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Morphophonemics of Àlágò Noun Plural Formation

Ogah, Ashikeni Thomas, PhD, Umaru, Yakubu Jacob, PhD & Amende, A. Charles

Abstract

This paper investigates the morphological principles involved in the formation of plurals of nouns in Àlágò. The Blench wordlist of 1017 lexical items was used to collect data for this study from competent native speakers of the language across the five local government areas where Àlágò is spoken in Nasarawa (Keana, Obi, Awe, Doma and Lafia). The study discovered that there are basically two means by which plurals of nouns are formed in Àlágò. The first is by the prefixation of a plural morpheme àwì- while the second is substitution by mutation. Consequently, to form the plural forms of most nouns (regular nouns), prefix the morpheme àwì- (plural marker) to the root noun with the final vowel of the plural morpheme being deleted. The phonological process of deletion is observed to interfere with this rule, since the final vowel of the plural marker is deleted when the morpheme is prefixed to the noun. However, the high tone of the deleted vowel /i/ of the plural marker is always retained. This makes it a morphophonemic phenomenon which involves deletion and tone stability. The other means of plural formation attested is substitution by mutation involving the substitution of the initial close-mid back rounded vowel /ò/ of the root noun with an open-mid front unrounded vowel /à/. The low tone of the substituted vowel of the stem is retained in the replacive morpheme “à-” which corroborates tone stability phenomenon.

Keywords: plural, number, morphophonemics, noun inflection, Àlágò

Introduction

The question of how nouns inflect for number in language has been of interest to language scholars, linguists and grammarians alike over the years (see Katamba 1993, McMahon 2002, Haspelmath & Sims 2010, Ubong & Udoudom 2012, Adejoh 2012 and a host of others). However, no conscious effort has been made over the years toward deliberately investigating the morphological principles and rules

involved in formation of plural forms of nouns in Àlágò. Though few attempts have been made on description of noun plural formation in Alago over the years, for instance Amu-nnadi (2006: 81) suggests the prefix *aw-* as the plural morpheme attached to a noun to form plurals in Alago as in *okposhi* “stick”, *awokposhi* “sticks”, *efu* “tree”, *awefu* “trees,” and a host of others which were however left without tone marking, and cannot be said to be elaborate on noun inflection for number, a lot still needs to be done to explain how noun plurals are marked in the language.

Literature Review

Àlágò is classified as an *Idomoid* language which belongs to the Benue-Congo subfamily within the Niger-Congo Phylum (Williamson 1986:261) The Àlágò (*Idoma Nokwu* “the older Idoma”) or Arago as they were earlier called by their neighbours, are one of the major ethnic groups in Nasarawa State. According to Ayewa (2010), Àlágò is spoken across five Local Government Areas in Nasarawa State (Keana, Obi, Awe, Doma and Lafia). The language has two main variety clusters (the western and the eastern variety clusters). Morphophonology in European tradition and morphophonemics in American tradition essentially deals with the interaction between morphology and phonology in determining the form of words. According to Crystal (2008), it is a branch of linguistics which refers to the analysis and classification of the phonological factors that affect the appearance of morphemes, or correspondingly, the grammatical factors that affect the appearance of phonemes. It studies the interaction between morphological and phonological or phonetic processes. Its chief focus is the sound changes that take place in morphemes (minimal meaningful units) when they combine to form words (see Katamba 1993:34, Booij (2007:33). This linguistic science consists of levels of analysis which interact with one another in mutual synergy. They are more or less systems of a system which are interconnected. The interaction and mutual relationship between phonology and morphology is therefore not surprising as it came to birth within the context of classical phonemics to attempt a solution to the inadequacies of the principle of biuniqueness in the first quarter of the twentieth century. It is assumed that surface phones are derived from underlying morphophonemes through a single system of morphophonological rules. Little wonder that Davenport and Hannah (2010:134) emphasise that it is the identification of such alternations between sounds of natural language and of phonological processes behind them that are the thrust of much of generative phonology. In English for instance, morphological structure may play a role in determining the phonological form of a complex word. When the affix “-ity” is added to the adjective “selective” to form “selectivity”, the main stress of the adjective shifts rightwards to the last syllable of the stem as seen in (1):

