A Grammatical Analysis on Biseni Personal Pronouns

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Abstract: *This paper analyzed the grammatical features of personal pronouns in Biseni within a formal linguistic framework. The paper found that only an independent set of personal pronouns is attested in Biseni. The paper claimed that gender as a nominal grammatical category is fully marked on Biseni personal pronouns as the third person singular pronoun distinguishes a masculine, feminine and even a neuter morphological form. The study noted that this is a peculiar feature of Biseni grammar as most languages with shared genetic relationship do not display this feature. The paper also found that Biseni morphologically distinguishes the nominative, accusative, and genitive case on personal pronouns. The study reported that Biseni has a parametric pro-drop typology that permits null subject pronouns to be recovered from the verbal morphology of the language. The study also found that Biseni personal pronouns perform modification functions and show anaphoric usage in their syntax. The paper reported a morpho-phonemic interplay in the response of Biseni personal pronouns to clausal case functions. And recommended a detailed investigation of pronominalization in Biseni in order to evaluate and document the grammatical features of clausal subjects and objects.*

Keywords: *Biseni, Personal Pronouns, Gender, Case, Pronominalization, Pro-drop.*

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1. Introduction:

The present study attempts a grammatical analysis of personal pronouns in Biseni. Biseni belongs to the Ịjọ language cluster of the Niger-Congo phylum (cf. Williamson 1969). According to Worufah (2007), Biseni clan occupies the Northern part of the Taylor creek in the present Yenegoa Local Government Area of Bayelsa State, Nigeria. Following a recent head count in 2021 commissioned by the Chiefs Council and Community Development Committee (CDC), the population of Biseni was put at fourty thousand (40, 000) speakers.

Thus, this grammatical description also doubles as a documentation for the preservation of this language.

2. The Phenomenon of Pronouns

A number of studies (e.g. Quirk and Greenbaum (1977), Huddleston (1988), Radford (1988), Downing and Lock (1992), Ndimele (1996), Crystal (1997), Watters (2000), Jenkins (2003), 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.

Evans (1999:337) classifies the use 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 pronouns 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 grammatical description of personal pronouns in Biseni.

3. Methodology

The researchers collected data from fluent native speakers of Biseni with the help of field assistants. Direct oral interview was also used to elicit comparative data from native speakers of the language. Also secondary sources of data such as texts and library materials were utilized.

4. Analyzing Personal Pronouns in Biseni

A set of independent personal pronouns occur in Biseni. These pronouns are capable of independent existence and each has an isolated meaning. This is in contrast with the situation in some Niger-Congo languages, for example Gokana, that has two sets of personal pronouns; an independent form and a dependent form (cf. Isaac 2021). These pronouns are used in all discourse contexts and can also occur as answers to questions, as in (1a-c):

1. tiba befie fi-ma

who DEM food eat –PST

'Who ate this food?'

a. Answer: aríi 'I'/wáminí 'we'

b. Answer: aríi 'you'/áminí 'you (PL)'

c. Answer: oríi 'him'/áminí 'they' árẹé 'her'

Thus, the independent pronouns are also emphatic since they can be used alone in a construction as a response to questions. In figure 4.1, we present the personal pronouns in Biseni.

Fig 4.1: Biseni Personal Pronouns

Person		Nominative (Subject)		Accusative (Object)		Genitive (Possessive)	
		Sg	Pl	Sg	Pl	Sg	Pl
1st Person		aríi/ni 'I'	wá 'we'	i 'me'	wa 'us'	nii 'my'	nii
2ⁿᵈ Person		áríi/ni 'you'	Áminí 'you'	í 'you'	áa 'you'	níí 'your'	níí
3ʳᵈ Person	Masculine	owiyée/ori 'he'	Áminí 'they'	o/oríi 'him'	a 'them'	Owiye his	áminí
	Feminine	áyee 'she'		á/árẹẹ 'her'		Aye her	their

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Personal pronouns in Biseni show overt morphological contrast in response to subject/object case distinction as shown in the following examples:

2. **Usage as Subject:**

a. **ni**   ebiri   bá -má

   I   dog   kill –PST

   'I killed a dog'

b. **ní**   ebiri   bá -má

   you   dog   kill –PST

   'You killed a dog'

c. **owiyee**   ebiri   bá -má

   He   dog   kill –PST

   'He killed a dog'

d. **áyee**   ebiri   bá -má

   she   dog   kill –PST

   'She killed a dog'

