Copula Constructions in Igala: A Cross-linguistic Typological Perspective

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Abstract
This paper investigates copula constructions in Igala, a Yoruboid language of the Benue-Congo subgroup spoken in central Nigeria. Drawing on elicited data from native speakers and framed within cross-linguistic typological literature (e.g., Curnow 2000; Pustet 2003; Mikkelsen 2005), the study identifies three primary copular forms in Igala: the verbal copula che*, the semi-copula* dà *(often combined with the object-demoting auxiliary* mú*), and the locative/existential copula* dẹ́*. Additionally, Igala permits zero copula constructions under constrained grammatical contexts, particularly in present tense and informal registers. These copula forms correspond with established typological categories while displaying language-specific morphosyntactic and semantic characteristics. The analysis further classifies Igala copular clauses into predicational, specificational, and equative types, following Higgins (1979) and Mikkelsen (2005). The findings contribute both to the documentation of Igala grammar and to broader typological models of copula systems, highlighting the grammaticalization pathways and contextual factors that shape copula use in the language.*
Keywords: Igala language, copula constructions, grammaticalization, Niger-Congo languages, linguistic typology

1. Introduction

A copula construction is a sentence structure composed of three key elements: a subject, a complement, and a copula—the element that links the subject to its complement. This connection typically serves to attribute specific grammatical or semantic properties to the subject. Within such constructions, the complement functions to describe or characterize the subject, with the copula facilitating this relationship.

In many languages, the copula is embedded within the verb phrase and often occupies the head position of the construction (Ndimele 1999; Isaac 2020). This differs notably from constructions where the predicate contains a lexical verb accompanied by an overt patient. Although copulas are often considered semantically light or referentially empty, their syntactic behavior and morphosyntactic realization vary considerably across languages.

The structural complexity and typological significance of copula constructions have attracted considerable linguistic attention, especially within cross-linguistic comparative research. Central questions guiding such inquiry include:

 i. What lexical categories do copulas represent across languages?
 ii. How do copulas manifest in diverse syntactic environments?
 iii. Within which typological frameworks can copula constructions be analyzed?

This paper addresses these questions through a descriptive analysis of copula constructions in Igala, thereby contributing to a broader understanding of copular systems within Niger-Congo languages and beyond. Igala is a Yoruboid language within the Benue-Congo subgroup, primarily spoken by the Igala people in Kogi State, Nigeria. Smaller Igala-speaking communities also exist in Esan

South-West (Edo State), Anambra West (Anambra State), and Uzo-Uwani (Enugu State). According to Ethnologue (2020), the estimated population of Igala speakers is approximately 1.62 million.

Data for this study were gathered through structured interviews and elicitation sessions with fluent native speakers from the Dekina and Idah dialect zones, employing a convenience sampling approach. Primary data consisted of direct linguistic elicitation, while secondary data were drawn from books, academic articles, journals, and relevant online sources.

2. A Cross-linguistic Assessment of Copula Constructions
2.1. Copula and Copula Constructions

A copula is defined as a linking element that connects the predicative structure—typically a complement—to the subject, with its primary function being to convey predicative content to the subject. Essentially, the copula enables the attribution of properties or identities to the subject.

Pustet (2003) challenges the more traditional definition offered by Crystal (1997), who treats the copula as a straightforward linker. Pustet argues that in some languages, a copula may not exist as an independent lexical item but is rather inferred through juxtaposition. For Pustet, a copula is a linguistic element that co-occurs with certain lexical items, acting as the nucleus of predication but contributing no semantic content to the predicate phrase itself. Similarly, Hengeveld (1992) emphasizes the copula's lack of independent semantic meaning, describing it as a functionally grammatical element rather than one carrying semantic content. Building on this, Mustaffa (2022) introduces the notion of semi-copulas—elements like *become* in English—that carry minimal

semantic content but do not fully qualify as verbs in terms of predicative meaning.

Shinjiro (2011) highlights the grammatical significance of copulas, especially those embedded within the verb phrase, underscoring the need for focused research on their structure and function. While many languages realize copulas as verbs, others express them through non-verbal categories such as particles or clitics (Pustet 2003; Shinjiro 2011).

