Interpretive Contrasts in the Kifuliiru Copular System

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1. Introduction

From a typological perspective, it is not uncommon to find languages that grammatically distinguish different flavors of predication, e.g., temporary vs. permanent/stage vs. individual (Milsark 1974, Carlson 1977, Diesing 1992, Kratzer 1995 a.o.). In many languages, this contrast corresponds to the use of distinct copular verbs in non-verbal predication (Ramchand 1997, Greenberg 1998, Green 2000, Bochnak et al. 2011, a.o.). In Spanish for example, the two *be*-verb forms *estar* and *ser* are reported to yield distinct interpretations of the predication relation they help realize (Milsark 1974, Carlson 1977, Maienborn 2005, Deo et al. 2017 a.o.). While both are available with the adjectival predicate *feliz* 'happy', *estar* yields a temporary (stage-like) state reading (1), while *ser* yields a permanent (individual-like) state reading (2).

(1) Juan **está** feliz
Juan estar.PRES.3SG happy
'Juan is happy' (i.e., he is in a happy mood)

(2) Juan **es** feliz
Juan ser.PRES.3SG happy
'Juan is happy' (i.e., he is happy by disposition) Spanish (Myler 2018: 8)

In this paper I will show that a similar interpretive contrast is encoded in the copular system of Kifuliiru (Bantu, JD63; Maho 2009), albeit with an added layer of complexity; while Kifuliiru encodes a temporary/permanent contrast in its two copular verbs *-li* (temporary state) and *-tula* (permanent state), it exceptionally exhibits a third copular form, *-muba*, whose distribution and interpretation is distinct from *-li/-tula*. I show that the copular contrasts in Kifuliiru closely align with the three-way contrast between dense (situation-descriptive), non-dense (characterizing), and maximal (defining) predicates outlined in Roy (2013): *-li* corresponds with *situation-descriptive* interpretations, *-muba* corresponds with *characterizing* interpretations, and *-tula* corresponds with *defining* interpretations.

From these observations, this paper ultimately attempts to make a theoretical point about predication. Specifically, I argue that the three-way copular contrast in Kifuliiru provides novel evidence against a strictly binary distinction between stage/individual-level predication.

2. Language background

Kifuliiru is a Lacustrine Bantu language of the JD group (JD63; Maho 2009) spoken in South Kivu, Democratic Republic of Congo. Although the current speaker population is unknown, recent population estimates posit roughly 400,000 speakers in South Kivu, with most situated near the city of Uvira (Van Otterloo 2011). There are also significant speaker populations in other countries, though these are poorly reported. The data presented in this paper were collected via direct elicitation with a native speaker consultant who represents a sizable population of resettled refugees from South Kivu who are now living in Kansas City, KS/MO.

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Kifuliiru exhibits prototypical properties of Bantu languages, e.g., SVO word order (though information structure plays a major role), extensive noun class morphology (including augment), and robust noun class agreement on verbs, adjectives, the linker, etc. (Van der Wal 2014, 2022).[1]

(3) Johana a-ka-bwona o-mu-gazi
Johana 1SM-PAST-see AUG-3-mountain
'John saw the mountain'

Like many Bantu languages, Kifuliiru features a complex tonal system consisting of both lexical and grammatical tone (see Van Otterloo 2014 for discussion). In an effort to avoid an inaccurate representation of this system, tone has been intentionally omitted from examples throughout. Tone has no observable effect on the copular contrasts discussed below.

3. Copular *be*-verbs

One of the central observations in work on non-verbal predication is that it often involves additional functional morphology — i.e., the copula — that does not appear in standard verbal predication. In general it is assumed that the copula is a semantically empty element that serves only to relate a non-verbal predicate to its subject and host inflectional features; the copula is a purely relational element that carries no semantic meaning (Lyons 1968, Hengeveld 1992, Stassen 1997, Pustet 2003, den Dikken 2006, Myler 2018). That being said, different forms of the copula are often reported to coincide with distinct interpretations in some languages. As we have already seen, the Spanish copular verbs *estar/ser* are reported to broadly distinguish stage- vs. individual-level predication, or something similar (1)-(2). In other languages however, copular contrasts may take on different interpretive flavors.

