Non-Verbal Predicate in English: Evidence from Iraqi Nominal Sentences

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Abstract
The fact that Iraqi nominal sentences are expressed without a verbal element has led the author to examine the status of the copula (*be*) in English. The aim is to reach at an explanation as to why Iraqi does not use a copula while English does. Explanation of this sort is significant because it has some direct implications on English language teaching and translation in Iraq. Using inductive method of reasoning, it has been established that tracing grammatical properties such as tense and agreement may lead to find-out the reason behind this cross-linguistic variation; and subsequently reach at a generalization that maybe applicable to other languages. The latter is an issue that remains open for further research. While placing the discussion within the parameters of the Government and Binding (GB) theory, the author concluded the reason as non-verbal predication in Iraqi, unlike English, can support a combination of these grammatical properties and thus rendering the need for a copula redundant.
 Keywords: Iraqi Arabic, nominal sentences, non-verbal predicates, verb to-be in English

1.1. Introduction:

The term '*non-verbal predicate'* refers to that kind of predicate in which information about the subject is expressed by a non-verbal element regardless of whether there is a copula or not. Therefore, in a sentence like *Sarah is sick*, it is the adjective *sick*, not the copula *is*, that gives information about the subject *Sarah*. This kind of predicate is, therefore, found in a clause construction which involves a subject and a predicate, while the subject may be a noun or pronoun, the predicate may be a nominal, an adjectival or a prepositional. As a matter of fact, in English, this kind of predicate always associates with a form of the copula *be*; and hence raising the possibility of being a verbal predicate.

In examining the status of such predicate, i.e., whether verbal or non-verbal, Hengeveld (1992) uses an eloquent technique which basically relies on two criteria; the first one concerns the operation of selection restrictions. That is, in the verbal predicate it is the verb that selects the type of argument involved while in the non-verbal predicate it is the non-verbal element that selects the type of argument involved. Therefore, in a sentence like *Ahmed is sick* it is the adjectival predication *sick* that decides the type of argument involved, i.e., animate, for which it is not possible to replace this animate argument with an inanimate one as in **the chair is sick*. Similarly, in a sentence like *Firas is a teacher* it is the nominal predication *a teacher* that decides the type of argument needed, i.e., human for which it is not possible to replace this argument with a non-human one as this would result in an ungrammatical sentence as in **the elephant is a teacher*. Thus, it appears that it is the non-verbal element, not the copula, that imposes such restriction on the selection of the arguments. The second criterion concerns the valency of the non-verbal predicates. That is, in the verbal predicates it is the verb that decides the number of the argument required, i.e., intransitive, transitive and di-transitive, while in the non-verbal predicates it is the non-verbal element that decides the number of arguments required as in *this car is fast* as opposite to *this car is similar to mine.* Both sentences involve the same form of the copula *be* which is combined with two different adjectives *fast* and *similar* respectively, however, the former requires one argument, i.e., the subject, while the latter requires two. Hence, the ungrammaticality of a sentence like **this car is similar* is explained by the fact that the adjective *similar* lacks an essential second argument. Similarly, in a sentence like *Firas is a denizen of New Delhi* it is the nominal predication *denizen* that obligatorily takes a complement headed by a preposition, i.e., *of New Delhi*. Moreover, prepositions in English may also decide the number of the argument required as in *Mr. Kumar is from India* as opposite to *she is nearby*. In the former sentence the preposition *from* is transitive and therefore takes an obligatory complement, i.e., *India* while in the latter the preposition *nearby* is intransitive and therefore does not need a complement (Tallerman, 2011, p. 116). Thus, it seems that it is the non-verbal element, not the copula, that decides the number and the type of the argument(s) required. Therefore, if any of these two criteria applies, then the predicate in point can be described as a *non-verbal predicate*.

On the other side, in a language like Iraqi Arabic, it seems that such predicates are expressed without using a copula, at least in the present tense. Therefore, in a sentence like *ʔānī mudarris-a* 'I (am) a female teacher' the subject *ʔānī* 'I' is put together with the nominal predication *mudarris-a* 'female teacher' without any linking copula. However, Iraqi Arabic necessarily involves the use of a copulative element, like that found in English, in such predicates in the past and future tenses. Nevertheless, it will be shown throughout this paper that such a copula, in both languages, is merely used to support the tense morpheme of the sentence. In fact, the idea of this paper has been mainly constructed because nominal sentences in Iraqi Arabic show compelling evidence in support of this

observation and has therefore led the author to reexamine the status of the so-called "*be-verb*" in English in light of data drawn from Iraqi Arabic nominal sentences.

