On the semantic distribution of copular verbs in Tundra Nenets

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Abstract

It is well known from the literature that sentences with nominal, adjectival, and adverbial predicates in Tundra Nenets involve the use of copular or copula-like verbs (namely *a-*, *me- tara-*, *xæ-* (*x ja-*)), at least under certain grammatical conditions. Tundra Nenets existential clauses, in addition, contain a copula-like (so-called existential) verb (*t a-*). Even though the copulas are already identified in the language, and the behavior of the various copular elements is well-documented and described, certain distributional aspects of copulas are not indicated in the existing literature. The present paper is devoted to clarify some cases of the (semantic) distribution of copular verbs in Tundra Nenets that have not been affected in detail so far. My goal is (i) to resolve certain seemingly exceptional cases that show difference from the pattern indicated in the literature, and (ii) to add further observastions to the discussion. The topics covered in the present paper are the followings: the use of the copulas *a-* vs. *tara-* in clauses with NP/AP predicates; the distribution of the copulas *a-* vs. *me-* in locative clauses, and the copula-distribution in locative and existential clauses.

Keywords: copular clauses in Tundra Nenets, temporary vs. permanent state and role interpretation, (in)animate subjects in locative clauses, definite/referential subjects of locative vs. existential clauses

1. Introduction

There is a rich discussion of Tundra Nenets (Samoyedic, Uralic) copula system and non-verbal clause-types including locative and existential clauses in the literature (see, e.g., Kuprijanova et al. 1957; Hajdú 1968; Tereš enko 1973; Katzschmann 1986; Salminen 1998; Wagner-Nagy 2011, 2016; Nikolaeva 2014; Jalava 2017). It is discussed that the copular verb *a-* appears in clauses with nominal and adjectival predicates (as well as in clauses with pronominal predicates) see (1)–(2), (e.g., Nikolaeva 2014: 253; 258).

(1)   *Igo   ekar   æ- ku.*
         Igor   doctor.3SG   be-FUT.3SG
         'Igor will be a/the doctor.'   [nominal predicate]

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(2)   *Igo   p'ir a   æ- ku.*
        Igor   tall.3SG   be-FUT.3SG
        'Igor will be tall.'   [adjectival predicate]

Note that in this type of non-verbal clauses the copula *a-* is only used in the future tense, as well as, in non-indicative moods. In all other cases, the predicate noun/adjective takes subject agreement and past tense suffixes, and the copula *a-* is missing from the clause, see (3) (cf. Kuprijanova et al. 1957: 198; Hajdú 1968: 47; Tereš enko 1973: 153; Salminen 1998: 539; Nikolaeva 2014: 252–258, a.o.).

(3)   *Igo   ekara-   /   p'ir a- .*
        Igor   doctor.3SG-PST   tall.3SG-PST
        'Igor was a/the doctor/tall.'

Additionally, the semi-copulas *tara-* and *xæ-* (*x ja-*) can be used in clauses with nominal/adjectival predicates when the predicate nouns/adjectives are inflected with the essive case (4)–(5) (cf. Nikolaeva 2014: 261–262).

(4)   *Igo   ekara- æ   **tara**.*
        Igor   doctor-ESS   be.3SG
        'Igor is a/the doctor.'
(5)   *m   škola   ekara- æ   **x ja**-dm.*
        1SG   school doctor-ESS   go-1SG
        'I became a doctor for the school.' (Nikolaeva 2014: 262)

Locative clauses having adverbial/PP predicates in Tundra Nenets obligatorily require the copulas *a-* or *me-*, and the distribution of these two copulas lies along the animacy of their subject. As Nikolaeva (2014: 263) notes, *me-* is used with a „human and sometimes non-human animate" subject; and *a-* appears when the subject is inanimate, see (6)–(7).

(6)   *to   labe-k na   **a**.*
        table   room-LOC   be.3SG
        'The table is in the room.'   [locative clause with inanimate subject]
(7)   *Igo   xar d- m'u a **me**.*
        Igor   house-GEN   inside be.3SG
        'Igor is in the house.'   [locative clause with animate subject]

Finally, there is a copula (also called existential verb) *t a-* that is required in existential clauses, see (8) (see, e.g., Wagner-Nagy 2011: 195; Nikolaeva 2014: 250–251).

