

ANIMACY DISTINCTIONS IN AKAN GRAMMAR*

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Animacy distinctions has never been considered to be one of the outstanding features of the grammar of Akan. However, based on the form and distribution of nominal prefixes in the language and the nature of the pronominal system, it is concluded that the notion of animacy distinction is relevant to the grammar of Akan.

0. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to show that the grammar of Akan is sensitive to animacy distinctions, and to some limited extent, we could even talk about the presence of animacy hierarchy in the language. Animacy distinctions in Akan appear mainly in nominal affixes and the forms and behavior of pronouns.

1. Nominal affixes

One of the areas in which the distinction between animate and inanimate nouns is shown is in the nominal affixes in the language. The fact that Akan has a nominal prefix system has long been recognized (see for example Christaller 1875, Balmer and Grant 1929, Akrofi 1935, Welmers 1971, 1973, Essilfie 1977, Dolphyne 1988, Dolphyne and Dakubu 1988, Osam 1993 and 1994). In Osam 1993 and 1994, in agreement with Welmers 1971 and 1973, the argument is made that the current noun prefixes are the historical remains of the old noun class system that must have existed in Proto-Akan. The prefixal system as it exists currently in the language is illustrated in (1).

(1) Class 1	o-nua	'sibling'
	o-nipa	'person/human being'
	o-birempon	'a great person'
	ɔ-baa	'woman'
	ɔ-bɔdɔm	'dog'
Class 2	ɔ-pɔnkɔ	'horse'
	a-bofra	'child'
	a-noma	'bird'
Class 3	a-berewa	'old woman'
	e-wi	'thief'
	i-dua	'tree'
Class 4	i-kur	'sore'
	i-dan	'building'
	ɛ-boɔ	'stone'
	ɔ-dan	'building'
	ɛ-woɔ	'honey'

Class 5	n-dua	'trees'
	n-kura	'mice'
	n-twɛr	'frogs'
	n-dowa	'bees'
	m-bofra	'children'
	m-bowa	'animals'
	m-fe	'years'
Class 6	a-ka	'debts'
	a-dan	'buildings'
	a-hɔho	'visitors'
	e-kunyin	'great men'
	e-din	'names'
e-kuw	'clubs/associations'	

As indicated in (1), the prefixes are either vowels or homorganic nasals. Prefixes involving vowels, with the exception of the prefix labeled Class 4, are paired on the basis of vowel harmony (2). The first member of each pair has the advanced tongue root feature (+ATR), and the second member is minus the advanced tongue root feature (-ATR). The nominal prefixes are also distinguished according to number. The prefixes marked Classes 1-4 indicate singular nouns whereas those marked Classes 5 and 6 identify plural nouns.

(2)	SINGULAR	PLURAL
Class 1	o-/ɔ-	Class 5 n-
Class 2	e-/a-	Class 6 e-/a-
Class 3	i-/ɨ-	
Class 4	ɛ-	

The noun prefixes currently in the language, in various ways, reflect the distinction between animate and inanimate nouns.

1.1 Singular prefix

One of the features of the prefixal system is that there is a semantic motivation associated with the nouns that take a particular prefix. For example, in the singular, the nominal prefix *o-/ɔ-* can be found, with some exceptions¹, on animate nouns. On the other hand, the prefix *e-/ɛ-* goes on inanimate nouns only. This distinction is illustrated in (3). In (3a), the nouns which have *o-/ɔ-* are animate. However, in (3b), only inanimate nouns are shown to have the prefix *e-/ɛ-*. The main point here is that whereas the *o-/ɔ-* are predominantly animate prefixes, the *e-/ɛ-* are inanimate prefixes without exception. In other words, only inanimate nouns occur with *e-/ɛ-*.

