and it will always be like that.

‘Sex is very dangerous these days.’

- (547) bō dzé gān bǒ lā yē [bān bō
 IMPERS speak(b) go(a) CL2DAT DAT COMP CL1/2.outside CL1/9.bad
 ǎ kī-lī]
 ADVLZ NMLZ-be_strong(a)

‘They are telling them that [the world] outside is very bad.’

However, cases of adjectival predicates are rare. This is partly due to the small number of adjectives (cf. §5.3.1). However, even with few adjectives, predicative use is marginal. It is more common to use a nominal predicate in which the noun is modified by the relevant adjective, as in (539).

13.2.3 Similative predicates

Similative predicates obligatorily include the copula verb **ǎ**. Similative predicates also require an adverbial constituent consisting of two particles **ná** and **áná** which are glossed ‘as’ and ‘like that’, respectively, as in (548)-(550).

- (548) wān w-ō mí dzě ní lā yē
 CL1.child CL1-DET CONSEC say(b) CL1.mother.3POSS DAT COMP
 [dō w-én ǎ ná áná] n=tó ǎ yē
 CL3.beans CL3-DEM.PROX be(b) as like_that 1SG=FOC want(a) COMP
 m=fō ǎ wá lā, yē k-ó níŋ nō
 1SG=tell(a) come(b) 2SG DAT COMP CL7-DET CL7.thing SUBORD
 wān w-ō ǎ lè k-ó f-án ǎ nsōlā
 CL1.child CL1-DET P1 do(a) CL7-REL PROX-here LOC CL1/2.afternoon

‘The child told the mother: as these beans are like this, I want to tell you what your child has done here in the afternoon.’

- (549) ká [gbō w-én ǎ ná áná] bēn ɲwóm
 COND CL3.house CL3-DEM.PROX be(b) as like_that 2PL CL2.children
 b-ó, bēn yíŋ yá t-ó tǎ t-ó
 CL2-DET 2PL build(c) go_up(c) DIST-there up DIST-DET

‘As this house is like this, you, the children will be building it up (adding on top of the house).’

- (550) ɲwóm w-ō kpán ǎ, áká [dʒwēn kú
 CL1.husband CL1-DET be_correct(b) come(b) like Missong home.LOC
 ǎ ná áná]
 be(b) as like_that

‘The husband came as near as Missong, like that.’

This construction is similar to Lovegren’s “Gesture-framing construction” in Mungbam (Lovegren 2013: 445). However, I am not aware that any of the

clauses in the examples above has a hand gesture as its predicate. Instead, the predicate is the adverbial proform **áná** ‘like that’, and it is always specified by a subsequent sentence describing what the adverbial proform **áná** ‘like that’ refers to, i.e. what the subject of the copula clause is like.

13.2.4 Numeral predicates

Numeral predicates are introduced by the copula verb **ǎ́**. I am not aware of any instances of numeral predication in which the copula is omitted. The numeral in a numeral predicate construction takes a concordant noun class prefix,² as in (551)-(553).

- (551) [bǎ kà ǎ́ bǎ-fyē], wān mǎnǎ wù-mwò āmì wān
 CL2 P1 be(b) CL2-two CL1.child CL1.man CL1-one and CL1.child
 kpé wù-mwò
 CL1.woman CL1-one

‘They were two, one boy and one girl.’

- (552) [bì ā ǎ́ dzǎ wǎ bí-fyē]
 CL8 NEG be(b) again NEG CL8-two

‘They [the frogs] are no more two of them.’

- (553) bǎ gān yīŋ jī k-ǎ, [kī ǎ́
 count(a) go(a) CL3/7a.egg CL9.chicken CL7a-DET, CL7a be(b)
 kī-mǎŋ], [kī ǎ́ dzǎfī]
 CL7a-how_many, CL7a be(b) ten

‘Count those eggs! How many are they? There are ten.’

The presence of a full NP subject is not obligatory in numeral predication (554). However, the use of a tonal dummy subject (cf. §6.2) is required if no subject NP is present.

- (554) wù dzě yē [ǎ́ bǎ-mǎŋ]
 CL1 say(b) COMP DS.be(b) CL2-how_many

‘He said that [there] were how many?’

