ON THE SYNTAX AND SEMANTICS OF PERSONAL PRONOUNS IN GOKANA

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ABSTRACT

Personal pronouns perform critical functions in sentence grammar and discourse structure. This paper described the syntax and semantics of personal pronouns in Gokana within a formal linguistic framework. The paper found that two forms of personal pronouns, dependent and independent pronouns, are attested in the language. The dependent pronouns are clitic elements. We claimed that the distinction in the syntax and semantics of these pronouns lies in their grammatical functions and not in their morphological realizations. The paper found that the Gokana personal pronouns have impoverished case and gender systems. The paper reported an interplay of semantic selection in the derivation of the syntactic process of pronominalization. The paper identified the modification functions of Gokana personal pronouns and claimed that the dependent pronouns in their possessive case structures are inalienable modifiers while the independent pronouns are alienable modifiers. The paper noted that there is a remnant of the null subject pronoun in the syntax of Gokana. The paper recommended that this vestige occurrence of the pro-drop phenomenon in the language be fully investigated.

KEYWORDS: Personal Pronouns, Gokana, Syntax, Semantics, Case, Gender, Pronominalization

Introduction

Gokana is spoken in Gokana Local Government Area of Rivers State, Nigeria by approximately 200,000 people. It is closely related to Baan, Eleme, Tee, and Kana. These languages form a genetic unity and Williamson and Blench (2000:33) classify them in Delta-Cross of Cross River within the Bantoid-Cross of the East Benue-Congo branch of Benue-Congo.

This paper described the syntax and semantics of personal pronouns in Gokana within a formal linguistic framework.

The Phenomenon of Pronouns

According to Crystal (1997:312) a pronoun is:

> "A term used in the grammatical classification of words, referring
> to the closed set of items which can be used to substitute for a
> Noun Phrase or single Noun"

A number of studies (e.g Quirk and Greenbaum (1977), Huddleston (1988), Downing and Lock (1992), Jenkins (2003), Ndimele (1996), Radford (1988), Watters (2000) and Kari (2007) agree that the use of pronouns generates in language structure the possibility of

repeated reference to the same person, place, thing or idea without using the same nominal repeatedly; as illustrated in (i) and (ii):

    i)   **John** believes that **John** can give **John's** car to **John's** sister.

    ii)   **John** believes that **he** can give **his** car to **his** sister.

In (i), the NP John freely occurs without any pronominal substitution but in (ii), the NP is subsequently substituted with the appropriate pronouns. Thus, constructions containing pronouns as in (ii) overtly eliminate the repetition of NPs that possibly create awkwardness within clause structure in overt syntax.

Crystal (1997:312) also notes that "the grammatical statement of pronominal distribution in a language is usually quite complex" Evans (1999:337) classifies the uses of pronouns as follows:

    i)   Pronouns are used to make reference to an object (or objects) present in the shared perceptual environment.

    ii)   Pronouns are intended to be understood as being coreferential with a referring expression occurring elsewhere in the sentence or discourse.

    iii)   Pronouns which have quantifier expressions as antecedents are used in such a way as to be strictly bound by those quantifiers.

Accordingly, Heike and Simon (2015:2) asserts that:

> "One of the features that make pronoun a special class of linguistic items is the way in which they contribute to the meaning of sentences (or other constructions in which they occur). On the one hand, they can pick out the same kinds of objects as full lexical nominals when they enter interpretation. On the other hand, they lack a comparable descriptive content. This gives them a border line status within the linguistic system, between lexical categories like Nouns, and functional categories like Complementizers".

Heike and Simon (2015:3) also claim that:

> "Nominals are like pronouns in that they identify objects, but unlike pronouns they do so based on their descriptive content. Complementizers are like pronouns in that they lack a descriptive content, but unlike pronouns they do not pick out objects in discourse".

There seems to be a consensus of opinion in the linguistic literature that the grammar, representation and interpretation of pronouns is a research domain that requires significant attention. Thus, the present study attempts a description of the syntax and semantics of personal pronouns in Gokana.

Methodology

The researcher collected data from fluent native speakers of Gokana with the help of the field assistant. The researcher also relied on his intuition as a native speaker of the language but where any given set of data contradicted his intuition, direct oral interview was used to elicit comparative data from other native speakers of the language. Secondary sources of data such as texts and library materials were also utilized.

