

Obolo Subject Markers

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Abstract

Subject markers are ubiquitous in Obolo morphology. The ubiquitousness of subject markers in Obolo morphology calls for a linguistic analysis. This study aims to find out the status of Obolo subject markers. This study examines the morphological forms of Obolo subject markers, the distribution of subject markers and provides a morpho-syntactic analysis of subject markers in sentences. The data for this study were collected from native speakers of the language to corroborate the introspective knowledge of the researcher. This study is mainly descriptive. The descriptive method of morpheme-to-morpheme glossing in Linguistics is used to analyse the data used in this study. The study revealed that subject markers are morphologically conditioned. A morphosyntactic analysis of these subject markers shows that these subject markers can occur with the emphatic forms of personal pronouns or proper nouns. The morphosyntactic analysis also shows that subject markers can retrieve the phi features of dropped subjects. The possibility of dropped subjects makes Obolo a null subject language. The major thrust of this study is the reanalysis of subject markers as clitics against affixes.

Keywords: *Subject markers, clitics, affixes and clifix*

Introduction

Obolo is a Congo-Benue language spoken in Andoni Local Government Area of Rivers State and Eastern Obolo Local Government Area of Akwa State. The people of Obolo occupy Nigeria's Niger Delta. In spite of the intimidating influence of English, Obolo is still a viable language.

Faraclas (1984) noted subject markers as subject prefixes. He explained that subject markers occur as subjects of verbs and are always attached to the verb as prefixes. In a similar vein, Enene (1998) opined that these subject markers are pronominal affixes and are always prefixed to the verb. He gave examples to show that the subject prefix is obligatory with or without an overt subject noun phrase as shown below.

- (1) Émì ñ-tù mú (2) Ñ-tù mú 'I said it.'
1sg 1sg –say 'I said it.'

This study aims to find out the status of subject markers in Obolo. To achieve this aim, this study is divided into three parts which provide answers to the following questions.

- (a) What are the morphological forms of Obolo subject markers?
- (b) How are Obolo subject markers distributed?
- (c) What are the morpho-syntactic features of Obolo subject markers?

This study examines the morphological forms of Obolo subject markers, the distribution of subject markers and provides a morphosyntactic analysis of subject markers in sentences.

A. The Morphological Form of Obolo Subject Markers

Obolo Personal Pronouns			
Person	Number	Independent Forms	Dependent Forms
1 st	Singular	Èmì	ń / ñ
	Plural	Èjì	è
2 nd	Singular	Òwù	ò
	Plural	Ènyì	è / ì
3 rd	Singular	ómô	ò / ì
	Plural	èmâ	è

Subject markers are nominals. They are non-emphatic pronouns. The ubiquitousness of subject markers in Obolo nominal morphology calls for examination. Inflected verbs in Obolo are subject marked. Except for the verb in the imperative which is covertly marked, verbs are often marked. These subject markers are presented below:

First Person Singular Marker *n-*

n is a syllabic nasal that assimilates the place of articulation of the consonants that come immediately after it homorganically. *n* marks the first person speaker.

- (3) ñ- lîbí
 1SG SM VR 'I ran.'
- (4) ñ- tét
 1SG SM VR 'I caught.'
- (5) ñ- fùk
 1SG SM VR 'I counted/read.'

Second Person Singular Marker *o-*

o marks the second person singular.

- (6) òwù ó- lîbí
 2SG SM VR
 You SM ran 'You ran.'
- (7) òwù ó- tét
 2SG SM VR
 You SM caught 'You caught.'
- (8) òwù ó- jè
 2SG SM VR
 You SM ran 'You ran.'

If used without the independent pronoun, *òwù*, a simple question is implied.

- (9) Ó- lîbí?
 SM VR INQ
 2SG run 'Have you run?'
- (10) Ó-tét?
 SM VR INQ
 2SG catch 'Have you caught?'

- (11) Ó-jé?
SM VR INQ
2SG go 'Have you gone?'

Third Person Singular Marker *i-*

i marks the third person singular.