Martinović (2015) defines a copula construction as a sentence containing two constituents—a subject and a non-verbal predicate—connected by a copula. This perspective is supported by Bentley (2015) and Abubakar (2013), who argue that non-verbal predication does not necessarily require a full verb; predicates may derive from categories like nouns, adjectives, or prepositions.

Further, Hengeveld (1992:32) asserts that the non-verbal predicate lies at the core of the semantic structure of the clause, while the copula serves merely as a grammatical support element when necessary. Aligning with this view, Curnow (2000:1) offers a widely cited definition: "A copula construction is the basic linguistic structure used to express (a) identity between two participants, typically noun phrases (e.g., 'that man is my father,' 'that woman is Mary'), and (b) group membership or classification via noun phrases (e.g., 'that woman is a doctor,' 'that man is a teacher')."

2.2. Cross-linguistic Typology of Copula Constructions

Cross-linguistic studies of copula constructions examine both their syntactic structures and semantic properties. Foundational typological frameworks proposed by scholars such as Curnow (2000), Higgins (1979), and Mikkelsen (2005) have significantly contributed to our understanding of the diverse forms and functions copulas can assume across languages.

2.2.1. Syntactic Typology

Based on morphosyntactic realization, Curnow (2000) identifies four primary types of copula constructions:

a. Verbal Copula Construction
- The copula is a dedicated verb.
- Structure: Subject + copula verb + complement (e.g., *She is a teacher*).
- Exhibits verb-like behavior: appears in typical verbal positions, can be negated or questioned, and may co-occur with auxiliaries.
- Complements are usually nominal, adjectival, or prepositional.
- Supported by Baker (2003), Higgins (1979), and Mikkelsen (2005).

b. Particle Copula Construction
- The copula is a non-verbal, non-inflecting particle.
- Functions solely as a linker between subject and complement.
- Often originates from focus markers or conjunctions (Stassen 1997).
- Discussed in Pustet (2003) and Stassen (1997).

c. Inflectional Copula Construction
- Copular meaning is encoded through verbal inflection on the predicate rather than an independent verb.
- Inflections express tense, person, or mood.
- Typical in languages with rich verbal morphology.
- Cited in Payne (1997), Pustet (2003), and Curnow (2000).

d. Zero Copula Construction
- No overt copula is present; the subject and predicate are simply juxtaposed.

- Common in present tense or timeless truths where an explicit copula is unnecessary.
- Often conditioned by the lexical category of the predicate, such as nominals or adjectives.
- Frequent in informal, predicative, or identificational contexts (Mikkelsen 2005).
- Discussed by Pustet (2003) and Stassen (1997).

2.2.2. Semantic Typology

Higgins (1979) classifies copula constructions into four main semantic types as we show in Table 1.

Table 1. Semantic Types of Copula Constructions (Adapted from Higgins 1979)

Type	Description
Predicational	The complement describes or attributes a property to the subject (e.g., *She is tall*).
Specificational	The complement specifies the value of a variable introduced by the subject.
Identificational	The subject and complement refer to the same individual.
Equative	The subject and complement are co-referential (e.g., *Clark Kent is Superman*).

Mikkelsen (2005) later refines this classification by subsuming the Identificational type under the Equative category and further dividing Equative constructions into **Demonstrative Equative and Truncated Cleft**, a reduced cleft construction that retains focus semantics.

2.2.3. Implications for Igala

The typological distinctions outlined above—both syntactic and semantic—provide a robust framework for analyzing copula constructions in Igala. Specifically, they enable a precise investigation of:

1. The morphosyntactic strategies Igala employs to encode copula constructions.
2. The semantic distinctions made between identity, predication, and specification.
3. The contextual factors, such as tense and predicate class, that influence whether the copula is overtly realized or omitted.

The following sections apply these theoretical insights to Igala data, assessing how the language conforms to, deviates from, or extends the established typology of copular constructions.

3. Copular Constructions in Igala

This section presents a comprehensive descriptive account of the morphosyntactic structures and semantic functions of copula constructions in Igala. Drawing on native speaker data, the analysis is framed within the typological perspectives outlined in Section 2, emphasizing both universal tendencies and language-specific particularities.