3. **Usage as Object:**

a. ebiri   **i**bá -má

   dog   me kill –PST

   'The dog killed me'

b. ebiri   **i** bá -má

   dog   you kill –PST

   'The dog killed you'

c. ebiri **ọ** bá -má

   dog   him kill –PST

   'The dog killed him'

d. ebiri   **á**bá -má

   dog   her kill –PST

   'The dog killed her'

Observe that in the constructions in (2) and (3), different pronominal forms function as subject and object. This indicates clearly that the morphological form of the pronouns changes according to their syntactic functions. Also observe the morpho-phonemic interplay in the syntactic function of the personal pronoun in (2a-b) as the basic difference in both forms is at the suprasegmental level. In what follows, the attested grammatical features of personal pronouns in Biseni are analyzed.

4.1 Case Marking and Biseni Personal Pronouns

Personal pronouns in Biseni show overt morphological contrasts in response to syntactic functions. In other words, the pronouns change their morphological forms in respect to subject, object and possessive grammatical functions in clause structure, as shown in fig 4.2:

Fig 4.2: Case Distinction and Personal Pronouns

Nominative Case Form		Accusative Case Form		Genitive Case Form	
Singular	**Plural**	**Singular**	**Plural**	**Singular**	**Plural**
aríi/ni 'I'	wá 'us'	i 'me'	wá 'us'	nii 'my'	wáminí 'our'
áríi/ni 'you'	áminí 'you'	i 'you'	áa 'you'	níí 'your'	aminií 'your'
owiyée/ori 'he'	áminíi 'they'	ọ/oríi 'him'	a 'them'	owiye 'his'	áminíi 'their'
áyee 'she'		á/árẹẹ 'her'		aye 'her'	

4.2 Gender Marking and Biseni Pronouns

Biseni has a significantly rich gender distinction in its pronominal system. The third person pronoun, unlike a number of Benue-Congo languages that do not show gender marking, is sensitive to gender contrasts as there are clear morphological changes in the form of the pronoun to show masculine and feminine gender contrasts, as in (4a-b):

4a. owiyée séi-má

   he   dance –PST

   'He danced'

 b. ayée   séi   -má

   she   dance –PST

   'She danced'

For the neuter gender (the third person inanimate pronoun 'it'), the short form of the masculine pronoun **ọ** is usually used or the pronoun can also be dropped and the construction is still grammatical as shown in (5a-c):

5a. ni   ere   fún   tubo -má

    I   that   book   buy –PST

    'I bought that book'

 b. ni   ọ   tubo -má

    IS   3O (it)   buy –PST

    'I bought it'

 c. ni Ø tubo -má

    IS   -buy   –PST

    'I bought it'

The structure in (5b) has the noun **fún** 'book' in (5a) replaced by **ọ** the animate third person masculine pronoun, while in (5c) there is a pro-drop and the pronoun 'it' is retrieved from the context. This explains why the structure is still grammatical in spite of the null pronoun.

4.3 Selection Restriction and Biseni Personal Pronouns

There is no semantic selection in the use of personal pronouns in the syntactic process of clausal object pronominalization. The short form of the masculine accusative third person **ọ** 'him' can be used to pronominalize both animate and inanimate nominals in Biseni.

Examples:

6a. ni   árú   tubo -má

    I   canoe   buy –PST

    'I bought the canoe'

 b. . ni   ọ   tubo -má

    I   it   buy –PST

    'I bought it'

The construction in (6b) with **ọ** as the pronoun for canoe is grammatical and semantically acceptable in Biseni. Also note that the same pronoun can be used to pronominalize an animate entity as in (7a-b):

7a. ni   ebi   piri   –má

    I   PN   give   –PST

    'I gave Ebi'

 b. ni   o   piri   –má

    I   PN   give –PST

    'I gave him'

It is interesting to point out, however, that the use of **ọ** in pronominaliation for animate and inanimate nominal is only possible in the object position of sentences. For the subject position, only animate nominals can be pronominalized.

Examples:

8a. Fahyefah   kuro -má

PN   fall   –PST

'Fahyefah fell'

b. Owiyee kuro -má

Pro   fall   –PST

'He fell'

9a. igeji   kuro -má

spoon   fall   –PST

'The spoon fell'

b. ??Owiyee kuro -má

Pro   fall   –PST

'He fell'

Observe that (9b) translates to 'he fell' and not 'it fell', as Biseni places a semantic constraint on inanimate subject pronominalization. Thus there are only masculine and feminine nominative (subject) pronouns in Biseni.