13.2.5 Locative predicates and existential clauses

Locative predicates and existential clauses have the same form. Both contain locative constituents, but existential clauses co-occur with locative proforms

²The irregular numeral **dzǎfī** ‘ten’ does not take a noun class prefix (see (553)). For more on numeral agreement prefixes, see §5.4.

more frequently, while predicative possession constructions contain comitative phrases. Locative predicates and existential clauses, including predicative possession constructions, are the only nonverbal predicates which allow the use of the simultaneous-locative copula *gē* as an alternative to the copula verb *dí*. The use of the copula *gē* is described in §13.2.5.4.

13.2.5.1 Locative predicates

A locative predicate is introduced by the copula verb *dí*, as in (555)-(557). Locative predicates require the presence of a locative constituent (cf. §11.3.4) and a copula verb.

- (555) wé, [wù ā dí wō gbō kúnj ò]
 INTERJ CL1 NEG be(b) NEG CL3.house house_back.LOC INTERJ

‘Alas! She is not behind the house!’

- (556) [wù dí (í) jĩ mĩ]
 CL1 be(b) LOC CL9/10.market in

◊‘She is at the market.’

- (557) [gbàn w-ā wú-kpé w-ō dí gbā ò]
 CL1.in-law CL1-2SG.POSS CL1-female CL1-DET be(b) house.LOC INTERJ
 yē wù níj yē wū dā wá lā ò
 COMP CL1 want(c) COMP CL1 see(a) 2SG.PP DAT INTERJ

‘Your mother-in-law is in the house [saying] that she wants to see you!’

The locative constituent can be represented by a locative proform, such as *fán* ‘here’ in (558) or the interrogative pronoun *nā* ‘where’ in (559).

- (558) [n = dí f-án], n = dí Tela Mwom
 1SG = be(b) PROX-here 1SG = be(b) T. M.

‘I am here. I am Tela Mwom.’

- (559) ní bú jĩ tí wú lā,
 CL1.mother.3POSS ask(b) go_down(a).IPFV surprisingly CL1PP DAT
 yē mĩ wān, [ɲwóm w-ā dí tí
 COMP 1SG CL1.child CL1.husband CL1-2SG.POSS be(b) surprisingly
 nā (ò)]
 where INTERJ

‘Her mother will ask her: My child, where is your husband?’

13.2.5.2 Existential

Existential clauses are not formally different from locative clauses. However, they usually have a presentative function by introducing discourse participants. This is reflected in the frequent use of the modifier **dzū** ‘a certain’ in (560)-(562), to modify the subject, as characteristic forthetic clauses (cf. §14.5). Existential clauses express the existence of the subject referent, either in general, as in (561), or in a specific place, as in (562). They employ the copula verb **dĩ** and usually require a locative constituent, as in (560)-(563). However, the presence of a locative constituent is not obligatory. The locative phrase in existential clauses is commonly represented by the spatial proform **fĩn** ‘there’, as in (see (560)-(562)), and less frequently by a more elaborate locative phrase, as in (563).

- (560) [kpé dzū kà dĩ fĩn]
CL1.woman CL1/9.INDEF P3 be(b) there

‘There once was a woman.’

- (561) [mò dzū dĩ fĩn] wù kǎn tsɔ́ à
CL1.person CL1/9.INDEF be(b) there CL1 lack(b) CL7/8.witchcraft Q

‘Is there any person who does not possess witchcraft?’

- (562) kyé yá gān f-ɔ́ ywú, [fĩ-yǎn
look(c) go_up(c) go(a) PROX-there CL1/2.hanging_dryer CL19-leaf
dzú dĩ fĩn], ā mū jĩ
CL19.INDEF be(b) there 2SG take(a) go_down(a)

‘Look up at the hanging dryer! There is a certain leaf. You should take it down.’

- (563) Pě dzé yē [mbĩ dĩ wú gbā]
P. say(b) COMP CL6.wine be(b) CL1.PP house.LOC

‘Pe said that there was wine in his house.’

When an existential predicate is negated, the locative constituent is absent (see (564) and (565)).

- (564) Pě kǎ dóm jũ yē wū tʃũ kwó
P. P3.HAB shake(?).IPFV come(b).IPFV COMP CL1IRR come(b) enter(c)
ké gbá, [dʒĩ kǎ dĩ wɔ́]
return(c) house.LOC CL3.way P3;NEG be(b) NEG

‘Pe was ravaging [places] in order to come back into the house but there was no way.’