3.1 Inventory of Copula Forms

Igala employs three main copular forms — **che, dà,** and **dé̩** — each with distinct syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic properties. Table 2 summarizes their core features.

Table 2. Inventory of Copula Forms in Igala and their Core Functions

Copula	Gloss	Primary Function & Notes
che	'is/are'	Primary verbal copula for predicational and equative clauses; inflectable for tense-aspect via auxiliaries; does not combine with ODA mú.
dà	'become'	Semi-copula signaling change of state; combines productively with ODA mú to indicate completive or progressive aspects.
dẹ́	'be/exist'	Locative or existential copula; used in existential clauses, locative statements, and cleft constructions; forms lexical compounds (e.g., dẹ́jú).

These copulas demonstrate Igala's rich system of predication, distinguishing states of being, transitions, and existence/location.

3.2. Syntactic Patterns

3.2.1. Verbal Copula *che*

The verbal copula **che** functions as the default copula for attributive and equative predications. It occupies a canonical position between subject and predicate, consistent with the S + COP + Predicate order typical of many languages. In terms of tense-aspect marking, **che** combines with a limited set of auxiliaries (e.g., *á* 'AUX') to mark future or non-past tense, but notably excludes the object demoting auxiliary *mú*, which is reserved for dynamic or progressive predicates. In terms of negation and interrogation marking, **che** can be negated or questioned, demonstrating verb-like behavior, as illustrated in the examples below:

(1) *Áda ǐ che ítíchà ń.*
  'Daddy is not a teacher.'
(2) *Áda che ítíchà a?*
  'Is Daddy a teacher?'

Cross-linguistically, the Igala copula **che** shares notable similarities with elements like *be* in English or *ne* in Hausa. Like these counterparts, **che** functions both as a copular element and as a verb, demonstrating inflectional and syntactic behavior typical of verbs. This dual functionality aligns with the verbal copula type outlined in Curnow's (2000) typology, where the copula is treated not merely as a linker but as a morphosyntactically active verb.

3.2.2. Semi-Copula *dà*

The semi-copula **dà** in Igala encodes a sense of change or transition in state and is marked by more complex morphosyntactic behavior than the primary copula **che**. One of the key features of **dà** is its ability to combine with auxiliaries, particularly the object demoting auxiliary **mú**, which adds aspectual nuance. When used with **mú**, the construction conveys either a progressive or completive sense, indicating that the change of state is either ongoing or has recently been completed. This distinguishes **dà** from **che**, which does not co-occur with **mú**, and reflects a more dynamic, aspectually sensitive predicate structure. This usage corresponds to what Mustaffa (2022) identifies as semi-copulas—forms that retain minimal lexical meaning while contributing significantly to aspectual interpretation. Unlike **che**, **dà** combines freely with both **á** (an auxiliary indicating future or non-past) and **mú**, demonstrating its syntactic flexibility as a dynamic predicate. The positioning of negation also reflects this syntactic behavior, as it typically targets the auxiliary rather than the copula itself. For example:

(3) **Ónobùlẹ lẹ́ ǐ mú dà íchẹ́kpa ń**
'The woman has not become a yeti.'
This sentence illustrates how **dà** functions within a broader aspectual and negation framework, showcasing its semi-lexical nature and grammatical integration in expressing transformation or state transition.

3.2.3. Locative/Existential Copula *dẹ́*

The locative copula **dẹ́** in Igala plays a specialized role in encoding spatial and existential relations. It is primarily used in existential clauses to introduce the presence or existence of an entity, much like the existential constructions found in English ("there is") or Japanese (**iru/aru**). This usage highlights its function in asserting that something or someone is present in a particular space or state.

A distinctive feature of **dẹ́** is its capacity for **lexical compounding**, which reflects its morphological productivity. For instance, the compound form **dẹ́jú**, meaning 'be alive', illustrates how **dẹ́** extends semantically from mere physical location to more abstract states such as vitality or ongoing existence. This compounding ability not only broadens its semantic range but also emphasizes its role in expressing existential states beyond simple location.

