Copulas and the semantics of location

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Abstract

Work on copula systems has been a rich field of inquiry in syntax and semantics, with a particular interest in languages with multi-copula systems. In such languages, different forms are used for specific syntactically and/or semantically distinct copula constructions. To date, however, there is no discussion of the copula system in Kinyarwanda, a Bantu language spoken in Rwanda. In this paper, I provide a description of the distribution of the two copulas in Kinyarwanda, showing that their use does not fit previous typologies of copula constructions. I argue that the choice of copula hinges on both the predication of a location as well as the semantics of central coincidence, which is tied to the neutralization of the contrast of the two copulas in the first- and second-person.

1 Introduction

Work on the meaning of copulas — and on semantics more generally — is limited for the Bantu languages; there has been no work that discusses the copula system in Kinyarwanda (Bantu; Rwanda) which has two: ni and –ri. This paper fills this gap by documenting the distribution of these two copulas, and situates this system into typological work on copulas, arguing for an analysis that hinges on the semantics of location and central coincidence. For instances where the two copulas differ, whether the predicate is a location is the crucial predictor for which copula will be used. However, not all persons and tenses have a contrast, and I argue that central coincidence — distance from the deictic center of conversation (i.e. 1st- and 2nd- person present) — conditions when there will be a contrast between the two copulas.

A copula has been understood as a linker between subjects and predicates with lexemes that do not form predicates on their own (Pustet 2003; Crystal 1980). As Stassen (1997) puts it: “the copula is basically a ‘hat rack’ for categories of verbal morphology” (66); in other words, copulas often serve as grammatical hosts for tense, aspect, and mood morphology for elements that can’t encode this themselves (e.g. nominals and adjectives).

Work on the semantics of copular clauses has found different kinds of constructions that use a copula. For example, Standard English makes use of the verb be for various kinds of copular phrases (cf. Mikkelsen (2005); Mikkelsen (2011)).

(1)  a. Kyle is happy.                predicational
    b. The man I met was was John.     specificational
    c. That woman is Mary.            identificational
    d. Mary is HER.                   equative
Many languages have morphologically distinct copulas for these (or other) semantic functions (cf. Section 4). In this paper, I document and analyze the copula system in Kinyarwanda, which has two copulas: –ri and ni. The two differ in their uses, with the first being reserved for statements about locations, while the second has several semantic uses, including the four in (1). A further component to the copula system is that the distinction between the two morphological forms is neutralized in the first- and second-person. I argue that this due to an interrelation of the notions current relevance and central coincidence, the former giving privilege do events that are happening in the present, and the latter giving delimiting participants in proximity to deictic center.

Finally, I engage with work on the copula system in Swahili, specifically on the origins of the form ni, which has been argued to be an innovation in Swahili (McWhorter 1992). I show that the use of ni in Kinyarwanda (and other related Bantu languages) casts doubt upon the proposal that ni is an innovation in Swahili. I instead propose that ni originated in an earlier stage of the East Branch of Bantu.

The paper proceeds as follows: in the next section, I give a brief description of the morpho-syntactic structure of Kinyarwanda and then in §3 I provide a description of the two copulas in Kinyarwanda and their cognate forms in related Bantu languages. I then turn to a summary on previous work on multi-copular systems, showing that they fail to capture the semantic distinction between the two forms in Kinyarwanda. In §5 I outline an analysis of the Kinyarwanda data, proposing that the distinction between the two copulas hinges on the semantics of location and central coincidence. I conclude in §6, outlining future research questions in the semantics of copulas in Bantu languages.

2 The Structure of Kinyarwanda

Kinyarwanda is a Bantu language spoken in Rwanda and neighboring countries by approximately 12 million people. It predominantly has SVO word order, and rich agreement and valency-changing morphology. Verbs in the language agree with the subject in number and noun class, of which there are 16.\(^1\) The data in (2) provides an example of the agreement morphology in the language.

\begin{align*}
(2) & \quad \text{a. Umu-gabo a-ra-shaka iki-jumba.} \\
& \quad \text{1S-PRES-want 7-sweet.potato} \\
& \quad \text{‘The man wants a sweet potato.’} \\
& \quad \text{b. Aba-gabo ba-ra-shaka ibi-jumba.} \\
& \quad \text{2S-PRES-want 8-sweet.potato} \\
& \quad \text{‘The men want sweet potatoes.’}
\end{align*}

In (2a), the class 1 subject agrees with the class 1 agreement marker on the verb. The plural, class 2, changes the agreement shown on the verb.


