

## 120. Zero Copula for Predicate Nominals

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### 1. Defining the values

This map shows the areal distribution of zero copula encoding for predicate nominals. That is, the map indicates whether a given language is like English, in which predicate nominals always require an overt copula (see 1), or rather like Russian, in which omission of the copula is allowed for at least some constructions (see 2).

- (1) a. *John is a sailor.*  
 b. \**John a sailor.*

- (2) Russian (Maria Koptjevskaja–Tamm p.c.)  
*Moskva gorod*  
 Moscow city  
 ‘Moscow is a city.’

Thus, the following values will be shown on the map:

@	1. Zero copula is impossible	211
@	2. Zero copula is possible	175
	total	386

To avoid misunderstandings, a couple of remarks on the use of the term *zero copula* may be in order. This term has been used traditionally in the literature on predicate nominal sentences (see, for example, Benveniste 1966b). It will therefore be familiar to many readers, which is why I have decided to employ it in this chapter. I realize, however, that the term may give rise to Euro-centric interpretations, in that it might suggest that languages which do not have an overt copula are somehow

“defective”. On a more theoretical level, the term might suggest that, in languages with zero copula encoding of predicate nominal sentences, there is some phonologically null copula present in the syntax of these sentences, or, alternatively, that there is something corresponding to a copula in the conceptual/semantic structure underlying predicate nominal sentences in these languages. It should be stressed that none of these inferences are warranted. The term *zero copula* is used here as a strictly neutral technical label, in that it refers purely to a construction in which the relation between a subject and a nominal predicate is not marked by an overt item.

Furthermore, it should be noted that the scope of this chapter is restricted to stative predicate nominal sentences only. That is, the encoding of predicate nominal sentences which have a dynamic reading (commonly marked by some item meaning ‘become’) is not taken into consideration. Hence, when it is stated that a language has zero encoding in predicate nominal sentences, it should not be inferred that such languages cannot have an overt item in sentences which are similar to the English sentence *John became a dentist*, it only means that they lack an overt copular item in sentences that are similar to English *John is a dentist*.

## 2. The continuum of zero copula encoding

Although, for the purposes of this map, zero copula encoding is defined as a yes/no-parameter, it is important to realize that this parameter in effect forms a continuum, with two extremes and a number of in-between cases. At one extreme we have languages like English, in which zero copula encoding is never allowed. Other examples of this type are Finnish, Kabyle (Berber; Algeria), and Japanese.

- (3) Finnish (Fromm and Sadeniemi 1956: 115)

*ystävä-ni on pappi*

friend–my COP.3SG.PRES vicar  
 ‘My friend is a vicar.’

- (4) Kabyle (Hanoteau 1906: 88)  
*netsa d’ agellid’ en temourth agi*  
 he COP king of country this  
 ‘He is king of this country.’

- (5) Japanese (Makino 1968: 2)  
*John wa sensei da.*  
 John TOP teacher COP  
 ‘John is a teacher.’

At the other end of the continuum we find languages in which zero copula encoding is mandatory for any construction that involves predicate nominals. Sinhala (Indic; Sri Lanka) and Tubu (Saharan; Libya) are cases in point. A concentration of languages of this type is found in Australia and New Guinea. Pitjantjatjara (Pama–Nyungan; Northern Territory, Australia) and Asmat (Trans–New Guinea; Papua, Indonesia) are examples.

- (6) Sinhala (Gair 1970: 45)  
*unnæhee huṅgak prāsidda kene–k*  
 he very famous person–NOM  
 ‘He is/ was a very famous person.’

- (7) Tubu (Lukas 1953: 170)  
*sígən līfi*  
 3SG.EMPH orphan  
 ‘He is/was an orphan.’

- (8) Pitjantjatjara (Douglas 1959: 55)  
*wait ngalyayala*  
 man doctor  
 ‘The man is/ was a doctor.’

- (9) Asmat (Voorhoeve 1965a: 168)

*no ów akát*

1SG man handsome

‘I am/was a handsome man.’

At intermediate positions on the continuum can be situated languages in which the use of the zero copula is limited by a condition of some sort. A well-known, and frequent, condition in this respect involves a split between present and nonpresent tense. Russian and Maltese are examples of languages in which a zero copula is used in the Present, whereas a full copula is mandatory for all other tenses.

- (10) Russian (Maria Koptjevskaja-Tamm p.c.)

a. *ona vrač*

she doctor

‘She is a doctor.’

b. *on byl učeník-om*

he be.M.PST pupil-INSTR

‘He was a pupil.’

- (11) Maltese (Albert Borg, p.c.)

a. *Albert tabib*

Albert doctor

‘Albert is a doctor.’

b. *Albert kien tabib*

Albert be.3SG.M.PST doctor

‘Albert was a doctor.’

An even more radically limited use of the zero copula is illustrated by Hungarian. Zero copula encoding in this language is restricted not only to the present tense, but also to sentences with third person subjects. In all other cases, use of the full copula *vagy* is obligatory.