- (12) î- líbí
3SG SM VR 'S/he ran.'
- (13) î- tèt
3SG SM VR 'S/he caught.'
- (14) î- fùk
3 SG SM VR 'S/he read.'
- (15) Asùk î- sá ñjín î- tèt írín.
Prop name 3SG use net 3SG catch (past) fish
Asùk used net to catch the fish through net.

A change in tone from /î/ to /ì/ creates a change in the subject from third person singular to second person plural. The changed subject also affects the sentence. The construct with /î/ is a declarative sentence while the construct with /ì/ is an imperative sentence.

- (16) ì- líbí
2PL SM VR 'You (pl) run!'
- (17) ì- tèt
2PL SM VR 'You (pl) catch!'
- (18) ì-fùk
2PL SM VR 'You (pl) read!'

Third Person Singular Marker *o-*

o is the alternative form for third person singular. *O-* replaces *i-* when the independent pronoun is emphasized.

- (19) òmô ó- líbí
3SG SM run 'S/he ran. '
- (20) òmô ó- tèt
3SG SM catch 'S/he caught. '
- (21) òmô ó- fùk
3SG SM read 'S/he read. '

The *o* subject marker used in sentences (19- 21) acts as a relative marker. Also, it qualifies the independent pronoun.

- (22) òmô ó- fùk
3SG SM read 'S/he read. '

òmô ó-fùk does not just mean 'S/he read', it has a relative meaning 'She is the one that read.' *òmô* is the subject of the construct in (22). The subject marker cannot thus be a subject in this

construct. The subject marker in this construct is likely an adjunct (Spencer and Luis 2012:144), where it provides more information on the subject.

Plural Person Marker *e*-

e marks first person, second person and third person plural forms. A listener decodes the referent of *e*- through its antecedent.

(23) èjì è- lîbí
1PL SM VR run ‘We ran.’

(24) ènyì é- lîbí
2PL SM VR run ‘You ran.’

(25) èmâ é- lîbí
3PL SM VR run ‘They ran.’

In examples 23-25, the subjects can be dropped. Èjì, ènyì and èmâ can be dropped and the sentences would still be meaningful because the subject markers bear the syntactic features of the subjects. In examples 23-25, the subject marker *e* marks first person plural, second person plural and third person plural. One would expect ambiguity in the use of *e*. However, the referent of *e* is retrieved through discourse.

Morpho-Syntactic Analysis of Subject Markers

By function, a subject marker can replace an independent form or subject in a sentence. The agreement relation shown by these pronominal referents is referential as it tracks the subject which serves as the referent (Nikolaeva 2003). Both the independent and dependent forms can co-occur in a construct as shown below:

(26) èmì ñ- lép fitúró.
1SG SM buy perf bread ‘I have bought bread’

(27) òwù ò- lép fitúró.
2SG SM buy perf bread ‘You have bought bread’

(28) ómô ò- lép fitúró.
3SG SM buy perf bread ‘S/he has bought bread’

(29) èjì è- lép fitúró.
1PL SM buy perf bread ‘We have bought bread’

(30) ènyì è- lép fitúró.
2PL SM buy perf bread ‘You(pl) have bought bread’

(31) èmâ è- lép fitúró.
3PL SM buy perf bread ‘They have bought bread’

Observe the degree of selection (cf Kari 2002) of these subject markers in examples 32-34.

(32) ñ- lép fitúró.
SM buy bread ‘I have bought bread.’

- (33) *ń- bâ- lép fitúró.*
 SM FUT buy bread ‘I will buy bread.’

- (34) *ń- lé- lép fitúró.*
 SM AM buy bread ‘I had bought bread.’

However, these non-emphatic forms have the features of clitics. These non-emphatic forms have the typical properties of clitics as listed by Spencer and Luis (2012): they do not stick to a particular construct or segment and their syntax differs from fully-fledged words. Although, these subject markers can substitute the emphatic forms and NPs, their syntax differs from independent forms and pronouns. Distribution is the sole distinction between personal pronouns and pronominal subject markers. Subject markers cannot head focused constructions unlike personal pronouns and full-fledged NPs. Examples:

- (35) *Írè èmì.*
 FOC 1SG ;It is I.’