\(^1\)These are indicated in the glosses with Arabic numerals. Odd classes are singular; even classes are plural.
2006; Zeller & Ngoboka 2006; Jerro 2015) or on agreement (Jerro 2013; Jerro & Wechsler 2015).

To date, there has been no investigation into the copula system of the language; in fact, little work has looked at the semantics of copulas in Bantu languages (though see McWhorter (1992) on Swahili for a diachronic account on Swahili — cf. the discussion below).

3 Copulas in Kinyarwanda

There are two copulas in Kinyarwanda: $-\text{ri}$ and $\text{ni}$. The two contrast in meaning in the third person, but the distinction is neutralized for first- and second-person in favor of the copula $-\text{ri}$. In this section I discuss the semantic contrast of the two forms.

3.1 $-\text{ri}$

The copula $-\text{ri}$ is traceable to Proto-Bantu *$\text{de}$, and is widespread throughout Bantu (Wald 1973). It requires a subject agreement marker, and it hosts tense morphology in the future and past tenses.\(^2\) For example, in (3) there is no tense morphology in the present tense, while there is past tense morphology in (4).

(3) Karemera $a-\text{ri}$ m’u Rwanda.
Karemera 1S-COP in Rwanda
‘Karemera is in Rwanda.’

(4) Karemera $y-a-\text{ri}$ m’u Rwanda.
Karemera 1S-PAST-COP in Rwanda
‘Karemera was in Rwanda.

Semantically, $-\text{ri}$ is only felicitous to predicate of locations, as in (5a); it is not available with predicate nominals (5b) or adjectives (5c):

(5) a. Mukamana $a-\text{ri}$ mu rugo.
Mukamana 1S-COP in house
‘Mukamana is at home.’

b. *Mukamana $a-\text{ri}$ umwarimu.
Mukamana 1S-COP teacher
Intended: ‘Mukamana is a teacher.’

c. *Mukamana $a-\text{ri}$ munini.
Mukamana 1S-COP big
Intended: ‘Mukamana is big.’

In addition to classes 1 and 2, which are reserved for humans; this contrast is found with other third-person gender classes. Examples from classes 7/8 (for inanimate objects) and 9/10 (for animals) are given in (6) – (9), respectively:

\(^2\)I am grateful to Gilbert and Felicite Habarurema and Solange Nirere for their native speaker intuitions regarding the Kinyarwanda data.
(6) a. Igi-tabo ki-ri mu-cyumba.
    7-book 7S-COP IN-room
    ‘The book is in the room.’
b. *Igi-tabo ki-ri ubururu.
    7-book 7S-COP blue
    ‘The book is blue.’

(7) a. Ibi-tabo bi-ri mu-cyumba.
    8-book 8S-COP IN-room
    ‘The books are in the room.’
b. *Ibi-tabo bi-ri ubururu.
    8-book 8S-COP blue
    ‘The books are blue.’

(8) a. In-zovu iri mu Kagera.
    9-elephant 9-COP in Akagera
    ‘The elephant is in Akagera (National Park).’
b. *In-zovu iri ikigera.
    9-elephant 9-COP grey
    ‘The elephant is grey.’

(9) a. In-zovu zi-ri mu Kagera.
    10-elephant 10-COP in Akagera
    ‘The elephants are in Akagera (National Park).’
b. *In-zovu zi-ri ikigera.
    10-elephant 10-COP grey
    ‘The elephants are grey.’

3.2 **ni**

The copula *ni* — unlike *–ri* — does not show agreement of any kind, and does not host any tense morphology.

In the third-person, *ni* is used with predicate nominals and adjectives.

(10) a. Kyle ni mu-nini.
    Kyle NI 1-big
    ‘Kyle is big.’
b. Kyle n’ umwarimu.
    Kyle NI teacher
    ‘Kyle is a teacher.’