Take for example the copular system in Modern Irish (Stenson 1981, Carnie 1995, Roy 2013). Like Spanish, Modern Irish also exhibits a distinction between its two copular *be*-verbs *is* and *bí*, however the contrast between the two is not identical to a traditional stage/individual contrast in the sense of Kratzer (1995).[2] Unlike previous accounts of stage/individual contrast in other languages, both *is* and *bí* are reported to be compatible with individual-level predicates, suggesting that any interpretive difference between them is likely unrelated to the stage/individual contrast (Carnie 1995, Roy 2013). As for their interpretive effects, Stenson (1981) suggests that the difference between the two copulas is that *is* describes a 'defining' characteristic of the subject, whereas *bí* simply describes a state. As such, *is* is used to describe priesthood as a core characteristic of the subject in (4), while *bí* instead describes being a priest as something the subject does for work (see Stenson 1981 and Roy 2013 for further discussion).

(4) **Is** sagart é mo dhearthair
be$_{IS}$.PRES priest him 1SG.POSS brother
'My brother is a priest' (he is a member of the set of priests)

(5) **Tá** mo dhearthair ina sagart
be$_{Bí}$.PRES 1SG.POSS brother in.AGR priest
'My brother is a priest' (his chosen career) Irish (Stenson 1981: 94)

The point here is that, though similar in some ways, the contrast between *is* and *bí* cannot be derived from the stage/individual distinction alone.

[1] Per Bantuist tradition, noun class identity is marked in the gloss via noun class number. In general, odd-numbered classes (below class 10) tend to be singulars of the following even-numbered class. e.g., class 1 forms plurals in class 2. The classes have broad semantic properties, e.g., class 1/2 consists of humans, though there are many exceptions. In this paper proper names are left unmarked, but pattern with class 1 nouns. Subject noun class agreement is expressed via a subject marker (SM).

[2] Note that Modern Irish *is/bí* are invariant copulas, while Spanish *estar/ser* are inflectional verbal copulas (Curnow 2000). For the purposes of this paper I will classify both the Modern Irish and Spanish copulas as '*be*-verbs' (see Curnow 2000 for more discussion on copular forms).

3.1. Kifuliiru copulas

Kifuliiru, like many other Eastern Bantu languages, features a highly complex copular system that utilizes multiple distinct copular forms in the expression of non-verbal predication (Schneider-Zioga 2018, Gibson et al. 2019). The form of the copula is sensitive to various morphosyntactic and interpretive factors that have been shown to play a role in copular variation in Bantu languages, including copular clause type (à la Higgins 1979), tense-aspect-mood environment, and the context of evaluation (Schneider-Zioga 2018, Gibson et al. 2019). In this paper I will focus on one small corner of the Kifuliiru copular system, namely present tense, "pure" predicational copular sentences (Higgins 1979).[3] In this environment, Kifuliiru exhibits three interpretively distinct *be*-verbs: *-li*, *-muba*, and *-tula*.[4] To my knowledge, a three way copular contrast of this sort has seldom, if ever, been reported in other Bantu languages.[5]

Like the distinction between *estar* and *ser* in Spanish, the two Kifuliiru copulas *-li* and *-tula* encode a general distinction between "temporary" and "permanent" predication, respectively. In (6), *-li* yields a time-bounded, stage-like interpretation of the locative description "in Kinshasa"; the subject is understood to be in Kinshasa only temporarily.[6] In contrast, *-tula* in (7) yields a permanent interpretation of the same locative description; being in Kinshasa is interpreted as a property that defines Maneno.

(6) Maneno a-**li** Kinshasa
Maneno 1SM-be$_{-LI}$ Kinshasa
'Maneno is in Kinshasa' (right now; he's visiting)

(7) Maneno a-**tula** Kinshasa
Maneno 1SM-be$_{-TULA}$ Kinshasa
'Maneno is in Kinshasa' (he lives there)

While reminiscent of the stage/individual distinction in terms of interpretation, much like Modern Irish *is/bí*, the distribution of *-li/-tula* does not align with previous descriptions of the stage/individual contrast in other languages. For example, though *-li* yields a stage-like interpretation in (6), it is sometimes available with canonically individual-level predicates; though unavailable in contexts where a property holds indefinitely (8), *-li* may be used with an individual-level predicate, e.g., 'short', to yield a contextually bound interpretation (9).

