Subject agreement with denominal copulatives in Zulu

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.


Onderwerpskongruensie met denominale kopulatiewe blyk nie verpligend te wees soos in die geval van werkwoorde nie. Onder Zulu-grammatikiers het egter nie eenstemmigheid wat die gebruik van die onderwerpsakakel in denominal kopulatiewe betreft 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. pronominalisatie en fokus die gebruik van onderwerpsakakels mag beïnvloed. Die bevindinge aangaande onderwerpskongruensie met denominale kopulatiewe in diskoers word in die lig van probleme wat uit die beskouing van tradisionele grammatici voortspruit, beskou.

S. Tydskr. Afrikatale 1986, 6: 57–61

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 tyikati ‘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 eni kahle, . . .
   1 9
   (Ntuli, 1971:100)
   ‘He knows that Mthiyane is a man who is well-to-do,’ . . .

4) ‘Phela amthetho 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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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 Nyenbezi’s novels includes two examples of denominal copulatives which are directly preceded by their respective antecedents.

(7) ‘Ngenziwa ngoba bengitihi uzongishela into enkululukubaliso, kanti uzongishela imbube no ngesonto.’

‘Kanti ngumbhelo yini uma ngikholuma ngesonto? Linani isonto Jeh?’ kubuza uAlice ngomoya wokudumela.

‘Ungangizwa kabi Mnikwethu. Angisho ukuthi uyabheka, ngithi isonto ungumbhelo. Yini yona isonto?’

‘Kanti wena umaza ziva yi ngamakholwa?’

‘Ngizalwa yiziphukuphukuphu ezifana nani nje Alice.’

‘Hawu! Hawu! Hawu! Jabulani, unghasho kanjani ukuthi abazali bakho yiziphukuphukuphu?’


‘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 Jeh?’ 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 lingumbhelo ‘the church is nonsense’, subject agreement takes place, which according to mother tongue speakers is optional in this case. Therefore isonto ngumbhelo would have been equally grammatical. The second denominal copulative, abazali bakho yiziphukuphukuphu ‘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 bayiziphukuphukuphu.

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. Givon (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.

Lougrens (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 ungumbhento '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.


'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 with the towns of the country. He focuses laba basemaphandleli '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 subjectivl antecedent.

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

'Atakhi. Unguye. Unegama elikhulu lomuntu. Usho ukuthini uma ukhulumisa kanje MaNtuli?'


'I said, 'Hey, girl of Mphemba; it 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 subjectivl 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! . . . Inza lela ngikutshele, uSampiyi phthungile nomnda engqufundswanga ngoba uyinonda eqotho eimelayo izi layo. . . . ' (Gumbi, 1972:10)

' 'You see! . . . listen let me tell you, Sonayiphile 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 kale, kodwa ukwenza kwakhe sengathi ungumuntu ufundisiwe.' (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 dahe isipho sami esivela kuJohn.'

'Hawu ngumuphi lowo John?'

'Yisigulana sami esesaphila, sithi siyabonga ngoba ngangisipithe kahe.' (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 ekulumela noMaNtuli kodwa umhlelo eloku ethe mbe kuThembu.

'Uyabona-ke Nkosikazi, ngishilo lapho kulendodana yakhko, angithi yinndodana yakhko kambe lona Nkosikazi?' (Nyembezi, 1972:32)

'Ndebenkulu continued talking to MaNtuli but his eyes were fixed on Thembu 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 yinndodana yakhko 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.


‘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...’


(Ntuli, 1971:100)

‘He knows that Mhiyane 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 Mhiyane.’

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 subjectiv al 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) UMmpande wayeyinkosi ‘Mpande was a king’
(16b) UMmpande 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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Present Tense</th>
<th>Compound Past Tense</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>uyinkosi</td>
<td>wayeyinkosi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kuyinkosi</td>
<td>kwakuyinkosi</td>
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<tr>
<td>-yinkosi</td>
<td>kwakuyinkosi</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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 kgoší ‘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 kgoší ‘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.

**Références**