(8)   *labe-kana   xasawa **t   a**.*
        room-LOC   man   exist.3SG
        'There is a man in the room.'   [existential clause]

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The goal of this paper is twofold. I aim at resolving some exceptional cases that seemingly differ from the pattern indicated in the literature. Additionally, I add further observations to the existing discussion. I concentrate on the semantics of the clause-types above and put aside the analysis of the various syntactic constructions. I argue that the copular verbs in Tundra Nenets are indeed in complementary distribution across constructions, and the selection of a particular copular verb purely hinges on semantic criteria.

In the paper, I consider copulas as elements that link the subject NP/DP and the non-verbal predicate, and do not „add any semantic content" to the construction (see, e.g., Pustet 2003: 5; Mikkelsen 2011). Therefore, I exclude from the discussion (most of) the semi-copulas introduced in Nikolaeva (2014: 261–262). I make only one exception to this in Section 2, where I discuss the use and (relative) distribution of the so-called semi-copula *tara-* 'needed' (and I compare it with the copula *ŋa-*). I included this (semi-)copula to the present examination because its meaning in the constructions in question corresponds to the meaning 'be' – thus its literal meaning is not retained –, and so it meets the copula „definition" above. I concentrate here on the copulas used in affirmative clauses, and exclude those appearing in negated non-verbal clauses (such as *jaŋko-*) (for a detailed description of copulas used in negated non-verbal clauses see, e.g., Wagner-Nagy 2011; Mus 2015).

The data discussed here are from consultations with a native speaker informant, who speaks the Yamal subdialect of Tundra Nenets. If it is not otherwise indicated, the examples cited throughout the paper are from him. Additionally, I used a monolingual Tundra Nenets corpus built within the frame of a research project (ID: NKFIH_FK 129235) undertaken in the Hungarian Research Centre for Linguistics.[1] The corpus contains c. 470.000 tokens of texts from various text-types, such as narratives, folklore texts, phrasebook texts, as well as, articles and interviews from newspapers (for a detailed description of the corpus see Mus–Metzger 2021a, b). I, nevertheless, have not made a statistical and/or comprehensive analysis on the corpus data, instead I used the data for formulating my preliminary hypotheses. These hypotheses were then tested with the help of the native speaker informant.

The Tundra Nenets examples are uniformly transcribed here by considering the principles described in Hajdú (1968), Salminen (1993, 1998), Staroverov (2006), and Kavitskaya–Staroverov (2008).

The outline of the paper is as follows. In Section 2, I discuss the distribution of the two copulas *ŋa-* and *tara-* in clauses with nominal/adjectival predicates. In Section 3, I add some complementary data to locative clauses, and discuss the concept of 'animacy' in Tundra Nenets. In Section 4, I describe the semantic difference of subjects in Tundra Nenets locative and existential clauses. Section 5 summarizes my findings.

2. Temporary state and role interpretation

As mentioned in the Introduction, predicate nouns and adjectives can appear both with the copula *ŋa-* (9) and the (semi-)copula *tara-* in Tundra Nenets (10) (cf. Nikolaeva 2014: 253, 261–262; Jalava 2017: 407).

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(9)   *Igo   ekar   /   p'ir a   æ- ku.*
         Igor   doctor.3SG   tall.3SG   be-FUT.3SG
         'Igor will be a/the doctor/tall.'
(10) *Igo   ekara- æ   /   p'ir a- æ   tara.*
         Igor   doctor-ESS   tall-ESS   be.3SG
         'Igor is a/the doctor/tall.'

Note that *a-* alternates with zero in the present and past tenses in all number and person in the indicative, since nominal and adjectival predicates take subject agreement and past tense suffixes (see example (3) above).

   The copula *tara-* obligatorily requires the nominal/adjectival predicate in the essive case (11). In contrast, the copula *a-* does not seem to be compatible with the essive suffix (12). It is to be noted, however, that Jalava (2017: 407) mentions some „sporadic examples" from newspaper texts in which the copula *a-* appears together with an essive marked nominal.

