

BOOK REVIEW

Gábor Zólyomi: Copular clauses and focus marking in Sumerian. Warsaw/
Berlin: De Gruyter Open, 2014, pp. 200.

1. Introduction

Copular clauses and focus marking in Sumerian deals with copular clauses in the Sumerian language and provides a detailed discussion, typology and analysis of these constructions, with special emphasis on the role of the copula in specificational copular clauses and its relation to focus marking. The book provides an excellent overview of the typology of copular clauses in Sumerian, with detailed information on the formal properties, as well as the semantic characteristics of the constructions under discussion. The analysis of specificational copular constructions and the discussion of the grammaticalization of the copula into a focus marker (which is claimed to be weakly grammaticalized) is of interest to any historical linguist as it provides an example of biclausal constructions becoming monoclausal and the use of the grammaticalized focus marker being generalized to various constructions having nothing to do with the original linguistic context. To be more precise, Chapter 5 and 6 show that the Sumerian copula develops into a focus marker in biclausal copular constructions corresponding to English *it*-cleft sentences, and it is used to mark constituent focus on numeral expressions and on question words and to mark polarity focus and theticity on the whole sentence.

Since it is impossible to ask native speakers about their intuitions or for more information concerning certain constructions, the linguist has to make the most of the data available. This is especially true when one investigates information structure, which would be much easier if one had spoken data as well, or at least some information about the prosody of sentences. This study undertakes the challenge of studying information structure based on written data, and the author studies every sentence

and its context carefully and builds a systematic picture of the information structural properties of copular sentences and Sumerian focus marking in general.

2. Discussion

After a short introductory chapter, Chapter 1 introduces some basic features of Sumerian grammar, including the nominal template, the case system, the system of verbal affixes and finite verb forms. The chapter also introduces the types of texts that comprise the corpus used throughout the book, as well as the notational conventions used in the examples, their segmentation and glossing. It also provides a quick glance into the complexities of handling data from an extinct language.

Chapter 2 is titled “Non-verbal predicates in Sumerian” and is an overview of the type of copular clauses we find in the language. The Sumerian copula is *me* ‘to be’, which has an independent finite form and an enclitic variant, both of which appear clause finally. (There is no non-finite form.) Sumerian also has copula drop in 3rd person singular in certain contexts. The subject is in absolutive case (morphologically unmarked), a fact that becomes very important in the discussion of grammaticalization in Chapter 6. The predicative complement (PC) is generally also in absolutive case, but it may appear with genitive, ablative or equative case markings as well. I think it is worth noting that these latter cases seem to be internal to the nominal functioning as the predicate; for example, when a possessive or prepositional expression appears there in English as in *The book is John’s* or *My friend is from Hungary*. We are not dealing with predicative cases here, that is, these do not seem to be cases that the PCs receive because of their predicative status (contrary, for example, to case marking on secondary predicates in Hungarian and other languages).

The subject may be a full NP, a pronoun or just a pronominal agreement marker on the copula. Agreement with the subject in person and number is always present. Sometimes the copula may agree with the possessor of the subject if the possession is inalienable. The independent form and the enclitic copula are in complementary distribution, the independent one has to appear in subordinate copular clauses and when there is a verbal affix attached to it other than the marker of finiteness.

When the subject is 3rd person singular, the copula may be absent from the clause under some circumstances (so it is not a general copula drop in 3rd person). Firstly, the copula may be dropped in copular clauses that function as proper names and that have an overt lexical subject noun

present. The chapter provides several examples for this, however, it remains unclear to me how we know that these clauses are really clauses and not appositive constructions, that is, nominal expressions. Is it because there are examples with the copula that are obviously clausal, as the examples in (37)–(39)? If so, why are those examples with the copula treated as proper names and not as finite clauses? There may be independent, non-linguistic reasons for assuming that we are dealing with clauses here, but it is not obvious from the examples or the discussion. Secondly the copula is absent in certain seal inscriptions, but it is not clear to me how the example given in (40), and thus the whole group, is different from the first category (other than the genre of the text).

The copula is also absent in negative sentences with 3rd person singular subjects where the copula would be enclitic in the positive counterpart. In this case, the negative sentences only contain the negative particle /nu/, which has elsewhere been claimed not to be a copular element.

Finally, the copula may also be dropped in interrogative clauses with a 3rd person singular subject. The interesting thing is that there is an element glossed as COP in these sentences, but as Chapter 5 argues it is not a real copula but a focus marker, appearing on the interrogative phrase to mark its focal status.

After the general properties are introduced, Chapter 3 gives a classification of copular clauses. Both structural and semantic properties are taken into consideration in the typology, as Sumerian is claimed to be a language where information structure determines the word order.

Two main groups are distinguished based on the order of the subject (S) and the predicative complement (PC) with respect to the copula (COP): In one basic order we find the PC in front of the copula; this is the unmarked order. In the other, information structurally marked order, it is the subject that immediately precedes the copula.