Crucially, *ni* is in complementary distribution with *–ri* and can never be used with locative predicates:

(11) *Kyle ni mu rugo.
    Kyle NI in house
    Intended: ‘Kyle is at home.’
Several other semantic functions are captured by *ni*, such as the various semantic categories discussed by Mikkelsen (2005); Mikkelsen (2011).

(12) a. In-gofero *ni* mini.
   9-hat  N1 big
   ‘The hat is big.’
   predicative

b. Umu-curanzi njye nahuye nawe *ni* Michael Jackson.
   1-singer  I  met  I  N1 Michael Jackson
   ‘The singer that I met is Michael Jackson.’
   specificational

c. Uriya *ni* John.
   that.DIST N1 John
   ‘That (over there) is John.’
   identificational

d. Superman *ni* Clark Kent.
   Superman N1 Clark Kent
   ‘Superman is Clark Kent.’
   equative

Crucially, none of these can be used with the –*ri* copula.

(13) a. *In-gofero a-ri* mini.
   9-hat  9S-COP big
   ‘The hat is big.’
   predicative

   1-singer  I  met  I  1S-COP Michael Jackson
   ‘The singer that I met is Michael Jackson.’
   specificational

c. *Uriya* a-ri John.
   that.DIST 1S-COP John
   ‘That (over there) is John.’
   identificational

d. *Superman a-ri* Clark Kent.
   Superman 1S-COP Clark Kent
   ‘Superman is Clark Kent.’
   equative

The two also differ in their use with bare plurals. *ni* is used with bare plurals, while –*ri* cannot.

(14) a. In-zovu *ni* nini.
   10-elephant(s) N1 big
   ‘(Generally), elephants are big.’

b. Aba-ntu *ni* b-eza.
   2-people N1 2-kind
   ‘(Generally), people are friendly.’

(15) a. *In-zovu zi-ri* nini.
   10-elephant 10S-COP big
   ‘(Generally), elephants are big.’
b. *Aba-ntu ba-ri b-eza.
   2-people 2S-COP 2-kind
   ‘(Generally), people are friendly.’

The first-pass generalization of the distribution of the two copulas is quite straightforward: –ri is used for locative predicates, while ni is used for all other semantic constructions commonly associated with copulas, such as with predicate nominals/adjectives with specificational, identificational, equative, and bare plural readings.

3.3 The Neutralization of ni and –ri

The characterization discussed in the previous section, however, is only present in the third-person; for first- and second-person (singular and plural), –ri is the copula used for all types of predicates covered by ni in the third person. For example in (16), –ri (or it’s allomorph –di) is use with predicate nominals and adjectives.

   1SGS-COP 1-big 1-foreigner in house
   ‘I am big / a foreigner / at home.’
   2SGS-COP 1-big 1-foreigner in house
   ‘You are big / a foreigner / at home.’

(17) a. Tu-ri ba-nini / aba-zungu / mu rugo.
   1PLS-COP 2-big 2-foreigners in house
   ‘We are big / foreigners / at home.’
   b. Mu-ri ba-nini / aba-zugu / mu rugo.
   2PLS-COP 2-small 2-foreigners in house
   ‘You (plural) are big / foreigners / at home.’

This is crucially different from the pattern for the third person outlined above — cf. (5) above. In other words, for first- and second-person copula constructions, there is only one copula: –ri. In the third person, there is a contrast between –ri and ni where the former is restricted to locative predicates and the latter is used in all other semantic contexts. The pattern is schematized as in Table 1. Note that the different noun classes are all types of third-person categories; the ones specifically included in the table roughly correspond to classes for humans (1/2), inanimate objects (7/8), and animals (9/10).

The descriptive generalization outlined in the previous section is neutralized in first- and second-person; –ri is used across the board for all semantic and syntactic types of predicates.