(11) **Igo*   ekar   /   p'ir a   tara.*
         Igor   doctor   tall   be.3SG
         Intended: 'Igor is a/the doctor/tall.'
(12) **Igo*   ekara- æ   æ- ku.*
         Igor   doctor-ESS   be-FUT.3SG
         Intended: 'Igor will be a/the doctor.'

The copula *tara-* is also used as a lexical verb with the meaning 'is needed/necessary', in which case its grammatical subject, i.e., the experiencer takes the locative case marker, see (13) (cf. Nikolaeva 2014). In cases where *tara-* is used as a copula its grammatical subject is in the nominative see, e.g., (10) above.

(13) *Ivan-xana   ekar   tara- .*
         Ivan-LOC   doctor is.needed.3SG-PST
         'Ivan had to be a doctor.'

As for the semantic distinction of the two constructions with *a-* and *tara-* copulas. The literature suggests that the two clauses are distinguished along the line of permanent vs. temporary states of being (Jalava 2017: 408). It means that the clause with the copula *a-* expresses a permanent state, while *tara-* „typically" describes a non-stable temporary state „of acting in a certain function or role" (Jalava 2017: 405; 407–408). The following examples partly support this observation with some additional notes. First, it seems that both *a-* and *tara-* can be used referring to the individual's temporary state, see (14) and (15). Thus, the copula *a-* is also used with temporary state interpretation. Note that in these contexts the two constructions are interchangeable.

(14) context: Ivan worked as a doctor, but he is already retired.
         a.   *Ivan   ekara- .*
                Ivan   doctor.3SG-PST
                'Ivan was a doctor.'

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       b.   *Ivan   ekara- æ   tara- .*
             Ivan   doctor-ESS   be.3SG-PST
             'Ivan was a doctor.'

(15) context: Larisa worked as a teacher and now she is a journalist.
       a.   *Larisa   a eki toxolabada- .*
             Larisa child   teacher.3SG-PST
             'Larisa was a teacher.'
       b.   *Larisa   a eki toxolambada- æ   tara- .*
             Larisa child   teacher-ESS   be.3SG-PST
             'Larisa was a teacher.'

Second, the role interpretation suggested by the literature is not activated in (14b) and (15b), i.e., the *tara-* construction also refers to the individual's profession and not translated as 'Ivan was/acted as a doctor.' and 'Larisa was/acted as a teacher.' Respectively. The following examples in (16) and (17) illustrate that the construction with the copula *tara-* is interpreted as a temporary state/function without an additional role interpretation if only it combines with an NP denoting a profession. If the NP does not denote a profession the sentence indeed gets the role interpretation, see (16b) and (17).

(16) context: Vera is a shaman. He has a granddaughter. Vera thinks that his grand-daughter will be a shaman.

       a.   *Vera-   u-   e   u   ta eb'a   æ -wanda.*
             Vera-GEN   child-GEN girl   child   shaman   be-DEB.3SG
             'Vera's granddaugther will be a shaman.'
       b.   *#Vera-   u-   e   u   ta eb'a- æ   tara-wanda.*
             Vera-GEN   girl-GEN   child girl   shaman-ESS be-DEB.3SG
             #'Vera's granddaugther will be a shaman.'

(17) context: Vera's granddaughter plays a part in a school play.
           Vera-   u-   e   u   ta eb'a- æ   tara-wanda.
             Vera-GEN   girl-GEN   child girl   shaman-ESS be-DEB.3SG
             'Vera's granddaugther will be as a shaman.'

Third, the example in (18) illustrates that the *tara*-construction is compatible with AP predicates too. The clause does not get a temporary state interpretation with the adjective either, even though being hungry is indeed a temporary state. Instead the role interpretation retains in this context again.

(18)   a.   *Ivan ofis-x na-nda   am oja- .*
             Ivan   office-LOC-OBL.3SG   hungry-3SG.PST
             'Ivan was hungry in his office.'
         b.   *Ivan ofis-x na-nda   am oja- æ   tara- .*
             Ivan   office-LOC-OBL.3SG   hungry-ESS   be-3SG.PST
             #'Ivan was hungry in his office.'
             'Ivan played a role in which he was hungry in his office.'