In the first type, where the PC appears before the copula, we find three subgroups with various subtypes: (A) the topic of the clause is the subject argument; (B) the topic is another constituent, not the subject; and (C) there is no topic in the clause. The S PC COP order can be regarded as the basic word order of copular sentences, with the subject as topic and the PC and COP constituting the comment part of the sentence. The topical subject can be a full NP or it can appear only as the agreement marker on the copula. The subject can also appear as a pronoun before the PC, and in this case it often functions as a contrastive topic or the sentence is equative. Other constituents can be topics of the copular clause as well; a typical non-subject topic is the possessor of the PC, which then appears

outside the PC on the left periphery. Copular clauses with no topic are attested, too; they are generally PCs in another copular clause.

A note on terminology comes up here. The term ‘topic’ is used both in the structural and in the notional sense, which makes the above classification based on word order slightly confusing. Topic is referred to as a structural position, a place on the left periphery of Sumerian sentences where constituents which are topical, discourse old, or known are found – this covers the use of the term whenever there is an overt nominal in the clause. Assuming this use of the term, it is strange to find (enclitic) topics appearing in the comment part of the sentence. This is the case when the topical subject is only expressed by the (pronominal) agreement marker on the verb. (Importantly, there are agreement markers that are not topical as well, as indicated by the existence of topicless copular clauses.) Once one gets used to the fact that ‘topic’ is both a place and a notion independent of place in the clause, it becomes easier to process the classification.

In the second big group of copular clauses, we find the subject before the copula, and the PC precedes them. These are specificational copular clauses, and the subject is in focus. The subject can be a pronoun or a full NP (e.g., a proper name). In these sentences, it is either the PC or often the left-dislocated possessor from the PC that functions as the topic of the clause.

The information structure of the sentence is, thus, characterized by topic constituent(s) on the left periphery and the focus left adjacent to the verb. There are also biclausal copular constructions and they can involve a clefted focus. The basic word order corresponds to neutral sentences, but in principle it can also involve focus on the PC (without a change in word order). Since we do not have access to information about the intonational patterns of Sumerian sentences, only the context can help identify such focused predicative constituents.

Chapter 4 introduces copular biclausal constructions (CBC), the most complex sentence types discussed in the book. In these sentences, the initial clause is always copular, and one of the participants of the copular clause and one of the other clause is coreferential. These sentences can be attributive or specificational, and Chapters 4 and 5 deal with the two types, respectively.

In attributive CBCs, the participant that is shared between the two clauses is the topic in the initial copular clause. It is argued that the construction involves a paratactic relative clause (Comrie & Kuteva 2005) and that functionally they overlap with appositive constructions.

As far as their relation to relative clauses is concerned, it is shown that Sumerian has regular relative clauses, both finite and non-finite. When it comes to relative clauses involving the copula (which are always finite), the subject cannot be relativized, CBCs are found instead. The examples correspond to English sentences of the following type: *John is a sailor; he built a house* (p. 70). These can be analyzed as paratactic relative clauses: the relationship between the two clauses is rather loose (there is no relative pronoun either), basically they involve two full clauses adjacent to each other and sharing a participant (Comrie & Kuteva 2005).

This construction has the same function as appositives, the PC attributes a property to the subject. Appositives involve an anchor and an apposition, for example, *John, my friend*, and the apposition can be of various semantic types, one of which is attributive (see Heringa 2011 on appositives). In section 4.3, a parallel is drawn between the two constructions, and the conclusion is that CBCs with an overt NP subject in the initial copular clause correspond to appositives systematically, but there is no appositive counterpart to CBCs that have no overt subject or have a pronominal subject in the copular clause. This is claimed to be so because the distribution of pronominal subjects is restricted. It is also important to note that in many cases, the difference between attributive CBCs and attributive appositive constructions is only structural, they both express a predicational relation between the two constituents, but one is a finite clause indicated by the (agreeing) copula, the other is a nominal expression.

Sumerian CBCs have a further function, however; one where the copular clause expresses reason or concession. Furthermore, the topical shared participant of the two clauses in CBCs may be the possessor of the PC of the initial copular clause as well, especially when the subject is only expressed by the agreement marker on the copula.

The last section of Chapter 4 outlines a diachronic change the inputs of which are CBCs. The essence of the change is that the copula of the paratactic relative clause (that is, of the initial copular clause) may become the standard marker of similitive constructions. This means that a sentence such as *The temple is a great mountain, it reaches to the sky* may become *The temple like a great mountain reaches to the sky* (p. 97). A change like this turns a biclausal structure into a monoclausal one. Although there are still two predications in it, there is only one verb. This diachronic change is one of the ways a copula may grammaticalize and become a formal marker of some syntactic relation other than simply predication. The similitive monoclausal structure seems to be used in literary texts.

