The emergence of *na* as a copula in Nigerian Pidgin

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1. Preliminaries: on Nigerian Pidgin and the data used here

Nigerian Pidgin (NigP hereafter) is an English-based expanded pidgin spoken in Nigeria as one among the first languages by more than fifty millions of people and as the main community language by one million of people in the multilingual Southern region (i.e. the area of Port Harcourt and the Niger Delta). Despite the widespread assumption that creole languages tend to have no copulas in their basilectal forms (supposedly due to the recent process of pidginization that originated them), NigP shows a complex copula structure with different copular lexemes and with a non-trivial usage of verbal adjectives. In this paper we will focus on the syntactic distribution of two copular items, namely *be* and *na*, both equative copulas used in identity copular sentences.

NigP originated from the English-based pidgin used between Africans and English traders starting from the 17th century; some traces of a previous Portuguese-based trade pidgin (15th century) are still available in modern NigP (e.g. *sabi* – to know, *pikin* - child, *potoki* – a stupid*, dash* – to give*, palaver* – to discuss). Modern NigP stabilized during the colonial era, starting from 1850. Languages involved in the contact are colonial English (superstrate) and African languages of the Kwa and Benue Congo families (substrates); moreover, it seems that Krio language of Sierra Leone has played a relevant role as an adstrate in the 19th century.

Data presented here comes from two hours of recording of spontaneous NigP speech collected in 2007 during a field trip in South-Western Nigeria (Lagos, Ibadan and Benin City). The language is informal NigP as spoken by educated young urban speakers in a multilingual environment. Although the corpus of spontaneously produced linguistic data has been the primary source, two questionnaires have been submitted to NigP speakers in order to deepen some issues and the answers coming from those questionnaires constitute part of the data considered here.

The article displays as follow: in 2 I will give some theoretical background on the copula as a grammatical category and in 3 I will sketch NigP system of copulas. In 4 and 5 I

will describe the distribution of *be* and *na* in NigP identity copular sentences. In 6 I will draw some conclusions.

2. Copulas: types, definition and taxonomy

The term "copula" is commonly used in grammatical description to refer to a linking verb, a verb which has little independent meaning and whose main function is to relate other elements of the clause structure, normally a subject and a complement (Crystal 1988: 76, Lyons 1968: Ch 7, Matthew 1981: Ch 5). In English, for example, the main 'copulative' verb is *to be*, as in "*he is a doctor*". The term is often restricted to this verb but there are many other verbs with similar functions, e.g. *feel* as in "*he feels angry*". Many philosophers and linguists worked on the copula as an important item in terms of logical and linguistic properties. Aristotle, Frege, Russell and Strawson are some great philosophers who contributed to the research under a philosophical and logical angle, while contributions more centred on linguistic issues came from Halliday (1967), Akmajan (1970), Higgins (1973), Jackendoff (1983), Declerck (1988), Moro (1988) and Panunzi (2010). The two traditions are not separated and the taxonomy we are going to present benefits from contributions from both of them.

The term copular sentence has been traditionally referred to sentences where the verb "to be" is followed by an adjectival or a nominal phrase. In Akmajan (1970) we find a fundamental distinction between *predicative* and *specificational* sentences, which has been later accepted and expanded by Higgings and Declerck. In this tradition the taxonomy of copular sentences is based on the nature of the complement to the right of the verb "to be" and not on the value of the verb itself. The main distinction sets apart verb phrases with a predicative (non referential) meaning from verb phrases where the constituent to the right of the copula has a referential meaning. This has been developed as a polar opposition between *predication* (as in 1 below) and *specification* (as in 4), that can be best viewed as a continuum:

Table 1

		grammatical structure	feature ±determinate	relation of the constituents	semantics	type of clause
1	**Carlo is *bald***	**cop + AP**	**-**	**-**	**"having the property of"**	**PREDICATION**
2	Carlo is *a good student*	cop + NP	indet.	token-type	"being a case of"	CATEGORIZATION PREDICATION?
3	The dog is *an animal*	cop + NP	indet.	type-type	"being included in"	GENERICAL CATEGORIZATION
4	**Carlo is *my best friend***	**cop + NP**	**det.**	**token-token**	**"being definable as"; "being identified as"**	**SPECIFICATION**
5	My best friend is *Carlo*	cop + proper noun	det.			
6	Clark Kent is *Superman*	cop + proper noun	det.	token-token	"is identical to"	EQUATION
7	The morning star is *the evening star*	cop + NP	det.			

