

The syntax of copular constructions in Mauritian

Workshop 2007

1 Introduction

It is commonly known that Creole languages have verbless copular constructions. In Mauritian (henceforth MC), which is a French-based Creole, the copula is severely constrained since it only appears in *wh*-extractions, *viz.* only in interrogatives, relatives, exclamatives, for instance, but never in declaratives. Building on previous work (Syea 1997 [5], Sag & Wasow 1999 [3]), we propose an HPSG analysis of verbless copular clauses without a null copula, and a lexical entry for the copula that takes advantage of the lexical analysis of extraction (Bouma & al. 2001 [4]).

2 The data

2.1 Verbless copular sentences

MC has an absent copula in declaratives whether the predicate is adjectival, prepositional or nominal, may it be in the past, present or future and whether the predicate is negated or not as exemplified in (1).

- (1) Zan (pa) (ti/pu) (*ete) dan lakour/(enn) profeser/malad
John (NEG) (PST/IRR) (*COP) in garden/(a) teacher/sick
John (was/will be/is) (not) in the garden/a teacher/sick.

Similar to AAVE (Bender 2001 [1]), these verbless sentences behave as finite clauses. They can be embedded and coordinated with verbal clauses:

- (2) Mo krwar/panse zan dan lakour/enn profeser/malad
1SG believe/think John in garden/(a) teacher/sick
I believe/think that John is in the garden/a teacher/sick.
- (3) Mo pe ale e Zan pa kontan
1SG PROG go and John NEG happy
I'm leaving and John is not happy

2.2 Distribution of the copula *ete*

The lexical form *ete* appears in *wh*-extractions: in direct (4) and indirect interrogatives (5), in topicalisations (6), in relatives clauses (7), clefts (8) and exclamatives¹ (9) (which is not accepted

¹Syea [5] discusses such data, but does not include exclamatives.

by all speakers).

- (4) Ki tifi la *(ete)?
what girl DEF COP
What is the girl?
- (5) mo pa kone ki tifi la *(ete)
1SG NEG know what girl DEF 3SG COP
I don't know what this girl is.
- (6) en voler zan *(ete)
A thief John COP
A thief John is.
- (7) sa madam ar ki li *(ete)
DEM woman with REL 3SG COP
the woman with whom he is
- (8) pares ki li *(ete)
lazy COMP 3SG COP
It is lazy that he is
- (9) % ala enn bon dokter li *(ete) la!
DEIC a good doctor 3SG COP DEF
What a good doctor he is!

That the predicate is extracted is shown by the fact that we can have a long distance dependency as in (10). Notice that it is the predicate extraction that triggers the lexical realization of the copula. In interrogatives with an in-situ *wh*-word, or with a *wh*-subject, the copula is impossible (11, 12). It is also impossible if only a complement of the predicate is extracted (13). The same applies in relative clauses where the subject is relativized (14) and in exclamatives with no extraction (15).

- (10) kisannla to panse tifi la *(ete) ?
who 2SG think girl DEF COP
Who do you think this girl is?
- (11) Zan *(ete) kot sa?
John (COP) where
John is where?
- (12) kisannla *(ete) malad?
who COP sick
who is sick?
- (13) kont kisannla zan *(ete) ankoler?
against who John COP angry
Against whom John is angry?
- (14) sa madam ki *(ete) malad
the woman REL (COP) sick
the woman who is sick

- (15) % ala zan (*ete) zoli!
 DEIC John (COP) beautiful
 How beautiful John is!

Finally, when a locative or manner predicate is extracted, the lexical copula appears to be optional:

- (16) kot zan (ete)?
 where John (COP)
 Where is zan?
- (17) ki manyer madam la (ete)?
 how way woman DEF COP
 How is the woman?

We summarise the data in the table below.

	impossible <i>ete</i>	optional <i>ete</i>	obligatory <i>ete</i>
Declaratives	+	-	-
Interrogatives	wh-subj/in-situ	wh-loc/manner	wh-pred.
Relatives	subj.rel.	-	pred.rel loc.rel
Exclamatives	no extraction	-	wh-pred

Notice that *ete* is not necessarily in final position. It can be followed by various PPs or adverbial modifiers.

- (18) ki zan *(ete) dan sa lekol la?
 what John COP PREP DEM school DEF
 what is John in this school?

We thus analyse *ete* as a head selecting for a gap predicative complement.

3 An HPSG analysis

In HPSG, two main types of analysis have been proposed for verbless clauses: a construction-based approach (as in Sag & Wasow 1999 and Ginzburg et Sag 2000) and a lexicalist approach, based on a null copula form (as Bender 2001 [1] and Borsley 2004 [2]). We argue here in favor of the former.

3.1 Syea's analysis

Working within Principles and Parameter theory, Syea 1997 [5] proposes an analysis with two forms of the copula: a weak form (which is null) and a strong form (which is *ete*). He formulates the following generalization: “the copula has the weak form in the environment of a following overt constituent and the strong form in the environment of a following trace”. His analysis is based on the ECP, which says that traces must be properly governed (assuming the null copula cannot be a proper governor), but he has to reformulate it, so that head-government requirement applies at PF, while antecedent-government requirement applies at LF, since the copula (being semantically void) does not exist at LF. Our main argument against a null copula analysis is based on the distribution of weak pronouns, the negation and TAM markers. Weak forms of the 1st and 2nd personal pronouns

(*mo* and *to*) can appear in verbless copular sentences but not in case of an extraction, unlike strong forms *mwa* and *twa*:

(19) To dan lakour (you in the garden)

(20) Kot to *(ete) ? (Where you are?)