(12) Hungarian (Ginter and Tarnóci 1991: 76, 78)

- a. *én tanár vagyok*  
 1 SG teacher be.1 SG.PRES  
 'I am a teacher.'
- b. *ő diák*  
 3 SG.M pupil  
 'He is a pupil.'

For the purposes of the map, only languages of the English type have been rated as type 1. In other words, a language is considered to be a member of type 2 if it allows the use of a zero copula, however minimal – as in the case of Hungarian – this use may be.

### 3. Types of copular items

As shown extensively by Stassen (1997: 76–100), not all items that are used as copulas in nominal predication have the same morphosyntactic status. A well-known class of copular items is formed by the **verbal copulas**, which have (by and large) the same morphosyntactic properties as verbs: English *be*, Spanish *ser* and Russian *byt'* are illustrations of this class. In addition to this, however, large areas of the world show the use of nonverbal copular items. Particularly prominent is the use of a **pro-copula**, i.e., a demonstrative or personal pronoun which serves as the linker between subject and predicate nominal, and which is obligatory in nominal predication. We find this option especially in northern and central Asia, in North Africa and the Middle East, and in eastern Indonesia and Melanesia. Hebrew, Motu (Oceanic; Papua New Guinea), Turkish, and Beja (Cushitic; Sudan) are examples of languages with the pro-copula strategy; in Turkish and Beja, the pro-copula takes the form of a suffix.

(13) Modern Hebrew (Li and Thompson 1977: 428)

*Moše hu student*  
 Moshe 3SG.M student  
 ‘Moshe is a student.’

- (14) Motu (Lister–Turner and Clark 1930: 54)

*lau na tau ia be hahine*  
 I DEM/COP man she DEM/COP woman  
 ‘I am a man, she is a woman.’

- (15) Turkish (Lewis 1967: 98)

*Türk-üm*  
 Turk-1SG  
 ‘I am a Turk.’

- (16) Beja (Tucker and Bryan 1966: 543)

*barú:k hadʔá:-bwa*  
 2SG.M sheik-2SG.M  
 ‘You are a sheik.’

In addition to pronouns, quite a few other nonverbal items are attested in copular function. Such **particle copulas** have their origin in a variety of markers of discourse-oriented phenomena such as topicalization, backgrounding, or contrastive focus for subjects or predicates. An example of such a particle copula was given in sentence (4), where the Kabyle copula *d'* can be identified as a general conjunctive/contrastive marker; for one thing, it is used as the conjunction ‘and/with’ between noun phrases. Another example is from Awtuw (Lower Sepik–Ramu; Papua New Guinea), where the item *po* is a general focus marker. Unlike in verbal sentences, the item is obligatory with nominal predicates. A similar situation holds in Vai (Mande; Liberia).

- (17) Awtuw (Feldman 1986: 60, 138, 148)

a. *Yen w-æy-re*

2SG NONFACT-go-FUT

‘You will go.’

- b. *wan po 'w-æy-rere*

1SG FOC NONFACT-go-DESID

‘I am the one who wants to go.’

- c. *wan po rameyæn*

1SG FOC/COP human.being

‘I am a human being.’

(18) Vai (Welmers 1976: 116; Koelle 1854: 92)

- a. *mànjáǎ mù ná'à à fě'ě*

chief FOC I him see.PERF

‘It was the chief whom I saw.’

- b. *mō kóro mú nda*

man old FOC/COP I

‘I am an old man.’

It must be concluded, then, that full copulas do not form a homogeneous morphosyntactic class. For the purposes of this map, however, differentiation between various classes of full copulas has been ignored. As a result, any language that has a full copula has been rated as a member of type 1, regardless of the morphosyntactic status of the copular item (provided, of course, that the zero option is inadmissible in the language).

#### 4. Geographical distribution

Regarding the distribution of zero copula encoding across the world's languages, the first thing to be noted is that there appears to be no major linguistic area in which the use of a zero copula is completely excluded. However, the areal distribution of zero copula encoding is far from random. The map shows a number of linguistic areas in which zero copula encoding is highly conspicuous. In particular, a zero-strategy is used almost uniformly in the Pacific region (Australian, Papuan, and eastern

Austronesian languages), and it is highly prominent in South America, as well as in the northern part of Africa. Opposed to this, we find areas in which a zero copula constitutes a minor or marginal option. This is the case in Europe and the Middle East (covering Indo-European, Semitic, Turkic, Caucasian, and Uralic languages), northern India and the Himalayas, sub-Saharan Africa, North and Central America, and East Asia (covering China, Korea, Japan, and the Philippines). It should be added that, quite often, the distribution of zero copulas within a language family or area is rather unpredictable. Languages which are closely related areally or genealogically may differ considerably in the extent to which they allow zero encoding. For instance, while Austronesian languages typically opt for zero encoding, a full copula is mandatory in a closely related group of three Austronesian languages from northern and central Vanuatu (Lonwolwol, Big Nambas, and Paamese).