Analyzing Personal Pronouns in Gokana

The personal pronoun is distinguished from other types of pronouns because such grammatical categories as person, number, case and gender apply to it (Ndimele 1993:50).

The Gokana personal pronoun only responds to person and number distinction in overt syntax while case and gender distinctions are covert in the independent personal pronouns. Two sets of the personal pronouns are attested: the independent and dependent personal pronouns. The difference between the independent and dependent forms of the personal pronoun in Gokana is that whereas the independent pronouns are emphatic and meaningful in isolation (i.e. without being used in a structure), the dependent pronouns are non-emphatic and meaningless in isolation. Thus, the dependent pronouns cannot function as answers to questions, but the independent pronouns can be used as answers to questions as illustrated in the constructions in (1a-c) and (2a-c) respectively.

1) Question: mée   ní   e   a   beè   dé   gyãá   ẽ?
   Who   FOC   RCM   PRO   PST   Eat   Food   EM
   'Who ate the food?'

   a) Answer: * m 'I'/ è 'we'
   b) Answer: * ờ 'you'/ ờ…..i 'you (pl)'
   c) Answer: *à 'he/she'/ bà 'they'

2) Question: mée   ní   e   a   beè   dé   gyãá   ẽ?
   Who   FOC   RCM   PRO   PST   Eat   Food   EM
   'Who ate the food?'

   a) Answer: nda 'I'/ beere 'we'
   b) Answer: oro 'you'/ booro 'you (pl)'
   c) Answer: ẹrẹ 'he/she'/ baara 'they'

Observe that the dependent personal pronouns in (1a-c) cannot function as answers to the question in (1) as they are non-emphatic and therefore not capable of independent existence. Thus, the dependent personal pronouns are ungrammatical in this usage. The dependent personal pronoun can only function in a sentence with a given case role.

On the other hand, the independent personal pronouns in (2a-c) can occur as answers to questions because they are emphatic and can be used independently. This accounts for the grammaticality of (2a-c). In Fig 1, we present the independent and dependent pronouns in Gokana.

Fig 1: Gokana Independent and Dependent Pronouns

INDEPENDENT PRONOUNS		
NUMBER	**SINGULAR**	**PLURAL**
Person		
1st	nda 'I'	beere 'we'
2nd	òro 'you'	booro 'you'
3rd	èrẹ 'he/she'	baara 'they'
DEPENDENT PRONOUNS		
NUMBER	**SINGULAR**	**PLURAL**
Person		
1st	m 'I'	è 'we'
2nd	ò 'you'	ò…i 'you'
3rd	à 'he/she/it'	bà 'they'

The same morphological form of the independent personal pronoun can function as both subject and object in a sentence.

Examples:

3) Usage as Subject
   a) **Nda** beè fẹ gbógó
      I   PST kill dog
      "I killed a dog"
   b) **Oro** beè fẹ gbógó
      You PST kill dog
      "You killed a dog"
   c) **ere**   beè   fẹ   gbógó
      He/She   PST   kill   dog
      "He/She killed a dog"

4) Usage as Object
   a) Gbógó   beè fẹ **nda**
      Dog   PST kill me
      "The dog killed me"
   b) Gbógó   beè fẹ **oro**
      Dog   PST kill you
      "The dog killed me"
   c) Gbógó   beè fẹ **ere**
      Dog   PST kill him/her
      "The dog killed him/her"

Observe that the highlighted pronouns function as Subject in (3a-c) while the same pronouns function as object in (4a-c). Thus, what determines the difference between the subject personal pronouns (Independent) and the object personal pronouns (independent) in Gokana is the syntactic function of the pronoun and not the morphological form of the pronoun.

A. Case Marking and Gokana Personal Pronouns

Independent personal pronouns in Gokana do not show any overt morphological contrast in response to subject/object case distinction as shown in the examples in (3-4) except in the possessive case, as shown in Fig 2:

Fig 2: Case Distinction and Independent Personal Pronouns

Subject Form		Object Form		Possessive Form	
Singular	Plural	Singular	Plural	Singular	Plural
nda 'I'	beere 'we'	nda 'me'	beere 'us'	nda 'my'	beere 'our'
òro 'you	booro 'you'	òro 'you	booro 'you'	nlo 'your'	booro 'your'
èrẹ 'he/she'	baara 'they'	èrẹ 'him/her'	baara 'them'	nde 'his/her'	baara 'their'

