

Subject agreement with denominal copulatives in Zulu¹

Sonja E. Bosch

University of South Africa, Pretoria

Subject agreement with denominal copulatives appears not to be compulsory, as is the case with verbs. Zulu grammarians are not, however, of one mind regarding the usage of the subject concord in denominal copulative constructions. The purpose of this article is to investigate subject agreement with denominal copulatives in a discourse framework, as certain discourse strategies such as pronominalization and focus may influence the employment of concordial agreement. The findings concerning subject agreement with denominal copulatives in discourse are discussed in the light of problems arising from the views of traditional grammarians.

S. Afr. J. Afr. Lang. 1986, 6: 57–61

Onderwerpskongruensie met denominale kopulatiewe blyk nie verpligtend te wees soos in die geval van werkwoorde nie. Onder Zulu-grammatici heers egter nie eenstemmigheid wat die gebruik van die onderwerpskakel in denominale kopulatiewe betref nie. Die doel van hierdie artikel is om ondersoek na onderwerpskongruensie met denominale kopulatiewe in 'n diskoersverband in te stel, aangesien sekere diskoersstrategieë soos bv. pronominalisasie en fokus die gebruik van onderwerpskakels mag beïnvloed. Die bevindinge aangaande onderwerpskongruensie met denominale kopulatiewe in diskoers word in die lig van probleme wat uit die beskouinge van tradisionele grammatici voortspruit, beskou.

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In this article the functionality of the intermittent use of subject agreement with denominal copulatives in Zulu, as set out by traditional grammarians, is investigated. Subject agreement with denominal copulatives does not seem to be a compulsory phenomenon in Zulu as is the case with verbs. There are indications, however, that Zulu grammarians are by no means of one mind as far as the usage of the subject concord in denominal copulative constructions is concerned.

Doke (1973:217) as well as Van Eeden (1956:399) state that the omission of the subject concord of a subject noun which is expressed before a denominal copulative, seems to be connected with class correlation. In other words, the subject concord may be omitted if the subject noun belongs to the same class as the denominal copulative, for example

- (1) *Ibhubesi yikati* 'The lion is a cat'
5 5

On the other hand, subject agreement usually takes place if the subject noun and the denominal copulative belong to different classes, according to Doke (1973:217) and Van Eeden (1956:402), for example

- (2) *Ingonyama iyikati* 'The lion is a cat'
9 9 5

The foregoing statements by these two grammarians cannot be regarded as the final answer to the problem of subject agreement with denominal copulatives, since literary texts show that the above-mentioned rules are not applied consistently, for example

- (3) *Uyazi ukuthi uMthiyane yindoda emi kahle.* . . .
1 9 (Ntuli, 1971:100)
'He knows that Mthiyane is a man who is well-to-do, . . .'
(4) *Phela umthetho wukudla kwethu lena emadolobheni;*
3 15
ehe, wukudla kwethu, . . . (Nyembezi, 1972:44)
' "Indeed the law is our food far away in the towns; yes it is our food," . . . '

The above extracts are only a few of the examples found illustrating nouns which do not agree concordially with a succeeding denominal copulative, although they belong to different classes and should, according to Doke (1973:217) and Van Eeden (1956:402) show subject agreement.

Van Rooyen, Taljaard, Msimang & Bosch (1984:51) claim that the use of grammatical agreement personalizes the

Sonja E. Bosch

Department of African Languages, University of South Africa,
P.O. Box 392, Pretoria, 0001 Republic of South Africa

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copulative, i.e. singles out a certain person if [+humans] are concerned or definitizes it if [-humans] are concerned. The denominal copulative without subject concord has an 'impersonal and indefinite connotation' according to Van Rooyen *et al.* (1984:51), who do not, however, give examples in context, which makes it difficult to interpret their point of view.

According to mother tongue speakers, the following two sentences, the first of which incorporates the subject concord in the copulative construction and the second of which appears without subject concord in the copulative, both carry the same meaning.

(5a) *UJohn ungumfana* 'John is a boy'

(5b) *UJohn ngumfana* 'John is a boy'

Consequently it is not clear why Van Rooyen *et al.* (1984) should consider the first to be a 'personal' copulative and the second an 'impersonal' copulative, especially since the latter cannot be translated as 'it is' as Van Rooyen *et al.* (1984) state it to be the case when the subject concord is omitted.