The continuum goes from 1 to 7 according to the referential value of the copular complement, which derives from two factors: the type of phrase and the value of the feature ± *determinate*. When the copular complement is an adjective, as in 1, we have a predication because the referential meaning of an adjective is null and the verb *to be* acts as an element joining a property (*baldness*) with its bearer (Carlo). Predication does not project an argument structure so that the adjective in 1 cannot be said to be an argument of the verb and no theta role is attributed to it by the verb. The adjective is just a property predicated about a subject.

In 4, on the contrary, the copular complement is a noun phrase and it is +*determined* (*my best friend*), as it is the subject (Carlo). The copular complement is therefore fully referential and represents an argument, namely the direct object. While in predications the complement tells something *about* the subject, in specificational sentences the complement answers to the question *who* or *what* is the subject: the semantic value of the copula changes from the predicative "having the property of" to the specificational "being definable as" (*what*) or "being identified as" (*who*).

In 2 and 3 we have intermediate cases where the copular complement is a non-determined noun phrase. In 2 the constituent "a good student" retains some predicative features because its referential status is low. The copular complement expresses a *type* that should describe a property about a subject (a *token*). Some philosophers like Frege (1892) have treated it as a predication even if the copular complement is not an adjective; actually, linguistically speaking, it is more close to a specification since it is made of a noun phrase. In 3 we have two constituents that represent abstract *types* related in the sense that one should be considered "being included in" the other: this is a **generic categorization**, different from both predication and specification.

One property of specificational sentences is that they are reversible, so that 5 is a possible sentences as well as 4, while constituents in sentences 1, 2 and 3 can not be reversed. Finally, in 6 and 7 we find a special case of specification, namely **equation**. There is not substantial difference between specification and equation. However, in specifications the referential value of the constituents (subject and object) is not the same for both constituents (one is more descriptive or abstract than the other); in equations the two constituents have exactly the same referential value.

Semantically speaking, the copula is often considered as an empty dummy verb, an almost transparent connector that acts as a mute deictic pointer to indicate the predicate. Especially in predicative sentences its meaning and function coincide with that of an arrow. Lyons (1968: 322) observes that in many languages the copula is an unnecessary item and that it performs in the clause as an anchor to tense, mood and aspectual markers so that it is generated in the superficial structure only when there is no other element able to carry these distinctions. McWhorter (2005: 177-178) agrees with this view and adds that due to this semantic weakness it is easily dropped out in pidginization. Moreover, copulas are absent in other types of simplified languages as children language (Moscati 2007):

(8)   a. quetto Giovanni (Martina 2;7.15)

        b. questo bianco (Raffaello 2;04.29)

English and other Indo-european languages use the same copula of predicative and specificational clauses in existential/locative sentences, when the copula precedes adverbial and prepositional phrases. When the verb "to be", or any equivalent in other languages, is used in locative/existential contexts, the semantics and the syntax of the verb change completely. Strictly speaking, it does not represent a copula anymore: semantically the verb is much more filled in with meaning and it shows up alone or with many kind of indirect and direct objects. In table 2 a summary from Jackendoff (1983):

Table 2

9	John **is** in the room	cop + AdvP/PrepP	Locative
10	The meeting **is** at 6.00 PM	cop + PrepP	Temporal
11	"**be** in existence."	cop + AdvP/PrepP	Existential

3. Copulas in Nigerian Pidgin

Summing up, we can say that copulas cover three main semantic values: existence/location, predication and identity. We intend here identity as a category encompassing what we defined as specification, equation and categorization (example 2-7 above), as in table 3:

Table 3

type	English example	NigP
EXISTENCE/LOCATION	My friend **is** there	déy
PREDICATION	My friend **is** cute	no copula
IDENTITY	My friend **is** the boy with the hat	**be**/na

In English the three of them are performed by the same lexical item, the verb *to be*. Many languages, however, set apart existence/location on one side and predication/identity on the other side: Spanish, for example, uses the lexical item *estar* versus the item *ser* to this respect. In NigP the three categories are realised in three different ways:

a) Existence/Location is realised using the copular item *déy*. The existential copula is followed by adverbial phrases, prepositional phrases, nominal phrases or may stand alone:

(12)   Ideas **déy**.
        Ideas COP
        There are ideas

(13)   Im **déy** school.
        He COP school
        He is at school

(14)   Im **déy** for Lagos
        He COP for Lagos
        He is in Lagos

b) Predication is realised without copula through verbal adjectives (or adjectival intransitive verbs). Items that are normally considered adjectives in Indo-european languages behave like intransitive stative verbs in most Southern Nigerian languages and in NigP as well. Faraclas (1989:132), author of a NigP grammar, is categorical with respect to this issue: "there is no category 'adjective' in NP [Nigerian Pidgin]. Most of the items which convey the same meanings as do adjectives in other languages are stative verbs in NP. Stative verbs take the same arguments and modifiers in the same combinations and the same order as do other verbs". We see an example in 15:

(15)   My teacher **funny**
        My teacher be.funny
        My teacher is funny (inherent predication)

Therefore, according to Faraclas it would be formally wrong to describe such constructions as zero copula plus adjectives. Nevertheless a construction like 16 is also possible in NigP, where a locative/existential copula precedes the 'verbal adjective':

(16)   My teacher **déy**   funny

        My teacher COP   be.funny

        My teacher is funny (accidental predication)

Examples in 15 and 16 differ because the first is a predication of an inherent and permanent property while the second is a predication of a temporal and accidental property. This can be interpreted in terms of Stage/Individual Level predications: 15 should be seen has predication independent of any temporal stage (Individual level - *my teacher is a funny person, in general and as far as I know him*) while 16 should be view as a temporally bounded predication about the subject in a particular occasion (Stage level - *he has been funny yesterday in class*). However the issue of verbal adjectives in NigP is a complicated and intriguing one that deserves separate treatment and we will not deepen any further here.

c) Instead, what we are going to deal with here is the expression of *IDENTITY* in NigP: we will consider the group of *identity copular sentences* that encompasses specification, equation and categorization (namely examples 2-7, all those in table 1 except predication). Identity copular sentences in NigP are realised through the copula *be* and through the focus introducer *na* that shows some copular functions. Both the lexical items can be defined as **equative copulas**. According to Faraclas (1989: 99) the identity verb *be* is the most commonly used copular element in copular sentences with nominal complements and "the functions of *be* and *na* overlap to some degree when a nominal element both precedes and follows [the copula]" (Faraclas 1898:106). Actually, it is the aim of this paper to show that in the variety of NigP here under investigation the two copular items are not interchangeable and their distribution is complementary. For example we see in 17 an occurrence where the copula *be* makes up an acceptable sentence, while the same occurrence with the item *na* results ungrammatical according to the informant:

(17)   You **be**   lady   * You **na** lady

        You COP lady

        You are a single woman

In 18 however, in the similar context of an identity copular sentence we get *na* as the correct item against *be*:

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(18) Bill **na**   beta student   * Bill **be** beta student

Bill COP? good student

Bill is a good student

In the next paragraph we will see in more detail the distribution of the two items, we will discuss the copular status of the focus introducer *na* and say something on the ongoing process it is undergoing.