In terms of syntactic distribution, **dẹ́** shows **restricted predicate compatibility**. It typically co-occurs with locative phrases or nouns that denote a place or setting, which suggests that its selection as a copula is strongly **semantically conditioned**. Rather than serving as a general-purpose copula, **dẹ́** is tightly linked to predicates involving space, presence, or being, making it an essential component of Igala's strategy for expressing existence and location.

3.3. Predicate Types and Word Classes

Igala's copular predicates occur across several lexical categories, each influencing the choice and behavior of the copula. **Nominal predicates**, such as kinship terms, roles, or identities (e.g., *ítíchà* 'teacher'), typically require an overt copula—most commonly **che**—to link the subject and predicate. However, in present tense or informal discourse, these constructions may appear without an overt copula, reflecting the language's allowance for zero-copula structures.

Adjectival predicates, which describe qualities or states (e.g., *édúdú* 'darkness'), are compatible with all three main copula forms. The selection often depends on the aspectual or semantic nuance: **che** is used for stative descriptions, **dà** is preferred when the adjective marks a change or transition into a state, highlighting its semi-copular function.

Locative or prepositional predicates are most frequently paired with the copula **dé̩**, whose semantics are inherently spatial or existential. This alignment ensures that statements about location or existence are grammatically coherent and semantically precise, reinforcing the specialized role of **dé̩**' within Igala's copular system. The lexical class of the predicate influences both the morphosyntactic choice of copula and the licensing of zero copula constructions.

3.4. Zero Copula in Igala

Igala allows the omission of the copula, especially with nominal predicates in present tense or informal discourse. The zero copula construction involves simple juxtaposition of subject and predicate. In Igala, zero copula constructions are permissible under specific grammatical and pragmatic conditions. These constructions involve the omission of an overt copular element, with meaning derived

from context, particularly in present tense or timeless statements. Zero copula commonly occurs when the predicate is nominal or adjectival, and the utterance is situated within informal or conversational discourse. This strategy reflects a broader cross-linguistic tendency in which copulas are often dropped in contexts where tense and identity are recoverable. Examples of Igala zero copula include (4) and (5):

(4) **Ọ́jọ́ Ẹ́nẹ̀ẹ̀nyọ̀**
   'God [is] good.'

(5) **Áda ítíchà**
   'Daddy [is] a teacher.'

These examples illustrate how identity and predicational meanings can be conveyed without an explicit copular verb, as long as the structural and contextual cues are clear.

The presence of zero copula in Igala aligns with widely observed cross-linguistic patterns, where copula omission typically marks present tense identity or predicational statements. As noted by Mikkelsen (2005) and Stassen (1997), this phenomenon is common in languages across different families, especially when the grammatical environment makes the copula semantically redundant. In Igala, beyond its grammatical function, zero copula also serves pragmatic purposes. It can signal informality or conversational tone, foreground the predicate for emphasis, or enhance prosodic focus in discourse. Thus, its use is not merely structural but also communicatively strategic.

3.5. Semantic Classification of Copula Constructions in Igala
Employing Higgins' (1979) and Mikkelsen's (2005) semantic typology, Igala copula constructions fall into three major categories. Table 3. Semantic Classification of Copula Constructions in Igala

Type	Example	Interpretation
Predicational	*Ẹ̀gàhị̃ che ìgbẹ̀lẹ́* ('Egahi is a damsel')	The complement attributes a property or quality to the subject.
Specificational	*Ájádù che Íjísọ́sì* ('The Saviour is Jesus')	The complement specifies the value of a variable introduced by the subject.
Equative	*Ọ̀pàlúwa Ògwùchẹ́ che Àtá Ígálâ* ('Opaluwa Ogwuche is Attah of Igala')	The subject and complement refer to the same individual or entity.

An additional nuance observed in the Igala data is the tendency to blur the distinction between identificational and equative copula constructions. This supports Mikkelsen's (2005) position, in which identificational clauses are subsumed under the broader equative category. Rather than maintaining a rigid separation, Igala constructions suggest a continuum where referential equivalence and identity are pragmatically rather than structurally distinguished. Moreover, the realization of different copula types in Igala is modulated by contextual factors. The specific choice of copular form—whether *che*, *dà*, or *dẹ́*—interacts with the presence or absence of auxiliaries and with tense-aspect distinctions. For instance, the semi-copula *dà*, which expresses change of state, is notably absent in clauses expressing static identity, reinforcing its role as a dynamic predicate marker rather than a general-purpose copula.

