I tried for three years to find the verb ‘have’ in Ewe…” Those were the words uttered with a mix of frustration and delight of a missionary on furlough several years ago. (Welmers 1972. 208)

This quotation echoes the challenges presented to a researcher in Bantu linguistics by the surface structure (spoken) form of a typical Bantu language. A major part of the problem is attributed to the many morphophonological processes operating on the basic forms thus obscuring the actual forms of particular morphemes and/or lexical items. Given the spoken form of Kikamba, for example, one can isolate four forms of the verb ‘be’; e.g. ni-T and -Tth as the sentences below show.

a. Kana ke vaa.
   The child is here.

b. Nyie) ni mūwau
   (Nyie) n-1 mū-wau.
   (I) Is-be I-sick.
   I am sick.

c. Ka-ana ni ka-wau
   12-child be 12-sick
   the child is sick.

d. Kana kakeethiwa kawau
   Ka-ana ka-ka-ithiwa ka-wau
   12-child 12-tns-be 12-sick.
   The child will be sick.

In this paper we want to examine these forms to determine which one is the basic form of the verb ‘be’ and then go further and discuss the characteristics of the verb ‘be’ in Kikamba.

Introduction

The form of the verb ‘be’ presents peculiar characteristics. In English for example it has eight forms while most other verbs in the language have an average of three forms. It is therefore of linguistic interest to examine the characteristics of the verb ‘be’ in Kikamba.

1Kikamba is a language spoken in the Eastern Province of Kenya by the Akamba people.
The Verb 'be' in Kikamba: Issues in Identifying the Form

The Four forms.

i). The e form

(1) a. Kana ke vaa.
The child is here.

b. Andū me vaa.
The people are here.

c. Mūndū e vaa.
mūndū is here.

The underlying morpheme structure of the above sentences, however shows that e results from a phonological process which coalesces the concord vowel, a, with the form ī. See the morpheme break in example (Z) below.

(2) a. ka-ana ka-ī vaa
12-child 12-be here.

b. A-ndū ma-ī vaa
2-people 2-be here.

c. Mū-ndū a-ī vaa.
l-person l-be here.

I will, therefore, not examine this form further since it is basically a surface structure realisation of the ī form.

ii). The ī Form

The ī form is exemplified in (2) above and (3) below.

(3) a. (Nyie) nī mūwau
(Nyie) n-ī mū-wau.
I Is-be 1-sick.
I am sick.

Adjectives take the nominal concord in agreement with the noun they are associated with. In the cases where adjectives are associated with pronouns like in the examples above, the nominal concord of class 1 (class 1 and 2 are basically the human noun classes in Kikamba) will be used with singular pronouns and the Class 2 nominal concord with the plural pronouns.
b. (ithyi) twī awau.
(Inthyi) tū-ī a-wau.
we 2p-be 2-sick.
We are sick.

c. (we) wī mūwau.
(We) ū-ī mū-wau.
you 2s-be 1-sick.
You are sick.

d. (Inywī) mwī awau.
(Īnywī mū-ī a-wau.
you 2p-be 2-sick
You are sick.

iii). The nī Form

Nī could be isolated as the form meaning ‘be’ in (4) below.

(4) a. Kī-veti nī kiwau.
7-woman be 7-sick.
The woman is sick.

b. Ka-ana nī ka-wau
2-child be 12-sick.
the child is sick.

c. Mū-ndū nī mū-wau.
1-person be 1-sick.
the person is sick.

iv). The ī th(ī)wa Form

(5) a. Kana kakeethī wa kawau
Ka-ana ka-ka-ī thi wa ka-wau
12-child 12-tns-be 12-sick.
The child will be sick.

b. Kīveti kī keethī wa kī wau
Kī-veti kī-ka-ī thi wa kī-wau
7-woman 7-tns-be 7-sick.
The woman will be sick.

c. (Nyie) ngeethī wa mūwau
(Nyie) n-ka-ī thi wa mu-wau
I lps-tns-be 1-sick.
I will be sick.
The Verb ‘be’ in Kikamba: Issues in Identifying the Form

Determining the Verb ‘be’

After eliminating e as a basic form of the verb ‘be’ we are left with three forms which could be variants of the verb ‘be’ in Kikamba or one of which is the verb ‘be’. In what follows I will try to determine which is the case.