4.4 Modification and Biseni Personal Pronouns

Personal pronouns perform modification functions in Biseni. As a head final language, the pronoun precedes the modified nominal element, as shown in (10a-c):

10a. ni   bira

my hand

'My hand'

b. ni   beri

your   ear

'Your ear'

c. áminí tọrukuro-mini

their   face-PL

'Their faces'

4.5 Anaphoric Relations and Biseni Personal pronouns

Personal pronouns show anaphoric usage in the syntax of Biseni. They pick up antecedents directly from the sentence in which they occur and also from the universe of discourse.

Examples:

11a. owiyeé fiye   fi-yọ

He   food   eat-PRO

'He is eating'

b. áyee   fiye   fi-yọ

she   food   eat-PRO

'She is eating'

12. ebi   tubọ   aru   tubo-má   fia   áyee   sili   yina-ma

   PN   child   canoe buy-PST   CONJ   she   money   have-PERF

   'Ebi's daughter bought a canoe, but she is rich'

Notice that the antecedents in (11a and b) are picked from the universe of discourse, as there are no elements within the sentence grammar in (11a and b) that provide any antecedent for the pronouns **owiyeé**and **áyee.** On the other hand, in the sentence in (12) the pronoun **áyee**'she' picks its referent/antecedent from another linguistic item **tubọ** 'child' in the sentence which serves as its antecedent. It is through the link to **tubọ** that the pronoun **áyee**derives its meaning.

The connection between the pronouns **owiyeé**and **áyee**and their antecedents is signaled by syntactic agreement features based on morphological distinctions which contribute a third person, singular number and gender features. Observe that the use of the pronoun **áyee** 'she' suggests that the antecedent is a feminine gender **tubọ** 'girl child' which agrees with the pronoun in marked morphological features.

The position held herein is that though personal pronouns are not anaphoric (anaphors are reflexives and reciprocals), they exhibit anaphoric relations in some aspects of their usage in Biseni syntax. This is so because 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.

1.1 The Pro-Drop Phenomenon and Biseni Personal Pronouns

The pro-drop phenomenon also referred to as **null subject** in the literature is observed in interrogative and their corresponding declarative counterpart constructions in Biseni, where the SPEC of INFL can also be suppressed in overt syntax and still generates grammatical structures.

Examples:

13a. ni   niga   sunyo-wa?

   You   how   stay-PRO-QM

   'How are you doing?'

 b. -   niga   sunyo-wa?

   Pro how   stay-PRO-QM

   'How are you doing?'

14a. ni   ebi   sun-yo

   I   good   stay-PRO

   'I am doing fine (I am fine)'

 b. -   ebi   sun-yo

   pro   good   stay-PRO

   'I am doing fine (I am fine)'

The simple interrogative in (13b) and the declarative in (14b) still retain their grammaticality and subject specificity even with the missing subject pronouns. Thus, from the examples in (13b and 14b), it is clear that Bisemi is of the **Pro-drop** parametric typology with underived inflectional

forms exhibiting neither a rich system of verb-agreement nor a rich system of subject-clitic agreement, yet has a possible licensing of **Pro.**

2. Conclusion

In this paper, we have analyzed the grammatical features of personal pronouns in Biseni. The paper found that unlike most Niger-Congo languages that distinguish two sets of personal pronouns, an independent form and a dependent form, just a single set of independent personal pronouns is attested in Biseni.

The paper noted that gender as a nominal grammatical category is fully marked on Biseni personal pronouns as the third person singular pronoun distinguishes a masculine, feminine an even a neuter form. The study noted that this is an interesting feature of Biseni grammar as most languages with shared genetic relationship do not display this feature.

The paper found that Biseni fully marks nominative, accusative and genitive case distinctions on personal pronouns. The study also reported a morpho-phonemic interplay in the response of Biseni personal pronouns to clausal case functions.

The paper claimed that the neuter pronoun 'it' does not occur in the subject form of Biseni personal pronouns. The paper noted that Biseni has a parametric pro-drop typology that permits null subject pronouns to be recovered from the verbal morphology of the language. And posited that Biseni personal pronouns show anaphoric usage in their syntax.

3. Recommendations

The paper recommended a detailed investigation of the syntactic process of pronominalization in Biseni in order to evaluate why it is possible to pronominalize only clausal objects and not clausal subjects in Biseni, and document the grammatical facts that emanate from this assessment.

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