4. *Be* and *Na* in identity copular sentences

4.1 Origins of the equative copulas be and na

 Be derives from the English verb *to be* and *na* is a focus marker whose etymology is uncertain. According to McWorther (1996: 202f) *na* has originated from a demonstrative pronoun (that -> dat -> da -> na). In the corpus we find 97 instances of the copula *be*. This number do not encompasses instances of the fixed expression "wey be say" nor instances of the lexical compound "be like" (*seem*). The number, however, comprises a number of occurrences of "no be" (NEG + COP), environ 20, where one can't say if we are facing a negation of the item *be* or of the item *na*. We find 83 occurrences of *na* having a copulative meaning. In total, this analysis is based on 180 tokens, extracted from a corpus of two hours of recorded speech.

 In NigP we can use *na* to perform new-information focus, contrastive focus and to construct cleft sentences. Its usage is becoming unmarked so that it may be used to introduce simple arguments of the verb.

(19) **Na**   hand   dem   for   <u>take</u>   <u>tear</u>   am   into pieces

FOC hand   they   COND   use.to   tear   him   into pieces

They would use their own hands to tear him into pieces

In (19) the item "hand" has been left-dislocated. The noun "hand" represents an argument of the verb "take" which is in a serial verb construction with the second verb "tear". The original position of the dislocated item would be in between the two verbs.

Na have some presentative functions so that it can appear alone with its complement as in 20 B (note that in the question A is possible to use the copula *be* while the use of *na* results in ungrammaticality):

(20)   A: Who **be**   dat one?   * Who na dat one?
             Who COP that?
             Who is that?

B: **Na** me!   (be   dat one)
             ***FOC** me*   *(COP   that one)*
             It's me!

Actually, out of 83 occurrences where *na* shows some predicative copular functions, only in 25 cases the item performs as a full equative copula, linking two constituents. In the great majority of the occurrences (59 cases) the topic of the predication, the "subject" of *na*, is linguistically null even if contextually clear and recoverable. In 21 the topic is *disting* (meaning a generic, unspecified thing) but the slot preceding *na* is a null one.

(21)   **[…]**   **Na**   video ehn?   <u>Distin</u>   abi?   Abi   […]   **na**   voice?
       TOPIC FOC video INT   this.thing isn't.it? Or   TOPIC FOC voice
       Is it video ehn? This thing, isn't it? Or is it voice [recorder]?

In cases like 20 and 21, however, a copular sentence has to be considered elided. Let's take into consideration example 20 above where the elided copular verb phrase (*be dat one*) is given in brackets. The elision, henceforth, entails the omission of the original copular item *be* and the concurrent omission of the topic (in 20, *dat*, the copular complement). The deletion of the topic is possible because the topic remains contextually available and counts as a null position before the focus introducer *na*; alternatively, the topic shows up in front of the clause, in the immediate first position before the focus introducer *na*, so that *na* remains in between the two NPs, focus and topic, as it happens in 22:

(22)   Dat one   **na** me
       That one NA me

That's me

In this type of sentences, according to Faraclas, (1989: 107) the item *na* "no longer serves as a signal for focalization and retains only its copular function, in much the same way as French *c'est*".

4.2 Na in identity copular clauses:

Faraclas (1989: 106) says: "The functions of *na* and *bi* overlap to some degree when a nominal element both precedes and follows *na*". Examples in 23 – 27 are taken from the corpus; an informant, then, has given grammatical judgements on the correspondent sentences with the copula *be*, which resulted not acceptable. The structure of all the occurrences in 23-27 is NP - **na** - NP but the examples have been chosen to display a variety of constituents both in the subject and the object position: we have different types of NPs with different values of animacy, definiteness, concreteness, deixis, constituent type and weight.

(23) Di guy **na** traffic warden   * be
      The guy NA traffic warden
      The guy is a traffic warden

(24) Nitendo   **na** company on its own.   * be
      Nintendo NA company on its own
      Nintendo is a company on its own

(25) Dis ting **na** cable.   * be
      This thing NA cable
      This thing is a cable

(26) Dat one **na** di   best   wey im don   attend.   * be
      That one NA the   best   REL   he   COMPL attend
      That one [that workshop] is the best that he has attended

(27) One funny ting **na** say   people déy.   * be

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> *A   funny   thing   NA   COMP   people   COP.EX*
> A funny thing is that there were people

At this point it is possible for the speakers to reanalyse the entire clauses as full predications, the speaker could attribute the role of the copula to the focus introducer *na* and relabel topic and focus as subject and object.