- (36) *Írè Áyílè.*
 FOC Ayile. ‘It is Ayile.’

- (37) * *Írè ń.*
 FOC 1SG ‘It is I.’

- (38) * *Írè è.*
 FOC 3PL ‘It is he.’

Sentences (37- 38) are ungrammatical because subject clitics cannot head focused constructions. Subject markers are not used in coordinated constructions. For examples:

- (39) *ńyì èmì mè Áyílè.*
 Give 1SG cord P name ‘Give me and Ayile.’

- (40) * *ńyì ń mè Áyílè.*
 Give SM cord P name ‘Give me and Ayile.’

Following the assertion that a proper word does not dissociate in deletion rules under identity (Zwicky 1977), these subject markers may be reanalyzed as clitics. The deverbal noun: ‘*ógbò*’. *Ógbò* (curse, n) is a derivative of the prefix /o/ and the root /gbo/ (curse,v). The ‘o’ in ‘ogbo’ does not detach or get deleted irrespective of its syntactic environment. This differs from the low degree of selection of subject markers shown in examples (32) to (34). The subject marker attaches to the root in (32) and attaches to aspectual markers in examples (33) and (34).

Subject markers in Obolo seem to fit ‘mixed systems’ (Spencer and Luis 2012). In mixed systems, same elements behave sometimes like affixes and sometimes like clitics. In mixed systems, the divide between subject markers as affixes and clitics is blurred because these subject markers behave as affixes and as clitics. Spencer and Luis (2012) explain that the divide between agreement (affixal morphology) and pronominal clitics is problematic because ‘there are clitics that behave like standard agreement markers and there are agreement systems that show some of the behaviour of clitic system.’

An illustration with Degema language as a contrast shows how Obolo subject markers fit the description of mixed system. Consider these examples from Degema (Kari 2005).

- (41) *ení jɔ ó = sírè = ɛ́n*
 Elephant the 3sgx= run= FE ‘The elephant ran.’

- (42) ení jɔ ɔ = jókóró = ↓ ɔn
Elephant the 3sgx=leave =FE ‘The elephant left.’

- (43) ení jɔ ó = siré jókóró = ↓ ɔn
Elephant the 3sgx=run leave =FE ‘The elephant ran away.’

These subject markers are fixed on the verbs in (41) and (42). But in (43), only the initial verb which is in the serial verb construction is subject marked. The second verb is not marked due to the identity of the reference (Kari 2005). These subject markers are detachable in certain syntactic environment.

A different scenario obtains in Obolo. Except verbs in imperative constructions, all Obolo verbs in sentences are subject marked. An imperative construction and typical sentences are shown below.

- (44) Ø sí lép írìn.
EC go buy fish ‘You, go and buy fish.’
- (45) Èmì ñ- lép írìn.
1SG SM buy fish. ‘I bought fish.’
- (46) Òwù ó- lép írìn.
2SG SM buy fish. ‘You (sg) bought fish.’
- (47) Òmô í- lép írìn.
3SG SM buy fish. ‘S/he bought fish.’
- (48) èmâ é- lép írìn.
3PL SM buy fish ‘I bought fish.’

The subject of the sentence determines the form subject marker that is attached to the verb. In a serial verb construction, the verbs are subject marked even when their antecedent is the same subject. The Subject marker is not detachable.

- (49) m̀fùk ñgé m̀kwéén ñsibí.
1SMread 1SMwrote 1SMstudied 1SMleft
I read, wrote, studied and left.
- (50) ófùk ógé ókwéén ósibí.
2SMread 2SMwrote 2SMstudied 2SMleft
You read, wrote, studied and left.
- (51) ífùk ígé íkwéén ísibí.
3SMread 3SMwrote 3SMstudied 3SMleft
S/he read, wrote, studied and left.

The stick of subject markers to verb forms makes these subject markers subject affixes. This behaviour contrasts with the Degema data (examples 39-41) where subject markers are detachable from the verbs. In Obolo, allomorphs of person morphemes are fixed on verbs. Obolo subject markers portray a ‘mixed system.’ A mixed system goes for ‘clifix.’ Clifix is a derivative from **clitics** and **affix**.