As for the statement of Van Rooyen *et al.* (1984:51) that the main function of the concords employed with denominal copulatives is to act as anaphora, it should be noted that in sentences such as (5a) the subject antecedent precedes the copulative directly and therefore the subject concord has no longer any pronominal features. For this reason, it does not seem that subject agreement with denominal copulatives can be described as anaphoric in all cases.

Ziervogel, Louw & Taljaard (1976:79,103) differentiate between descriptive and identifying copulatives on semantic and morphological grounds. It is not, however, possible to distinguish between these two groups semantically according to the examples given by Ziervogel *et al.* (1976):

(6a) *UPiti uyindoda* 'Peter is a man'

(6b) *Ibhubesi yisilwane* 'The lion is a wild animal'

Both examples could be interpreted as 'descriptive' copulatives semantically, because in both cases a noun is described by another noun with reference to its quality. On the other hand, both examples could just as well be interpreted semantically as 'identifying' copulatives, because in each case two nouns are identified with each other. The explanation for the use and omission of the subject concord with denominal copulatives by Ziervogel *et al.* (1976:78,103) is therefore confusing and unsatisfactory.

Summing up one could say that the most immediate problem concerning denominal copulatives is the difference of opinion among grammarians regarding the employment of concordial agreement. Although all the above-mentioned grammarians distinguish morphologically between the forms with and without subject agreement, they do not agree on the conditions concerning the use of a subject concord or not. Not one of the grammarians mentioned examines the phenomenon of subject agreement with denominal copulatives within discourse relation, but they base their findings on isolated sentences or even words. In the following section an attempt is made to solve this problem by referring to the denominal copulative construction in a discourse framework. In this manner, existing theories are set aside for the time being in order to examine the denominal copulative in natural discourse, where discourse factors could have an influence on its usage and construction. In the past, discourse analyses have already shed a great deal of light on problems encountered in Bantu languages.

Denominal copulatives preceded by antecedents

In this section copulatives preceded directly by their antecedents are viewed within discourse relation. The following extract from one of Nyembezi's novels includes two examples of denominal copulatives which are directly preceded by their respective antecedents.

(7) '*Ngenziwa ngoba bengithi uzongitshela into enkulu ekujabulisayo, kanti uzongitshela imibhedo ngesonto.*'

'*Kanti ngumbhedo yini uma ngikhuluma ngesonto? Linani isonto Jebh?*' kubuza uAlice ngomoya woku-dumala.

'*Ungangizwa kabi Mntakwethu. Angisho ukuthi uya-*

bhedo, ngithi isonto lingumbhedo. Yini yona isonto?' . . .

'*Kanti wena awuzalwa yini ngamakhohwa?*'

'*Ngizalwa yiziphukuphuku ezifana nani nje Alice.*'

'*Hawu! Hawu! Hawu! Jabulani, ungasho kanjani ukuthi*

abazali bakho yiziphukuphuku?'

(Nyembezi, 1977:108-109)

'*"I react like that because I thought you were going to*

tell me something important which pleases you, but you

will tell me nonsense about the church."

"*But is it nonsense if I talk about the church? What is*

wrong with the church Jebh?" asks Alice despondently.

"*But you misunderstand me, my sweetheart. I do not say*

that you are talking nonsense, I am saying that the church

is nonsense. What is the church?" . . .

"*But weren't you born from Christians?"*

"*I was born from fools who are just like you, Alice."*

"*Don't! Don't! Don't! Jabulani, how can you say that*

your parents are fools?"'

It will be noticed that in the first denominal copulative, *isonto lingumbhedo* 'the church is nonsense', subject agreement takes place, which according to mother tongue speakers is optional in this case. Therefore *isonto ngumbhedo* would have been equally grammatical. The second denominal copulative, *abazali bakho yiziphukuphuku* 'your parents are fools', is used without subject agreement in the extract, although concordial agreement with its antecedent is quite permissible to Zulu speakers, i.e. *abazali bakho bayiziphukuphuku*.

The intermittent use of the subject concord indicates that in cases such as these, the subject concord is merely an agreement morpheme and that pronominalization does not take place when an antecedent directly precedes a denominal copulative. Wilkes (1976:69) ascribes this to the fact that in Zulu, pronominal features of concordial morphemes probably faded when they were used in combination with their nominal antecedents, for instance in the case of object concords with the long form of the present tense. This could be an explanation for the intermittent use of the subject concord with denominal copulatives which are directly preceded by an antecedent.