(3) a.	o-panyin	'elder'
	ɔ-hɔho	'visitor'
	ɔ-kɔdɛ	'eagle'
	ɔ-kɔɔ	'crab'

b.	ε-boɔ	'stone'
	ε-dan	'building'
	ε-woɔ	'honey'
	e-tuo	'gun'

1.2 Loss of nominal prefixes

In Osam 1993 and 1994, the observation is made that one of the reasons for considering the noun class system in Akan as a decayed one is the loss of nominal prefixes. This loss may affect the singular only, or in some instances affects both the singular and the plural. In (4), the loss has affected only the singular nouns, but in (5) there is complete loss of the nominal prefixes in the singular as well as the plural.

(4)	SINGULAR	PLURAL	
	tɛtea	n-tɛtea	'ant'
	prako	m-prako	'pig'
	pataku	m-pataku	'hyena'
	bokiti	m-bokiti	'bucket'
	dadewa	n-dadewa	'nail'
	siw	e-siw	'hill'
(5)	SINGULAR	PLURAL	
	koraa	koraa	'calabash'
	kyɛw	kyɛw	'hat'
	sundzi	sundzi	'pillow'
	dwomba	dwomba	'pestle'
	wodur	wodur	'mortar'
	kuntu	kuntu	'blanket'

The complete loss of nominal prefixes as illustrated in (5) is another evidence that the grammar of Akan is sensitive to animacy distinctions. The observation here is that inanimate nouns are more likely to lose their nominal prefixes than animate nouns. There are definitely more inanimate nouns in the language without prefixes than animate nouns without them.

1.3 Double plural marking

As stated in Osam 1993:100, one of the characteristics of the decayed noun class system of Akan is that certain nouns have double plural marking. This is the process in which certain nouns mark their plurals by using a prefix and a suffix at the same time. When we examine those nouns which behave this way, we find that they are all human nouns. Non-human nouns do not undergo double plural marking. This process, therefore, serves to distinguish human nouns from non-human animate nouns as well as from inanimate nouns.

(6)	SINGULAR	PLURAL	
	ɔ-hen	a-hen-fo	'chiefs'
	ɔ-saman	n-saman-fo	'ghosts'
	o-banyin	m-banyin-fo	'men'
	o-panyin	m-panyin-fo	'elders'
	a-sew	n-sew-nom	'in-laws'
	o-nua	e-nua-nom	'siblings'

1.4 Numeral modifiers

Modification by numerals is not part of the nominal affixes but since it has to do with noun modification it is appropriate if it is discussed under this section. The behavior of numeral modifiers in Akan distinguishes human nouns from non-human ones. Before discussing this difference I give the numerals from 1 to 9 in Akan using the Fante dialect (7).

(7)	FANTE	ENGLISH
	kor	one
	ebien	two
	ebiasa	three
	anan	four
	enum	five
	esia	six
	esuon	seven
	awɔtwe	eight
	akron	nine

In all the dialects of Akan, when the numerals from 1 to 9 are used to modify human nouns, the form of the numeral is different from when they are used to modify non-humans. When these numerals modify non-human nouns, the forms are the same as given in (7). But when the modified noun is a human noun, the prefix *ba-* is attached to the numeral. This prefix derives from the noun *ba* 'child'. I should also point out that the vowel of the prefix will harmonize with the vowel of the root numeral. This distinction is illustrated in (8-10) with examples from the Fante dialect. As (9b) and (10b) show, it is wrong to put the prefix *ba-* on a numeral that modifies non-human nouns. On the other hand, when a numeral modifying a human noun does not have the *ba-* (8b), the result is only a questionable construction. It is possible to predict that over a period of time speakers may drop the *ba-* and regularize the form of the numeral modifiers.

- (8) a. Nyimpa ba-anan
 people child-four
 Four people.
- b. ?Nyimpa anan
 people four
 Four people.
- (9) a. N-dua anan
 CLASS 5-tree four
 Four trees.

- b. N-dua *ba-anan
 CLASS 5-tree child-four
 Four trees.
- (10) a. M-bɔɔm anan
 CLASS 5-dog four
 Four dogs.
- b. M-bɔɔm *ba-anan
 CLASS 5-dog child-four
 Four dogs.