- (565) tō nō lòn kǎ b-ǎ wù,
 CL7/8.day SUBORD CL7/8.suffering catch(b) CL8-REL CL1
 [kām b-ǎ bī-kpōn ā dǐ wō]
 CL7/8.thousand CL8-DET CL8-five NEG be(b) NEG

‘The day that suffering attacks her, the 5000 francs are not there.’

13.2.5.3 Predicative possession

Predicative possession is expressed by a copula in combination with a comitative phrase. The copula in predicative possession constructions is **dǐ**, as in (567).

- (566) [wù kè dǐ ā ɲwóm bǎ]
 CL1 P3 be(b) COM CL2.children CL2;3SG.POSS

‘She had children of her own.’

- (567) nǐ wū bú wú lā yē mǎ, [à
 CL1.mother CL1;3SG.POSS ask(b) CL1PP DAT COMP NCS.QUOT.Q 2SG
 kǎ dǐ ā mǎnō yē]
 P3.HAB be(b) COM CL1.male QUOT.Q

‘Her mother asked her: Do you have a husband?’

Predicative possession can also be expressed by the verb **kán** ‘have, hold’, as in (568).

- (568) bī ká kán ɲǐ, school, any nín bī nín k-ǎ
 1PL F2 have(c) CL6.water school any CL7.thing 1PL want(c) CL7-REL
 kǐ bī ká kán kǐ
 CL7 1PL F2 have(c) CL7

‘We will have water, a school, anything we want, we’ll have it.’

There is no semantic difference between the two possessive constructions described above, as shown in (569) where both are used in sequence by the same speaker, describing the same state of affairs. Here, the speaker is telling other villagers that people in Europe do not have land to clear and grow crops.

- (569) a. ǎyī, [bǎ ā dǐ wō ā dè fwén]
 no CL2 NEG be(b) NEG COM CL9.place clear(b)

‘No! They don’t have a place to clear.’

- b. bǎ ā kán wō
 CL2 NEG have(c) NEG

‘They don’t have [any]!’

The difference between the two constructions in (569a) and (569b) seems to be a pragmatic one. Note that it is possible to omit the object when the verb **kán** is used, as in (569a). This is not possible when possession is expressed by the copula verb **dí** in combination with a comitative phrase, as in (569a).

13.2.5.4 The locative copula **gē**

There is a second copula **gē** which can be used as an alternative to **dí** in locative non-verbal predicates in the wider sense, i.e. including locative predicates, existential predicates and predicative possession. This copula is not formally a verb because, although it co-occurs with tense markers like a verb, it does not fit into any of the three verb tone classes and, its tone being constant across tenses, it does not exhibit any of the tone changes characteristic of verbs. It has a mid tone in non-final position and a mid-low tone in final position,³ irrespective of the tense it occurs in.

At first glance, the copula **gē** seems to be simply a locative copula which is used as an alternative to the copula verb **dí** in locative, existential and predicative possession constructions. However, while **dí** is always grammatical, the copula **gē** cannot be used in the first clause of a sequence. It seems to be associated with simultaneity somehow. It is only used in contexts in which the second of two simultaneous events is described by a verbless predicate construction. However, it is unclear what exactly the semantic relation between the two events is. Furthermore, all attested examples are in the distant past or **p3** tense. While more research is needed in order to determine the exact function of **gē**, the examples provided in this section should provide a first impression. Examples of location encoded by the locative copula **gē** are in (570) and (571). Each example contains at least the clause containing the verbless predicate construction (in square brackets) and the clause preceding it.

- (570) *n = tsē, n = sēn dā kwō fī tšǎm,*
 1_{SG} = search(a) 1_{SG} = then see(a) enter(c) go_down(a) CL3/7a.axe
 [tšǎm kà gē mǎ mú mī áná],
 CL3/7a.axe **p3** be_there(a) only CL3/10.corner in like_that
 tšǎm bā syā w-ś kpān ŋgó
 CL3/7a.axe IMPERS split(a).IPFV CL3-REL CL3.wood upon

‘I then searched and saw an axe down in [the corner]. The axe was just there in a corner of the house like that, the axe that they split wood with.’

