Sixteenth-century evidence regarding the origins of the Capeverdean verbal marker -ba

Evidências seiscentistas sobre a origem do marcador verbal -ba
do kabuverdianu

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Abstract: This article explores the possibility that some inflectional morphemes in modern creoles are not the result of recent decreolization but have existed in some restructured varieties of Portuguese used by Africans since the 16th century. It compares the anterior suffix -ba found on Sotovento Capeverdean verbs such as kantaba ‘cantava’ ‘was singing’ (cf. P cantava) with the corresponding Guinea-Bissau anterior marker ba, which is a free morpheme, a fact that led to speculation that both have a dual origin in Portuguese -va and a postverbal serial verb (ka)ba influenced by the substrate. However, what appears to be a past or anterior inflection -ba occurs in a passage in the Portuguese of Africans in a play written in 1524: the copula sa takes the suffix -ba and is translated as ‘era’ [‘was’]. The implications of the existence of this early occurrence of saba are then considered, along with the etymology of the copula sa or sã in archaic Portuguese and modern African and Asian varieties of creole Portuguese.

Keywords: Língua de Preto; Copula; Creole inflections.

Resumo: Este trabalho explora a hipótese segundo a qual morfemas flexionais em línguas crioulas modernas não são o resultado de crioulização recente posto que já estavam presentes em algumas variedades de português reestruturado empregadas por africanos desde o século XVI. Este artigo compara o sufixo anterior -ba encontrado em verbos do kabuverdianu de Sotavento.
como em kantaba ‘cantava’ com o marcador correspondente do kriyol de Guiné-Bissau ba, um morfema livre, o que nos permite supor que ambos possuem uma origem dupla no português, ou seja, -va e no verbo serial pós-verbal (ka)ba, influenciados pelas línguas do substrato. Contudo, o que parece ser uma flexão de passado ou de anterior -ba ocorre na passagem do português supostamente falado por africanos em uma peça teatral escrita em 1524: a cópula sa recebe o sufixo -ba e pode ser traduzida como ‘era’. As implicações da existência desta ocorrência de saba são então consideradas, juntamente com a etimologia da cópula sa ou sã no português arcaico e nas variedades modernas dos crioulos de base portuguesa da África e da Ásia.

**Palavras-chave:** Língua de Preto; cópula; flexão.

### 1 Introduction

This paper offers newly uncovered evidence to help solve an old problem with important implications for linguistic theory: whether inflectional morphemes have existed in some restructured varieties of Portuguese used by Africans since the very beginnings of these varieties, rather than being the result of comparatively recent decreolization.

### 2 The morpheme (-)ba: bound or free?

One of the few indisputable inflections found in basilectal varieties of the Atlantic creoles is the past or anterior marker -ba found in Capeverdean (CV): kantaba ‘cantava’

1 (Lopes da Silva 1957:140). This "-ba...foi tirada dos verbos portugueses da 1ª conjugação (canta-va) e assumiu a forma -ba" (ibid.)

However, the credibility of this etymology alone was undermined by the nearly total lack of inflected forms in other Atlantic creoles and the fact that in the closely related Portuguese-based creole of Guinea-Bissau (GB), the past/anterior marker ba is not a bound morpheme like its Capeverdean counterpart:

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1 Was singing.

2 -ba was taken from the first conjugation of Portuguese verbs (canta-va) and took the form -ba.
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(1) GB (Kihm 1994:99)

N konta u ba...  
1S tell  2S PAST

I told you...

Kihm suggests conflation with GB kaba ‘finish’ (cf. P acabar idem) and substrate forms: ‘...we may suppose that both /-va/ and (a)cabar, the latter reinforced by the phonetically similar Manjaku, Diola-Fogny, and perhaps still other languages, ba, had to enter into the process’ (1994: 103). Boretzky (1983:132) agrees that Im Crioulo von Guinea-Bissau ist kaba zu ba verkürzt worden, erscheint aber ebenfalls nach dem Verb und drückt Vorzeitigkeit aus³. As Jacobs (2012: 212) points out in reference to the Atlantic creoles, ‘...a postverbal past marker is not found in any creole other than So[tovento] cv and GBC (Kihm 1994:103), a circumstance that requires an explanation’, which may in fact be the dual origin of ba in Portuguese -va and a postverbal serial verb (ka)ba.