The i and ni forms

First I will examine ni and i. A good question to ask is why one would want to consider either or both of these as the verb ‘be’? The first reason is based on semantic and morphological consideration. In (3) above the meaning of the other morphemes is accounted for except for i and in the same way ni seems the only item which could mean ‘be’ in (4). A second reason why each of these forms may be considered a form of the verb ‘be’ has to do with word order. Kikamba is a SVO language and both the i and ni occupy the position a verb would occupy in these structures. Thirdly, cross-linguistically we find that most Bantu Languages use forms related to these two for the verb ‘be’. For example Kiswahili uses ni, Kikuyu ri, Shona ri and nge and Kivunjo ni (Moshi 1988).

Now, on the basis of the examples given above one would draw the conclusion that i and ni are variants of one form and that i is used with personal pronoun subjects as in examples (3 a-d), while ni is used with other subjects as in examples (4a-c). One would then want to ask why it is that the personal pronoun subjects need a special form. One of the reasons that will be given is that the personal pronouns are typically left out and therefore if the person number information is not coded there would be information loss. Perhaps then this is the form capable of encoding this information. Secondly, the feature of the verb ‘be’ having special forms for the personal pronouns would not be peculiar to Kikamba, it has been observed in other Bantu languages (Moshi, 1988). Is it the case then that there is a special form of the verb ‘be’ in Kikamba that is used with personal pronouns? To answer this question we will examine more examples.

The earlier examples, (3) and (4), were all in the present tense. In the past tense, however, the distribution just arrived at above about i and ni is not maintained as the sentences in (6) below show.

(6) a. (Nyie) ni nai mūwau.
   (Nyie) ni-na-i mū-wau.
   1 s-tns-be 1 -sick.
   I was sick.

b. (Ithyi) tūnai awau.
   (Ithyi) tū-na-i a-wau.
   we 2p-tns-be 2-sick.
   We were sick.

c. (We) ūnai mūwau
   (We) ū-na-i mū-wau.
   you 2s-tns-be 1-sick.
   You were sick.
These examples indicate that the \( \tilde{i} \) observed above is not a special form used with personal pronouns, (6e-g are similar to example (4) above where the \( \tilde{n} \tilde{i} \) form is used except for the difference in tense). This then calls for the restricting of the use of the \( \tilde{n} \tilde{i} \) form or for a reanalysis of the data.

The common factor in examples (2), (3), and (6) where \( \tilde{i} \) is used is the presence of verbal affixes. This seems to point to the solution that \( \tilde{i} \) is used when the verb needs to support obligatory verbal affixes (tense, subject agreement). In (4) above Subject agreement, the only required affix here, can be omitted because the subject is overt\(^3\). In example (6), however, we not only need the subject agreement but also the past tense marker. It seems then that we have the form \( \tilde{i} \) when there are obligatory affixes and the form \( \tilde{n} \tilde{i} \) when there are no affixes. This may further suggest that there is only one form \( \tilde{i} \) which attracts an \( n \) insertion when there are no obligatory verbal affixes, or one form, \( \tilde{n} \tilde{i} \), which loses its \( n \) in the presence of verbal affixes. If this was so, however, we would expect the \( \tilde{i} \) to have the same tone in both instances. This is not so. The \( \tilde{i} \) in (2), (3) and (6) is in low tone while the tone of the \( \tilde{i} \) of \( \tilde{n} \tilde{i} \) in example (4) is high. The nasal deletion/insertion explanation is also unmotivated because there are no independent cases in the language where a nasal is inserted or deleted in similar circumstances.

The alternative analysis is to argue that only one of these forms is the verb ‘be’ and that the other form has a different function. We would then face the issue of choice. Which of the two forms is to be considered the basic form of the verb ‘be’ and why? We will first look at the option that only \( \tilde{i} \) is the verb ‘be’ and that \( \tilde{n} \tilde{i} \) has a function other than the form of ‘be’, in the structures in which it occurs. This presents two tasks:

1. Establish the function of \( \tilde{n} \tilde{i} \) in example (4) and,
2. Determine the ‘be’ in these sentences.

\(^3\)This Option seems available only to the verb ‘be’. Other tensed verbs in the language must obligatorily incorporate the subject-verb agreement whether the subject is overt or not.
We begin with the first. There are two ‘other’ morphemes with the form nī in Kikamba. These are the focus marker and the agentive particle. The nī in the examples in (4) above is for sure not an agentive particle because the latter occurs exclusively in passive structures in Kikamba as in (7) below.