1.2. Non-verbal Predicate in Iraqi Arabic:

As mentioned above, Iraqi Arabic provides strong evidence in favor of our observation. That is, the subject and the predication in nominal sentences are juxtaposed without linking them by any copulative element as shown by the following examples drawn from Iraqi:

1)

a)   *ʔānī   mudarris-Ø*   b) *ʔānī   farħān-Ø*
     I.1S   teacher.MS   I.1S   happy.MS
   'I (am) a male teacher'   'I (am) happy'   Masculine
                                                      Present

c)   *ʔāħnā   mudarrisīn*   d) *ʔāħnā   farħānīn*   Tense
    we.1pl   teacher.Mpl   we.1pl happy.Mpl
   'we (are) male teachers'   'we (are) happy'

In the above examples, a semantic relationship is established between the subject and the predication: *ʔānī* and *mudarris-Ø*, *ʔānī* and *farħān-Ø*, *ʔāħnā* and *mudarrisīn* and *ʔāħnā* and *farħānīn* without any moderator. This relationship is arguably established through agreement properties. Thus, when the predication is an adjective or a noun, it agrees with the subject in number and gender even though in principle first person pronoun does not show gender distinction. This is further shown below:

2)

a) *ʔānī   mudarrisa*   b) *ʔānī   farħāna*
    I.1S   teacher.FS   I.1S   happy.FS   Feminine
 'I (am) a female teacher'   'I (am) happy'   Present
                                                        Tense

c) *ʔāħnā   mudarrisāt*   d) *ʔāħnā   farħānāt*
   we.1pl   teacher.Fpl   we.1pl happy.Fpl
 'we (are) female teachers'   'we (are) happy'

While examining tense in the above sentences, it seems that it is not overtly expressed. However, it may be overtly realized when we use Iraqi negative particle *mū* as illustrated below:

3)

a)   *ʔānī mū   mudarris-Ø*   b) *ʔānī   mū   mudarrisa*
     I.1S not teacher.MS   I.1S not   teacher.FS
   'I (am) not a male teacher'   'I (am) not a female teacher'   Present
                                                                 Tense

c)   *ʔāħnā mū mudarrisīn*   d) *ʔāħnā mū mudarrisāt*
   we.1pl not teacher.Mpl   we.1pl not teacher.Fpl
 'we (are) not male teachers'   'we (are) not female teachers'

The negative particle *mū* is a free morpheme used to negate nominal sentences that are in the present tense. It is not used to negate verbs rather it is used to negate the whole proposition of a sentence (Erwin, 2007, p. 332). Therefore, it mostly appears in a construction where there is no verb. Thus, it seems that tense, in the above sentences, is implied but not overtly expressed.

These examples strongly demonstrate that tense and agreement are realized in the structure rendering the appearance of an auxiliary redundant.

Although tense is not overtly seen when the sentence is in present tense, it must be overtly expressed in past and future tenses by using a form equivalent in meaning to English copula *be* and that is *čān* '*was*' as illustrated in the following examples:

4)

a)	*Ɂānī*	*čin-it*	*mudarris-Ø*	b)	*Ɂānī*	*činit*	*mudarris-a*
	I.1S	past.be.S	teacher.MS		I.1S	past.be.S	teacher.FS
		'I was a male teacher'				'I was a female teacher'	
c)	*Ɂāħnā*	*čin-na*	*mudarrisīn*	d)	*Ɂāħnā*	*čin-na*	*mudarrisāt*
	we.1pl	past.be.pl	teacher.pl		we.1pl	past.be.pl	teacher.pl
		'we were male teachers'				'we were female teachers'	