In examples from literature it was observed that the denominal copulative shows subject agreement with its antecedent when focus or contrast is involved. Givón (1976:151 *et seq.*) and Ponelis (1976:55 *et seq.*) hypothesize in their theories concerning the development of subject agreement, that the subject concord was originally a focus morpheme which developed into an agreement morpheme. The subject concord could possibly still have the function of a focus morpheme in cases of denominal copulatives showing agreement with nominal antecedents directly preceding them.

Louwrens (1979:16) sums up focus as a process according

to which prominence is given to a certain item in a sentence. According to Chafe there is a link between focus and contrast in so far that

'What is communicated by a contrastive sentence is that a certain focus item rather than other possible cases is correct, . . .' (1976:35)

Returning to (7), something is nonsense according to Jabulani, but Alice is not sure what Jabulani is referring to. He makes himself clear by stating that it is not Alice who is talking nonsense, but it is the church which is nonsense. In other words *isonto* 'the church', the antecedent of the denominal copulative *lingumbhedo* '(it) is nonsense', is focused or contrasted in the context.

Another example is found in another novel by Nyembezi. Ndebenkulu told Mkhwanazi how upset he was when MaNtuli laughed at him when he fell from the cart. But he had accepted it as a woman's sense of humour.

- (8) *Wathi, 'Ehe, ngiyabazi kakhulu abantu besifazane Mkhwanazi. Abanawo umqondo ohluzekile, umqondo ofana nowethu thina madoda; cha, abanawo. Baze babe ngcono abantu besifazane basemadolobheni. Laba basemaphandleni bayingozi. Indoda bangayidalela amacala amakhulu bona bengaboni.'* (Nyembezi, 1972:44)

'He said, "Yes, I know women very well, Mkhwanazi. They do not have a lightened mind, a mind that is like that of us men; no they don't. The women of the towns are (eventually) better. These of the country are a danger. They can cause a man big debts without realizing it."'

In this extract Ndebenkulu contrasts the women of the towns with the women of the country. He focuses *laba basemaphandleni* 'these of the country' in order to let Mkhwanazi understand that not all women are the same as far as sense of humour is concerned.

The use of a subject concord with denominal copulatives involved with focus or contrast constructions could well be to augment the idea of focus or contrast. Such a subject morpheme could possibly still be functioning as a focus morpheme.

Denominal copulatives not preceded by antecedents

The examples dealt with are denominal copulatives which are not immediately preceded by a subjectival antecedent.

- (9) *'Yehe Ntombi kaMphemba; naye-ke ukhulumisa okwakho nje. Uqhakambise bona ubukhulu bakhe. Uthi ungumuntu omkhulu.'*

'Akathi. Unguye. Unegama elikhulu lomuntu. Usho ukuthini uma ukhuluma kanje MaNtuli?'

'... Angithi incwadi yakhe ifikele ezandleni zethu uhlezi lapha etafuleni udla amasi? Ingani awuzange ungitshele ukuthi kanti ngumuntu omaziyo lona? ...' (Nyembezi, 1972:38)

'Hey, girl of Mphemba; he too finds fault with you. He boasts of his greatness. He says **he is a great person**.' 'He does not say, he is it. He has a great name this person. What are you trying to say if you talk like this, MaNtuli?'

'... I thought his letter arrived in our hands when you were sitting here at the table eating sour milk? Why didn't you ever tell me that it is a **person** you know this? ...'

In the above extract the first denominal copulative *ungumuntu* shows concordial agreement with its antecedent

uNdebenkulu and is therefore morphologically pronominalized, while the second denominal copulative *ngumuntu* which also has the noun *uNdebenkulu* as antecedent, appears without subjectival concord.

The translation of this text also indicates that semantic pronominalization has taken place in *ungumuntu*, namely '**... he is a (great) person**'. The translation of *ngumuntu* which is not morphologically pronominalized, indicates the use of the empty 'it', i.e. 'it is a person'.

In Zulu literature numerous examples are found which conform to the above-mentioned finding that (a) subject agreement in the denominal copulative results in semantic pronominalization, for example

- (10) *'Uyabona! ... lalela ngikutshela, uSonayiphi ulungile noma engafundiswanga ngoba uyindoda eqotho elimelayo izwi layo. ...'* (Gumbi, 1972:10)

'"You see! ... listen let me tell you, Sonayiphi is in order even if he is not learned, because **he is a man** who is reliable and who uses his voice. ..."'

