

Copulas in existential constructions in Swahili

Hannah Gibson hg6@soas.ac.uk and Lutz Marten lm5@soas.ac.uk
SOAS, University of London

There are three copula forms in Swahili: the ‘pure’ copula (1a), the possessive copula (1b) and the locative copula (1c) (Ashton 1947, Schadeberg 1992).

- (1) a. Juma ni mw-alimu.
 Juma COP 1-teacher
 ‘Juma is a/the teacher.’
- b. Juma a-na wa-nafunzi wa-tano.
 Juma SM1-POSSCOP 2-student 2-five
 ‘Juma has five students.’
- c. Shule i-ko m-ji-ni.
 9.school SM9-LOCOP17 3-town-LOC
 ‘The school is in town.’

The relation between locative, presentational, existential and possessive constructions has long been noted cross-linguistically (e.g. Clark 1978, Freeze 1992, Lyons 1967). Indeed, of these three copula forms found in Swahili, the possessive copula and the locative copula are both found in existential constructions.

Swahili has two existential constructions, both of which are formed with a copula and a locative element. The first, **locative-possessive constructions**, are formed with a possessive copula and a locative subject marker. The second, **locative-copula constructions**, are formed with a locative copula and a non-locative subject marker agreeing with the theme argument. Both constructions can be used to express existence in a place or more abstract existence.

The locative-possessive construction is based on the possessive copula with the formative *-na* and locative concords from one of the locative noun classes. There are three locative classes in Swahili, approximately denoting proximity (class 16 *pa-*), distance (class 17 *ku-*) and interiority (class 18 *m-*). Locative-possessive constructions can be formed with each of them:

- (2) Pa-na wa-chache wa-ji-som-e-a-o kwa
 SM16-POSSCOP 2-few SM2-REFL-read-APPL-FV-REFCD2 with
 moyo ...
 3-heart
 ‘There are (only) a few who study from their heart ...’ [Sha Kie 34/5]
- (3) Je, ku-na maswali?
 Q SM17-POSSCOP 6-question
 ‘Are there any questions?’ [Hus Kin 043:015]
- (4) Ha-m-na sababu y-a ku-huzunika.
 NEG-SM17-POSSCOP 9.reason 9-GEN 15-become_sad
 ‘There is no reason for sadness.’ [Majira 2003-05-16]

The locative-copula construction involves a non-locative subject marker but a locative copula (*-po*, *-ko*, or *-mo*), which is formally identical to the so-called referential concord used in relative clauses and anaphoric demonstrative pronouns (5-7).

- (5) Wa-tu wa-po.
 2-person SM2-LOCOP16
 ‘There are people/people are there/available.’ [Kez Gam 052: 014]
- (6) Zi-ko sababu m-bili zi-li-zo-fany-a
 SM10-LOCOP17 10.reason 10-two SM10-PAST-REFCD10-make-FV
 kitabu hi-ki ki-andik-w-e.
 8-book DEM-8 SM8-write-PASS-SBJV
 ‘There are two reasons which made this book be written.’ [Jen Fal 1]
- (7) Sukari i-mo kabati-ni?
 9. sugar SM9-LOCOP18 cupboard-LOC
 ‘Is the sugar in the cupboard?’ [Ashton 1947: 131]

The difference in the specific locative morphology between the two constructions (locative subject concord vs locative copula/referential concord) is related to differences with respect to structure and interpretation: The locative-possessive construction has a more rigid word order and a more narrow range of interpretations than the locative-copula construction. It can only be used if the theme argument follows the copula (the locative phrase can precede, follow, or be omitted), and it always receives a locative-existential presentational interpretation. This is because locative subject markers in locative-possessive constructions function as expletive subject markers, and thus require the theme NP not to be encoded as a subject and to be placed after the predicate. The post-verbal position of the theme results in a presentational construction, and the use of the possessive copula in an existential interpretation.

In contrast, in locative-copula constructions, the non-locative subject marker can be used both anaphorically and as an expletive marker. This means that a much wider variety of word-orders are possible in the locative-copula construction, and that the construction is available for a wider range of interpretations, resulting from the respective placement and information-structural role of the locative and the theme argument.

This talk develops an account of these two existential constructions in Swahili and the role of subject agreement markers and copula forms in their structure and interpretation. It shows how the form and function of the construction types are partly distinct and proposes that the greater flexibility of locative-copula constructions in terms of structure and interpretation results from the pragmatic meaning and information structure of existential and locative constructions, and from the lexical constraints of how this meaning is expressed, which are imposed by the copulas themselves as well as the subject markers.