By contrast, the dependent personal pronouns show overt morphological contrast in response to case distinction. There are distinct forms for the subject, object and possessive cases, as shown in Fig 3:

Fig 3: Case Distinction and Dependent Personal Pronouns

Subject Form		Object Form		Possessive Form	
Singular	Plural	Singular	Plural	Singular	Plural
m 'I'	è 'we'	m 'me'	i 'us'	na 'my'	bẹẹ 'our'
ò 'you'	ò…I 'you'	ni 'you'	ii 'you'	o 'your'	bọọ 'your'
à 'he/she/it'	bà 'they'	ẹ 'him/her/it'	va 'them'	à 'his/her'	ba 'their'

B. Gender Marking and Gokana Personal Pronouns

Gokana has an impoverished gender system. The third person pronoun (whether independent or dependent) is insensitive to gender contrasts, as there are no morphological changes in the form of the pronoun **ẹrẹ** 'he/she' or **à** 'he/she/it' to show gender contrasts.

It is also striking to note that while the dependent third person pronoun **à** may refer to masculine, feminine and neuter contrasts 'he/she/it' the independent form **ẹrẹ** can only refer to masculine and feminine contrasts 'he/she'.

Examples:

        5a)   a   dú   lé
                He/She/It   be   good
                "He/She/It is good"

        b)   ẹrẹ   dú   lé
                He/She   be   good
                "He/She*It is good"

Observe that in (5a), the interpretation "it is good" is possible but in (5b) such an interpretation is not possible. This is because the meaning of **ẹrẹ** does not include **it** (i.e. the inanimate distinction). **ẹrẹ** in Gokana only refers to animate masculine and feminine contrasts, not neuter contrasts.

A significant gap that is found in Gokana as a result of the 'missing' third person inanimate pronoun in the independent pronoun is that one cannot pronominalize third person inanimate entities in Object position in Gokana.

Examples:

6a)   m   beè   zarí   kpá
        I   PST   buy   book
        "I bought the book"
b)   m   beè   zarí   ø
        I   PST   buy   –
        "I bought it"

7a)   m   beè   mon   faà
        I   PST   see   motor
        "I saw the car"
b)   m   beè   mon   ø
        I   PST   see   –
        "I saw it"

8a)   m   beè   tú   ìkpè
        I   PST   take   spoon
        "I took the spoon"
b)   m   beè   tú   ø
        I   PST   take   –
        "I took it"

The (a) structures of (6-8) have inanimate nouns in their object positions. But observe that these nouns are omitted in the (b) structures without a corresponding pronoun replacing them, yet the constructions are grammatical.

It is not possible to pronominalize an inanimate noun in Gokana because the third person pronoun **ẹrẹ** 'he/she' or 'him/her' found in the language only has ANIMATE reference.

C.   Selectional Restriction and Gokana Personal Pronouns

There is an interplay of semantic selection in the use of Gokana personal pronouns in the syntactic process of pronominalization. The Gokana third person independent personal pronoun **ẹrẹ** can only select non-human animate entities in its pronominalization process as no inanimate nominal can undergo the syntactic process of pronominalization in Gokana as illustrated in the example in (6-8).

A violation of this restriction will generate semantically deviant constructions as in (9b) used as a pronominalized version of (9a):

9a)   m   beè   zarí   kpá
        I   PST   buy   book
        "I bought the book"
b)   ?? m   beè   zarí   ẹrẹ
         I   PST   buy   him/her
         "I bought him/her"

The construction in (9b), as a pronominalized version of (9a); although grammatical it is semantically deviant and unacceptable in Gokana. The inanimate interpretation in (9a) is completely lost, as (9b) has a full ANIMATE interpretation.

By contrast, the selection of non-human animate nominal is illustrated in the following.

Examples:

    10a)   Ledum   beè   fẹ   gbógó
              PN   PST   kill   dog
              "Ledum killed the dog"
    b)   Ledum   beè   fé   -ẹ
              PN   PST   kill   it
              "Ledum killed it"

Observe that the pronoun **-ẹ** can replace the Object **gbógó** 'dog' as in (10b). Thus, **-ẹ** also has the neuter meaning 'it' in this usage since **gbógó** 'dog' is a non-human noun. But consider this data:

    11a)   Ledum   beè   gyò   kpó
              PN   PST   spoil   box
              "Ledum spoilt the box"
    b)   ! Ledum   beè   gyò   -ẹ
              PN   PST   spoil   it

In Gokana, (11b) as a pronominalized counterpart of (11a) is semantically deviant and uninterpretable as well as unacceptable because the object pronoun **ẹ** has been wrongly used to pronominalize the inanimate object **kpó** 'box' in (11a) in violation of the selectional restriction rule that prohibits the pronominalization of inanimate objects in Gokana.