(8) *Context: Safari is shorter than everyone in town, and everyone knows this fact about him.*
Safari a-**#li/✓tula** mu-fi
Safari 1SM-be$_{-LI}$/be$_{-TULA}$ 1AGR-short
'Safari is short' (in general)

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[3] The present tense in Kifuliiru is generally marked by the absence of tense morphology. In other tenses, overt tense morphology surfaces between the subject marker and the verb root. Since all of the examples in this paper involve the present tense, it has been left unmarked in the gloss.

[4] The copular forms *-li* and *-muba* are reconstructed in proto-Bantu as the copulas **de* and **bà*, respectively (Meeussen 1967, Wald 1973). Cognates of both can be found throughout Bantu, although their distributions vary significantly across languages (Gibson et al. 2019). The latter copula, *-muba*, is assumed to be morphologically complex, at least historically. In non-copular clauses, the prefix *mu-* is sometimes used as a present tense/present progressive marker:

(1) a-mu-soma
1SM-PRES-read
'S/he is reading'

The historical source of *-tula* is unclear. However, it appears to be related to Kinyarwanda (JD61) *-tura* 'dwell, inhabit, live', which may provide some insight into its source.

[5] Lamba (M54; (Doke 1922) is the only other Bantu language I know of that features three copular *be*-verbs. That said, the interpretive contrast between the *be*-verbs in Lamba is slightly different from those in Kifuliiru (see Schneider-Zioga 2018 for further discussion).

[6] Though locatives in Kifuliiru are often associated with a locative noun class marker as in many other Bantu languages, locatives involving city names tend to involve no overt locative morphology.

(9) *Context: Safari is considered tall, but now he's standing next to someone much taller than him.*
Safari a-**✓li/#tula** mu-fi
Safari 1SM-$_{-LI}$/be$_{-TULA}$ 1AGR-short
'Safari is short' (in this context)

In addition to *-li/-tula*, Kifuliiru also exhibits a third copula, *-muba*, in present tense pure predicational clauses. Like *-tula*, *-muba* often coincides with what appear to be "permanent" interpretations; *-muba* yields a "permanent" interpretation of locative descriptions (10) and nominal predicates (11).

(10) Maneno a-**✓muba/✓tula** Kinshasa
Maneno 1SM-be$_{-MUBA}$/be$_{-TULA}$ Kinshasa
'Maneno is in Kinshasa' (he lives there)

(11) Safari a-**✓muba/✓tula** mu-ganga
Safari 1SM-be$_{-MUBA}$/be$_{-TULA}$ 1-doctor
'Safari is a doctor' (his lifelong career)

Importantly however, *-muba* crucially differs from *-tula* (and *-li*) in that it cannot co-occur with an individual-level predicate in the presence of a definite (class 1) subject. That is, despite the fact that *-muba* yields "permanent" interpretations elsewhere (10)-(11), it cannot ascribe canonically individual-level properties like 'tall' to definite subjects; *-muba* is unavailable in both a "permanent-state" context where *-tula* is available (12), and a "temporary-state" context where *-li* is available (13).

(12) *Context: Safari is taller than everyone in town, and everyone knows this fact about him.*
Safari a-**#li/#muba/✓tula** mu-la
Safari 1SM-be$_{-LI}$/be$_{-MUBA}$/be$_{-TULA}$ 1AGR-tall
'Safari is tall' (in general)

(13) *Context: Safari is considered short, but now he's standing next to someone much shorter than him.*
Safari a-**✓li/#muba/#tula** mu-la
Safari 1SM-be$_{-LI}$/be$_{-MUBA}$/be$_{-TULA}$ 1AGR-tall
'Safari is tall' (in this context)

That said, *-muba* is not systematically incompatible with individual-level predicates. In fact, it may co-occur with an individual-level predicate in the presence of a generic subject. In this environment the use of *-muba* yields a kind-reading; the properties in (14)-(15) characterize kinds of trees.[7]