Past Tense

Examples in (4) show two important points: (1) the auxiliary verb *čān* 'was' which exemplifies past tense morpheme, agrees in person and number but not in gender with the preceding subject, and (2) the predication *mudarris* agrees in number and gender with the preceding subject. Relating the above examples to our previous discussion, this state of affairs demonstrates that, with or without overt tense realization, agreement is overtly realized. In other words, the visibility of the tense in (4) does not interrupt or contribute to the semantic relationship that has been established between the subject and the predication. It merely indicates the timing of the sentence, i.e., past tense. This leads us to confirm our previous observation that it is agreement, not tense, that establishes this semantic link. Examples above also lead us to confirm that the appearance of the auxiliaries is driven by the necessity to realize tense morpheme overtly. This realization must be different in form and shape from what we saw in the present tense to avoid ambiguity. Similar result comes out of the following examples where future tense marker is used:

5)

a) *Ɂānī*   *rāħ-Ɂā-kūn*   *dʒāhiz-Ø*   *baʕid*   *sāʕa*
I.1S   will.1SM.be   ready.MS   after   one-hour
'I will be ready after one hour'

b) *Ɂānī*   *rāħ-Ɂā-kūn*   *dʒāhiz-a*   *baʕid*   *sāʕa*
I.1S   will.1SM.be   ready-FM   after   one-hour
'I will be ready after one hour'

c) *Ɂāħnā*   *rāħ-in-kūn*   *dʒāh-zīn*   *baʕid*   *sāʕa*
we.1pl   will.1Mpl.be   ready.Mpl   after   one-hour
'we will be ready after one-hour'

d) *Ɂāħnā*   *rāħ-in-kūn*   *dʒāh-zāt*   *baʕid*   *sāʕa*
we.1pl   will.1Mpl.be   ready.Fpl   after   one-hour
'we will be ready after one-hour'

Future Tense/Aspect

In 5 (a & b) the first person singular prefix *Ɂā-* and the future prefix *rāħ-* are attached to the imperfect form of the verb *čān* making it *rāħ-Ɂā-kūn*; the same holds true for 5 (c & d) with *-in-* instead of *Ɂā-*. Thus, it appears that the function of the so-called "verbs" in (4) and (5) is to support tense morpheme; and that agreement morpheme, which appears on them, is a byproduct feature.

However, this state of affairs highlights a very important question and that is: *why do we have agreement manifestations on two elements in the structure*. The answer comes straightforward. It seems that agreement is used, as stated earlier, to indicate semantic relationships. That is, elements, in a structure, must be connected to one another. This connection is established through agreement manifestations, i.e., person, number and/or gender (PNG). If we work along this line of reasoning, we can reach at a general understanding of the nature of agreement in natural languages; which appears to be one of the means of establishing semantic relationships between different elements in the sentence.

1.3. Non-verbal Predicate in English:

In English, it seems that non-verbal predicate is expressed by using (1) a form of the copula *be* which appears to have syntactic, but not semantic, function and (2) a predication which maybe a noun, an adjective or prepositional phrase. In the following, we shall validate our observation developed thus far which may be restated as: the main function of the copula in non-verbal predicate is to establish a link between the subject and the predication by supporting grammatical properties which reflect this link (as shown in table-1). This might explain why they are called 'linking verbs'[1] as illustrated below:

6) I am a teacher.
7) He is happy.
8) They are in India.

Table 1. *Clause structure*
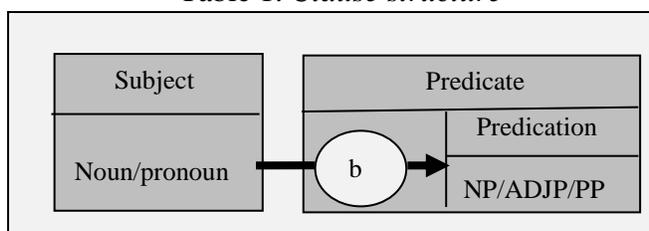
The examples (6-8) show that a semantic relationship is established between the subject and the predication: *I* and *teacher, he* and *happy* and *they* and *in India.* However, it seems that the copula in the above sentences does not contribute the semantic and syntactic attributes such as (argument and thematic roles) in the sentences. In GB theory, this state of affairs is exemplified by a typical structure of Exceptional Case Marking (ECM) where these copulas are dropped from the structure without changing the meaning of the sentence as illustrated in the following pairs of sentences:

9)

a. I consider [that Ali is tall.]   =   b. I consider [Ali tall.]
c. I deem [that Ahmed is a teacher]   =   d. I deem [Ahmed a teacher]

Given that these verbs are syntactically and semantically insignificant and thus can be dropped. At this stage, a question such as, why do we have to use a semantically and syntactically dormant element in these sentences, becomes very relevant. There must be some compelling reasons that force us to use them. We can answer this question by a careful analysis of the sentences in (9). The analysis will make it clear that the copula 'is' in (9 a & c) is the expression of the tense which assigns nominative Case to the embedded subject. And that the examples in (9 b & d) will explain that the verb of the matrix clause assigns accusative Case to the embedded subject by a process of ECM. Thus, in situations where there is no need to express the tense morpheme, *to be* copulas are not used as the case in (9 b & d). Therefore, it appears that the main function of the verbs in the above examples is to support the tense morpheme.

However, *to be* copulas in the above examples also exhibit agreement in person and number in accordance with the subject of the sentence. It seems that it is the agreement morpheme that controls the form of the copula *to be* such as *am, is* and *are*. These variants of *be* are in present tense and they change due to the PNG of the subject. Thus, we can assume that these copulas are used only for the tense and agreement features; and they are syntactically insignificant in the sentence. Further evidence comes from the fact that this task, i.e., supporting tense and agreement, cannot be done by any other element in the sentence in such cases. For example:

10)

        a. *He tall**s**   (~ He is tall)
        b. *He an idiot**ed**   (~ He was an idiot)

It seems that these copulas are characterized by the ability to support the negative and interrogative morphemes which distinguish them from thematic verbs as illustrated by the following examples in table-2:

Table 2. *The state of negative and interrogative morphemes in English*

No.	TYPE OF SENTENCES	NON-THEMATIC VERBS	THEMATIC VERBS
11.	NEGATIVE	He **is not (isn't)** a teacher	*He **runs not (runsn't)**
12.	INTERROGATIVE	**Are** they teachers?	***Runs** he?

Therefore, *to be* copulas, in English, are used to accomplish certain tasks, i.e., to support bound morphemes present in the structure. These tasks cannot be completed by any other element in the sentence.

Indeed, the author's claim is supported by the passive construction in English where *to be* copulas are only used to support the tense and agreement properties, and that is because of the inability of the thematic verb to support such features/ properties in such constructions. That is, English morphological rules stipulate that a verb cannot bear more than one overt inflectional suffix[(2)]. Therefore, the main verb in the passive construction can perform only one task and that is to hold the passive suffix, i.e., *-en*. The load of other markers such as tense and agreement in the structure can be given to an auxiliary verb as illustrated in the following example and its tree diagram:
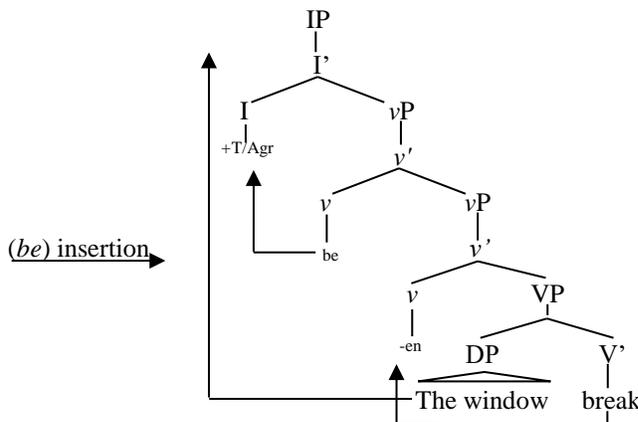
13) The window is broken

Figure 1. Passive tree diagram

A critical evaluation of the above example and its tree diagram would reveal two important points, (1) the auxiliary, i.e., *is* expresses the tense and agreement morphemes and (2) the thematic verb expresses the passive morpheme. In GB theory terminologies; the thematic verb moves upward to pick up the bound passive morpheme, which lies in a position normally occupied by an agentive light verb[(3)], and it cannot move further up because, as stated above, its morphological need is saturated, i.e., it cannot bear more than one inflectional morpheme. Therefore, another element, i.e., *to be* in this case, is inserted in order to support the tense and agreement. We know in English tense and agreement need external support because they are bound morphemes. Thus, it appears that it is the need to express the tense and agreement overtly in the above example that would require us to insert *to be* copulas. Therefore, we might not find these auxiliaries in a construction where the tense and agreement are not expressed. Fortunately, such construction is available in English as shown by the following example:

14) We heard [the window broken by the burglar] = the window was broken by the burglar

Example (14) strongly demonstrates that it is tense and agreement that necessitate the appearance of the auxiliary *be* because the difference between the embedded clause in the brackets in the example on the left of the equal sign and the finite version of the same example on the right is the expression of the tense and agreement in the latter. Therefore, the passive construction in English gives convincing evidence supporting our assumption that *to be* verbs are only used to support the tense and agreement morphemes in declarative sentences[(4)].

Similarly, in the progressive construction which involves a progressive morpheme such as *-ing*, the *be*-copula in each case is only used to support the tense and agreement morphemes as shown in the following example and its tree diagram:
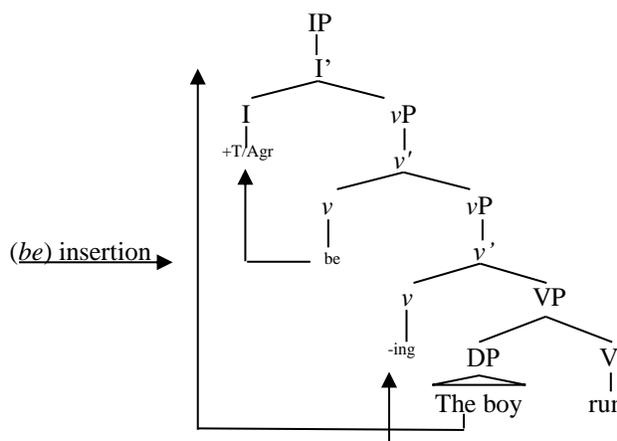
15) The boy is running.

Figure 2. Progressive tree diagram

Figure (2) shows that the main verb moves upwards to pick up the bound progressive morpheme i.e., *-ing* and it cannot move further up because it has got its maximum number of inflectional markers. But the tense and agreement morphemes must be supported by another element. Therefore, an auxiliary, i.e., *be* is inserted in small *v* which subsequently moves upwards to I position to pick up the tense and agreement morphemes. However, it should be clear at this stage that the author considers the auxiliary *be* in the above examples to be equal to the light verbs in

languages like Hindi, Panjabi, Gujarati, etc. Both are semantically delexicalized or grammaticalized and they function as the host for inflectional markers such as tense and agreement properties of the sentence. Moreover, both ultimately form just one unit, and contribute to the aspectual meaning of the main verbs that they are associated with. This has been shown in the following example of the compound verb construction in Hindi-Urdu where the light verb *diya* 'give' functions as an auxiliary verb and a carrier of the syntactic information (Das, 2006, p. 55):

16)   dineš-ne   mera   kam   kər   diya
     dinesh-3MS-Erg   my   work-MS do-v^1 give-v^2-perf-MS
                         'Dinesh did my work'

Example (16) will support the author's earlier observation from the data of Hindi-Urdu that in (16) the V^2 'diya' – 'give' is a light verb here because there are only two arguments in the sentence and also because there is no contribution of the meaning of 'give' in the predication of the sentence.

Now, let us move on to reiterate the status of the copula *be* which becomes very clear in the example (17). This example offers four bound morphemes, i.e., tense, agreement, progressive and passive as numbered below respectively. These bound morphemes must be supported by suitable elements. In such condition two *be* auxiliaries may be used as shown by the following example:

17) The car **was**$_{1\&2}$ be**ing**$_3$ fix**ed**$_4$

In (17) there are two aspectual morphemes in addition to the tense and agreement morphemes. If we Start from the terminal node of the tree in figure 3, the main verb bears the passive morpheme, i.e., (-ed) and then an insertion of *be* is done to take care of the progressive morpheme which the main verb has left it out due to the process of passivisation. The other things that must be explained in the example are that the tense and agreement morphemes are picked up by another *be* insertion operation in the given tree.
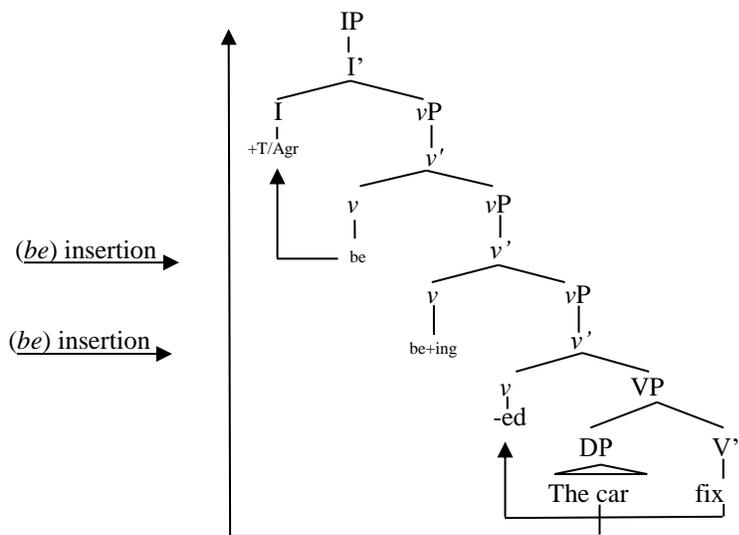

Figure 3. Passive progressive tree diagram

Figure 3 proves that *be* is only used to carry the bound morphemes present in the structure. Again, that is because each *be*-verb/main-verb can only bear one inflectional morpheme. Except at the position of 'I' where the inserted element can bear two morphemes, i.e., tense and agreement Pollock (1989).

Thus, it appears that *be* in every usage, i.e., whether main or auxiliary is delexicalized element inserted into the structure only to support bound morphemes. Moreover, such uses of delexicalized elements are not new in English. In the following examples '*do*' as an auxiliary has been used to support the main verb for its predication which is possible only if '*do*' does not contribute any meaning in the sentence.

18)

    a. Did you buy that car?   b. you didn't buy that car.

    c. you DID buy that car!   d. you bought that car, didn't you?

In (18a) the auxiliary '*do*' has moved to the front position of the sentence to make the interrogative form of the declarative sentence *you bought that car.* In (18b) the auxiliary '*do*' is used to support the negative morpheme while in (18c) the auxiliary is used to emphasize the main verb of the declarative sentence. Finally, in (18d) the auxiliary is used to form tag question. These tasks cannot be achieved by the main verb and therefore the Do-insertion operation takes place.

Thus, based on facts arrived at so far, the author concludes that *be* and *do* in English are language specific rules as they are semantically dormant elements inserted into the structure to fulfill a structural need which cannot be achieved by otherwise verbal or other elements that are present in the sentence. Taking this conclusion a step further, the author expects that other languages do not show these kinds of non-thematic "verbs" if they have got other elements that can support bound morphemes such as tense and agreement. Iraqi Arabic is a case in point.

1.4. Conclusion:

It has been shown that the so-called '*be*-verbs' in English are nothing but a realization of tense and agreement properties present in the structure. Iraqi supported this observation by proving that non-verbal predication can support these grammatical properties; and thus, rendering the appearance of a verb-be-like element redundant.

The author arrived at this conclusion after comparing the morpho-syntactic properties of Iraqi nominal sentences and their English equivalents. While placing the discussion within the realm of GB theory that has provided the necessary theoretical background and the tools needed to reaffirm this conclusion.

Endnotes:

(1). Because this paper focuses on *to be*, the author abstracts away from other verbs such as *remain, become, etc.* which sometimes function as linking verbs. However, when they function as linking verbs in English, they can be substituted by a form of *to be* (Hengeveld, 1992: chapter 4).

(2). According to Pollock (1989) tense and agreement are two separate morphemes. However, in English they always appear together on the same verbal element. Therefore, they might be considered as an exception to this rule.

(3). According to Burzio (1986), in the passive construction the agentive light verb is replaced by the passive morpheme which as it does not assign thematic role to its specifier, it does not assign accusative Case to the theme, and hence the theme has to move for Case assignment.

(4). Because in negative and interrogative sentences *be* copulas are used to support the negative and interrogative morphemes in addition to the tense and agreement as illustrated by examples (11 & 12) respectively.

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