³The copula **gē** can occur in clause-final position when it is used with the full predicate meaning ‘be there’, as in (572).

- (571) tō dōm lā wù gān dā sēsǎŋ, [sēsǎŋ]
 CL7/8.day other DAT CL1 go(a) see(a) CL9/10.spider CL9/10.spider
 kə gē dʒwó]
 P3 be_there(a) CL1/2.water_place

‘One day she went and saw a spider. The spider was at the water place.’

Just like the copula verb **dǐ**, **gē** is also attested as a full predicate, as in (572).

- (572) nǐ wū kə fǎ ā ɲ-ɲwōm
 CL1.mother.3SG.POSS 3SG.POSS P3 be_occupied(b) COM INF-stir(b)
 ɲām, [wān nǐ gē], wù yí
 CL8.fufu CL1.child CL1.mother be_there(a) CL1 rearrange_fire(c).IPFV
 gū
 CL3/7a.fire

‘Her mother was stirring fufu. Her sister was there. She was rearranging the fire.’

Examples of possessive predication with the simultaneous-locative copula **gē** are found in (573)-(574).

- (573) ókě, byé-ā-ntí twó yā, [wù kə gē ā
 okay B.-COM-N. carry(b) go_up(c) CL1 P3 be_there(a) COM
 mù-gē mú dzú í sǎks-ā-mǒtò mī]
 CL18-maize CL18;3SG.POSS CL18.INDEF LOC S.-COM-M. in

‘O.K., Bie-a-Ntie carried up [the corn]. She had her small corn with her in a Sacks & Motor bag.’⁴

- (574) è, wù mū yó byān wú áná, wù
 yes CL1 take(a) go_up(c) CL3.breast CL3;3SG.POSS like_that CL1
 fǎ gàn wān wū w-ɔ̄ lā, [wù gē
 give(b) go(a) CL1.child CL1;3SG.POSS CL1-DET DAT CL1 be_there(a)
 ā wān wū]
 COM CL1.child CL1;3SG.POSS

‘Yes. She [the mother gorilla] takes up the breast like this and gives [it] to the child. She had a child.’

The particle **gē**, which is identical in segmental shape with the simultaneous locative copula, functions as a linking element in clause combinations which combine two clauses describing simultaneous events, as in (575).

⁴“Sacks & Motor bag” refers to a sturdy plastic bag with the company name “Sack & Motor” imprinted on it. These bags are commonly used in this area for carrying things over great distances.

- (575) wù dzé gē wù yí
 CL1 say(b).IPFV while CL1 eat(b).IPFV

◊‘He is talking while he is eating.’

13.2.6 Constructions with the semi-copula tǔ ‘come, become’

The verb **tǔ** ‘come’, which is frequently used as a main verb and as a minor coverb in SVCs (cf. §9.1.1.1) is also used as a semi-copula with the meaning ‘become’, as in ((576) and (577)). In order to function as a predicate, it is complemented by a noun phrase. The verb **tǔ** is a fully-fledged Class B verb.

- (576) bǎ nīm sūtēē, [bǎ tǔ ɲwén nswén]
 CL2 sit(a) extensively CL2 come(b) now CL2.friends

‘They stayed [together] for a long time and became friends.’

- (577) [wù tǔ ɲkǒŋ]
 CL1 come(b) CL1.chief

◊‘He has become a chief.’

13.3 Other grammatical functions of copula verbs

The copula verb **dǐ** occurs in several constructions in addition to nonverbal predicate clauses. The general copula verb **dǐ** can be a hodiernal tense marker (§13.3.1), and is found in compound tense and counterfactual conditional constructions (§13.3.2) as well as in a construction expressing ability (§13.3.3). Cleft constructions are also formed with the general copula **dǐ**, cf. §14.6.

13.3.1 F1 future marking

The F1 future marker **dǐ** is identical in shape with the copula verb **dǐ**. Like all tense markers, it occurs at the beginning of the verb complex, preceding the verbal core, as in (578)-(580). For more on tense marking, cf. Chapter 8.

- (578) n = dǐ tsó jí dǒi dè nō
 1SG = F1 show(a) go_down(a) CL3.road CL9/10.place SUBORD
 wān wā dǐ f-ó
 CL1.child CL1-POSS be(b) PROX-REL

‘I will show you the way to where your child is.’