It is also possible to use the human noun numeral modifier as the head of a noun phrase. This is illustrated in (11). These sentences are taken from the New Testament of the Bible. In this usage it is impossible to replace the (*ba*+numeral) with the plain numeral. So whereas in its function as the modifier the numeral could possibly occur without the *ba*- (see 8b), when it functions as the head of the noun phrase it is grammatically wrong to have a bare numeral. In (11), therefore, *ɔbaako* 'one (person)' and *baakron* 'nine (people)' cannot be replaced with *kor* 'one' and *akron* 'nine' respectively.

- (11) a. Na ɔ-baa-ko no bua-a no de
 and CLASS 1-child-one the reply-COMPL 3SG OBJ COMP
 "Ana i-nn-suro Nyankopɔn?" (Luke 23:40)
 why 2SG SUBJ-NEG-fear God
 And the (other) one replied "Don't you fear God?"
- b. Na ba-akron no wɔ hen? (Luke 17:17)
 and child-nine the be where
 And where are the (other) nine (people)?

2. Pronouns

Another source of evidence for the animate-inanimate distinction is the pronominal system of the language. The evidence is based on the forms and the behavior of pronouns.

2.1 Subject pronouns

The subject pronouns in the language are distinguished on the basis of animacy. This distinction exists only in the Twi dialects, and it is relevant only in the 3SG subject pronoun. The 3SG subject prefix for animate nouns is *o-/ɔ-*, but that for inanimate nouns is *e-/ɛ-*. This is illustrated by examples (12) and (13).

- (12) a. Abofra no be-yera
 child the FUT-be lost
 The child will be lost.
- b. ɔ-be-yera
 s/he-FUT-be lost
 s/he will be lost

- (13) a. Dua no be-yera
 tree the FUT-be lost
 The tree will be lost.
- b. e-be-yera
 it-FUT-be lost
 it will be lost

It is clear that these prefixes derive from the old noun class system (Osam 1993). The animate subject prefix is a reanalysis of the old noun Class 1 marker whereas the inanimate subject prefix derives from the old noun Class 4 prefix. In the Twi dialects, the distinction in animacy as reflected in the 3SG subject prefixes is strictly maintained. In Fante, however, this distinction is neutralized since the same pronominal form is used irrespective of the animacy status of the antecedent noun. The Fante equivalent of (12b) and (13b) would be (14). Note that Fante uses the lexical form *yew* 'be lost' in place of the Twi verb *yera* 'be lost'. So the verbs *yew* and *yera* 'be lost' are dialect variants.

- (14) o-be-yew
 s/he/it-FUT-be lost
 s/he/it will be lost

2.2 Lack of number distinctions

A further evidence of the grammatical differentiation between animate and inanimate nouns is that whereas anaphoric animate pronouns distinguish between singular and plural, inanimate pronouns do not make such distinctions. This distinction applies more in the case of Asante and Akuapem and related dialects than in Fante, even though as I will show below, in the speech of some Fante speakers this distinction is available. In (15a), the subject is a plural animate noun and in (15b) it is replaced by the anaphoric pronominal prefix, *wɔ* 'they'. In (16a), the subject is an inanimate plural noun but the pronominal prefix replacement in (16b) is the same form used for singular as illustrated earlier in (13b).

- (15) a. Mbofra no be-yera
 children the FUT-be lost
 The children will be lost.
- b. Wɔ-be-yera
 3PLU-FUT-be lost
 They will be lost.
- (16) a. Ndua no be-yera
 trees the FUT-be lost
 The trees will be lost.
- b. e-be-yera
 3PLU-FUT-be lost
 They will be lost.

The relationship between the notion of animacy and subject prefixes can be summarized as in (17).