Chapter 5 discusses specificational copular biclausal constructions and is the main chapter on the historical aspect of the analysis as it deals with the grammaticalization of the copula into a focus marker and the change in sentence structure it goes together with. It is shown that originally biclausal constructions became monoclausal after the copular linker of the main clause and the subordinate clause had become a grammatical marker of focus instead of a predicate. The reconstruction proposes that the syntactic change took place in specificational biclausal copular constructions. Structurally, these sentences are characterized with a word order where the subject is found adjacent to the copula (in attributive CBCs, the PC is the one adjacent to the copula). Semantically, they involve (identificational) focus on the subject of the copular clause. This sentence type is said to correspond to English *it*-clefts.

Identificational focus is associated with a preverbal structural position, which means that focal constituents are either simply preverbal or are expressed with the cleft construction. Section 5.2 discusses Sumerian cleft constructions. The Sumerian cleft is compared to English *it*-clefts, but it differs from English in various respects, the most important being that the subject of the copular clause is in focus and that the copula agrees with it. This means that instead of constructions like *It is me who you saw*, we have structures corresponding to the non-English sentence *I am you saw* with focus on the precopular subject.

The clause corresponding to the English relative clauses is not a subordinate clause in Sumerian, a claim supported by the fact that the enclitic copula is found in these sentences, instead of the independent form typical of subordinate clauses. In fact, the argument is that by the period of most of the linguistic data the book discusses, the originally biclausal structure was reanalyzed and the copula was already a focus marker. The original construction was a specificational CBC, with a paratactic relative, which then changed into a monoclausal structure. The grammatical element, which was originally the copula of a specificational copular clause, is still verbal and agrees with the focus, but its distribution is broader.

The claim that the element that looks like the copula is a focus marker is supported by evidence from case marking. What would have been the subject of the original copular clause is not necessarily in the absolutive case that is typical of regular copular clauses; its case marking depends on its syntactic function in the “content clause” (p. 114).

When numerical expressions appear in this construction and are followed by the focus marker, the number is interpreted as ‘exactly *n*’, which is consistent with it being a focus. It is proposed that the copula is attached to the numeral expression to emphasize the ‘exactly *n*’ reading.

Further evidence to the generalized focus marker function of the copula is that it appears with constituent questions. In interrogative sentences, the question word may appear sentence initially or right before the verb. When it is sentence initial – that is, when its focus function is not inherently shown by the word order – it is followed by the copula in its 3rd person singular enclitic form. When the question word is in front of the verb, it does not have to be followed by this marker, but there are examples where it is, which further supports the grammatical marker status of the copula.

It is also suggested that the grammaticalization is not complete: the purely structural focus marking strategy is possible as well, the morphological marking is not obligatory when the focused constituent is preverbal.

Chapter 6 provides further constructions that involve the focus marking function of the copula. One context where it is used is *thetic* sentences (in the sense of Kuroda 1972), which are presentational sentences generally expressing all new information, introducing new entities into the discourse. Here, the whole sentence expresses information focus, and this is marked by a clause-final copula.

This copular element marks focus in sentences with polarity focus as well. These constructions are used “to emphasize the speaker’s belief of the truth or factualness of the proposition expressed by the clause” (p. 180). The scope of the focus is the polarity of the clause. Polarity focus can also be marked with a prefix and the two markers can even appear at the same time, doubly encoding focus in those sentences.

The question whether the constructions in Chapter 5 and those in Chapter 6 can be related is raised but the answer is only a tentative possibility based on typological evidence. I would like to note that the fact that *thetic* sentences are marked with the copula as well suggests that the “copula”/focus marker may be a fully generalized functional element in the sense that it is not only identificational foci that are marked but also information focus. Unless one analyzes the *thetic* sentences provided in Chapter 6 as structures involving identificational focus on the whole clause or on the verbal predicate – which is plausible, especially in the case of existential sentences –, they are possibly analyzed as simply containing all new information, that is, involving information focus. The other contexts seem to involve identificational focus; even polarity focus can be argued to have identificational (or contrastive) focus on the polarity of the sentence. This suggests that this function of the copula was generalized, and the system is only weakly grammaticalized in the sense that focus marking is not obligatorily morphological.

Chapter 7 provides a brief summary of the main points of the previous chapters and an outlook on Sumerian linguistics and the future of descriptive or formal studies of the language.

3. Conclusion

The summary says that the book was meant to be for linguists and Sumerologists alike, and as a non-Sumerologist linguist, I must say it has succeeded in accomplishing at least one part of its goal. The discussion of the often very complex data is detailed enough that even someone with no background on Sumerian can follow, and the proposals and generalizations are put forth in a way that is surely accessible to all readers with some linguistic background.

This book is an important piece of work for people working on the Sumerian language, as well as for general or historical linguists interested in the typology of copular clauses and in the grammaticalization processes that may be related to the copula or to focus marking in any language. The book is also of interest to the general public since Sumerian is one of the oldest documented languages, with linguistic data as old as 5000 years (the texts analyzed in the book come from the 3rd and 2nd millennia BC). The fact that we find the same complexity of structures and the same type of diachronic processes that characterize languages thousands of years later is evidence of natural language being a part of our biological endowment and not a cultural development of recent times.

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