- (1) selective >
selectivity

Also, the English suffix “-al” is attached to verbs that end in a stressed syllable as in (2):

- (2) i.
arrive>arrivalii.
recite>recital (Booij
2007:155)

Similarly, word classes could be distinguished by contrasts such as singular and plural through certain inflectional processes which do not change the grammatical classes of the stems to which they are attached. Mc Mahon (2002) maintains that in the morphophonemics of the English plural inflectional morpheme, the alternations of the /s/,/z/ and /iz/ allomorphs are in complementary distribution as seen in (3) below:

- (3) i. *cats* ii. *dogs*
iii. *losses*,
respectively
(McMahon 2002:90)

Katamba (1993) concurs that the voice assimilation process displayed by the –s plural suffix in the English examples above is not unique to that morpheme, the –s third person singular present tense suffix in verbs shows exactly the same alternations as shown in the examples (4):

- (4)
/-iz/ after sibilants as in:
i. /wɔːʃ/ wash ~ /wɔːʃiz/ washes
/-z/ after voiced segments other than sibilants as in:
ii. /riːd/ read ~ /riːdz/ reads
/-s/ after voiceless consonants other than sibilants as in:
iii. /dʒʌmp/ jump ~ /dʒʌmps/ jumps.

Also, the same rule applies to genitives as seen in (5) below:

- (5)
/-iz/ after sibilants as in:
i. /liz/ Liz ~ liziz/
Liz’s
/-z/ after voiced segments other than sibilants as in:
ii. /dʒein/ Jane ~ /dʒeinz/ Jane’s
/-s/ after voiceless consonants other than sibilants as in:
iii. /mik/ Mick ~ /miks/ Mick’s

It is important to note that parametric differences occur in marking grammatical number, for instance in some other languages such as Kwakwala (A native American language), number is a derivational category and plurality has a different meaning from what obtains in English. According to Katamba (1993:215), in Kwakwala, the meaning of plural is unpredictable and plurality may indicate; i. Repeated action ii. Several subjects iii. An action occurring simultaneously in different parts of a unit.

Furthermore, in languages with noun class systems such as Swahili, particular plural affixes are assigned based on the noun class a word belongs. Katamba (1993: 235) presents the following examples (6) in Swahili:

- (6)
- | | | |
|----------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|
| CL1 singular | CL2 plural | |
| i. <i>m- mtu</i> | <i>wa- watu</i> | 'person' |
| ii. <i>mgeni</i> | <i>wageni</i> | 'guest' |
| CL3 | CL4 | |
| iii. <i>m-</i> | <i>mti</i> | <i>mi- miti</i> tree' |
| iv. <i>mganda</i> | <i>miganda</i> | bundle |
| CL7 | CL8 | |
| v. <i>ki- kikapu</i> | <i>vi- vikapu</i> | basket |
| vi. <i>kitabu</i> | <i>vitabu</i> | book |
- (Katamba 1993:235)

In German, the umlaut (vowel mutation) rule is morphophonemic. Haspelmath & Sims (2010:34) posit that in German, one way of forming the plural of a noun is by replacing a back vowel of the singular form (eg. [ʊ], [a:], [ɔ]) by a front vowel (eg. [Y],[e:], [Ø], spelled ü, ä,ö) as in:

- (7)
- | | |
|---------------------|----------------------------|
| Singular | plural |
| i. <i>Mutter</i> | <i>mütter</i> mother(s) |
| ii. <i>Vater</i> | <i>väter</i> father(s) |
| iii. <i>Tochter</i> | <i>töchter</i> daughter(s) |

According to Adejoh (2012:39) most nouns in Idoma are pluralized by the replacive prefix morpheme “a” copular which alternates with “o” by a process of mutation. This is illustrated in the examples (8) below:

- (8)
- | | |
|-------------------------|------------------------|
| Singular | Plural |
| i. <i>ɔche</i> 'person' | <i>a che</i> 'persons' |
| ii. <i>ɔyi</i> child | <i>ayi</i> 'children' |

- iii. *ònya* 'woman' *ànya* 'women' iv. *oklobià* 'young man'
àklobià 'young men' v. *onchénya* 'lady' *anchénya* 'ladies'
vi. *nyakwòchè* 'elder' *ànyakwòchè* 'elders'

Notice the alternation of the initial phoneme “o” and “a” to form the plurals in the above examples. As far as the substitution of a phoneme for another accounts for changes in meaning of a morpheme (change from singular to plural), the process is considered as morphophonemic.

Also, some nouns in Idoma form their plurals by means of additive morphemes. The morphophoneme “a” is prefixed to root noun to form the plural form as seen in examples (9) as posited by Adejoh (2012:39);

(9)

singular plural

i. *adà* ‘father’ *àdàdà* ‘fathers’

ii. *ene* ‘mother’ *àene* ‘mothers’

iii. *òbá* ‘husband’ *áòbá* ‘husbands’

iv. *èbè* ‘animal’ *àèbè* ‘animals’

v. *igbanò* ‘bird’ *àigbanò* ‘birds’

Reduplication results to vowel lengthening which is productive in pluralization in Idoma, the reduplicated morpheme is morphophonemic since it is responsible for pluralization as demonstrated in the examples (10) below:

(10)

singular plural

i. *èchò* ‘stone’ > *ècheechò* ‘stones’ ii. *èfu* ‘hill’ >

èfèèfu ‘hills’ iii. *òlè* ‘house’ > *òlòlè* ‘houses’

iv. *òchi* ‘tree’ > *òchòòchi* ‘trees’

v. *ikpoku* ‘bone’ > *ikpòkòkò* ‘bones’

(Adejoh 2012:40)

Note that in examples 10 i-iv, the stem, which is reduplicated first undergoes modifications; in some cases “o” changes to “e” while in others “e” changes to “o” before being lengthened. These are cases of partial reduplication while 10v above is a case of complete reduplication.

Dalhatu (2017: 98) presents an interesting case of tone in Gbagyi nominal pluralization where the plural prefix “a-” takes either a high or low tone depending on the tonal pattern of the root noun. The examples (11) are illustrative:

(11)

Singular Plural

- i. *fwiŋwá* “house” *áfwiŋw*
“houses” ii. *túkwó* “bead”
túkwó “beads” iii. *pita* “leg”
ápítà “legs” iv. *zókŋwú* “oath”
ázókŋwú “oaths”
- v. *bwàdà* “shoe” *àbwàdà* “shoes”
- vi. *dùgba* “frog” *àdùgba* “frogs”
- vii. *mula* “wedding” *àmula*
“weddings”
- viii. *kata* “lie” *àkata* “lies”
- ix. *znudù* “cross” *àznudù* “crosses”

As shown in data (11), the plural prefix “a-” exhibits both high and low tonal patterns. The prefix selects between the two tones depending on the tonal pattern of the singular nouns, particularly the tone of the initial syllable of the nouns. When the noun begins with a high or extra high tone, the plural prefix assumes a high tone as in (i - iv). However, the prefix bears a low tone in the environments of a mid and low tone as in (v - ix).

Methodology

Data were collected from five informants within the age bracket of 45 -71 (one from each of the five LGAs) where Alágo is spoken. The informants were carefully selected based on their perceived competence in the language under investigation and literacy in English language. All interview sessions were recorded to avoid relying on short term memory. While using the Sony IC Noise cut Playback digital voice recorder for the recording sessions, precautions were taken to ensure that the recordings were clear enough. In the course of the interviews, the researcher noted in a jotter, all issues that required special attention. The Blench wordlist of 1017 lexical items was the instrument used for elicitation of data. With the aid of the Blench wordlist, data were collected from native speakers of the language through one-on-one interviews and spanned through a period of about three months as repeated visits had to be made in certain cases. The researcher also conducted structured and unstructured informal elicitation interviews to generate corpus since the research goes beyond the word level to phrases and sentences. The study adopted the descriptive procedures/methods for morphophonemic analysis put forward by Hayes (2009:162). The following procedures were adopted:

- i. the data were examined, and provisional division of the forms of words were made into morphemes.
- ii. morphemes that alternate, and their allomorphs were isolated.