4.3 Research hypothesis and issue on ground

Na occurs in identity copular contexts (23-27) so as it does the copula *be* (17 and 20). *Na* appears to have been reanalysed as an equative copula. The reanalysis is possible if we consider that an ellipsis involving the copula and the topic has occurred (otherwise no verb would be present in the clause). Consequently, the topic of the sentence stands in the first position and *na* follows immediately, introducing the focus:

(28)   Di guy /   **na**   traffic warden   ~~be   the guy~~
       TOPIC   NA   FOCUS   COP   TOPIC

Items preceding *na* are always topics: we know this for sure because when a pronoun is in the subject position it cannot appear in its nominal form but it has to be expressed in its accusative form, which classifies it as a topic:

(29)   Me/ **na** Warri reggae master   * I/ na Warri reggae master
       1ps.ACC na Warri reggae master
       I am the chief of Warri reggae music

For these reasons it is better to analyse sentences from 22 to 28 using categories of information structure instead of syntactic categories such as "grammatical subject" and

"copular complement". "Di guy" and "traffic warden" are more properly analysed as topic and focus. Given this, some relevant issues are:

1. Is the <u>distribution</u> of *na* complementary to that of *be*?
2. Could *na* be considered a copula and thus a verb? Does it project an <u>argument structure</u>?
3. Can we speak about a <u>grammaticalization path</u> from focus marker to copula?

Here we will not give definitive answers to these questions. We partially answered to the second question, saying that the elements preceding and following the items *na* are best analysed as topic/focus than as subject/object: *na* is not able to assign nominative case to its subject. We are now going to deepen the first issue discussing the distribution of *na* and *be*; and thus give some suggestions concerning the third question, namely the grammaticalization path.

5. Constraints in the use of *be* and *na*

5.1 Pronominal and non-pronominal subjects

Be appears with pronominal subjects and *na* with non-pronominal subjects.

(30)	I **be** DJ	* I **na** DJ
(31)	I **be** lady	* I **na** lady
(32)	I **be** Italo	* I **na** Italo
<u>(33)</u>	You **be** tif	?? You **na** tif[1]
(34)	E **be** my best friend	* E **na** my best friend
<u>(35)</u>	Im **be** my best friend	Im **na** my best friend
(36)	We **be** your family	* We **na** your family
(37)	Una **be** nice people	* Una **na** nice people
(38)	Dem **be** my family	* Dem **na** my family

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[1] Second person personal pronoun "you" can occur, according to informants, with both *na* and *be*. "The more correct form would be 'You be my best friend', but it is not unheard for people to say 'you na my best friend'."

All pronouns in the paradigm choose (or at least strongly prefer) the copula *be* except *im*, third person singular pronoun, which is used with both *be* and *na*. Its allomorph *e*, however, accepts only *be*. This may be due to the fact that speakers (especially if bilingual in Nigerian English) process *im* as an accusative form, and thus as a topic, while they can't in any way analyse as topics personal pronoun such as *e* (3ps), *I* (1ps), *we* or *una* etc.

On the contrary, when the subject is a NP or a proper noun the copula *be* is clearly disfavoured while *na* is fully acceptable as we saw in examples 22-29 above and as we can see below in 39-43:

(39)   ? Di man **be** my brother.   Di man **na** my brother

(40)   ? Dat cd **be** one of my priceless possessions o.   Dat cd **na** one of my priceless
                                                              possession

(41)   ? Dat ting **be** nonsense.   Dat ting **na** nonsense.

(42)   * John **be** my cousin   John **na** my cousin

(43)   * Di woman **be** sister.   Di woman **na** sister.

5.2 A diachronic cue?

At this point I have to take into consideration a relevant structural difference between the data given by Nicholas Faraclas in its 1996 grammar of NigP and the data I collected in 2007-2010 intended as corpus occurrences and meta-linguistic judgements.