3.4 A Comparison With Copulas in Other Bantu Languages

The copula –ri is traceable Proto-Bantu, reconstructed as *de, and there are cognate forms throughout the Bantu-speaking region (Wald 1973). Ni, on the other hand, has been argued to be an innovation in Swahili, a Bantu language spoken in Tanzania, Kenya, and DR Congo.
Table 1: Interaction of –ri and ni copulas with first-, second- and third-person in the present (McWhorter 1992). The claim of the Swahili innovation hypothesis is that ni originated as a focus particle which was reanalyzed as as a copula in Early Modern Swahili. However, ni is also found in several other East Bantu languages, such as Kinyarwanda, Runyankore (Bantu; Uganda), Haya (Bantu; Tanzania), and Chichewa ndi. The family tree in (18) gives a visualization of the languages under discussion in the East Bantu family (Schoenbrun 1997; Nurse 1999; Williamson & Blench 2000; Nurse & Phillipson 2003; Hammarström et al.).

(18) Narrow Bantu
    East Bantu
        NE Savannah
            Sena Nyanja
                Nyanjaic
                    Chichewa/Nyanja
                        NE Coastal
                            Swahili
                                Water Nyanza
                                    Rutara
                                        Haya
                                            Kinyarwanda
                                        W. Nyanza
                                            Kivu
                                                W. Nyanza
                                                    Sabaki
                                                        Nyankore

The Swahili innovation hypothesis could be maintained if it is assumed that ni was spread by contact through East Africa. While the focus of this paper is not on the historical origins of this copula, I provide two arguments against the Swahili innovation hypothesis: (i) that the use of ni is too far-reaching in places that do not have sufficient contact with
Swahili for *ni* to have been borrowed, and (ii) that the semantic space of the copula systems is too variegated to have had various languages have borrowed form from Swahili.

The first argument against the Swahili innovation argument is that if *ni* is indeed an innovation in Swahili, its presence in other languages would be most easily explained from language contact. However, many of the languages that have *ni* have had little to no prolonged contact with Swahili, such as Kinyarwanda and Runyankore. In addition to the phonological dissimilarity between Chichewa *ndi* and Swahili *ni*, though the contact has also been minimal between Swahili and Chichewa.

Another piece of evidence against the Swahili innovation hypothesis is that the distribution of *ni* in the languages is different. In Kinyarwanda, there is the restriction of *ni* to use only with the third person. In Swahili, *ni* is used for first-, second-, and third-person (plural and singular).

(19) Hamisi / Mimi / Wewe *ni* mpishi.
    Hamisi / I / you COP cook
    ‘Hamisi/I/you is/am/are a cook.’

(20) Sisi / Ninyi / Wao *ni* wapishi.
    We / You / They COP cook
    ‘We/you/they are cooks.

Additionally, *ni* in Swahili can be omitted in specific contexts, but no work has provided a detailed explanation of what licenses these contexts (though see (McWhorter 1992 and (Pustet 2003) for brief discussions. Kinyarwanda, on the other hand, never allows the omission of the copula.

Another parallel system is found in Chichewa, where the distribution of the two cognate copulas shows a separate semantics from either Kinyarwanda or Swahili. Chichewa has –*li*, the derivative of the Proto-Bantu *de*. Like Kinyarwanda, this form agrees in person with the subject. In addition, Chichewa has a second copula *ndi*, which shows no agreement and is the putative cognate to *ni* in the East Bantu languages.\(^3\) Note that the first-singular subject marker and the copula are both *ndi*.

(21) a. Ndi-ne m-phunzitsi.
    COP-1SSG 1-teacher
    ‘I am a teacher.’

b. Ndi-nu a-phunzitsi.
    COP-2SPL 2-teacher
    ‘You (formal) are a teacher.’

c. Ndi m-phunzitsi.
    COP 1-teacher
    ‘S/he is a teacher.’

(22) Ndi-ne osangalala.
    COP-1S happy
    ‘I am a happy person.’

\(^3\)I am grateful to Geoff Mlongoti for providing the Chichewa examples presented here.
The copula *ndi* is used to convey inherent properties of the predicate, such as with professions, as shown in (21). The copula *–li* is used for temporary descriptions, centered around a specific event or point in time (see the distinction between stage- and individual-level predicates in §4). Note the use in (22), where a predicate like *osangalala* ‘happy’ indicates that the subject is inherently happy.

