

The Noun Class System of Ogbia

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Abstract

This paper investigates the noun class system of the Ogbia language. The criteria used to group the nouns into different classes is based on the ability of the noun stem prefixes alternating in the formation of most plurals, thus forming a semantic grouping where certain items have some semantic correlation and concord or agreement markers. The classification of nouns is done through the alternation of different prefixes to show singular and plural nouns. The language has ten vowels which exhibit an almost complete vowel harmony system. Hence, noun class prefixes have to agree with the inherent vowels of the stem. Vowels with [+] or [-] ATR co-occur with other vowels that share the same feature in a noun stem. Three vowels in the language do not occur at stem initial position and consonants do not begin nouns in the language. The concord or agreement markers used here are the attributive and predicative adjectives, the relative pronoun concord, the demonstrative concord marker, the possessive pronoun concord marker and the adjectival phrase concord marker. The definite article 'the' marks for number in the language of study. While this is not discussed separately in this study, it is noticed that it occurs as a suffix and not a prefix. Based on Welmers (1973) description of a noun class language, the language can be classified as having a vestigial noun class system.

1. Introduction

The nouns in a language can be grouped based on their grammatical functions in terms of alternating prefixes and agreement with other grammatical categories in a construction. The grouping of these nouns usually have a semantic implication. A noun class system according to Childs (2003) will consist of a complete division of all nouns in the language into a number of classes. Though the division need not register itself on the noun itself, it must do so with other classes of morphemes, modifying or dependent elements such as adjectives and demonstratives. Greenberg, (1978) claims that in discussing the noun class or gender system of a language, two basic factors must be taken into consideration. These are classification and agreement. A noun class language on the other hand, can be said to be a language whose nouns can be systematically grouped

according to their semantic relationship, prefix alternation and concordial relationship in grammatical constructions.

Paul de Wolf (1971: 27-29) outlines the different criteria for determining noun classes. These are;

1. The shape of the nominal affixes of the language under consideration.
2. The shape of the concord prefixes
3. The shape of the pairing nominal affixes (i.e. plural affixes).
4. The shape of the paired concord affixes
5. The category of number, which may be divided into (a) singular classes, (2) plural classes and (c) single classes.
6. Gender: that is, the singular/plural pairs, or one class gender as the case maybe.
7. Semantic criteria. This is the semantic content of the classes. This means that the classes are named after the most prominent features of their content. For instance, one may group some nouns into the personal (or human) class, and others into animal class.
8. A combination of some of the above mentioned criteria. In such a case, one would have to specify which criterion will be primary one, and which will be the secondary one.

Welmers (1973:160) says ‘in branches of the Niger-Kordofanian language family with the exception of Mande, it is typical that a noun in its simplest form can be analysed as consisting of a stem and an affix’. The classification of nouns in this sense is not inherent in noun stems as such, but is rather associated with the prefix. In his description of noun class systems, Idowu (1980:69) also said that all nouns which have identical noun prefixes and which display the same class concord markers are said to be members of the same noun class.

All nouns in Ogbia begin with a vowel prefix and some of these prefixes alternate when forming their plurals. The forms of nouns in Ogbia fit Welmers’ description of the nouns in the Niger-Kordofanian languages as stated above. Although, Welmers went ahead to state that nouns in some West African languages have a number of prefixes which distinguish singular and plural and have semantic correlation but do not participate in concordial relationships as the ones described in the Bantu languages. A noun class system in this sense is made up of the independent noun stems (that is words which control the agreement of words), dependent prefixes (that is those whose agreement is controlled by the independent noun stem), and their associated concord markers. Concord or agreement can be considered a huge determiner in the discussion of a noun class system

The nouns in Ogbia as a West African language, distinguish singular and plural, have semantic correlation and tend to participate in concordial relationships in grammatical constructions too. In all, three criteria are used to group the Ogbia nouns in this paper.

These are; prefix alternation, semantic correlation and concordial relationship. However, the most prevalent criterion used in this work is the prefix alternation.

2. An Overview of Ogbia

The Ogbia language is spoken in the Ogbia Local Government of Bayelsa State, South-South Nigeria. There are three major varieties identified in the language. They are Anyama, spoken in the Anyama clan and Agholo spoken in the Kolo group area of the Local Government Area. The Otakeme variety is spoken in Otakeme and other communities in the Oloibiri clan. Speakers of the language are also referred to as Ogbia. The population of speakers of this language is about 350. Linguistically, Ogbia forms part of the Central Delta Language. The language is said to have 10 vowels which exhibit a near complete vowel harmony in the language. Williamson (1984:22) groups these vowels into two sets. One set [i, e, o, u, ə] having the +ATR feature and the other [ɪ, ɛ, ɔ, ʊ, a] having the –ATR feature. Therefore, vowel affixes attached to the noun stem must agree with inherent vowels of the noun stem. Three tone levels make up the tonal system in Ogbia plus a downstep that rarely occurs (Isukul 2009:39). The tones are the high, low and mid. The mid tone is unmarked here. Data gathered in this work is from the Otakeme variety which is spoken by the Olobiri group in Ogbia. Data elicited from this variety is collected from native speakers between the ages of 40 and 65 through interviews and observations and others by introspection. A careful examination of the data collected shows that, most nouns in the language form their plural by alternating the prefixes, while some do not distinguish a plural form from a singular form except with a concord marker in a construction. However, a small group form their nouns in an irregular pattern.