3.6. Pragmatic and Discourse Considerations

The use of copula forms in Igala is closely tied to pragmatic considerations such as focus, emphasis, politeness, and discourse structure. In terms of information structure, the overt verbal copula *che* often introduces presupposed or backgrounded information, while the omission of the copula can signal immediacy, assertiveness, or foregrounding of the predicate. This makes zero copula constructions particularly useful in spontaneous or emotionally charged contexts.

Register and formality also influence copula choice. In more formal or ceremonial registers, speakers tend to favor overt copulas, often accompanied by auxiliaries to mark tense or aspect. In contrast, informal speech—such as everyday conversation—permits the omission of the copula, reflecting a relaxed syntactic economy and mirroring broader patterns of stylistic variation. Additionally, the locative copula *dé* serves a specialized role in cleft and pseudo-cleft constructions. These structures are employed to foreground specific constituents within a sentence, allowing speakers to manipulate focus and topicality. The use of *dé* in such contexts underlines its discourse-organizing function, extending its utility beyond mere existential or locative meanings.

Igala's copula system exemplifies a complex interplay of morphosyntax, semantics, and pragmatics. The verbal copula *che* functions as the canonical linking verb in both predicational and equative clauses, occupying a central position in the syntax of stative expressions. In contrast, the semi-copula *dà* encodes dynamic change or transition of state and productively combines with aspectual auxiliaries, highlighting its role in aspectual modulation. The locative or existential copula *dé* is used to express presence, location, or existential states, and is morphologically

productive in forming compounds such as *dẹ́jú* ('be alive'). Additionally, Igala permits zero copula constructions, especially in informal registers and present tense contexts, reflecting a pragmatic dimension in the deployment of copular strategies. These findings suggest that copulas in Igala are not merely syntactic placeholders but are semantically nuanced and grammatically robust elements essential to the structure of predication.

4. Analysis and Discussion

This section provides a comparative and analytical interpretation of **Igala copula constructions**, drawing on the **syntactic** and **semantic typologies** established in prior sections. The analysis shows how Igala both aligns with and diverges from known cross-linguistic patterns in the expression of copularity.

4.1. Alignment with Typological Frameworks

The typological literature (Curnow 2000; Pustet 2003; Mikkelsen 2005) categorizes copula systems across languages into identifiable syntactic and semantic types. The analysis of Igala shows that its copular system aligns with several of these major types.

4.1.1. Verbal Copula

The element **che** in Igala aligns with the **verbal copula construction**, comparable to BE in English. It occurs in the canonical *S + COP + NP/AdjP* structure and demonstrates the behavior of an inflectable verb as in (6):

(6) Áda   che   ítíchà
    Daddy   is   teacher
    'Daddy is a teacher.'

This confirms that Igala falls into the **verbal copula** typological class as defined in **Curnow (2000)**.

4.1.2. Semi-Copula

The form **dà**, used with the auxiliary **mu**, exhibits features of a **semi-copula**. While it carries some semantic content ('become'), its function is **not fully lexical**, positioning it between full verbs and pure grammatical copulas:

(7) Ónobùlẹ lẹ́ mú dà íchẹ́kpa
       The woman   has   become   a yeti
       'The woman has become a yeti.'

This form parallels the English *become* and aligns with Mustaffa's (2022) discussion on **semantic minimalism** in semi-copular expressions.

4.1.3. Locative Copula and Existential Use

The locative copula **dẹ́** shows characteristics of **non-verbal or inflectional copula types** found in typologically similar languages. Its use in **existential constructions** and **truncated clefts** points to an extended copular function beyond predication:

(8) Ọ́jọ́ mi dẹ́jú
       My   God   is alive
       'My God is alive.'

The morphological compounding seen in **dẹ́ + ẹju** (life) is indicative of Igala's strategy to **lexicalize existential states**, a trait shared with many Niger-Congo languages (Stassen 1997).