This system is distinct from both Kinyarwanda and Swahili; the *–li* copula is used with stage-level predicates, while *ndi* is used with individual-level predicates. Assuming that this form is cognate to Swahili and Kinyarwanda *ni*, it is unlikely that it was recently borrowed from Swahili. I argue that this means that the *ni* copula is traceable to the East Bantu sub-branch.⁴

Moving to other copulas in Bantu languages, Swahili has a special set of copulas for locations: *–ko, –po,* and *–mo.* In grammars, each of the three are described as depending on the nature of a location (at, inside, etc), but crucially, all are specifically used for kinds of locations.

(24) a. Mohammed yu-*ko* wapi?
Mohammed CL1S-COP where
‘Where is Mohammed?’

b. Sukari i-*ko* wapi?
Mohammed CL1S-COP where
‘Where is the sugar?’

Russell (2003:18)

Interestingly, the cognate to *–ri* in Swahili grammaticalized into the verbal past tense morpheme *li–*.

3SGS-PST-want wine
‘He wanted wine.’

Because of grammatical reanalysis of the copula as a tense marker, there is no synchronic cognate copula to *–ri* in Swahili.

Another pattern for expressing identification in some languages is a change in tone on the first syllable of the noun. This is found in languages like Shona (Bantu; Zimbabwe).

(26) a. múnhù
   person
   ‘person’

b. múnhù
   person.PRED
   ‘it is a person’

Shona; Welmers 1973:323

This option, however, does not seem exploited in the East Bantu branch of the family.

⁴Given the tendency for languages to delete sounds, it is possible that the earlier form would be *ndi*, and the /d/ is deleted in some of the cognate languages.
4 Work on Multi-Copular Systems

Moving outside of the Bantu family, there are several languages with multi-copula systems where the choice of copula depends on the syntactic nature of the predicate and/or the semantics of the copular construction. In this section, I outline three different kinds of multi-copular systems that have been discussed in the literature, which I call lexical category systems, stage- and individual-level systems, and particular-characterizing systems. I go through each of these kinds of systems and show that the Kinyarwanda pattern does not fit with the generalization for the other languages discussed in the literature.

In some languages with multiple copulas, the use of a particular copula depends on the lexical category of the predicate. For example, Bambara (Niger-Congo; Mali) has four copulas used with nominals, adjectives, verbal predicates, and “quantificational, temporal, and participial predicates, among other things” (Pustet 2003:46,[2.75-2.78]), as in (27a-d), respectively.

\[(27)\]
\[\begin{array}{ll}
a. & \text{nìn ye námása ye} \\
& \text{this COPa banana COP} \\
& \text{‘This is a banana.’} \\
b. & \text{so ka sûrún} \\
& \text{house COPb small} \\
& \text{‘The house is small.’} \\
c. & \text{ne be taa} \\
& \text{1SG COPc leave} \\
& \text{‘I am leaving.’} \\
d. & \text{caman dòn.} \\
& \text{many COPd} \\
& \text{‘There are many.’}
\end{array}\]

It is possible that the distinction between \(ni\) and \(–ri\) is simply a difference in the category of the predicate; \(–ri\) always appears with a PP, while \(ni\) can appear with nouns and adjectives, there seems to be something a deeper explanation to be uncovered.

A frequently noted semantic difference between copulas is between stage- and individual-level predicates (Carlson 1977; Kratzer 1988; Fernald 2000; Bochnak et al. 2011). A stage-level predicate is one that describes an accidental or transitory property of an individual. Individual-level predicates, on the other hand, describe an essential, time-stable property of an individual. For many languages, it has been argued that their two copulas are used in line with these two kinds of predicates. Examples of this distinction have been given for many languages, including Spanish in (28) and Washo (29).

\[(28)\]
\[\begin{array}{ll}
a. & \text{María es rubia.} \\
& \text{Maria \textit{is(ser) blond}} \\
& \text{‘Mary is blonde.’} \\
b. & \text{María está cansada.} \\
& \text{Maria \textit{is(estar) tired}} \\
& \text{‘Mary is tired.’} \\
\end{array}\] (Maienborn 2005:156,[1])
The (a) sentences have the individual-level interpretation, while the (b) sentences have a stage-level interpretation. For example, in (29), the crucial distinction is between whether the woman is currently drunk at the time of the utterance (a stage-level reading) or whether drunkenness is a time-stable property of the woman (an individual-level reading).

