A sign language copula

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Copulas are attested in a wide variety of spoken languages (Pustet 2003) but sign languages are a very different story. In fact, we are not aware of any study confirming the existence of a sign language copula, although Jantunen (2008) hypothesizes that the sign PI in equative sentences in Finnish Sign Language may be in the process of becoming a copula. On the other hand, the absence of a copula has been reported for many sign languages, including BSL (Sutton-Spence & Woll 1999:110), Auslan (Johnston & Schembri 2007:202-203) and DGS (Pfau 2008).

   In this talk, we will argue that ÍTM (Íslenskt táknmál, Icelandic Sign Language) has a non-verbal copula that has been grammaticalized from a pronoun, a well-known grammaticalization path for copulas in spoken languages (see Gelderen 2011:128-142 and references cited there; on grammaticalization in sign languages, see Pfau & Steinbach 2006). The ÍTM copula is glossed as BIDD because of the mouthing that accompanies this sign. Apparently, BIDD derives from the sign DET-ER in DTS (Danish Sign Language), which is formed in the same way as BIDD except for the mouthing. (The historical relationship between ÍTM and DTS is fairly well established; see Aldersson & McEntee-Atalianis 2008). Among other things, DET-ER is used as a third person anaphoric pronoun referring to a topic, as in (1) (see http://www.tegnsprog.dk):

(1)   AUGUST,   DET-ER   OTTENDE   MÅNED
      August   it.is   eight   month

The clause-initial phrase in (1) (AUGUST) is seperated from the rest of the clause by an intonational break and it is co-articulated with non-manual topic marking, indicating that it is a left-peripheral element whereas DET-ER is the subject. Similar examples are also found with BIDD in ÍTM. However, in clear contrast to DET-ER, BIDD can be used as a copula with adjectival and nominal predicates, as in (2a,b), and also in equative sentences, as in (3a,b):

(2a)   PRO-1   (BIDD)   SVANGUR
       I   be   hungry   'I am hungry'

(2b)   MAMMA   PRO-1   (BIDD)   LÆKNIR
       mother my   be   doctor   'My mother is a doctor'

(3a)   REYKJAVÍK   (BIDD)   HÖFUÐBORG   ÍSLAND   'Reykjavík is the capital of
       Reykjavík   be   capital   Iceland   Iceland'

(3b)   ÞRETTÁN   JÓLASVEINN   (BIDD)   KERTASNÍKIR   'The thirteenth Christmas
       thirteen Christmas.troll be   Kertasníkir   troll is Kertasníkir'

The example in (2a) is important because it shows unambiguously that BIDD can be a copula preceded by a subject. (Apart from the fact that BIDD cannot refer to a first person pronoun, one can check this example at signwiki.is to see that there is no topic marking here.) The other examples can be articulated in two ways, i.e. with the clause-initial phrase as a subject preceding a copula or a topic followed by an anaphoric pronoun. This suggests that the

grammaticalization of BIDD into a copula involves reanalysis of the initial phrase as a subject. This is parallel to the diachronic development of copulas in many spoken languages, including Mandarin, Hebrew, Palestinian Arabic and Wappo (Li & Thompson 1977).

BIDD is optional as a copula but in its absence the AP/DP complement must be accompanied by a head nod. Otherwise, the head nod is optionally co-articulated with BIDD and its complement. As for the lexical category of copular BIDD, we assume that it is a particle rather than a verb due to its restricted syntactic distribution, e.g. the fact that (i) BIDD cannot be the complement of an auxiliary or a modal, and (ii) BIDD cannot follow its complement although OV is possible (for some speakers) in ÍTM. This suggest that BIDD occupies a head position in the functional layer above vP/VP although it is possibly base-generated inside VP where it enters into a local relation with its AP/DP complement.

BIDD is often described as an affirmative marker, just like copulas in some spoken languages. This can be seen most clearly in cases where BIDD alternates with the locative/existential sign LALLA:

(4a) ÞJÓÐLEIKHÚS   LALLA/BIDD   MIÐBÆR
       national.theater   located/be   town.center

(4b) LALLA/BIDD   FUNDUR   KVÖLD
       exist/be   meeting   tonight

Although we have rather limited data on locatives and existentials in ÍTM, it seems that BIDD is only used in such constructions as an affirmative marker. Thus, (4a) with BIDD would be appropriate as an answer to a yes-no question ('Where is the national theater'?). By contrast, (4a) with LALLA could be a neutral statement or a yes/no-question (with the appropriate non-manual markers) about the location of the national theater. Similar considerations apply to the contrast between BIDD and LALLA in existentials like (4b).

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