On the basis of these examples we can conclude that both *a-* and *tara-* constructions can be interpreted as expressing temporary states/functions with NP predicates referring to some profession. In which case, however, neither of the constructions gets role interpretation. The semi-copula *tara-* is also compatible with further NPs/APs, in which case the construction is constrained into a role interpretation that can be either permanent or temporary. Note that a similar observation is made, for instance, in Estonian (see Matushansky 2012).

3. Animacy distinction

Now, let us turn to the distribution of copulas in locative clauses. As it is mentioned in the Introduction, locative clauses contain either the copula *a-* or the copula *me-*. Their distribution in the locative clauses is due to the animacy of the subject. Thus, inanimate subjects require the copula *a-* (19), while animate (non-human and human) subjects involve the use of the copula *me-* (20)–(21) (Nikolaeva 2014: 263). It is to be noted, that the copula cannot be omitted in locative clauses.

(19)   *to   labe-k na   a.*
        table   room-LOC   be.3SG
        'The table is in the room.'

(20)   *Igo   xar d-   m'u a me.*
        Igor   house-GEN   inside be.3SG
        'Igor is in the house.'

(21)   *we ekoxar d-   m'u a me.*
        dog house-GEN   inside be.3SG
        'The dog is in the house.'

Nikolaeva (2014: 260) notes, that there are variations among speakers in constructions with non-human animate subjects. Thus, we find examples, in which it is the copula *a-* that appears with an animate non-human subject instead of the copula *me-*. This variation is illustrated below in (22)–(23).

(22)   *jexena-   to-xona   me- .*
        sturgeon-PL   lake-LOC   be-3PL
        'The sturgeons are in the lake.'

(23)   *jexena-   to-xona   a- .*
        sturgeon-PL   lake-LOC   be-3PL
        'The sturgeons are in the lake.'

I suggest, however, that the selection of the copula in locative clauses is subject to intra-speaker variation, and it is due to the semantic interpretation of the subject in locative clauses. Thus, the sentence in example (22) means that the subject *jexena* 'sturgeon' is alive at the time of the utterance/discourse, while in (23) this animate entity gets an inanimate interpretation as it is not alive anymore. This variation shows us that animacy is not a continuous scale in Tundra Nenets – as it is generally assumed in languages, for instance, by Kuno–Kaburaki (1977); Rosenbach (2008) –, but it is grammaticalized as an ontological feature. It means that an animate entity gets an inanimate interpretation if it is not alive anymore (for the concept of animacy

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see, e.g., de Hoop–de Swart 2018). Thus, the subject *jexena* 'sturgeon' is interpreted as a not-living entity in the given sentence in (23), and this feature of the subject has to be coded in the locative construction. Consequently, the copula *a-* end up accepting a subject that is usually/prototypically animate but it is not alive in the time of the discourse.

Interestingly, shifting of animacy does not work with the copula *me-*. As it is illustrated in (24), the copula *me-* cannot appear with a seemingly inanimate subject that refers to an animate referent in the actual discourse.

(24) context: You work in a restaurant, and one guest ordered a pancake. You tell the waiter where this guest sits.

   * i a _ eska   ta ana me.
   pancake   there be.3SG
   Intended: 'There is the pancake, i.e., the guest who ordered the pancake.'

We can conclude that the copulas in locative clauses are indeed selected by the animacy of the subject, but animacy in Tundra Nenets is an ontological feature and it seems that it cannot be shifted to an inanimate entity.

4. Definite/referential vs. indefinite/non-referential subjects

Finally, let us discuss the semantic distribution of copulas in locative and existential clauses. As it is suggested by the literature, the existential verb *t a-* appears in existential sentences (25), and the copulas *a-/me-* are used in locative clauses (26) (see, e.g., Wagner-Nagy 2011: 195; Nikolaeva 2014: 250–251). (The distribution of *a-/me-* in locative clauses is discussed in the previous section.)