(14) Kino ki-ti ki-**muba** ki-refu
7.DEM 7-tree 7SM-be$_{-MUBA}$ 7AGR-tall
'This (kind of) tree is tall'

(15) Kino ki-ti ki-**muba** ki-ofi
7.DEM 7-tree 7SM-be$_{-MUBA}$ 7AGR-short
'This (kind of) tree is short'

In summary, Kifuliiru utilizes three different copular *be*-verbs, e.g., *-li*, *-muba*, and *-tula*, in present tense pure predicational clauses. The first copula, *-li*, broadly coincides with temporary, stage-like interpretations; it describes a property that holds of a limited context of evaluation. In contrast, *-tula* is associated with permanent, individual-like interpretations; it describes a property that holds of a much broader context. Finally, *-muba* similarly yields permanent interpretations, but it can only co-occur with individual-level predicates in the presence of a generic subject, in which case it yields a kind-reading.

[7] Note that the predicate *-refu* 'tall' in (14) is different from the predicate *-la* 'tall' seen previously, e.g., (12)-(13). Importantly, these two are purely interchangeable; *-refu* could be used in (12)-(13) with no change in interpretation. I would expect the distribution of the two forms to vary considerably across speakers, as *-refu* is most likely a borrowing of the Swahili predicate *-refu* 'tall'.

4. Discussion

In an attempt to capture the observation that languages sometimes distinguish between properties that hold temporarily of an individual and properties that hold indefinitely, accounts like Milsark (1974), Carlson (1977), Diesing (1992), and Kratzer (1995), a.o., posit a binary distinction between stage-level and individual-level predicates. For some of these accounts, the stage/individual contrast is purely lexical; only stage-level predicates have an eventuality argument (see Kratzer 1995). For others, the source of the stage/individual contrast is instead syntactic; assuming all predicates are predicates of eventualities, interpretive contrasts must arise due to differences in their structure (Roy 2013).

Based on predicational contrasts in French, Spanish, and Russian, Roy (2013) posits three syntactically and interpretively distinct types of non-verbal predicate (16). So-called *dense* (situation-descriptive) predicates range over mass (non-atomic) eventualities, yield "temporary" state interpretations, and are syntactically associated with a bare predicate XP. In contrast, *non-dense* (characterizing) predicates range over atomic eventualities, allow for interpretive "gaps", and are associated with an additional projection above XP, the classifier phrase (ClP). Finally, *maximal* (defining) predicates range over maximal eventualities, yield "permanent" state interpretations, and are uniquely associated with the presence of a number phrase (NumP) above ClP and XP.

(16) *Predicate types in Roy (2013)*

a.	[$_{XP}$]	dense	(situation-descriptive)
b.	[$_{ClP}$[...]]	non-dense	(characterizing)
c.	[$_{NumP}$[...]]	maximal	(defining)

With respect to the Kifuliiru copular system, the analysis presented in Roy (2013) presents a much more viable means of deriving the three-way interpretive contrast between *-li/-muba/-tula* than a binary stage/individual analysis. From an interpretive standpoint, there is a clear parallel between the dense/non-dense/maximal distinction and the distinction between *-li/-muba/-tula*; both distinguish temporary predication on the one hand and permanent predication on the other, with an intermediate category falling somewhere between the two. Given this overlap, I will argue that the contrast between *-li/-muba/-tula* directly corresponds to the predicate contrasts in Roy (2013), at least with respect to interpretation. Specifically, I will argue that the Kifuliiru copular system has lexicalized the interpretive contrast between dense, non-dense, and maximal predicates, i.e., the situation-descriptive/characterizing/defining contrast.

To illustrate, let us first consider the copula *-tula*, which is strongly associated with permanent interpretations. The interpretive profile of *-tula* quite naturally corresponds to maximal predicates in Roy (2013), which range over maximal eventualities and yield defining interpretations. Adopting the semantics presented in Roy (2013), the meaning of *-tula* would be something like (17).