In its NigP grammar Faraclas (1996: 50) gives as equivalent and perfectly acceptable the occurrences in 44:

(44)   a. Di woman **be** sista   b. Di woman **na** sista   ("The woman is a nun")

Faraclas collected his huge corpus of NigP data in the city of Port Harcourt in the Niger Delta in 1985 and 1986. My data, collected 20 years later, show that today sentences like 44a are NOT acceptable, while it was so in the mid 80s:

(45)   a. ~~Di woman **be** sista~~   b. Di woman **na** sista

One could say that the huge geographic distance between Port Harcourt and Lagos, the difference in the ethnic composition of the population, together with the diachronic gap, may concur explaining this change. However, we are facing a systematic loss or erosion of the copular features of the item *be*: not only identity copular sentences but predicative structures too are undergoing similar changes. While in Faraclas grammar 46a, 46b and 46c are given as possible (but not equivalent) sentences, my informants do NOT accept 46a:

(46)   a. ~~My pot **be** smol~~   b. My pot **déy** smol   c. My pot smol

In some way *be* is loosing ground, or for a diachronic drift or for a diatopic change in the Southwestern variety of Lagos with respect to the Southsouthern variety of Port Harcourt. Nevertheless, as far as identity copular sentences are concerned, *be* remains THE main copula as for the speakers as for the grammarians. *Be* still gets some basic predicative and verbal properties that are missing to *na*: let's see which ones in the next paragraphs.

5.3 Verbal morphology

    Be assumes the regular NigP <u>verbal morphology</u> while *na* does not appear concomitantly with any morphological marker.

(47)   If <u>e</u> **no   gò   fit   be**   dis Sunday, e **gò be**   next Sunday be dat.
       If it **NEG IRR POT COP** this Sunday, it IRR COP next Sunday COP that
       If it is not going to be this Sunday, it will be next Sunday

If one wants to use mood, aspectual, tense markers or even negation with *na*, then *be* will appear in its place.

5.4 Wh interrogative pronouns

The presence of any *Wh* interrogative pronouns interdicts the presence of *na*:

(48)   a. <u>Wetin</u> **be** im name?   * **na**   b. Im name **na** Maria   * Im name **be** Maria
       What COP her name
       What's her name?

(49) a. <u>Who</u> **be** dat?   * **na**   b. Dat one **na** my son   * Dat one **be** my son

    Who COP that   That one COP? my son

    Who's that?

Questions in 48a and 49a with the interrogative pronouns *wetin* and *who* require the copula *be* but both answers in b. require the item *na* according to my informants. Other interrogative pronouns we find in the corpus are in the examples below:

(50)   <u>Which one</u> **be** dis?   * na

(51)   <u>How many</u> watts **be** the JEDI?   * na

(52)   <u>Which kind</u> home video **be** dis?   * na

(53)   <u>Were</u> **be** your area?   * na

Even when the sentence is affirmative the presence of an interrogative pronoun interdicts the use of *na*:

(54)   You wan find out <u>who</u> **be** omonile   * na

(55)   I know <u>why</u> the thing **be** like that   * na

(56)   W<u>etin</u> I wan do **be** dat   * na

The informant has been less categorical about his answers in occurrences where the copular item governs a sentential complement as in 57 and 58 below:

(57)   a. <u>Why</u> e **be**   say   we no dèy   fit   sleep?

        Why it COP COMPL we NEG IPFV POT sleep

        Why can't we sleep?

    b. ?? <u>Why</u> **na** say we no dèy fit sleep?