(25) *labe-k na* *xasawa* *t a.*
    room-LOC man   exist.3SG
    'There is a man in the room.'
(26) *kniga škaf-* *m'u a a.*
    book drawer-GEN inside be.3SG
    'The book is in the drawer.'

Nevertheless, the literature does not provide a proper definition of locational and existential constructions. In this paper, I define locative clauses as clauses that have identifiable, i.e., definite or referential subjects (cf. Dryer 2007). While I consider existential clauses as clauses whose subject either introduces a novel referent into the discourse or reintroduces (or focalizes) a referent that has already been mentioned (Abbott 1993, 1997; Ward & Birner 1995; McNally 2011). Therefore, I consider the subject of an existential clause as an indefinite or at least a non-referential phrase (for a detailed description of definiteness effect in general see, e.g., Safir 1982; Reuland 1983; Reuland–ter Meulen 1987). On the basis of these working definitions, there are Tundra Nenets examples, in which *t a-* and *a-/me-* seem to overlap. For instance, the existential verb *t a-* in Tundra Nenets can have a seemingly definite/referential subject, such as 'Igor' in example (27).

(27) *xusuwej   labe-k na   Igo   t a.*
      every   room-LOC   Igor   exist.3SG
      'There is Igor in every room.'

In this case, however, the denotation of 'Igor' is not limited to only one person, but the proper name refers to a set, and each of the elements of the set are named 'Igor'. Thus, the proper name 'Igor' gets an indefinite interpretation.

    Similarly, we find examples in which the locative copulas appear with a seemingly indefinite subject. For instance, in contexts, in which the locative element is quantified by a universal quantifier and the interpretation of the subject is expected to be indefinite, the copulas *a-/me-* appear, see (28).

(28) *xusuwej   labe-k na   xasawa   me.*
      every   room-LOC   man   be.3SG
      'The man is in every room.'

The sentence in (28), nevertheless, expresses that the bare noun subject 'the man' is indeed definite, and the sentence means that this definite NP frequently appears in the given location but not at the same time.

    Outside of these marginal exceptions, it is only the verb *t a-* that is acceptable in pure existential contexts, i.e., in contexts in which a new referent is introduced into the discourse. The question in (29a), for instance, can only contain the verb *t a-*. Similarly, the verbs *a-/me-* can only be used in contexts in which their subjects get a definite interpretation. Thus, the answer to the question in (29a) can only contain the verb *me-* if the subject is definite, see (29b, c).

(29) a. *cirk-x na   slon-   t a-   /   #me-* ?
          circus-LOC   elephant-PL exist-3PL   /   be-3PL
          'Are there elephants in the circus?'
      b. *j ku ,   zoopark-x na me- .*
          not.exist   Zoo-LOC   be-3PL
          'No, they are in the Zoo.'
      c. *#j ku ,   zoopark-x na t a- .*
          not.exist   Zoo-LOC   exist-3PL
          #'No, they are in the Zoo.'

These lead us to conclude that the subject of Tundra Nenets existential sentences with the verb *t a-* are interpreted as indefinite/non-referential, while those of locative clauses with the copulas *a-/me-* are deifinite/referential. Additionally, it seems that subject noun phrases get their difinite/referential interpretation from the context.

5. Summary

In this paper, I discussed the semantic distribution of various copulas in Tundra Nenets, namely *a-, tara-, me-, t a-*. First, I showed that *a-* and *tara-* both appear in clauses with NP/AP predicates, but *tara-* has a more restricted use, and it is limited to two contexts: (i) it can have a temporary interpretation with NP (+essive) predicates referring to some profession, (ii) outside of (i) the construction is constrained into a

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role interpretation with further NPs/APs (also appearing in the essive). Second, I discussed the copulas a- and *me-* used with AdvP/PP predicates in locative clauses. In line with the literature, I concluded that the copulas are selected by the animacy of the subject, and I showed that the concept of animacy in Tundra Nenets is an ontological feature. I also illustrated that animacy cannot be shifted (to an inanimate entity). Finally, I examined counter-examples in locative and existential clauses, and showed that a-/*me-* can only appear with definite/referential subjects, while *t a-* is exclusively used with indefinite/non-referential subjects.

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