Many languages have copulas. In contrast, other languages do not employ copulas.

Although the term 'copula' is encountered regularly both in the descriptive and in the theoretical literature, authors hardly ever bother to define it; nevertheless, they are readily understood by any reader who has mastered the basics of philology. The meaning of the term 'copula' is, apparently, so self-evident that rigid definitions become unnecessary.

Characteristics of copulas (found in the literature):
- semantically empty (i.e. meaningless); in the literature, this is met with the widest acceptance.
- copulas are encountered only in predicate positions -> syntactic functions:
  1. the function of a linker between subject and predicate (def: 'copula is a term which refers to a linking verb whose main function is to relate other elements of clause structure, especially subject and complement')
  2. the function of a syntactic 'hitching post' to which verbal inflectional categories can be attached (def: 'copula is a dummy element whose sole purpose lies in carrying verbal morphology in predicate phrases whose nucleus consists of a lexeme which is incompatible with verbal morphology' [p. 3])
  3. the function of a predicator which is added to lexemes that do not form predicates on their own (def: 'an element which enables a non-verbal predicate to act as a main predicate under those circumstances in which this non-verbal predicate could not fulfill this function on its own' [p. 4]).

Pustet's definition of 'copula':
'A copula is a linguistic element which co-occurs with certain lexemes in certain languages when they function as predicate nucleus. A copula does not add any semantic content to the predicate phrase it is contained in.' [this def is in accordance with the traditional 'semantic emptiness' definition; it also relies on the assumption that the occurrence of copulas is restricted to predicate position (p. 7)]

In addition of copulas (as defined above), there are two additional types of elements which participate in the formation of predicates:
- semi-copulas (or quasi-copulas)
- auxiliaries

However, unlike copulas (again, as defined above), both semi-copulas and auxiliaries add meaning to the predicate phrases in which they are
contained. This semantic function, while not directly affecting the inner core of the predicate phrase, that is, its lexical nucleus, by altering the intrinsic semantic content of the latter, consists in 'importing' either grammatical categories or other meaning components into the predicate phrase.

p. 6
- Like copulas, semi-copulas and auxiliaries cannot be used as predicates on their own. However, as has been pointed out above, semi-copulas and auxiliaries can be differentiated from copulas in that they add meaning to the predicate phrase they are contained in.
- Semi-copulas often express (e.g.) aspectual meanings. In many cases auxiliaries code aspectual categories, too.
- The difference between semi-copulas and auxiliaries is that the primary function of a semi-copula is to add meanings of a more lexical nature whereas the primary function of an auxiliary is to code grammatical categories.

- Copula use may be conditioned by, for example, pragmatic factors (e.g. style; colloquial-formal, spoken-written).

p. 7
- Copulas are typically intransitive.

p. 31
- Copulas are frequently encountered as components of existential predicates.

p. 34
- Copula dropping: in many languages which have a copula, the copula can be freely omitted (e.g. in Cantonese and Turkish). In other languages, the copula can or must be deleted in specific grammatical environments (e.g. Russian).
- Copula dropping is a phenomenon which in the worst case blocks the outlook on language-specific facts regarding copula usage.

p. 39-45
Structural types of copulas (Pustet):
- Syntactically free copulas (e.g. morphosyntactic verbs, adjectives)
- Syntactically bound copulas (different affixes, perhaps even tones)

Stassen's (1997) types (included in also Pustets study) [p. 45]:
- verbal copulas
- pronominal copulas (pronouns are among the diachronic sources of copulas)
- particle copulas (these have their origin in a variety of...markers of discourse-oriented categories such as topicalization, backgrounding, or contrastive focus for subjects or predicates)
- Copulas are sometimes homonymous with elements conveying certain pragmatic notions, such as emphasis (e.g. Turkish element -DIr, argued to be a copula, can also be used to express 'emphatic, official certainty').

p. 60
- In Mandarin, the (alleged) copula shi has a pragmatic function of expressing special affirmation.