Another distinction proposed in the literature is between particular and characterizing interpretations, which intersects with the distinction between stage- and individual-level predicates (Deo 2011). A particular claim is one where some situation holds at the evaluation index (e.g. now), while a characterizing claim is a generalization which holds across indices (including now). In short, a characterizing claim is one that holds generally or is a habitual action. An example of this distinction comes from Marathi:

(30) a. anu vyasta āh-e
   Anu busy COP1-PRES
   ‘Anu is busy (right now).’

b. anu vyasta as-t-e
   Anu busy COP2-PRES-F
   ‘Anu is (generally) busy.’

In (30a), the interpretation is that the person is busy at the relevant point in time (i.e. the present), while (30b) says that the person is generally busy, including being busy at the relevant point in time (the present).

None of the three patterns outlined above for multi-copular systems fits the pattern found in Kinyarwanda. As I show in the following section, the crucial component to the Kinyarwanda system is that the –ri copula is a predicate for locations.

5 An Analysis of the Copula System in Kinyarwanda

5.1 Determining –ri vs. ni in Kinyarwanda

Returning to the copulas ni and –ri in Kinyarwanda, a central question is what captures the distribution of the two forms. I entertain three hypotheses for capturing the distinction between the two copulas: morphological suppletion, the stage- and individual-level distinction, and locatives. I elaborate on the predictions of each of these hypotheses and ultimately argue for the locatives analysis of the Kinyarwanda copula.

The first hypothesis is that that the two are two suppletive phonological forms of the same paradigm, comparable to the distinction between is and are in Standard English. This hypothesis can be ruled out since the two forms always contrast semantically. There is another form –ba which is used in the future and infinitive (i.e. ku-ba ‘to be’), and this
form can be considered suppletive. There is no contrast in meaning with –ba; all copular meanings take –ba in the future. I return to this point in (43) and (44). Because ni and –ri are in complementary distribution semantically, I rule out the suppletion hypothesis.

A second hypothesis is that the difference aligns with the distinction between stage-level and individual-level predicates (cf. Bochnak et al. (2011) on Washo), where ni is for individual-level predicates and –ri is for stage-level predicates. While this is technically an accurate portrayal of the two forms because locations are a subset of stage-level predicates, but it’s not strongly predictive of the distribution of –ri, which is only used with locations and no other stage-level predicates. There is no negative evidence for other non-locational stage-level predicates because the language uses verbs to convey stage-level states. The sentences in (31) are examples of the types of stage-level predicates are indicated with verbs.

(31)  a. Karemera a-ra-huz-e.
      Karemera 1S-PRES-busy-PERF
      ‘Karemera is busy.’
   b. Mukamana a-r-ishim-ye.
      Mukamana 1S-PRES-happy-PERF
      ‘Mukamana is happy.’
   c. Mama a-ra-baba-ye.
      Mama 1S-PRES-sad-PERF
      ‘Mama is sad.’

The distinction between stage- and individual-level predicates does not quite fit the system in Kinyarwanda since there are no non-locational stage-level predicates to test against the hypothesis.

I propose a new system for the copulas in Kinyarwanda, which is that –ri is reserved for explicit statements about locations.

(32) Umw-ana a-ri i Kigali / mu rugo / kw’ishuri.
    1-child 1S-COP in Kigali / in home / at school
    ‘The child is in Kigali / at home / at school.’

All other semantic types of copular sentences are left for ni, such as (33) and (34), repeated from (44) and (15) above.

(33)  a. Kyle ni mu-nini.
      Kyle NI 1-big
      ‘Kyle is big.’
   b. Kyle n’ umwarimu.
      Kyle NI teacher
      ‘Kyle is a teacher.’
(34)  a. In-zovu ni nini.
      10-elephant(s) NI big
      ‘(Generally), elephants are big.’
b. Aba-ntu ni b-eza.
   2-person NI 2-kind
   ‘(Generally), people are friendly.’

There is one instance where the two forms overlap in use, though they still contrast in meaning. In sentences that indicate a permanent location of a place, such as a city located within a country, both copulas may be used. Consider the examples in (35) – (36), which describes that Kigali is a city in Rwanda.