Baptista (2002: 201) pointed out that cv ‘...-ba is a verbal inflection found exclusively bound to verb stems’, causing speculation that the cv inflection -ba may have had its origin in a free morpheme like GB ba but later came to conform to the bound-morpheme status of the Portuguese inflection -va through decreolization. It has also been pointed out that Portuguese -va alone as the etymon of cv -ba and gb ba seems unlikely in that no other examples are known of creole morphemes being derived from superstrate inflections, which cannot be isolated or stressed and tend to be semantically opaque, thus not lending themselves to transfer.

3 Língua de Preto -ba

As the Portuguese sailed farther and farther south along the western coast of Africa in the 15th century until they rounded the Cape of Good Hope in 1488 and reached India in 1498, they established trading posts and began bringing Africans back to Portugal, first to be trained as interpreters for later voyages and then to work as slaves in Lisbon and on the large estates of the Algarve. Gil Vicente and other 16th century Portuguese dramatists created literary representations of the speech of these Africans, which came to be known as

³In the Creole of Guinea-Bissau kaba has been shortened to ba and also occurs after the verb to express anteriority.

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língua de preto or falar guinéu. These texts have been studied by linguists such as Coelho (1880-86), Teyssier (1959, 2005) and Naro (1978). Naro claimed that the speech forms that arose between Africans and Portuguese in Europe represent a true pidgin which then served as a model for the Portuguese pidgin that emerged in Africa, but there is scant evidence that this Língua de Preto (LP) represents a stable pidgin with norms rather than simply the Portuguese of foreigners with errors that were not random only insofar as they were influenced by its speakers’ first languages. These were apparently often related to the same languages, in fact, that were part of the substratum of some Portuguese pidgins and creoles, which accounts for certain of its similarities to these. The present study has identified a structure that throws light on the above controversy regarding the free or bound status of the morpheme ba: what appears to be a past or anterior inflection -ba occurs in a passage in Língua de Preto in a play called O Negro da Frágua d’Amor, written by Gil Vicente in 1524 (Teyssier 2005: 285):

\[
\begin{array}{ll}
\text{Língua de Preto} & \text{Portuguese} \\
Oyae, seoro ferreyro, & Olhai, senhor ferreiro \\
\text{boso meu negro tornae} & \text{transformai-me vós em negro} \\
\text{como mi saba primeyro!} & \text{Como eu era primeiro}
\end{array}
\]

The form sa is clearly the LP copula sa (also spelled saa) as in:

\[
(3) \quad \text{LP (Teyssier 2005)}
\]

\[
\begin{array}{ll}
\text{Tu saa home o saa riabo?} \\
2s & \text{COP man or COP devil} \\
\text{‘Are you a man or a devil?’}
\end{array}
\]

Thus the only possible meaning of saba is past ‘was’, as the translation era indicates (See Section 4). While the relationship between the LP and the modern Upper Guinea creoles is not straightforward, this documentation of an apparently inflectional form -ba in the 16th century suggests that the bound status of modern cv -ba might not be the product of modern decreolization.
4 The copula sa in Creole Portuguese

Lipski (2002:66) points out that the copula sa occurs in three Gulf of Guinea creoles: São Tomé (ST), Principe (PR) and Annobón (AB):

(4) ST (Ivens Ferraz 1979:77)

E sa pletu.
3s COP black
‘He is black.’

(5) PR (Günther 1973: 85)

Ina sa migu mutu
3p COP friend very
‘They are very good friends.’

(6) AB (Post 1995:199)

Xama Zwan sa?
place John COP
‘Where is John?’

Lipski (2002:66) also notes the alternate Annobonese form sam in Schuchardt (1888:196), but not the cognate form tha in Angolar (AN), in which the voiceless interdental fricative regularly corresponds to the voiceless alveolar fricative in the other Gulf of Guinea varieties of creole Portuguese. The former sound is spelled <th> (as in English) in Maurer (1995) and <T> in Lorenzino (1998):

(7) AN (Maurer 1995:92, my translation)

Ê tha pisikadô.
3S COP fisherman
‘He is a fisherman.’