(17)

	Animate	Inanimate
Singular	ɔ	ε
Plural	ɔɔ	

This lack of number distinction in the inanimate pronominal prefixes reflects the presence of animacy hierarchy in the language. In his discussion of animacy hierarchy, Comrie states the following: '... having distinct singular and plural forms is again a characteristic of noun phrases with high animacy ... another opposition that correlates closely with animacy is the existence versus non-existence of a number distinction, the split invariably being that noun phrases higher in animacy have the distinction while those lower in animacy do not.' (1981:180, 182) Even though the evidence for such a hierarchy in Akan is minimal compared to languages like Russian, Chukchi, Dyirbal and many others, we still have something that validates the argument that the notion of animacy hierarchy is relevant in the language.

2.3 Possessive pronouns

The distinction between animate and inanimate nouns is also demonstrated, in the Twi dialects, in the marking of certain possessive constructions. These are the constructions in which the possessed noun indicates some kind of relation, for example self, inside, bottom. In Akan and other languages, these are the nouns which are the sources of postpositions. In such constructions, when the possessor noun is animate, a full pronoun is used; but when it is inanimate we only get a pronominal prefix which incidentally is of the same form as the subject pronominal prefix. This difference is shown in (18) and (19).

- (18) a. Kofi ho a-ye fi
 Kofi self PERF-be dirty
 Kofi is dirty.
- b. Ne ho a-ye fi
 3SG POSS self PERF-be dirty
 He is dirty.
- (19) a. Adaka no ho a-ye fi
 box DEF self PERF-be dirty
 The box is dirty.
- b. ε-ho a-ye fi
 it-self PERF-be dirty
 It is dirty.

2.4 Behavior of 3SG object pronoun

Another evidence that the grammar of Akan is sensitive to animacy has to do with the behavior of the 3SG object pronoun. An aspect of Akan grammar that has been noted by various writers (including Christaller 1875, Stewart 1963, Boadi

1976, Lord 1982, Saah 1988, 1992) is that if the antecedent of the 3SG object pronoun is an inanimate noun, the pronoun is not overtly coded. Boadi 1976 refers to this as the "Pronoun-3-Object Deletion Rule". Examples (20) and (21) illustrate this phenomenon. In (20a) the direct object is an inanimate NP, whereas in (21a) it is an animate NP. If the inanimate NP of (20a) is replaced by a pronoun, even though the sentence is grammatical, semantically, it implies that the antecedent of the object pronoun is an animate entity, not an inanimate one. The only way (20b) can be formed to mean that the direct object is an inanimate entity is to have a zero pronoun in object position, as shown in (20c). Similarly, in (21c) where the object pronoun is covertly coded, the implication is that the direct object is an inanimate entity. In order to have the meaning that the direct object is an animate entity, the object pronoun has to be overtly coded as in (21b).

- (20) a. Kofi bɔ-tɔn dua no
 Kofi FUT-sell tree the
 Kofi will sell the tree.
- b. Kofi bɔ-tɔn no
 Kofi FUT-sell 3SG
 *Kofi will sell it.
- c. Kofi bɔ-tɔn Ø
 Kofi FUT-sell 3SG
 Kofi will sell (it).
- (21) a. Kofi bɔ-tɔn abofra no
 Kofi FUT-sell child the
 Kofi will sell the child.
- b. Kofi bɔ-tɔn no
 Kofi FUT-sell 3SG
 Kofi will sell him/her.
- c. Kofi bɔ-tɔn Ø
 Kofi FUT-sell 3SG
 *Kofi will sell him/her.

Even though Akanists are aware of this process, not enough has been done in terms of an explanation. One paper that has tried to deal with the issue is Saah 1992. This paper sets the rule in Akan within the framework of the Government and Binding Theory by treating it as an example of null object in Akan. Another paper that also attempts to explain the process is Boadi 1976. Boadi's approach is to determine the historical source of the phenomenon. His conclusion is that this phenomenon must have been borrowed into Akan from Ga, a neighboring Kwa language spoken in coastal Ghana.