It is, however, possible to pronominalize both [+ANIMATE] and [-ANIMATE] nouns in subject position.

Examples:

    12a)   Ledum   beè   dò
              PN   PST   fall
              "Ledum fell"
    b)   a   beè   dò
              PRO   PST   fall
              "He fell"

    13a)   ikpè   beè   dò
              spoon   PST   fall
              "The spoon fell"
    b)   a   beè   dò
              PRO   PST   fall
              "It fell"

The constructions in (12a-b) exemplify [+ANIMATE] pronominalization while (13a-b) exemplify [-ANIMATE] pronominalization.

D.   Modification and Gokana Personal Pronouns

Both forms of the Gokana personal pronouns, dependent and independent forms, perform modification functions as they can modify nominal. And there is a **consensus** among analysts to label personal pronouns that modify nominal as possessive pronouns.

Zua (1987:55) claims that in Gokana both dependent and independent possessive pronouns expresses modification. But the difference in the expression of modification by both forms lies in the linear order of the modifier and the modified. She observes that while the dependent possessives express inalienable modification, the independent possessive expresses alienable modification.

Examples:

14) Inalienable modifications: Dependent pronouns
   a)   ba-m
       hand my
       "my hand"
   b)   tó-ní
       ear your
       "your ear"
   c)   sĩ-va
       face their
       "their faces"

15) Alienable modifications: Independent pronouns
   a)   nda bá
       my hand
       "my hand"
   b)   nlo tó
       your ear
       "your ear"
   c)   baárà sĩ
       their face
       "their faces"

Thus, the dependent pronouns in their modification function usually occur after the nominal they modify as in (14a-c) while the independent forms usually precede the nominals they modify, as in (15a-c).

E.   Cliticization and Gokana Personal Pronouns

This study agrees with Zua (1987:55) that the Gokana dependent object pronouns are clitics as they are always attached to any immediately preceding lexical items.

Crystal (1997:87) defines a clitic as a:

> "term used in grammar to refer to a form which resembles a word, but which cannot stand on its own as a normal utterance, being structurally dependent upon a neighboring word in a construction…"

Gokana dependent object and possessive pronouns are usually attached to an immediately preceding element as in (16a-c):

16a) Ledum   gébeè   gbĩ   -ẽ
      PN   will   find   CL
      "Ledum will find him"
b)   ba   beè   sii-va
      they   PST   catch them
      "They caught them"
c)   bá-m dù ká lé
      hand my be very good
      "My hand is very clean"

Observe that the forms in (16a-c) are clitics as they cannot stand on their own and are structurally dependent on the immediately preceding lexical item.

F.   Anaphoric Relations and Gokana Personal Pronouns

Gokana personal pronouns show anaphoric usage in their syntax. They do not only pick up antecedents from the universe of discourse but they can also pick up an antecedent directly from the sentence in which they occur.

Examples:

17)   ẹre   gé   dé   gyãá
      He/She DR   eat   food
      "He/She is eating"

18)   Sira   Ledum beè zarí faà vaá ẹrẹ   dú kà pòbnen
      Daughter PN   PST buy car conj. He/She be very big person
      "Ledum's daughter brought a car and she is a very wealthy person"

Observe that in (17), the pronoun **ẹrẹ** 'he/she' picks its referent/antecedent directly from the universe of discourse. There is no element within the sentence grammar in (17) that provides an antecedent for the pronoun **ẹrẹ** 'he/she' as used in (17). By contrast, in the compound sentence in (18) the pronoun **ẹrẹ** 'he/she' does not pick out a referent/antecedent directly from the universe of discourse, but **ẹrẹ** is linked up with another linguistic item in the sentence: a nominal (Sira Ledum 'Ledum's daughter') that serves as its antecedent. It is through the link to this antecedent that the pronoun derives its meaning.