- **a.** Ila ing'ei ninakwatiwe nī volisi
  The thieves were arrested by the police.

- **b.** Nymba ino inaaikiwe nī nau
  This house was built by my father.

There is, however a likelihood that the nī in (4) above is the focus particle. The focus particle is used for both assertive and contrastive focus in Kikamba. In the assertive focus use for example, the particle is affixed on the verb in a position preceding all the other verb affixes. It is the first element of the predicate. Could this then be the nī in question? We will use the contrastive focus position to determine the function of the nī in the example (4) since only one focus particle is allowed in a clause.

- **a.** Ninyie (nī) mūwau.
  Ni nyie (n-ī) mū'-wau.
  foc I (lps-be) 1-sick.
  It is me who is sick.

- **b.** Nithyi (twī) awau.
  Ni ithyi (tū-ī) a-wau.
  foc we (lpp-be) 2-sick.
  It is us who are sick.

- **c.** Nī kīveti kiwau.
  Nī kīveti kī-wau.
  foc 7-woman 7- sick.
  It is the woman who is sick.

- **d.** *Nī kīveti nī kīwau.

- **e.** Nī kana kawau
  Ni ka-ana ka-wau
  foc 12-child 12-sick.
  It is the child who is sick.

- **f.** *Nī kana nī kawau

The orthography is not uniform in representing the focus particle in assertive focus position. It is sometimes represented as a word and sometimes as the first affix in the verbal complex. The latter is the more regular representation and therefore we have adopted it.
The optionality of the verbal element in (8 a) and (8 b) can be explained in terms of obligatoriness of the subject pronouns when contrastive focus falls on them. The optionality of \(\text{twi}\) and \(\text{twi}\) also indicates a possible co-occurrence of the \(\text{ni}\) focus particle and the \(\text{I}\) for ‘be’.

Example (8 a) has the focus particle in contrastive focus position and the \(\text{I}\) form optional. Examples (8 c) and (8 e) have contrastive focus and no overt form of the verb ‘be’. (8 d) and (8 f) have contrastive focus and the \(\text{ni}\) form and are illformed. This shows that the focus particle is allowed to co-occur with the \(\text{ni}\) form we are considering here and suggests the possibility that two are one and the same thing. A look at the tone pattern of the two forms gives more support to this proposal. Both are in High tone.

Thus we conclude that the \(\text{ni}\) in example (4) above is a focus particle in the assertive focus position and, therefore, the sentences are marked for assertive focus and have no form for the ‘be’. It would be important to observe the co-occurrence features between the \(\text{I}\) form and \(\text{ni}\) assertive focus position. (9) below shows the co-occurrence possibilities.

9. a. Nyie \(\text{ni}-\text{nina}\) muwau
   Nyie \(\text{ni}-\text{nina}\) na-I m\(\text{u}\)-wau
   I foc-lps-tns-be l-sick.
   I was sick

b. Kiveti \(\text{ni}\) k\(\text{i}\) naI ki wau
   Kiveti \(\text{ni}\) k\(\text{i}\)-na-I k\(\text{i}\)-wau
   7-woman foc-7-tns-be 7-sick
   The woman was sick.

These two examples show that the focus particle \(\text{ni}\) can co-occur with the \(\text{I}\) form of the ‘be’.

The following is a summary of the examination of \(\text{ni}\) and \(\text{I}\) as forms of the verb ‘be’:

1. \(\text{I}\) is the basic form of the verb ‘be’ and must surface to avoid floating affixes such as subject agreement as in example (2) or subject agreement and tense in example (5).

2. The verb ‘be’ does not surface in present tense sentences whose subject is other than first and second person pronouns, i.e. where there is no risk of floating affixes.\(^5\)

3. When the form \(\text{I}\) is omitted the focus particle \(\text{ni}\) in assertive focus position can be mistaken for a ‘be’ form.

\(^5\)The present tense can optionally be marked with a zero form in Kikamba (which means there is no tense affix) because of the pronoun drop option in Kikamba, the subject-verb agreement form must surface when the subject is first and second person pronoun. This necessitates the occurrence of the form \(\text{I}\).
The I and the Ith(i)wa Forms

Now we will consider the distinction and/or distribution of I with relation to the form Ith(i)wa. The sentences we have considered so far were either in the present or in the past tense. When the future tense is used there seems to appear another form of ‘be’ as the sentences in example (10) show.