(17) ***-tula*** (Defining):

a. ∃e[MAX(e) & P(e) & Subj(e,x)]

b. There is an event of x being P and for all e P(e), there is no e' such that e is a proper part of e' and P(e').

In this sense, *-tula* yields "permanent" interpretations because it describes properties that hold of maximal eventualities. For example, with the locative predicate "in Kinshasa" (7), *-tula* asserts that the eventuality e of x being in Kinshasa is maximal; there is no larger eventuality e' such that e is part of e' and e' is an eventuality of "being in Kinshasa". In other words, x must not be in Kinshasa temporarily.

Turning now to *-muba*, we have seen that this copula sometimes yields "permanent" interpretations, and sometimes yields kind-level or generic interpretations. I argue that both interpretations can be accounted for if *-muba* corresponds to non-dense predicates, which range over atomic eventualities, and express nondivisive properties, i.e., P need not hold of all subparts of an eventuality e (Roy 2013).

(18) ***-muba*** (Characterizing):

a. ∃e[P(e) & Subj(e,x) & P is nondivisive]

b. There is an event of x being P where P is nondivisive (P need not hold of all subparts of e).

If *-muba* is used to describe properties that are nondivisive, the "permanent" and kind-level interpretations fall out nicely. "Permanent" interpretations in examples like (10)-(11) occur because there is no limit imposed on the size of the relevant eventuality; P could hold of a maximal (or near-maximal) eventuality so long as P is nondivisive. As such, "permanent" interpretations of *-muba* describe properties that hold of large eventualities but allow for interpretive gaps. With the nominal predicate 'doctor' in (11), for example, *-muba* might be used to describe the subject's trade (e.g., trained as a doctor) even if the subject is not a doctor currently/consistently (e.g., they sometimes work as an administrator). In a sense, this is why non-dense predicates are said to yield "characterizing" interpretations; they denote characteristic properties that are broadly true of a whole eventuality but not necessarily all of its subparts (Roy 2013). This analysis also explains why *-muba* cannot attribute individual-level properties to definite subjects, despite generally yielding "permanent" readings; if *-muba* corresponds with characterizing interpretations, it describes properties that need not be true of all subparts of an eventuality, whereas individual-level descriptions, e.g., 'tall' (12)-(13), hold of maximal eventualities, and are therefore true of all subparts of an eventuality. The generic interpretation of *-muba* is also captured by P being nondivisive. Since *-muba* describes nondivisive properties (i.e., it allows "gaps"), it can attribute an individual level property to a generic subject to yield a kind-reading; there is a (general) eventuality of x being P, e.g., *this kind of tree is (usually) tall*, but not all subeventualities of e must be P eventualities, e.g., *this kind of tree is (usually) tall, but the one in front of me is not*.

Finally, let us consider the copula *-li*, which generally yields temporary, stage-like interpretations. As expected, *-li* straightforwardly corresponds to dense predicates, which range over mass (non-atomic) eventualities, and yield temporary, situation-descriptive interpretations. Although there are other ways to capture a situation-descriptive interpretation of this type, I will adopt a basic predicational semantics for *-li* (19).

(19) ***-li*** (Situation-Descriptive):

a. ∃e[P(e) & Subj(e,x)]

b. There is an event of x being P.

The semantics provided for *-li* assumes a three-way, competition based system between the entries above (repeated below in 20). The use of *-li* results in the implicature that P is divisive and that the P eventuality is non-maximal. As such, *-li* yields contextually bounded interpretations of locative (8) and individual-level descriptions (9) precisely because there are other copulas, e.g., *-muba/-tula*, that are used to describe larger eventualities or nondivisive properties. The same idea is true with *-muba*. The use of *-muba* results in the implicature that the relevant eventuality is larger than that associated with *-li*, but non-maximal (i.e., smaller than that associated with *-tula*).

