

‘Be/have’ verbs in historical perspective

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A ‘be/have’ verb is a verb expressing possession in clauses such as English *John has a car*, in which the coding of the Possessor and the Possessee is similar to that of A and P in typical transitive clauses, but also used intransitively as a copula in plain-locational predication (i.e., in clauses such as English *John is in his office*),¹ sometimes also in nominal and/or adjectival predication (*John is a teacher, John is tall*). The following examples (from Li & Navarro 2015: 86, 89, 93) illustrate such a configuration in Kikuyu (Bantu), an AVP/SV language in which subjects are obligatorily indexed by means of a verbal prefix.²

- (1) *mũ-ti-rĩ* *arimũ.*
SBJ:2PL-NEG-**be/have** PL.teachers(2)
‘You are not teachers.’ (nominal predication)
- (2) *tũ-rĩ* *a-rũaru.*
SBJ:1PL-**be/have** cl2-sick
‘We are sick.’ (adjectival predication)
- (3) *i-bera* *rĩ-rĩ* *gĩ-kombe-inĩ.*
SG-pear(5) SBJ:cl5-**be/have** SG-cup(7)-LOC
‘The pear is in the cup.’ (plain-locational predication)
- (4) *tũ-rĩ* *n-gari.*
SBJ:1PL-**be/have** SG-car(9)
‘We have a car.’ (possessive predication)
- (5) *ha-rĩ* *benjũ* *metha-inĩ.*
SBJ:cl16-**be/have** SG.pencil(9) SG.table(9)-LOC
‘There is a pencil on the table.’ (inverse-locational predication)

Most of the languages that have a ‘be/have’ verb are spoken in Mainland South East Asia. In this area, according to Chappell & Lü (2022), ‘be/have’ verbs are mainly found in Tibeto-Burman (Jingpho, Tujia, and several languages belonging to the Lolo-Burmese, Qiangic and Karenic branches of Tibeto-Burman), but also in two Austroasiatic languages (Bugan and Mang), in one Hmongic language (Yanghao), in three Sinitic languages (Hainan Southern Min, Linxia and Dabu Hakka), and in four varieties of Bai (a language whose classification as a Sinitic language or a highly sinicized Tibeto-Burman language is unclear).

Outside of Mainland South East Asia, this configuration is attested in a few languages of the Ghana-Togo region in West Africa: Akan (Kwa; Boadi 1971, Redden & Owusu 1995), Nkonya (Kwa; Reineke 1972) and Lama (Gur; Simnara 2019).

The other languages for which I have been able to find mentions of the existence of a ‘be/have’ verb show no areal clustering:

- Indonesian (Austronesian; Sneddon 1996),

¹ On plain-locational predication, as opposed to inverse-locational predication, see Creissels (2019).

² The role played by the subject index of class 16 in the inverse-locational clause (5) is comparable to that of *there* in the English equivalent of this clause.

- Diu Indo-Portuguese (Creole; Cardoso 2009),
- Gulf Pidgin Arabic (Bakir 2014),
- Iatmul and Manambu (two closely related Papuan languages; Jendraschek 2012, Aikhenvald 2008),
- Kikuyu (Bantu; Li & Navarro 2015).

In the presentation I would like to submit for the Workshop “Grammaticalization and diachrony of locative, existential and possessive predication”, I show that, for at least some of the languages listed above, there is solid evidence that the emergence of a ‘be/have’ verb resulted from one of the following scenarios:

- ‘have’ verb > existential predicator > locational copula
- copula used in possessive clauses of the type ‘At Possessor is Possessee’ > ‘have’ verb
- copula used in possessive clauses of the type ‘Possessor is with Possessee’ > ‘have’ verb

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