

Copular constructions in a language without copular verbs

This paper will focus on four sentence types found in Niuean (Polynesian, Tongic subgroup), all of which, in translation to English, use the verb “be”. Examples are provided in (1)-(4). (1) illustrates the obligatorily incorporating element *fai*, and (2) illustrates the construction *ha(ha): i ai*. Here, the element *ha* or *haha* is followed by a locative prepositional phrase *i ai*, translating as “be at there” or “there is”. (3) is a predicate locative, with the element *ha* followed by a locative prepositional phrase. (4), a predicate nominal, uses the element *ko*, followed by a nominal phrase. *Ko* is also used in focus clefts (5), as well as in other constructions.

While the first sentence has been analyzed (eg. Seiter 1980, Sperlich 1997, Massam 2001) as involving a verb *fai*, which obligatorily incorporates its object, the status of the first element in the other three sentences is more controversial. *Ha* and *haha* are analysed as prepositions or more generally as grammatical particles (Sperlich 1997), while *ko* has been considered to be a preposition (eg. Seiter 1980), a left peripheral complementizer (eg. Pearce 1999), a Tense element (Chung and Ladusaw 2004), and a Pred (Baker 2004).

Niuean has been considered a language without copular verbs. Predicate nominals such as (4), for example, have been analyzed as verbless sentences, with fronting of the predicate nominal directly, to give a [DP DP] or perhaps a [PP DP] structure for the sentence. In this paper, however, I will explore the hypothesis that the first elements in the sentences are not prepositional, but instead are light verbs, and in fact correspond to copular verbs, but in an isolating language with no inflection, hence their prepositional character.

Interestingly, under this analysis, all four constructions come to involve pseudo-incorporation, since the nominal or prepositional phrase within the predicate is fronted along with the light verb. If *fai* is considered a light verb also, rather than a lexical verb as previously, then the generalization arises that light verbal constructions in Niuean uniformly involve pseudo-incorporation (cf. Johns 2003 for Inuktitut obligatory incorporation with light verbs). In each case, though, the nature of the incorporated object differs, since it can be a bare NP, an ArtP, or a PP. The exact contributions of the types of objects will be outlined, as well as the motivation for the obligatory incorporation, with reference to other works on incorporation and ‘verbless’ sentences. In particular, we will address the various ‘flavors’ of the four types of light verbs used in these constructions (cf. Harley 2001).

Support for the light verb hypothesis will be drawn from a variety of constructions with *ko*, such as equatives (6) which can occur with double *ko* (7), and the use of *ko* to denote present tense (8). The complementary distribution of *ko*, *ha* and *haha* with the usual sentence-initial Tense/Aspect markers suggests that such phrases actually move higher in the clause than the usual predicate position, and this is supported by the position of negation and various auxiliaries. In conclusion, we argue that Niuean is not so clearly a language without copular verbs, and that this has implications for general theories of predication.

Examples

- (1) To **fai falaoa** a pogipogi
Fut be bread Abs tomorrow
“There will be bread tomorrow.”
- (2) **Haha: i ai** i hinei e tokogahoa ni: e tau tagata.
Pred at there at here Abs few only Abs Pl person
“There are only a few people here.”
- (3) **Ha: he fale fafao** a ia
Pred in house sick Abs she
“She is in the hospital”
- (4) **Ko e kamuta** a au
Ko Art carpenter Abs I
“I am a carpenter.”
- (5) **Ko e tama fifine fulufuluola** ne lagomatai e ia
Ko Art child girl beautiful T/A help Erg 3ps
‘It is the beautiful girl that he helped’
- (6) **Ko e fale ke lima aki** e fale i ko:
Ko Art house Sbjctv fifth with Art house at there
“That house over there is the fifth house.”
- (7) **Ko ia foki ko e tama ne ua aki** mai he toko fitu he haana a lafu.
Ko he also Ko Art child T/A two with from Art Pers seven of his Art family
“He was the second eldest of a family of seven children.”
- (8) **Ko e kumi agaia** au he tama haau
Pres seek still I at child your
“I’m still looking for your child.”

Reference cited in Abstract

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