(58)   a. <u>Wetin happen</u>   **be**   say   I no   déy   around

        What   happen.PAST COP COMPL I NEG IPFV around

        What happened it's that I was not around

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b. ?? Wetin happen **na** say I no déy around

However, one found a quick confirmation just googling the two NigP strings because the number of occurrences confirms the fuzzy intuition of the informant:

"why e **be** say": 73.000 result   "why **na** say" 1 result

"wetin happen **be** say": 63 results   "wetin happen **na** say" 1 result

A similar kind of constraint is the one regarding *mek*, a very frequent and salient NigP item who comes from the English verb *to make* and whose status has not been yet fully discovered. It gives a kind of exhortative and oblique meaning functioning as a complementizer in the sentence, as in 59:

(59) Mek   disting   **be** quick job!   * Mek disting na quick job!
     COMPL this.thing COP quick job
     Let's hope it will be a quick job!

5.5 A semantic constraint

The behaviour of the item *na* that we described in the previous paragraphs is possibly due to the semantic "charge" of the particle, which retains some semantic legacy of its origin as a focus introducer. In fact, the item *na* can be used in metaphorical and rhetorical contexts where the same item *be* would be not acceptable:

(60) I gò   buy   that Alesis abeg.   Compressor   **na**   compressor
     I IRR buy   that Alesis INT.   Compressor   COP   compressor
     I will buy that Alesis, that's it. A compressor is a compressor (it's important to buy a good one).

* I gò buy that Alesis abeg. Compressor **be** compressor[2].

6. Conclusions

6.1 Something is going on…

In this article we described the copular system of NigP encompassing the categories of predication, identity copular clauses and existence/location sentences. Predication requires verbal adjectives in NigP as well as constructions made of existential copula plus verbal adjectives; existence/location is realised through a dedicated copula which can appear alone or with any type of complement; in identity copular contexts, finally, we find two lexical items, the traditional copula *be*, etymologically related to the English verb "to be" and the focus introducer *na*, which shows incipient but evident copular functions.

Na occurs in identity copular contexts similar to the ones where the copula *be* occurs and in quantitative terms *be* and *na* occur environ with the same frequency in the corpus. Semantic and syntactic constraints governing one or the other have been discussed in paragraphs 4 and 5. We also gave a possible diachronic evidence in 44 and 45, claiming that in the south-western variety of NigP the copular item *be* is losing ground in favour of *na*. In 61 (That woman is a nun) we summarise the change:

(61)   a. Dat woman **be**   sister   -- >   b. Dat woman **na** sister

           SBJ   COP OBJ   TOPIC   ?   FOCUS

The two sentences in 61a and 61b were acceptable in the mid '80 in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, but today in Lagos we find that speakers uses and prefer 61b.

6.2 …but the change has not attained yet

Na has apparently substituted *be* in sentences where two NPs are linked in an identity copular clause: facing the two sentences in 61 informants systematically express their preference in

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[2] Faraclas (1996: 50) considers acceptable similar occurrences: "Wor **be** wor" and "Wor **na** wor" (War is war).

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favour of 61b. However, the presence of an argument structure in the sentence in 61b is, at least, dubious. It would be inappropriate to account for the constituents in 61b as "subject" and "object"; it would be probably inappropriate to claim without disclaimer the copular status of *na*, and thus its status as a full verb. We can give three reasons for this:

1. *Na* can occur only if the subject is an NP or a personal pronoun in its accusative form, so that, according to my analysis, speakers would be able to process them as **topics**.

2. If the topic is contextually available it can be dropped out, as in "Na video?"(see 21 above), without requiring the expletive subject pronoun "e" or "im". In NigP null subjects are not normally allowed and if *na* was a verb we should account for the fact that it exceptionally allow the absence of the subject.

3. Na does not bear any form of verbal morphology. *Na* occurs in sentences that are affirmative, indicative and atemporal or in the present tense; *be* occur in all other contexts (negative, subjunctive, past, future, irrealis, questions, interrogatives).

In conclusion, *na* apparently performs as an equative copula in contexts where it superficially link two noun phrases; it has superseded the use of *be* in those contexts that are at a time affirmative, present and indicative; however, it has not yet attained the status of a verb, it does not constitute a predication and it cannot assign nominative case to any element. It is followed by the focus it introduces and it follows the topic slot, in case it is null or explicit. Thus, it is better to analyse the item *na* as a focus introducer with some incipient copular function.

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