Among the Upper Guinea varieties of creole Portuguese, Lipski (2002: 67-8) notes the occurrence of a number of copular forms derived from Portugues ser, but none with the form sa. However, such a form is indeed found in Cape Verdean CP:
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(8) cv (Baptista 2002:86)

Dja korpu dja sa d’dađe.
now body PERF is of+age

‘Now, I am old.’

The form sa in sentence (8) above is unambiguously a copula; it is not listed in Lang et al. (2002: 670), which does, however, list sa as a ‘par[ícula] verbal, sempre seguida de ta, que exprime duratividade’⁴ Tavares (2012) also notes that cv sa can also function as a progressive marker: ‘...in Praia, although its occurrence is restricted, sa can stand alone with the same meaning and function of sta (and also occur without ta)...’:

(9) cv (Tavares 2012:58-9) (BT)

Pedru sta/sa fazi si trabadju di kaza.
Peter PROG (or FUT) do POSS.3SG work of house

‘Peter is doing his homework.’ or ‘Peter will do his homework.’

Of course the variation of sa occurring with or without a following ta to express progressive or habitual aspect is to be expected in a language that is still undergoing standardization. Tavares speculates that ‘...sa is a phonological variant of the marker sta...’ (2012:57), but it is interesting to note that Lang et al. (2002: 670) point out that sa has an allomorph s’ and that the ‘confusão com o verbo sta encontra-se por vezes a grafia sta em vez do correcto s’ta’⁵. Of course the first element in the cv combination of verbal markers sa ta could also have been influenced by the old cp copula sa.

There is a connection between the copula sa and the progressive verbal marker sa in the Gulf of Guinea creoles as well. Ivens Ferraz (1979) notes that the São Tomé progressive aspect marker is ska/fka or sa ka: ‘The particles ska/fka are contracted forms of sa ka. Sa is the verb ‘to be’ and ka is the serial verb ka preceding the main verb in the aorist. Sa places the action in the present, and ka conveyys the progressive sense’ (Ivens Ferraz 1979:82).

Finally, Lipski (2002: 67) notes that the copula sa and its variants sã and são (the last of which he calls ‘arcaizante’) occur in no Asian varieties of restructured Portuguese except the creole of Macau (MC):

⁴Verbal particle, always followed by ta, which expresses durativity.
⁵That its confusion with the verb sta sometimes stems from its being spelled sta rather than the correct spelling s’ta’.
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(10) MC (Ferreira 1973:148)

\[ \text{vôs sã iou-sua amór} \]

\begin{tabular}{lll}
2s & COP & 1s.POSS & love \\
\end{tabular}

‘You are my love.’

Thus the copula sa or sã belongs among the surprisingly few Atlantic features in Asian varieties of Creole Portuguese (Holm 2009).

What is the source of the creole Portuguese copula sa, which clearly existed as sa or saa in Língua de Preto in the 16\textsuperscript{th} century, as seen in sentence (3) above? The Macau CP form são suggests an etymology in the third person plural present tense of ser, but that variant could have been the result of decreolization. Lipski (2002:81) notes that in archaic Portuguese, Latin sum ‘I am’ and sunt ‘they are’ both began occurring in the forms som, sam, or sã, and after the 15\textsuperscript{th} century the nasalized vowels [ã] and [õ] both began to occur as the diphthong [ão]. Thus the CP form sa could have evolved from a denasalized form of archaic Portuguese sã. This scenario, which seems entirely possible, leaves only one aspect of CP sa unambiguously to the Africans: since so many West African substrate languages have phonemically distinct nasal versus oral vowels (Holm 2000:148-151), the denasalization of sã to sa could have been the input of either the super- or substrate languages or both. On the other hand, the extension of the single verbal form to all persons in both the singular and plural could only have been the contribution of the Africans. More importantly, there is (to my knowledge) no attestation in archaic Portuguese of the Língua de Preto past form saba as in (2), which is as unlikely to be the creation of adult native speakers of Portuguese as a form like beed for ‘was’ would be for adult native speakers of English: it must be an African creation.