Recall that Obolo nouns are not morphological marked. In examples 52 - 65, concord in subject and the verb is marked through the form of the subject markers and the vowel alteration in the concord marker. The subject in this sentence is ‘Emi.’ The subject morphologically conditions <m>, the subject marker. The subject marker is a simple clitic as it

can occupy the syntactic position of ‘emi’ (Haspelmath 2010). A tense marker ‘ba’ which is a concord marker follows the subject marker. The template below is repeated here as reference to explain the forms of the verb. Observe the morphological pattern of the subject, subject markers and concord morphemes presented below. The template below shows the underspecified vowel (V).

- (52) First person singular: èmi - /â/
- (53) Second person singular: òwù - /ô/
- (54) Third person singular: òmô - /ô/
- (55) First person plural: èji - /è/
- (56) Second person plural: èmâ - /è/
- (57) Third person plural: ènyi - /è/

Subject Marking

- (58) ófùk ógé ókwéén ósibí.
2SMread 2SMwrote 2SMstudied 2SMleft ‘You read, wrote, studied and left.’
- (59) ífùk ígé íkwéén ísibí.
3SMread 3SMwrote 3SMstudied 3SMleft ‘S/he read, wrote, studied and left.’

Independent and Dependent Pronouns

- (60) èmi mǎ- lǐbí
1SG FUT – run ‘I will run.’
- (61) èji mé- lǐbí
1PL FUT run ‘We will run.’
- (62) òwù mǎ- lǐbí
2 SG FUT run ‘You (sg) will run.’

Pronominals and Negative Markers

- (63) èmi kpǎ- lǐbí
1SG NEG run ‘I will not run.’
- (64) èji kpê- lǐbí
1PL NEG run ‘We will not run.’
- (65) òwò kpô- lǐbí
2 SG NEG run ‘You (sg) will not run.’

Subject Markers and Aspectual Markers

- (66) m- bǎ- lǐbí
1SG FUT–run ‘I will run.’
- (67) é- bē- lǐbí
1PL FUT run ‘We will run.’
- (68) ò- bô- lǐbí
2SG FUT run ‘You (sg) will run.’

Subject Markers and Aspectual Markers

- (69) èmì mǎ-ní- líbí
1SG FUT INC run 'I want to run.'
- (70) èjì mē- ní - líbí
1PL FUT INC run 'We want to run.'
- (71) òwù mô- ní - líbí
2 SG FUT INC run 'You (sg) want to run. '

As noted earlier, there is a morphological conditioning through vowel alteration. Vowel alteration in these examples is explained by the template provided in examples 52- 57. The subject determines the vowel in the aspectual and negation markers. Following this, the pronoun, subject markers and aspectual markers are sensitive to their shared phi-features (Dikken 2011). For grammaticality, the subject pronoun, the subject clitic and the concord marker are in agreement because AGR features are borne by these elements. An unacceptable sentence is produced if the sentence elements are not in agreement as shown below:

- (72) ! Òwù ní- lép fítúrú.
2s 1sSM FUT CM buy bread I want to buy bread.'

- (73) ! Òmô é- lép fítúrú.
3SG 3PL buy bread '!S/he they bought bread.'

These sentences are ungrammatical on account of subject-verb mismatches (Osenova n.d). The subject-verb violation can be traced to the features shown below.

- (74) 2SG * 1SG SM
[owu] [n-]

- (75) 3SG * 3PL SM
[omo] [e-]

Conclusion

Obolo subject markers are very conspicuous in Obolo nominal morphology. The paper has examined the morphological forms and structural identity of the subject markers. The paper also explored the morphosyntactic functions of Obolo subject markers.

Abbreviations and Symbols:

AM- Aspectual Marker, CM- Concord Marker, EC- Empty Category, FOC- Focus, FUT- Future, INC- Inchoative, INQ -Inquiry, NEG- Negative, PAST- Past tense, PERF- perfective, PL- Plural, SG- Singular, SM- subject marker, VR- Verb Root,

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