4.2. Zero Copula Strategy in Igala

The **zero copula strategy**, well-documented in African and Slavic languages, is also attested in Igala. In present tense or informal speech, the copular element is often omitted, especially when the predicate is nominal or adjectival:

(9) Ọ́jọ́   Ẹ́nẹ̀ẹ̀nyọ̀
       God   is good
       'God is good!'

This supports the argument made by **Mikkelsen (2005)** and **Pustet (2003)** that **tense** and **predicate class** are major conditions for copula omission. In Igala, the absence of an overt copula does not affect grammatical acceptability when the **present tense** and **identity statement** are inferable from context.

4.3. Semantic Interpretation of Copula Types

Applying Higgins' (1979) semantic typology, Igala copula constructions can be categorized into three main types. First, predicational copulas attribute qualities or roles to the subject, as in the example where "Egahi is a damsel." Second, specificational copulas identify a specific entity within a known set, illustrated by the sentence "The Saviour is Jesus." Third, equative copulas indicate referential equivalence between subject and complement, exemplified by "Opaluwa Ogwuche is Attah of Igala." Notably, there is little evidence for a distinct identificational construction in Igala, which aligns with Mikkelsen's (2005) proposal to subsume identificational types under the equative category.

(10) Ẹ̀gàhỉ   che   ìgbẹ̀lẹ́
      Egahi is   a damsel
      'Egahi is a damsel.'

(11) Ájádù   che   Íjísọ̀sì
      The Saviour is   Jesus
      'The Saviour is Jesus.'

(12) Ọ̀pàlúwa   Ògwùchẹ́   che   Àtá   Ígálâ
      Opaluwa Ogwuche is   Attah of Igala
      'Opaluwa Ogwuche is Attah of Igala.'

4.4. Lexical Sources and Grammaticalization

Typologically, copula elements frequently grammaticalize from full verbs, locative markers, or focus particles, as noted by Heine and

Kuteva (2002). In Igala, this process is evident in several ways. The copula che may historically stem from a general stative or existential verb, serving as the primary verbal copula today. The semi-copula dà retains part of its original lexical meaning "to become" and continues to grammaticalize, especially in constructions combining it with the auxiliary mù dà. Meanwhile, dẹ́ likely originates from a locative or existential base, a connection reinforced by its frequent pairing with ẹ́jú to form the compound dẹ́jú. Together, these forms reveal a layered and hybrid copular system in Igala, which strategically employs verbal, semi-verbal, and locative elements to encode different semantic and syntactic functions.

4.5. Constraints and Contextual Dependencies
Certain syntactic and semantic constraints govern how the copula is realized in Igala. First, zero copula is permitted only in the present tense, limiting its use to current or timeless statements. Second, copula omission is licensed mainly with nominal and adjectival predicates, whereas verbal or more complex predicates require an overt copula. Third, formality plays a role: formal speech tends to use the copula che explicitly, while zero copula is more common in informal, conversational, or spontaneous contexts. These patterns align with observations by Stassen (1997) and Pustet (2003), highlighting how copula usage is highly context-dependent and sensitive to both grammatical and pragmatic factors in natural language.

5. Conclusion
This study has examined the structural and semantic characteristics of copula constructions in Igala, combining cross-linguistic typological frameworks with native speaker data. It reveals that Igala employs a multi-form copular system, including the verbal

copula *che*, the semi-copula *dà* (often used with the auxiliary *mu*), and the locative/existential copula *dẹ́* (including the compound *dẹ́jú*). Additionally, zero copula constructions occur under specific grammatical conditions, primarily in the present tense and informal speech, aligning with patterns found in other languages.

Syntactically, Igala copulas correspond with typologies proposed by Curnow (2000) and Pustet (2003), while semantically, they encompass predicational, specificational, and equative functions as described by Higgins (1979) and Mikkelsen (2005). The data also highlight ongoing grammaticalization processes, where verbs and locative markers have evolved into copular forms.

This research contributes both descriptively and typologically by providing a detailed account of an underdocumented feature of Igala grammar and enriching our understanding of West Benue-Congo languages. Moreover, it demonstrates how Igala can inform and refine existing theoretical models of copula constructions. Future studies could investigate the historical development of copulas in Igala and related languages, as well as comparative analyses within the Yoruboid family to evaluate the prevalence of these strategies.

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