- iii. within each allomorph, the particular segment or segments that alternate were located.

In the processing of data, the transcription of the object language utilized the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) valued symbols and the interlinear morpheme-by-morpheme glossing principles were employed in keeping with the Leipzig glossing rules.

The transcribed data were then carefully observed and sorted into paradigms and syntagmes that clearly demarcated the morpheme boundaries to assist in drawing up the phonemes and phonological processes. Also, productive phoneme alternants that suggest morphophonemic indicators such as noun inflections for case, person and number were drawn.

Data Analysis and Discussion

Noun inflections for number were then identified and analyzed noun inflections for number or plurals of nouns in Àlágò are formed by the use of both additive and replacive morphemes just as in Idoma. All Àlágò nouns begin with vowels. To form the plurals of nouns therefore, two rules could apply; prefixation of plural morpheme and substitution of the plural morpheme by a process of mutation.

Rule 1: To form the plural forms of most nouns (regular nouns), prefix the morpheme àwí- (plural marker) to the root noun with the final vowel of the plural morpheme being deleted. The phonological process of deletion is observed to interfere with this rule, since the final vowel of the plural marker is deleted when the morpheme is prefixed to the noun. However, the high tone of the deleted vowel /í/ of the plural marker is always retained. This is a morphophonemic phenomenon which involves deletion and tone stability as demonstrated in the following examples (12):

(12)

Singular prefix+root noun plural

i. *igyè àwí* # *igyè* → *àwígyè* “thorns” ii. *ínyùwá àwí* #

ínyùwá → *àwínyùwá* “stars” iii. *òkpá àwí* # *òkpá* →

àwókpá “streams” iv. *èjì àwí* # *èjì* → *àwèjì* “lakes”

v. *èhọ àwí* # *èhọ* → *àwèhọ* “farms”

vi. *ishù* *àwí*# *ishù* → *àwíshù* “rivers”

vii. *ódá* *àwí*# *ódá* → *àwódá* “rooms”

viii. *èfú* *àwí*# *èfú* → *àwéfú* “hills”

ix. *oshè* *àwí*# *oshè* → *àwóshè* “slaves”

x. *íkpekyè* *àwí*# *íkpekyè* → *àwíkpekyè* “gizards”

xi. *òyá* *àwí*# *òyá* → *àwóyá* “feathers”

xii. *ènà* *àwí*# *ènà* → *àwénà* “cows”

xiii. *ìkpòwù* *àwí* # *ìkpòwù* → *àwìkpòwù* “goats”

xiv.íbíkúyákù	àwí#	íbíkúyákù → àwíbíkúyákù	“cats’
xv.ègye	àwí#	ègye → àwégye	“leopards’
xvi.ádágbá	àwí#	ádágbá → àwádágbá	“elephants’
xvii.íkínábò	àwí#	→ íkínábò àwíkínábò	“tortoises’
xviii.íkù	àwí#	íkù → àwíkù	“nile crocodiles’
xix.òyí	àwí#	òyí → àwóyí	“spirits’
xx.òtítẹ	àwí#	òtítẹ → àwótítẹ	“hunters’
xxi.òlọhá	àwí#	òlọhá → àwólọhá	“witches/wizards’
xxii.iwó	àwí#	iwó → àwíwó	“dogs’
xxiii.ígbánọ	àwí#	ígbánọ → àwígbánọ	“birds’
xxiv.ògwùgwù	àwí#	ògwùgwù → àwógwùgwù	“owls’
xxv.ènákòsàsè	àwí#	ènákòsàsè → àwénákòsàsè	“scorpions’
xxvi.èmíyá	àwí#	èmíyá → àwémíyá	“mosquitos’

