

**From focus marker to default declarative marker:
The unexpected evolution of the copula **ni* in Kilimanjaro Bantu**

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The most usual form of the copula in northeastern Bantu languages, namely **ni*, has also become in many of them a preverbal marker, displaying a number of grammatical functions. As noted by G ldemann (2003: 333), *ni*- as preverbal marker is most frequently used as a focus marker. Well-studied examples are to be found in Central Kenyan languages, such as Kikuyu E51, Tharaka E54, and Kamba E55. Based on the various types of focus defined by G ldemann (2003), it is notable that the presence of *ni*- is required in *predication* focus (1a), but excluded in *term* focus (1b). Preverbal *ni*- is thus used as an indicator of predication focus (PF). In other languages, e.g. Nyoro E11 illustrated in (2), *ni*- has specialized into a progressive marker. The evolution of a copula into a focus or progressive/continuous marker is cross-linguistically common (Heine & Kuteva 2002: 95-99).

A more surprising evolution, however, is observed in the Kilimanjaro Bantu (KB) languages (E60). The first descriptions and text collections published during the first half of the past century and reflecting roughly the languages as they were spoken around the First World War give for the Central Chaga dialects (E622) a picture very similar to that just seen for Central Kenya. This is illustrated in (3) with the Mwika dialect (E62b/E622C), where *predication* focus (3a) and *term* focus (3b) are distinguished by the presence vs absence of preverbal *n(i)*-. Apart from Central Chaga, few KB dialects had even approximately adequate published data until the 1970's, but those few at least showed no trace of preverbal *ni*. This is the case of Mashami (E62a/E621B), Siha (E621C) and Rwa (E61/E621A). Strikingly, whereas the situation is still the same with the last two mentioned, more recent grammatical analyses of KB show that all other dialects, including Mashami, have known an unprecedented expansion of the use of preverbal *ni* to the point that all positive declarative verbs have to be marked by it, independently of the pragmatic context. This is shown in (4).

In this paper, we examine the distribution of **ni* in northeastern Bantu languages according to its functions ranging from mere copula to preverbal focus marker. We pay special attention to its unexpected development obtained in KB, whereby it functions as a default marker in declarative sentences, and we propose some typological parallels and diachronic explanations.

Examples

- (1) a. **né**-nâ:-βá:nd-íé mo-o:nda wâ:kwa tɛɛ
 PF-SP1SG.REM-plant-ASP 3-field 3.POSS.1SG long_ago
 'I *planted my garden long ago*' (PF)
- b. nâ:-βá:nd-íé mo-o:nda wâ:kwa tɛɛ
 SP1SG.REM-plant-ASP 3-field 3.POSS.1SG long_ago
 'I *planted my garden long ago*' (TF) (Kamba, Ndumbu and Whiteley 1962)
- (2) a. tu-gúr-a
 SP1PL-buy-FV
 'we buy' (habitual)
- b. **ni**-tu-gúr-a
 PROG-SP1PL-buy-FV
 'we are buying' (Nyoro, Muzale 1998: 280)
- (3) a. Rumbe **na**-βe-woje wa-ka ma-kumi ya-βi
 Rumbe PF.SP1-IPFV-have.ASP 2-wife 6-ten 6-two
 'Rumbe *had twenty wives*,' (PF)
- b. u-mwi a-βe-woje ʃ-elya ʃ-itʃa
 1-one SP1-IPFV-have.ASP 7-food 7-good
 'one (of them) had *good food*.' (TF) (Stamberg 1938-39)
- (4) a. mamá **nǎ**-le-lu-βy-á lu-léemb-é kí-imbó ekyó fo !
 mother **ni**.SP1-PAST-OP1PL-say-FV SP1PL-NEG.sing-SBJV 7-song 7.DEM.II NEG
 'Mother told us not to sing this song.' (Mashami E621B, author's field notes)
- b. **nú**¹-kúnd-í ndʒí-imb-ê ?
ni.SP2SG-want-ASP SP1SG-sing-SBJV
 'Do you want me to sing?' (Mochi E622A, author's field notes)

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