Irrespective of the historical source of this phenomenon, it is my opinion that it has important functional implications in synchronic Akan. This view becomes relevant when we try to answer the question: Why is the object pronoun overt when its antecedent is an inanimate noun? The answer to this question is that it does so in order that the hierarchical ordering of animate and inanimate nouns is not subverted. It has to be understood that the form of the 3SG object pronoun is the same irrespective of the animacy status of the antecedent noun. Furthermore, as

mentioned above, since inanimate nouns do not make number distinctions in the pronoun, this same pronoun, *no*, is used for singular and plural antecedent inanimate nouns. The covert coding of the object pronoun when its antecedent is inanimate is built into the language to avoid the danger of hearers confusing an inanimate noun with an animate noun. It is a way of telling the difference between animate and inanimate nouns. In another sense the fact that animate nouns get replaced by pronouns but inanimate nouns are replaced by zero demonstrates that in a hierarchical ordering, animate nouns occupy a higher level than inanimate ones. It is for this reason that we can talk of animacy hierarchy in Akan.

Having discussed this process and the motivation for it, it is necessary to point out that there are two conditions under which this process is compromised. As it will be shown below, these exceptions can be functionally accounted for. One of the exceptions is that when the direct object in the sentence is followed by an adverbial element indicating time or location, the rule does not apply. In other words, for a third person pronoun whose antecedent is inanimate to be covert, as Boadi 1976 puts it, the inanimate direct object has to "occur utterance finally". This process is illustrated in (22). As shown in (22c), the presence of the adverbial *ɔkyena* 'tomorrow' requires that the object pronoun be overtly coded. That the overtness of the pronoun is conditioned by the presence of the adverbial element is supported by the fact that when the adverbial item is fronted in a focus construction as in (22d) so that the direct object is in utterance final position, the pronoun is not overt as expected. I should mention that when uttered without a context, the animacy status of the antecedent noun of the object pronoun in (22b) is not clear; it could refer to an animate or inanimate noun. Similarly in (22e), the sentence is ungrammatical if the utterance final pronoun has an inanimate noun as its antecedent.

- (22) a. Kofi *bɔ-tɔn* *dua* *no* *ɔkyena*
 Kofi FUT-sell tree the tomorrow
 Kofi will sell the tree tomorrow.
- b. Kofi *bɔ-tɔn* *no* *ɔkyena*
 Kofi FUT-sell 3SG tomorrow
 Kofi will sell it tomorrow.
- c. *Kofi *bɔ-tɔn* \emptyset *ɔkyena*
 Kofi FUT-sell 3SG tomorrow
 Kofi will sell (it).
- d. *ɔkyena* *na* Kofi *bɔ-tɔn* \emptyset
 tomorrow FOC Kofi FUT-sell 3SG
 It is tomorrow that Kofi will sell (it).
- e. **ɔkyena* *na* Kofi *bɔ-tɔn* *no*
 tomorrow FOC Kofi FUT-sell 3SG
 It is tomorrow that Kofi will sell (it).

We can offer a functional explanation as to why the presence of an adverbial element requires the inanimate object pronoun to be overtly coded. This explanation has to do, specifically, with the pragmatic notion of topicality. It has been established that, at the clausal level, the NP that codes the subject relation is more topi-

cal than any other entity in the clause; this is followed by the NP that codes the direct object relation (Givón 1984). In the Givonian functional framework, the subject is the "primary clausal topic" while the direct object is the "secondary clausal topic". Topicality hierarchy involving grammatical relations can be represented as follows:

Subject > Direct Object > Adverbial.

In Akan, the immediate postverbal position is one of the crucial defining characteristics of direct object. This means that an NP which bears the direct object relation necessarily has to occur immediately following the verb.

The reason the presence of an adverbial element in the post object position as in (22a) triggers the presence of the inanimate object pronoun is that since the direct object is more topical than an adverbial item, and since the immediate postverbal position defines direct objecthood in Akan, if the pronoun is not overtly present it would create the impression that the adverbial element is more topical than the direct object NP. It is as if the inanimate object pronoun finds its topicality status threatened and so it has to make a physical appearance in order to assert its status. With this explanation it is understandable why when there is no adverbial in sentence final position the pronoun is covert. Under that condition, there is no threat to its topical status.