Note that the plural marker always begins with a low tone. Also, the first syllable of the root noun copies the tone of the deleted vowel of the plural morpheme. It could therefore be stated that the plural morpheme is *àwí-* while the allomorphs are *àwí*, *àwá*, *àwé* and *àwó* respectively depending on the initial vowel of the root noun. This could be presented more clearly in a schema as follows:

àwí- (plural morpheme) *àwí-* occurs before noun which begins with /i/ *àwá-* occurs before noun which begins with /a/ *àwé-* occurs before noun which begins with /e/ *àwó-* occurs before noun which begins with /o/

The schema above indicates the allomorphs of the plural morpheme *àwí-*, which varies in concert with the environment of occurrence. In example 11i for instance, *igyè* means “thorn.” When the plural morpheme *àwí-* is prefixed to it, it becomes *àwígyè* meaning “thorns.” As earlier stated, the plural marker begins with a low tone and ends with a high tone. The final tone bearing vowel of the plural marker is deleted but the high tone is retained when it co-occurs with the root noun to form the plural (tone copying) and demonstrates tone stability and indicates changes resulting from phoneme and morpheme concatenation. Similarly, in example 11vii, *ódá* means “room.” To form its plural form, the final vowel of the plural marker *àwí-* is deleted but the tone is retained and passed on to the initial vowel of the root noun *ódá* to form the plural *àwódá* which means “rooms.”

The justification of this position is premised on the consideration of suffixation which accounts for stress shift in English as morphophonemic as demonstrated in (1) above *selective* > *selectivity*. If this is the case in English

language which is stressed, it therefore follows that in tone languages such as Àlágò, such phenomena as prefixation which accounts for tone copying and tone stability should equally be treated as morphophonemic since the plural morpheme for regular nouns has a constant form with varied allomorphs.

The other form of plurals in Àlágò is formed by Rule 2: Substitute the initial close-mid back rounded vowel /ò/ of the root noun with an open-mid front unrounded vowel /à/. The following examples are illustrative:

(13)

Singular		plural	
i. òyí	→	àyí	“child (ren)”
ii. òmulò	→	àmùlò	“man (men)”
iii. ònyiyà	→	ànyiyà	“woman (women)”
iv. òyínomulò	→	àyínomulò	“boy(s)”
v. òyínonyiyà	→	àyínonyiyà	“girl (s)”
vi. ònowà	→	ànowà	“blacksmith (s)”
vii. òyéhe	→	àyéhe	“spitting cobra(s)”
viii. òwí	→	àwí	“thief(thieves)”

Note that the low tone of the substituted vowel of the stem is retained in the replacive morpheme “à-” as demonstrated in example 13i. òyí “child” which becomes àyí “children” when the initial vowel ò is replaced with à by a process of mutation to form the plural with the tone of the replacive phoneme/morpheme being retained. This indeed corroborates tone copying and tone stability phenomena as morphophonemic.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it is obvious that in Àlágò, two processes are involved in the formation of plurals of nouns. They are prefixation of a morpheme àwí- to the root noun on the one hand and the substitution of a phoneme with another in other forms of nouns on the other hand. It is observed that in most cases of plural formation in Àlágò, the process of prefixation involves the phonological process of deletion of the final vowel of the plural morpheme which is prefixed to the root noun to form the plural. However, the high tone of the deleted plural morpheme is passed on to the first vowel of the root noun (tone stability). Also, in the other process which involves substitution, the low tone of the substituted vowel of the stem is retained in the replacive morpheme “à-” and corroborates the tone stability phenomenon. There is no doubt that these processes are morphophonemic since they both involve changes that result from the concatenation between phonemes and morphemes. Suffice it to say that Morphophonology (also morphophonemics or morphonology) is the branch of linguistics that deals with the interaction between morphological and phonological or phonetic processes. Its chief focus is the sound changes that

take place in morphemes (minimal meaningful units) when they combine to form words and corroborates the conclusion of this study.

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