- (11) *'... Ufundisiwe uJohn na?'* *'Angikamazi kahle, kodwa ukwenza kwakhe sengathi ungumuntu ofundisiwe.'* (Gumbi, 1972:37)

'"... Is John learned?'

'I do not know him well yet, but he acts as though **he is a learned man**.''

and that (b) the omission of subject agreement in the denominal copulative may be expressed as 'it is', as illustrated in the following extracts.

- (12) *'Ake ubheke dade isipho sami esivela kuJohn.'*

'Hawu ngumuphi lowo John?'

'Yisigulana sami esesaphila, sithi siyabonga ngoba ngangisiphethe kahle.' (Gumbi, 1972:37)

'"Sister, do have a look at my present which comes from John."

"Which one is John?"

"**It is my patient** who is still alive, he is thanking me because I looked after him well."

- (13) *Waqhuba uNdebenkulu ekhuluma noMaNtuli kodwa amehlo elokhu ethe mbe kuThemba.*

'Uyabona-ke Nkosikazi, ngishilo lapho kulendodana yakho, angithi yindodana yakho kambe lena Nkosikazi?' (Nyembezi, 1972:32)

'Ndebenkulu continued talking to MaNtuli but his eyes were fixed on Themba all the time.

"You see Madam, I said here to this son of yours, I presume **it is your son** this, Madam?"'

In (12) and (13) the context permits the substitution of semantic pronominalization for the empty 'it', i.e. *yisigulana sami* could be interpreted as 'it/he is my patient' and *yindodana yakho* as 'it/he is your son'.

It could be concluded at this stage that when the subject concord is used with a denominal copulative, the antecedent of which does not directly precede such a copulative, pronominalization has usually taken place, whereas when the subject concord is omitted, the denominal copulative could be interpreted as either 'it is' or as semantically pronominalized, depending on the context.

Denominal copulatives with *ku-*

In general, traditional grammarians make little or no reference to the use of the indefinite *ku-* as agreement morpheme with denominal copulatives. This phenomenon seems to be fairly

common, except in the cases of denominal copulatives preceded by [+human] antecedents. However, the following examples of [+human] antecedents with *ku-* as subject concord are found in literature.

- (14) 'UMbheduka bayamethemba abantu balapha ekusebenzeni kwamakhambi akhe. Selokhu afika nje kuhlale kutheleka amahle kuyena, nabantu abaqhamuka ezindaweni ezinezinyanga zazo imbala. Kuthi kanti ngumuntu othanda ukubiza kakhulu bamlandele abantu. Noma kungumuntu ongangenamisi, bengithi njengoba izinto ziyinkinga kanje awuthubuleke nakuyena nje ukuze abone angakwenza ngalezizinwele . . .' (Ntuli, 1971:74-75)

'The people here trust Mbheduka with the administering of his medicinal herbs. Since he arrived, rows (of people) have come to him, even people who appeared from places which actually have their own herbalists. But although he is a person who likes to charge a lot, the people follow him. Even if he is not a likeable person, I thought that because things are such a mystery, you might as well consult him too, so that he can see whether he can do anything with these hairs . . .'

- (15) Uyazi ukuthi uMthiyane yindoda emi kahle, inamatekisi, kanti kwazona nje izimoto zasekhaya zinhle ngokunye. Baze bejwayelana ngoba uKhumfela kungumuntu onolwazi lokukhanda izimoto, wase ede emsiza uMthiyane. (Ntuli, 1971:100)

'He knows that Mthiyane is a man who is well-to-do, he has taxis, in fact, in comparison to the cars at home they are attractive in their own way. They eventually became familiar with each other because Khumfela is a person who has knowledge of repairing cars, and then from time to time he helped Mthiyane.'

Mother tongue speakers agree that the appropriate class prefixes may substitute the indefinite *ku-* without bringing about any semantic change in examples (14) and (15). *Ku-* could have derogatory implications in (14) since the subjectival antecedent *uMbheduka* is derogated in the text as such. This does not, however, explain the use of *ku-* in (15).

