COPULAS IN SGAW KAREN

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Many languages have copula systems involving more than one copula. In such languages, the functional scopes of the participating copulas vary. In Sgaw Karen, three copulas exist. The functional differences between these can be defined at the semantic as well as at the pragmatic level. Basically, in Sgaw Karen, copulas occur with nominal predicates only -- adjectival predicates are not compatible with copulas. In this respect, Sgaw Karen differs from Indo-European languages, but conforms to the general areal pattern of copula usage encountered in South East Asia, i.e. in languages such as Burmese, Khmer, Korean, Thai, the Sinitic languages, etc. Some types of adjectival predicates, however, do require the presence of a copula in Sgaw Karen. These predicate structures will be explicitly addressed in this paper.

The copula \textit{lo:l}: specifically serves to code predicate structures whose semantic nuclei are terms of relationship:

(1) \begin{tabular}{l} 
Too \ COP \ \ 1SG.POR \ grandfather \\
'Too is my grandfather' (author's field data) (Tone is not written in the examples given here.)
\end{tabular}

The usage of the copulas \textit{me:w} : and \textit{k} is less restricted. \textit{Me:w} : \ and \textit{k} \ can be used interchangeably in many contexts, but substitution of one copula for the other always entails a change in meaning, which is sometimes drastic, sometimes very subtle. The unmarked choice of copulas with common nouns such as \textit{k} \ 'banyan tree' is \textit{me:w} :.

(2) \begin{tabular}{l} 
\textit{a i:ne} \ COP \ \ \textit{banyan tree} \\
'this is a banyan tree' (author's field data)
\end{tabular}

One of the meaning-changing functions of the copula \textit{k} \ is denoting contrastive emphasis:

(3) \begin{tabular}{l} 
\textit{a i:ne} \ COP \ \ \textit{banyan tree} \\
'this is a banyan tree (and nothing else)' (author's field data)
\end{tabular}

With specific lexemes, which mostly denote age groups, gender, materials, and substances, the contrast between \textit{me:w} : \ and \textit{k} \ expresses a semantic distinction that is coextensive with the notional difference between nouns and adjectives. Thus, in combination with \textit{me:w} :, the lexeme \textit{i:sa}: must be translated as 'salt' (cf. (4)). In combination with \textit{k}, however, the same lexeme must be given the interpretation 'salty' (cf. (5)).

(4) \begin{tabular}{l} 
\textit{a i:ne} \ COP \ \ \textit{i:sa}: \\
'this is salt' (author's field data)
\end{tabular}

(5) \begin{tabular}{l} 
\textit{p} \ COP \ \ \textit{i:sa}: \\
'sea water is salty' (author's field data)
\end{tabular}

The usage of the copulas \textit{me:w} : \ and \textit{k} \ in Sgaw Karen parallels the contrast between the copulas \textit{k} : \ and \textit{pen} \ in the neighboring language Thai. Judging from the Karen and Thai data compiled for this study, the striking similarity between the multiple copula systems encountered in Sgaw Karen and Thai is likely to be due to borrowing. This assumption is in line with the observation that Karen syntactic structures have been influenced by borrowing from Thai (e.g., Matisoff 1991:482).

REFERENCE