(35) Kigali i-ri mu Rwanda.
   Kigali 9S-COP in Rwanda
   ‘Kigali is in Rwanda.’
(36) Kigali ni mu Rwanda
   Kigali COP in Rwanda
   ‘Kigali is in Rwanda.’

If stage-level and individual-level interpretations where the crucial interpretive distinction between –ri and ni, it would be expected that ni would be used with permanent locations, and –ri would be unavailable in a sentence like (35). The ability for –ri to appear is predicted by its semantics of location, while the use of ni in (36) is predicted from its use as an individual-level predicate.5

A possible counterargument to the analysis presented so far is that –ri is actually categorized to appear with prepositional phrases. In the data presented so far, each use of the –ri copula appears with a prepositional phrase. However, –ri may does appear with locative adverbials, such as hano ‘here’ and aho ‘there.’

(37) a. Umw-ana a-ri hano.
   1-child 1S-COP here
   ‘The child is here.’
 b. Umw-ana a-ri aho.
   1-child 1S-COP there
   ‘The child is there.’

The data in (37a) show that the use of –ri is not restricted by lexical category (i.e. prepositional phrases); prepositional and adverbial locatives are permitted with –ri, as long as the predicate is a location.

The locational analysis can also be extended to Swahili, where there is a class of locative copulas –ko, –po, and –mo. In fact, these forms are arguably reanalyses of locative clitics are found in several other Bantu languages. For example, in Lubukusu (Bantu; Kenya) and Kinyarwanda, the locative clitics mo and ho can be added to verbs to replace a location.

5Speakers do note that there is a semantics contrast between (35) and (36), where the sentence with –ri is more “about a location.” More data needs to be collected to investigate the exact semantic difference between the two forms. However, the crucial point here is that the analysis outlined in this paper predicts that this should be a place where the two forms overlap, given that statements about the location of a city are both locations (indicated with –ri) and individual level predicates (indicated with ni.)
From the morphological evidence, it can be concluded that when the –li was reanalyzed as a tense marker in Swahili (cf. (25) above), it was replaced by another form to predicate over locations, the locative clitic. The innovation of locative clitics as the replacement for –li suggests that –li in Swahili had a locational use comparable to the synchronic pattern for Kinyarwanda.

Furthermore, Pustet (2003) suggests that Swahili allows stage-level predicates, using ni, though she doesn’t give any full examples. This suggests the locative hypothesis for Swahili copula –ko; if ni can truly appear with stage-level predicates, then the crucial contrast between –ko and ni in Swahili is not stage-level and individual-level readings, but rather whether the predicate is locational.

An interesting point in interest in Swahili is the seeming stage-level and individual-level distinction, with the –ko form being used with a comitative to create a stage-level reading, as in (41). The verb ku-na ‘to have’ is used for individual-level interpretations. \(^6\)

\[\text{(41)} \quad \text{Ni-ko} \quad \text{na} \quad \text{njaa.} \]
\[\text{1SGS-COP with hunger} \]
\[\text{‘I am hungry (right now).’} \]

\[\text{(42)} \quad \text{Ni-na} \quad \text{njaa.} \]
\[\text{1SGS-have hunger} \]
\[\text{‘I am hungry (in general).’} \]

Crucially, this contrast does not exist in Kinyarwanda; there is no comparable comitative possession construction in the language. While more remains to be investigated in the Swahili system, it is clear that location is the crucial component for the Kinyarwanda system.

### 5.2 Person Neutralization in Kinyarwanda

The distinction just discussed for ni and –ri holds for third-person subjects, but with first- and second-person, recall that both use –ri for all the different semantic and syntactic environments. In other words, the contrast between copula is neutralized in first- and second-person.