The only other explanation for the use of *ku-* in (15) seems to be that the present tense use of *ku-* as concordial morpheme with denominal copulatives is developing on the analogy of the use of *ku-* in the compound tenses. Although no explanation for the use of *ku-* in the compound tenses has been found as yet, the latter construction is abundant in literature, whereas the former is relatively scarce. Compare the following.

- (16a) *UMpande wayeyinkosi* 'Mpande was a king'
(16b) *UMpande kwakuyinkosi* 'Mpande was a king'

Mother tongue speakers confirm the fact that there is no semantic difference between (16a) and (16b). The employment of *ku-* as agreement morpheme with copulative predicates in compound tenses is common practice. As far as the present tense is concerned, however, a limited number of denominal copulatives with *ku-* is found in Zulu literature.

Figure 1 shows the equivalents of denominal copulatives in the present and compound tenses.

It is possible that we have to do with some historical development here. A classless subject concord *ku-* possibly developed from the true class concord. Being classless, *ku-* must have been deemed redundant due to its semantic emptiness and therefore it was probably omitted altogether

Present Tense	Compound Past Tense
<i>uyinkosi</i>	<i>wayeyinkosi</i>
<i>kuyinkosi</i>	<i>kwakuyinkosi</i>
<i>-yinkosi</i>	<i>kwakuyinkosi</i>

Figure 1 Equivalents of denominal copulatives in the present and compound tenses

in the present tense. In the compound past tense, however, the agreement morpheme, be it the true class concord or the indefinite *ku-*, is an important bearer of tense and may therefore not be omitted.

This postulated development is only applicable to denominal copulative predicates and not to verbs as such.

Zulu could well be following in the footsteps of other Bantu languages such as Northern Sotho where a classless subject concord for the compound past tense with copulative nouns is very common, for example

- (17) *Mpande e be e le kgoši* 'Mpande was a king'

The construction with the subject concord agreeing with the antecedent is seldom used according to a mother tongue informant, i.e.

- (18) *Mpande o be a le kgoši* 'Mpande was a king'

In the present tense a classless copulative formative *ké* (without subject agreement) is used throughout in Northern Sotho, except in the first and second persons. There is no agreement between subject noun and denominal copulative, for example

- (19a) *Basadi ké bašomi* 'The women are workers'
(19b) *Ké puku* 'It is a book'

One could possibly postulate that Northern Sotho has developed one step further than Zulu by discarding all subject agreement (except first and second persons which are pronominalized) with denominal copulatives in the present tense. In the compound past tense the classless subject concord is much more common than the true subject concord.

Against the foregoing background, the possible future course of development of the denominal copulative construction in Zulu may now be postulated as follows:

The subject concord, be it the true class concord or the classless *ku-*, could be omitted completely, as is the case in Northern Sotho. The true class concords of the second and first persons are pronominal morphemes and will therefore not be discarded. As far as the compound tenses are concerned, the use of the classless subject concord would probably gain ground over that of the true class concord, but being a bearer of tense, it would probably not be omitted altogether.

Conclusion

Subject agreement with denominal copulatives is not influenced by noun classes, nor does subject agreement convey definiteness or a personal meaning as indicated by traditional grammarians. Subject agreement with denominal copulatives which are not directly preceded by their antecedents, is determined by pronominalization.

Pronominalization, being a discourse factor, should be studied in a discourse framework and not in isolated words

or sentences. Subject agreement is optional in denominal copulatives which are directly preceded by their subject nouns.

The presence of subjectival concords in denominal copulatives is only semantically relevant when pronominalization takes place. However, when denominal copulatives are, for instance, directly preceded by their antecedents, subject agreement has no semantic influence. Therefore it does not seem plausible to classify denominal copulatives on the basis of subject agreement or not, as some traditional grammarians do. It is more convenient to follow the classification of Lanham (1953) and Van Rooyen *et al.* (1984), i.e. classifying all denominal copulatives under one heading, for example 'identifying copulatives'.

Furthermore, it seems as though a classless subject concord *ku-* is developing as concordial morpheme with denominal copulatives in the compound tenses. The present tense equivalent of this classless concord is either *ku-* or the omission altogether of a subject concord.

Note

1. This article summarizes some of the most important findings which were arrived at in a masters dissertation entitled *Subject and object agreement in Zulu*, Pretoria: University of Pretoria, which was completed in 1985. Financial aid by the HSRC for the purpose of this research is gratefully acknowledged.

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