(20) a. ***-li*** (Situation-Descriptive): $\exists e$[P(e) & Subj(e,x)]

b. ***-muba*** (Characterizing): $\exists e$[P(e) & Subj(e,x) & P is nondivisive]

c. ***-tula*** (Defining): $\exists e$[max(e) & P(e) & Subj(e,x)]

To this point, I have shown that the interpretive contrasts in the Kifuliiru copular system correspond to those associated with the three predicate types in Roy (2013). However, I have largely ignored one key component of Roy's analysis: the interpretive differences between the three predicate types are attributed to differences in their structure (16). That said, unlike languages like French, there is no evidence in Kifuliiru for a distinct syntax for situation-descriptive, characterizing, and defining readings.

One piece of evidence in favor of the lexicalization analysis I adopt here is that the Kifuliiru copulas don't exhibit the same distributional differences that would be expected under the structural analysis in Roy (2013). For example, though the NumP projection is predicted to be restricted to defining sentences (i.e., sentences involving *-tula* in Kifuliiru) under a structural analysis, a quantified NP predicate may appear with all three of the Kifuliiru copulas (15).

(15) Johana na Maria ba-√**li**/√**muba**/√**tula** ba-alimu ba-biri
John and Mary 2sm-be-*li*/be-*muba*/be-*tula* 2-teacher 2agr-two
'John and Mary are two teachers'

If the assumption is that only the "defining" copula *-tula* should allow a predicate with a NumP projection, then we would not expect a quantified NP predicate like that in (15) to be available with either *-li* or *-muba*.

A similar issue arises with mass term predicates, which are predicted to be incompatible with the ClP projection (which is uniquely associated with characterizing sentences) since they "lack count structure" (Roy 2013). Once again however, we find that all three copulas may be used with mass predicates in some cases, including the "characterizing" copula *-muba* (16).

(16) Gano ga-**✓li/✓muba/✓tula** ma-aji
6.DEM 6SM-be$_{-li}$/be$_{-muba}$/be$_{-tula}$ 6-water
'This is water' (pointing at water in a cup)

Given these observations, I suggest that the interpretive differences between the Kifuliiru copulas are not syntactically derived in the sense of Roy (2013). Instead, I opt to situate the three-way contrast on a relational Pred head (Bowers 1993) rather than attribute it to structural differences associated with the predicate. The idea here is that instead of there being one invariant Pred head or a binary Pred$_{\text{STAGE}}$/Pred$_{\text{INDIV}}$ contrast (Adger & Ramchand 2003, Markman 2008, Balusu 2014, Myler 2018), there are three variants of Pred that yield distinct interpretations of the predication relation.

The decision to employ three variants of Pred is quite compatible with the three-way predicate contrast proposed in Roy (2013) if languages allow "Bundling" (Pylkkänen 2002, 2008). It has been argued that in some languages v and Voice come "bundled" together as a single head v/Voice, while in other languages they project separately (Pylkkänen 2002, 2008, Harley 2017). Assuming that other combinations of functional heads can similarly be bundled, the difference between Kifuliiru and a language like French is simply whether the relevant heads are bundled together or not; in French, the distinct heads project in the syntax, while in Kifuliiru, they are bundled together as a single head, e.g., Pred. The reason there are three different Pred heads in Kifuliiru is because there are three different predicate types, and therefore three different bundles of functional heads. In this sense, the Kifuliiru copular system has lexicalized the three-way predicate contrast in Roy (2013) through "bundling".

Ultimately this proposal highlights the central theoretical claims in this paper: neither a binary stage/individual contrast nor a purely structural analysis can sufficiently account for the interpretive contrasts in the Kifuliiru copular system.

5. Conclusion

To summarize, Kifuliiru exhibits three interpretively distinct copular *be*-verbs in present tense pure predicational clauses, e.g., *-li*, *-muba*, and *-tula*. The interpretive contrast between the copulas mirrors the three-way distinction between dense (situation-descriptive), non-dense (characterizing), and maximal (defining) predicates as presented in Roy (2013); *-li* yields situation-descriptive interpretations, *-muba* yields characterizing interpretations, and *-tula* yields defining interpretations. In light of this three-way contrast, I suggest that a binary distinction between stage/individual predication may be insufficient to capture the the range of interpretive contrasts we observe in copular systems like Kifuliiru. Bigger picture, this paper further contributes to the typology of non-verbal predication and opens the door to future work on fine-grained distinctions in copular systems.

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