\(^6\)I am grateful to Justine and Hellen Sikuku for their explanation of this contrast in Swahili. See also Diercks & Halpert 2013 for discussion of constructions of the type in (42).
I propose that the heightened attention to location (i.e. a form dedicated to expressing the location of third-person entities) is related to the neutralization in the third person, through a notion of central relevance. I define central relevance as information that is privileged in relevance to interlocutors in a given discourse. Given that –ri introduces a semantics of location, I argue that the location of third-party entities is more relevant to the immediate discourse than the location of the first- and second-person entities, which can be taken for granted, since they are participants in a conversation at a specific place and time. The location of third parties, however, is not as easily taken for granted. Hence, the distinction between the locative copula –ri and the general copula ni is not relevant for first- and second-person because the location of these participants can be assumed from real-world knowledge.

This notion has been used in other places in research on semantics, specifically a mix of the notions of current relevance and central coincidence. The notion of current relevance has been used in work on tense and aspect as a way of understand perfect tenses (see McCoard (1978); Li et al. (1982); Dahl & Hedin (2000)). In this work, current relevance is defined as "the continuance of the result of a past event into the present" (Dahl & Hedin 2000:391). When a sentence with a verb in the perfect is used (e.g. I have eaten), it is implicated that the event is relevant to the present conversation.

Central coincidence has been a notion invoked in literature that has noticed various instances where third person behaves differently from first- and second- person, especially in instances of split ergativity (Hale 1986; Demirdache & Uribe-Extebarria 1997; Coon & Preminger 2013; Ritter & Witschko 2014). The distinction between ni and –ri is only present for third-person entities because describing the third-person’s location is the most relevant; first- and second-person are both present and can be taken for granted in the conversation. This is because the notion of central relevance makes third-person present information more privileged, predicting a distinction between different forms in third-person present. If the division between the two copulas is due to the relevance of the current location of a third-party, then it is predicted by this analysis that the distinction between ni and –ri will also be neutralized in non-present tenses.

The prediction, then, is that there will be neutralization with third person in the past and future tenses regardless of semantics. This prediction is borne out; locatives and predicate nominals both use –ri in the past and the form –ba in the future ((b)-(c), respectively.)

(43) a. John a-ri i Kigali.
   John 1S-COP in Kigali
   ‘John is in Kigali.’

   b. John y-a-ri i Kigali.
   John 1S-PAST-COP in Kigali
   ‘John was in Kigali.’

   c. John a-za-ba i Kigali.
   John 1S-FUT-COP in Kigali
   ‘John will be in Kigali.’

(44) a. John ni umwarimu.
   John NI teacher
Table 2: Interactions with Tense and Person

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tense</th>
<th>Copula</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>present</td>
<td>ari ni</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>past</td>
<td>yari</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>future</td>
<td>azaba</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

‘John is a teacher.’

b. John y-a-ri umwarimu.
   John 1S-PAST-COP teacher
   ‘John was a teacher.’

c. John a-za-ba umwarimu.
   John 1S-FUT-COP teacher
   ‘John will be a teacher.’

The data in (43) – (44) show that the contrast in the present between \( ni \) and \( \text{–}ri \) is neutralized in the past and future. The (a) sentences exhibit the contrast between \( \text{–}ri \) and \( ni \), which must be used with locations and non-locations, respectively. In the (b) and (c) sentences, however, locations and non-locations are marked with tense-marked \( \text{–}ri \) in the past and tense marked \( \text{–}ba \) for the future. This situation is summarized in Table 2.

The neutralization of the two copulas with past and future tenses supports the hypothesis that the distinction between \( ni \) and \( \text{–}ri \) in Kinyarwanda is contingent upon the notion of current relevance.

6 Conclusion and Unresolved Research Questions

In this paper, I have documented the distribution of \( ni \) and \( \text{–}ri \) in Kinyarwanda. I showed that in Kinyarwanda (and Northeastern Bantu languages more generally), copulas are distinguished by whether the predicate is a location. Furthermore, I claimed that the neutralization of the contrast between \( ni \) and \( \text{–}ri \) is explained by locational current relevance, resulting in the contrast only appearing in the third-person singular.

Finally, I argued that against earlier work on the copula \( ni \) in Swahili, claiming that this copula is more likely a form from an earlier stage of the Northeastern Branch, capturing its distribution throughout Northeastern members of the family.

While this paper has focused on description and analysis of the copula the system in Kinyarwanda, many questions on the semantics of copulas remain for these languages, and the variation found across the Bantu family is fruitful for future typological investigation.

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