5 The implications of LP saba

We now return to the issue of how speakers of substrate languages without inflections like the so-called Kwa group (a sub-family in the Niger-Congo phylum that played an important role in the development of many Atlantic creoles) could have dealt with the inflections of superstrate languages like Portuguese, Dutch, French and English. The old answer is that they didn’t: they found semantically similar free morphemes parallel to those in their mother tongues and transferred their grammatical meaning to the corresponding lexeme in the superstrate, e.g. (Holm 2000: 212):
(11) Yoruba

\[ \text{àwọn ọkùnrin yì} \]
they man this
‘these men’

(12) Príncipe CP

\[ \text{ine ọmi sé} \]
they man this
‘these men’

However, this explanation does not work when we are dealing with the relatively small number of substrate languages that are inflected. Clements (1996:110-112) notes that Marathi, the substrate of the Indo-Portuguese of Korlai (KL), has a highly inflected verbal paradigm, which also occurs in Portuguese, e.g. *cantar* ‘to sing’, *cantou* ‘s/he sang’.

(13) KL (Clements 1996:111) *kata* ‘to sing’; *kato* ‘s/he sang’

However, inflectional systems in the superstrate and substrate do not have to coincide so closely for inflectional morphemes to survive in creoles. Kihm (1994:131) notes that ‘Plural marking is...the only inflectional morphology there is in [Guinea-Bissau] Kriyol.’ Based in part on the Portuguese plural *-s*, nouns denoting humans (or humanized animals) can take a plural *-s*:

(14) GB CP (Kihm 1994:132) *omi* ‘man’; *omis* ‘men’

There is no number agreement with adjectives or other modifiers in basilectal varieties, although this can occur in more decreolized lects. Could decreolization account for the plural *-s* on nouns as well? Incanha Intumbo, in a personal communication cited in Holm (2008:301), argues against this being the case, given the inflection’s regular occurrence in basilectal varieties. Support for the pluralizer’s early presence in GB CP can be found in the inflectional marking of plurality in its West Atlantic substrate/adstrate languages such as Balanta, which make a morphological distinction between the singular and plural forms of class-marking prefixes on nouns.

Thus we must not dismiss out of hand the possibility of finding inflectional morphemes in a creole - or for that matter, a pidgin (cf. Bakker 2002). Holm (1989:269) may have been too fastidious in rejecting the status of Língua de Preto as a true pidgin because it lacked norms; the copula *sa* and its
apparently inflected past form saba (which occurs, elsewhere, e.g. on p. 291 of Teyssier 2005) could themselves be considered such norms. However, neither must we forget Teyssier’s caution: ‘...estes textos não são dados recolhidos no seguimento de inquéritos linguísticos, mas apenas fantasias imaginadas por um poeta’\(^6\). Yet he also realized how tempting these texts are:

Esta língua de preto procura, evidentemente, reproduzir, ou pelo menos evocar, o falar dos escravos negros que, em grande número, se encontravam em Portugal no tempo de Gil Vicente. Era a época, precisamente, em que se constituía o pidgin donde saíram os crioulos. Não se resiste à tentação de procurar, nos textos de Gil Vicente agora estudados, indicações sobre a formação dos crioulos portugueses.\(^7\)

I think we should heed Teyssier’s warnings, but not stop analysing these texts for the rare light they can cast on the otherwise undiscoverable process of linguistic restructuring which inspired the poet.

**References**


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\(^6\)These texts are not data gathered from linguistic fieldwork, but just the imagined fantasies of a poet.

\(^7\)Of course this Língua de Preto tries to reproduce or at least evoke the speech of the blacks who had come in great numbers to Portugal during the time of Gil Vicente. It was precisely the period of the formation of the pidgin from which the creoles would emerge. One feels an irresistible temptation to look for the traits of the Portuguese creoles in the current studies of Gil Vicente’s texts.


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