(21) Kot twa ? (Where you?)

If a null copula is involved in (19), and legitimates the weak form of the pronoun, then it should also be allowed in (20) (since the null copula is compatible with an extracted locative with an NP subject as in (16)). If there is no null copula, and the weak pronouns are analysed as proclitics (looking for a phonological host to their right), then (20) is expected to be bad without *ete*, since the pronoun does not have a host to its right. The same situation holds with the negation *pa* and the TAM markers *ti*, *pu*. They can occur in verbless copular clauses (as in (1)), but not when the locative predicate is extracted:

(22) kot zan ti *(ete)?
where John PST (COP)

Where was John?

(23) kot zan pa *(ete)?
where John NEG (COP)

Where wasn't John?

This restriction is surprising if the negation and TAM markers combine with a null copula in (1). If there is no null copula, these TAM markers are missing their complements in (22) without *ete* and the negation has no right constituent to adjoin to in (23) if *ete* is absent. We thus say that the TAM markers subcategorize for a canonical complement (which can be a finite VP or a predicative XP).

3.2 Our analysis of verbless clauses

Following (Sag & Wasow 1999), we propose to handle verbless copular clauses with a specific construction, with a non verbal head, which is a subtype of head-subject phrases.

(24) verbless-cop-cx \rightarrow *head - subj - phrase* & $\left[\begin{array}{l} \text{SYNSEM} \left[\begin{array}{l} \text{HEAD} \left[\begin{array}{l} \text{FORM } fin \\ verb \end{array} \right] \\ \text{CONT} \left[\begin{array}{l} \text{SOA } \boxed{2} \\ message^L \end{array} \right] \end{array} \right] \\ \text{HEAD-DTR} \left[\begin{array}{l} \text{HEAD } non-verbal \\ \text{CONT} | \text{NUCL } \boxed{2} \end{array} \right] \end{array} \right]$

This construction inherits from the head-subject phrase, which ensures that the subject is appropriate for the head. MC, unlike French, does not generally permit subject inversion. We thus have a precedence rule that forces the subject to precede the (non-verbal) head.

(25) head-subj-phr \rightarrow NON-HD-DTR *precedes* [[PRED +] OR [FORM *fin*]]

The constraint only applies to verbal or predicative head daughters. We analyse locative and manner *wh*-predicates as ambiguous in this respect (they are underspecified for the PRED feature). If they

are [PRED -], they can be analysed as heads and can precede the subject, and this is how we analyse examples (16) and (17) above without the copula. That *kot* is not extracted in (16) (without *ete*) is shown by the fact that we don't have a long distance dependency without *ete* as illustrated below:

- (26) *kot to panse zan *(ete)?*
 where 2SG think John COP?
 Where do you think John is?

3.3 Lexical entries for *ete* and *ti*

We now turn to the lexical entries for *ete* and the TAM markers. We analyse the copula as a raising verb which is constrained to take a predicative complement of the type *gap*. A TAM marker like *ti*, on the other hand, is constrained to take a finite VP or predicative complement of the type *canonical*.

$$(27) \langle \text{ETE}, \left[\text{ARG-ST} \left\langle \underline{\text{I}}, \left[\begin{array}{c} \text{PRED } + \\ \text{SUBJ } \langle \underline{\text{I}} \rangle \end{array} \right] \right\rangle_{\text{gap}} \right] \rangle$$

$$(28) \langle \text{TI}, \left[\text{ARG-ST} \left\langle \underline{\text{I}}, \left[\begin{array}{c} \text{PRED } + \\ \text{SUBJ } \langle \underline{\text{I}} \rangle \end{array} \right] \right\rangle_{\text{canon}} \right] \rangle$$

When the locative (or manner) complements are analysed as [PRED +], they can be extracted and the copula thus surfaces (as in examples 16 and 17).

4 Conclusion

We have argued against a null copula for Mauritian verbless copular clauses, and in favor of a construction-based analysis. The peculiar distribution of the lexical copula *ete* and the TAM markers in copular clauses also provide some support for a lexicalist theory of extraction, as advocated by Bouma & al 2001 [4]. We leave for future work a more precise analysis of the semantics of the construction, as well as an extension to comparative clauses (which can also appear with or without the copula).

References

- [1] Bender, E. 2001. *Syntactic Variation and Linguistic Competence: The Case of AAVE Copula Absence*. PhD thesis, Stanford University.
- [2] Borsley R. 2004. "An Approach to English Comparative Correlatives". In Stefan Müller, editor(s), *On-line Proceedings of the HPSG-2004 Conference, Center for Computational Linguistics, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven*. 70-92.
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- [4] Bouma G, R Malouf, Sag, I. & al. 2001. "Satisfying Constraints on Extraction and Adjunction". In *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory 1(19)*: 1-65.
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