The second condition which dictates the overt coding of the inanimate object pronoun is that there are a class of verbs which when used in the clause requires the presence of the pronoun. Example (23) illustrates this. In (23c) the absence of the inanimate object pronoun changes the meaning of the sentence. It should be noted that (23b) is ambiguous. If it is uttered in isolation from a context, the referent of the pronoun *no* could be either animate or inanimate.

- (23) a. Kofi *be-hyew edziban no*
 Kofi *FUT-burn food the*
 Kofi will burn the food.
- b. Kofi *be-hyew no*
 Kofi *FUT-burn 3SG*
 Kofi will burn it.
- c. Kofi *be-hyew Ø*
 Kofi *FUT-burn 3SG*
 *Kofi will burn (it).
- d. Kofi *be-hyew*
 Kofi *FUT-burn*
 Kofi will get burnt.

Other verbs in this class are: *sɛɛ* 'destroy', *bu* 'break', *hyew* 'burn', *kyaɛ* 'bend', *tɛn* 'straighten', *tɛw* 'tear', *moa* 'crumple', *yew* 'lose', *koa* 'bend', *monkyɛm* 'crumple', *butuw* 'overturn', *bɔ* 'break'. One feature of these verbs is that they belong to the class of middle verbs, that is those verbs which normally take Theme direct object in transitive clauses, but also permit Theme subject in intransitive constructions. Why these verbs condition the overt coding of the inanimate object pronoun is not very clear to me at this stage. However, a possible reason may be

because they allow Theme subject in intransitive constructions. In such constructions, the subject entity is the one which undergoes the event indicated by the verb. Now, if the clause is supposed to have an object entity but this entity is not overtly coded, the only interpretation we can assign to such a clause is that it is the subject, the Theme, which undergoes the change in state. So in (23c), without the overt pronoun, the sentence cannot be interpreted as 'Kofi will burn it'. With no pronoun following the verb *hyew* 'burn', we have to interpret it as being used intransitively (23d). There is a pragmatic constraint on this analysis and it is that the analysis is legitimate only where the verb is capable of taking animate Theme subjects. For example, the verb *bo* 'break' cannot be given the same analysis because by its semantics animate entities cannot be its Theme. Another possible reason is that these are change of state verbs which have drastic effect on the state of the entities which undergo the change of state. Since the change is drastic a way has to be found out to show the entity that has been so affected. In terms of notion of transitivity, the extent of the affectedness of the Theme NPs of these verbs make clauses that involve these verbs very high in transitivity. This is because the extent of the affectedness of a Theme entity is one of the indicators of high transitivity (Hopper and Thompson 1980).

3. Conclusion

In this paper I have shown that the conceptual distinction between animate and inanimate nouns in Akan has reflections in the grammar of the language. As mentioned at the beginning of the paper, Akan is not one of the languages noted for having an animacy hierarchy. Nevertheless, there is an extent to which we can say that the animacy distinctions instantiated in the language form a basis for such a hierarchy. This comes out in the pronominal coding of animate and inanimate entities. I have shown that whereas animate entities have coding forms which reflect differences in number, the same is not true of the coding forms of inanimate nouns. Furthermore, the system of plural suffixation in addition to the regular prefixation, sets human animate nouns apart from nonhuman animate and inanimate entities. The strongest manifestation of an animacy hierarchy is in the behavior of the inanimate object pronoun. Based on the evidence, we can say that in Akan, the following hierarchy exists:

Human > Animate Nonhuman > Inanimate.

This hierarchy, as has been shown above, is manifested in various aspects of the grammar.

NOTES

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¹ Even though the nouns which occur with the prefix *o-/ɔ-* are predominantly animate entities, there are some inanimate entities that take this prefix. Examples include *ɔbotan* 'rock', *ɔman* 'country, nation', *ɔdan* 'house', *ɔtan*

'hatred'. There are other cases like *owu* 'death', *ohia* 'poverty', *Osaman* 'ghost' which are biologically not animate but are considered as such based on cultural beliefs.

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