10. a. (Nyie) ngeethiwa mūwau
   (Nyie) n-ka-I thi wa mū-wau.
   I ps-tns-? be l-sick
   I will be sick.

   b. (Ithyi) tūkeethiwa awaw
   Ithyi tu-ka-ithiwa a-wau
   We lpl-tns-? be 2-sick
   We will be sick.

c. Kī veti kī keethi wa kī wau
   kī-veti kī-ka-I thi wa kī-wau.
   7-woman 7-tns-? be 7-sick
   The woman will be sick.

d. Kana kakeethi wa kawau.
   ka-ana ka-ka-I thi wa ka-wau.
   12-child 12-tns-?be 12-sick
   The child will be sick.

The form Ithiwa is isolated from the above and in example (5). This form is also used with the infinitive prefix kū- as in (11)

11. a. Ku-ithiwa mū-wau (kwī thiwa mū-wau)
   to-? be 1-sick
   To be sick.

   b. Ku-I thī wa mū-seo (kwī thī wa mūseo)
   to-? be 1-good
   To be good.

It is also found in imperatives as in (12).

12. a. Ithī wa vo
   Be there
b. ṭhī wa-i vao
Be-Plural there.

and subjunctives as (13):

13. a. Takethī wa nī naĩ na mbesa nī thī wa ninathooie liu.
If I had money I would have bought food.

b. Takethī wa nī kana nikwinuka.
If I was a child I would go home.

This then seems an apparent variant of the ‘be’ form established above and it has the special
distribution in future propositions, in infinitives, imperative, and subjunctives. A conclusion in this
line is made more attractive by the presence of a similar form in Kiswahili a related language. In
Kiswahili the regular form of the verb ‘be’, ni, does not admit tense inflections and the form kuwa
used with the tense affixes is traditionally analysed as a variant of ni. 7

14. a. Mwalimu ni mgojwa
The teacher is sick.

b. Mwalimu a-li-kuwa m-gojwa
The teacher was sick.

c. Mwalimu a-ta-kuwa m-gojwa
The teacher will be sick.

d. Mwalimu a-me-kuwa m-gojwa.
The teacher has been sick.

A closer examination of the ṭhī wa form in Kikamba, however, reveals that this form can co-
occur with the ṭ form established above. The examples below (15) show that the sentences in (10)
can optionally have the form ṭ in addition to ṭhī wa.

15. a. Nyie ngeethī wa (nī) mūwau
Nyie n-ka-ῑ thī wa (n-ī) mū-wau.
I lps-tns-? be lps-be 1-sick
I will be sick.

6The distribution of this form has something to do with the real unreal distinction in the language. It seems to be an
unreality marker and it is obligatory with the future tense of the verb be.

7Wesana-Chomi (1978) however analysed -wa as an auxiliary form associated with the verb ‘ni’ in Kiswahili.
b. Ithyī tūkeethī wa (twī) awau.
Ithyī tū-ka-ithiwa (tū-ī) a-wau.
We 1p-tns-? be 1pp-be 2-sick.
We will be sick.

c. Kī veti kī keethī wa (kī) kī wau.
kī-veti kī-ka-ī thī wa (kī-ī) kī-wau.
7-woman 7-tns-?be 7-be 7-sick.
The woman will be sick.

d. Kana kakeethī wa (ke) kawau.
ka-ana ka-ka-ī thī wa (ka-ī) ka-wau.
12-child 12-tns-?be.
12-be 12-sick.
The child will be sick.

7-woman 7-tns-be 7-sick.

From these examples and those considered above we realise that Ithiwa can be used without the form i for example in (10) with the future tense form but the i cannot be used without the Ithiwa form in this tense; the ill-formedness of (15 d). Further, we note that Ithiwa can be used with other rbs apart from the i form. For example:

a. Nyie ngeethī wa ngomete
Nyie n-ka-ī thī wa n-komete
I IPS-tns- ?be IPS-sleeping
I will be sleeping

b. Ithyī tūkeethī wa tūkomete.
Ithyī tū-ka-ī thī wa tū-komete
We 1pp-tns-?be 1pp-sleeping
We will be sleeping

c. Kī veti kī keethī wa kī komete.
kī-veti kī-ka-ī thī wa kī komete
7-woman 7-tns-?be 7-sleeping
The woman will be sleeping.
The conclusion we draw on this aspect is, therefore, that ṭhi wa is a helping verb (auxiliary verb) which obligatorily co-occurs with the infinitive, imperative, and subjunctive forms and the future tense of the verb ‘be’. Its main function seems to be the drawing of the distinction between real and unreal events/situations, that is, the distinction between realis and irrealis. When the future tense ṭhiwa is used with a verb it marks those situations predicted for the future or induced to be generated. The choice of the verb forms used with ṭhiwa shows that the realis/irrealis distinction in Kikamba groups the present and past together as realis and the future as irrealis.