- (579) à dǐ yó ĩ dʒɔ b-én mī
2SG F1 go_up(c) LOC CL8a.bridge CL8a-DEM.PROX in

‘You will go up on this bridge.’

- (580) kwē b-én ɲà t-án sé
CL7/8.rat CL8-DEM.PROX boast(a) DIST-here CL3/7a.attic
t-ání, n=dǐ lá kpí mé kwē
DIST-this_way 1SG=F1 make(a) die(b) finish(a) CL7/8.rat
b-én t-án sé ō
CL8-DEM.PROX there CL3/7a.attic EMPH

‘These rats which are showing off in this attic - I will kill all of them!’

13.3.2 Compound tense and counterfactual conditional constructions

The copula verb **dǐ** is used as auxiliary in compound tense constructions, as in (see (581)-(583)). These compound tense constructions consist of a copula clause which is complemented by a whole clause without overt subordinate marking. The copula clause in compound past perfect constructions starts with the locative proform **tɔ** ‘there’. The subordinate clause follows the copula **dǐ**, which in turn is preceded by the relevant tense marker, as in (581)-(582). In the future perfect construction, the locative proform is absent so that the tense marker or the copula verb occurs at the beginning of the sentence, as in (583). The tonal pattern of the F2 future tense marker makes it impossible to tell whether a tonal dummy subject (cf. §6.2) is present or not.

- (581) t-ɔ kà dǐ tĩ wū kà kwē fúbɔ,
DIST-DET P3 be(b) CL1.father CL1.POSS P3 return_from_bush(c) also
tĩ wū tʃú tsú bɔ wān w-ɔ
CL1.father CL1POSS come(b) beat(b) also CL1.child CL1-DET

‘When her father had also returned from the bush, her father came and also beat the child.’

- (582) t-ɔ kà dǐ sèsǎŋ kà dzé wú lā yē
DIST-DET P3 be(b) CL9.spider P3 say(b) CL1PP DAT COMP

‘The spider had told her: ...’

- (583) ká dǐ n=kó ɲwā mē ɲwàtì k-ɔ
F2 be(b) 1SG=P3? write(a) finish(a) CL7/8.book CL7-DET

◊‘I will (then) have finished writing the letter.’

A very similar construction is used to express counterfactual conditionals, as in (584). The counterfactual conditional construction differs from the compound tense constructions by having a subordinate clause introduced by the complementizer *yē*.

- (584) t-ɔ́ kə̀ dī yē bə̀ kə̀ bú sɔ́ wù áká síprèn
DIST-DET P3 be(b) COMP IMPERS P1 deliver(c) first CL1 like C.

‘If he had been delivered before Cypren...’

13.3.3 The ability construction

The copula verb *dí* is also found in a construction which expresses ability (see also §8.4.2). In this construction, *dí* functions as a copula followed by a non-finite verb which is marked by the proclitic *kə̀*=and which may in turn be followed by an object (585) or by an oblique argument (586). As example (585) shows, the ability construction can also have a deontic interpretation.

- (585) n=dí kə̀=fɔ́ dʒi wá lá yē ā gān
1SG=be(b) NOMLZ=report(a) CL9.road 2SG.PP DAT COMP 2SG go(a)
də wān w-ā yē
see(a) CL1.child CL1-2SG.POSS QUOT.Q

‘Can I show you the way to your child?’

- (586) ā n=tɣyē wɔ́ yē bɔ́ dí kə̀-gān ā byē
NEG 1SG=know(c) NEG COMP CL2 be(b) NMLZ=go(a) COM CL7a.feet

‘I wasn’t aware that they are able to walk on foot.’

The ability construction can be negated either with the unmarked negation strategy, as in (587), involving a preverbal and a postverbal negative marker bracketing the copula verb, or with a post-verbal frustrative marker, as in (588).

- (587) mɔ́ ā n=dí wɔ́ kə̀-gān mū á mí
CS.QUOT NEG 1SG=be(b) NEG NMLZ=go(a) take(a) ADVLZ 1SG.PP
ndʒɛn
alone

‘I said that I cannot go and take [the corn] on my own.’

- (588) wù dí kə̀=dɔ́ bɔ́
CL1 be(b) NMLZ=stay(b) FRUST

‘She cannot sit still.’