The connection between the pronoun **ẹrẹ** 'he/she' and its antecedent is signaled by syntactic agreement features based on the morphological distinctions that the pronoun contributes. Thus, in (18) the pronoun **ẹrẹ** 'he/she' contributes a third person feature, and a singular number feature. Although, the pronoun **ẹrẹ** does not mark gender contrast but it is able to pick out an antecedent from the sentence based on indentical morphological features. Observe that **Sira Ledum** 'Ledum's daughter' agrees with the pronoun **ẹrẹ** in the marked morphological features of the pronoun.

The argument we have presented here is that even though personal pronouns are not anaphors (anaphors are reflexive and reciprocal pronouns), they exhibit some anaphoric relations in some aspects of their usage in Gokana syntax. Since in some context, their interpretation and

syntax is governed by some referent within the domain of sentence grammar or the sentence in which they occur and not necessarily contextual information from the universe of discourse.

G.   The Null Subject Pronoun and Gokana Personal Pronouns

Isaac (2021:13) argues that the empty category, null subject pronoun is a syntactic feature that permits a minimal sentence to which no grammatical operation has applied to have a 'missing' subject in its structure. But the missing subject is recovered through a rich verbal morphology as the verb is able to show pronominal person/number inflection which renders the subject pronoun redundant.

He also reports that data showing a full extant characterization of the pro-drop phenomenon has not been attested in Gokana. However, he argues that the single grammaticalized pronominal person/number marker **–i** found in Gokana verbal morphology is a vestige (remnant) of the null subject pronoun phenomenon in Gokana. Consider this data:

19a)   a   beè   kọ,   e   beè   dú   be
     He   PST   say   we   PST   come   home
     "He said, we should come home"

b)   a   beè   kọ,   o   beè   dú   -i   be
   He   PST   say,   you   PST   come   you   home
   "He said, you should come home"

c)   a   beè   kọ,   bà   beè   dú   be
   He   PST   say,   they   PST   come   home
   "He said, they should come home"

Whereas the subject specification will be 'missing' and the constructions become underspecified and ungrammatical if we delete the subject pronouns from the reported constructions in (19a) and (19c) as shown in (20) and (21):

20)   *a   beè   kọ,   -   beè   dú   be
     he   PST   say,   ø   PST   come   home

21)   * a   beè   kọ,   -   beè   dú   be
     he   PST   say,   ø   PST   come   home

The reported construction in (19b) will still retain its grammaticality and subject specificity even with the 'missing' pronoun subject since the subject is recovered as a verbal affix within the verbal morphology of the language as seen as in (22):

22)   a   beè   kọ,   -   beè   dú   -i   be
     he   PST   say,   ø   PST   come   you   home
     "He said, you should come home"

Perhaps diachronic analysis could show that proto-Gokana was a pro-drop language and the pronominal person marker **–i** in the verbal morphology of the language is only a remnant that points to the existence of an earlier pro-drop system in Gokana. Maybe a full pro-drop system is reconstructable in a detailed diachronic study of this phenomenon in Gokana.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have analyzed the syntax and semantics of personal pronouns in Gokana. We found that two forms of personal pronouns: dependent and independent personal pronouns are attested in grammar of Gokana. The paper showed that only the possessive form of the independent personal pronoun is overtly morphologized while the subject and object forms are immune to morphological contrasts. The paper claimed that the distinction in the syntax of these forms lies in their grammatical functions and not in their morphological form. By contrast, the dependent personal pronouns show overt morphological contrasts in their syntax in response to case distinction as there are distinct forms for the subject, object and possessive cases.

The paper found that the Gokana personal pronouns have an impoverished gender system as the third person pronoun (whether dependent or independent) is insensitive to gender contrasts. The paper claimed that the language does not allow pronominalization of inanimate entities in object position. And reported an interplay of semantic selection in the syntactic process of pronominalization.

The paper identified the modification function of personal pronouns and claimed that the dependent personal pronouns function as inalienable modifiers while the independent pronouns are alienable modifiers. The paper also argued that the Gokana dependent object pronouns occur as clitics in the language.

We also claimed that Gokana personal pronouns show anaphoric usage in their syntax and argued that there is a remnant of the null subject pronoun in the syntax of Gokana.

Recommendations

The paper recommended a diachronic investigation of the remnant of the empty category, null subject pronoun in Gokana in order to determine whether it is possible to reconstruct a full pro-drop analysis from the present vestige form.

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