When ṭhiwa occurs, it takes the verb affixes ensuring there are no floating affixes and thus ṭhi form becomes optional. Wesana-Chomi (1978) drew similar conclusions concerning the Kiswahili -wa form.

**The Characteristics of the Verb ‘ṭhi’ in Kikamba**

One of the features that sets this verb apart from other verbs in the language is that it has a vowel only root and thus it does not require the verb-final vowel to meet the syllabic structure of the language. The other significance lies in the type of vowel it is. The examples above have shown that the verb ‘ṭ’ coalesces with other vowels and triggers gliding, e.g. in (9 b). The significance of this is that this vowel is identified as a ‘mutable’ vowel. In Kikamba, vowels fall into two groups: Mutable and Immutable. The latter are said to derive from a historical loss of consonants in Kikamba (usually ascertained by comparing forms in Kikamba with those in other related languages especially Kimeru and Kiembu). The immutable vowels are not affected by phonological processes, for example, ku+enda kiienda ‘to go’ (has an immutable e), while ku+enda kwenda to lose has a mutable e. The fact that the form of the verb ‘be’ in Kikamba is a mutable vowel has implications for the current search for linguistic universals. It points to the likelihood that the Proto-Bantu form of the verb ‘be’ is ī.

The other significant characteristic pertains to the restrictions in terms of the verbal affixes used with the verb ī. A typical verb in Kikamba can take up to 5 inflectional affixes preverbally and at least 2 postverbally (see Kioko (1994)). In the preverbal position the ī form can admit four affixes (the focus marker, the subject marker, the negative marker and the tense marker) and it has virtually no post root affixes.

Even with the preverbal affixes ī has restrictions above the general ones:

1. The focus particle is not allowed in the assertive focus position in the first and second person subjects in the present tense where the ī form is obligatory.

2. The subject marker is not obligatory in present tense third person or with full noun/pronoun subjects.
3. It is restricted in terms of the tense affixes it takes. It does not take the future tense form. As the examples above showed, for this purpose the auxiliary í th(í)wa is used.

The fewer affixes can be explained in terms of the phonological structure of the form:

a. Because it ends in a vowel it does not require the obligatory verb final affix.

b. When suffixes are required the form íthwa is used in addition or in the place of the form 'I'.

The Complements of the Verb í

Like the English verb 'be', the verb í can take an adjective (see most of the examples above), a nominal (as in (17) below), or an adverbial complement as in (18).

a. Íthyí twí Aklisto
Íthyí tu-í Aklisto
we 1p-be Christians
We are Christians

b. We wí mwalimu
We u-í mwalimu
you 2s-be teacher
You are a teacher

b. Asyai me vaya
Asyai ma-í vaya
Parents 2-be there
The parents are there.

The í form and also the í thí wa form combine with the particle na to express the meaning WE literary 'be with' as in (19) below,

Mwalimu ena mbesa
Mwalimu a-í -na mbesa
teacher 1-be-with money
The teacher has money.
In this combination it also expresses a variety of other states of being (see 20 below).

20. Mwalimu ena nzaa
    Mwalimu a-i-na nzaa
    teacher l-be-with hunger
    The teacher is hungry

Summary

In this paper we have compared the four surface forms that could pass for forms of the verb ‘be’ in Kikamba and, through a thorough examination of data, we have isolated the form as the basic form. We have observed that the i verb is obligatory when there are obligatory verb affixes. In the presence of the future tense, however, the auxiliary thi wa takes the affixes making the i form optional. Finally the characteristic features of the verb are discussed and various complements it takes exemplified.

References


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Abbreviations

ls  First Person Singular
lp  First Person Plural
2s  Second Person Singular
2p  Second Person Plural
foc Focus
tns Tense

The text of the examples is given in the Standard Kikamba orthography.

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