3. Prefix Alternation and Semantic Correlation of Nouns in Ogbia

An apt definition of a noun class language is the one given by Kari (2015:177). He says a noun class language is that in which the grouping of nouns is based on alternating prefixes that are semantically determined. This suggests that the alternating prefixes of nouns in a noun class language tend to co-occur on some related semantic bases. The nouns listed below alternate their prefixes to show singular and plural. The nouns to an extent can be grouped as members having some sort of semantic relationship. They could be personal nouns, animate nouns, plants, miscellaneous etc. Three vowel prefixes do not alternate in forming their plural as stated above but they can be classed as they seem to have some kind of semantic correlations. Examples are given below:

1. Nouns that represent body parts and household items

Prefix e- (sg)		i- (pl)
e-mu'	'head'	ì-mu'
e-du	'thighs'	í-du
e-nə	'fish'	ĩ-nə

è-kpò	‘seed’	ì-kpò
è-kùkù	‘water pot’	ì-kùkù
è-wùnú	‘stomach’	ì-wùnú
è-kuńè	‘mat’	ì-kuńè
e-kpom	‘basket’	i-kpom
è-gu’	‘door’	ì-gu’
è-dúrum	‘knee’	ì-dúrum

The nouns in this group are made up of words that constitute part of the body and household items. The words for ‘seed’ and ‘fish’ are assigned here even though they are slightly semantically diverse but the prefixes alternate to form plurals the same way.

2. Nouns in the table below represent body parts, animals, utensils and edibles

Prefix (sg) ɔ-		ɛ- (pl)
ɔ-nɔ	‘mouth’	ɛ-nɔ
ɔ-βagòɔ	‘arm’	ɛ-βagòɔ
ɔ-kpɔkpɔ	‘bone’	ɛ-kpɔkpɔ
ɔ-fɔrɔma	‘shark’	ɛ-fɔrɔma
ɔ-bùgɔ	‘monkey’	ɛ-bùgɔ
ɔ-nańa	‘sheep’	ɛ-nańa
ɔ-gàgà	‘shrimp’	ɛ-gàgà
ɔ-gɪa	‘knife’	ɛ-gɪa
ɔ-bɛɛ’	‘pot’	ɛ-bɛɛ’
ɔ-sɔβ	‘spear’	ɛ-sɔβ
ɔ-fɔɪ	‘plantain’	ɛ-fɔɪ
ɔ-bàmi’	‘banana’	ɛ-bàmi’

The nouns here are mostly body parts, animals, cooking utensils and edibles.

3. Nouns representing names of animals, tools and human referents

Prefix (sg) o-		i- (pl)
ò-gomə	‘axe’	ì-gomə

ò-gìdì	‘machete’	ì-gìdì
ò-kuròr	‘iron’	ì-kuròr
ó-ví	‘cow’	í-ví
ò-lògbo	‘cat’	ì-lògbo
ò-dùnə	‘ram’	ì-dùnə
ó-poríópò	‘pig’	í-poríópò
ò-nom	‘husband’	ì-nom
ò-won	‘mother’	ì-won
ò-jel	‘boy’	ì-jel

The data above can be grouped as referring to names of animals, farming tools and human referents. This kind of semantic grouping can be related to what Welmers (1973:161) describes as partial semantic correlation. According to him; ‘In any given Bantu language, most of the noun prefixes function as members of singular-plural pairs, though the pairing is evident only statistically, not on any formal basis; there is nothing that all singular prefixes or all plural prefixes have in common with each other. For some pairs, there is at least a partial semantic correlation. In many Bantu language grammars, accordingly, it has been considered convenient to say that a pair of prefixes, singular or plural represent one class of nouns; in addition, there may be some classes with one prefix distinction, reflecting identity of singular and plural or the absence of numeral distinction.’ The prefix i- in Ogbia, which is used to form the plurals of o-, can form singular nouns too. The other single nouns prefixes are ə- and a-. The difference is that nouns that use these prefixes do not alternate with other prefixes to form their plurals. The singular is the same as the plural form. The plural marking can be observed in larger constructions where these nouns show concordial relationship with their modifiers.

4. The examples below are nouns representing mixed items whose singular forms are expressed as plurals contextually.

Prefix i-	
a) ì-zon	‘nose’
b) ì-kpokí	‘buttocks’
c) í-kurúsi	‘cannon’
d) ì-kpímə	‘manilla’
e) í-gulə	‘room’
f) ì-kputú	‘stone’
g) ì-kpìkìlom	‘tail’
h) í-kpe	‘wrapper’

- i) ì-re 'tobacco'
5. A group of nouns representing body parts, names of animals and food items are given in the example below.

Prefix ə-

- | | | |
|----|--------|----------------|
| a) | ə-dien | 'eye' |
| b) | ə-to | 'ear' |
| c) | ə-nem | 'tongue' |
| d) | ə-like | 'leg' |
| e) | ə-noím | 'aerial yam' |
| f) | ə-pogì | 'bat' |
| g) | ə-díó | 'rainy season' |
| h) | ə-ségi | 'crocodile' |
| i) | ə-dùle | 'tortoise' |
| j) | ə-boß | 'salt' |
| k) | ə-ruè | 'dress' |
6. Nouns representing body parts, weapons and non-count nouns

Prefix a-

- | | | |
|----|----------|----------|
| a) | à-sìal | 'hair' |
| b) | à-laì | 'tooth' |
| c) | à-gùò | 'hand' |
| d) | à-báǵó' | 'chin' |
| e) | à-man | 'back' |
| f) | à-sì | 'blood' |
| g) | àmó | 'water' |
| h) | à-mùgu | 'smoke' |
| i) | à-lèpè | 'smoke' |
| j) | à-và | 'gun' |
| k) | à-bègèrè | 'spear' |
| l) | à-gbàna | 'arrow' |
| m) | à-láǵá' | 'needle' |
| n) | à-gbàka' | 'shoe' |

The prefix a- in the data above shows more of non-count nouns, weapons and parts of the body.

4. Concord Markers

Concord is sometimes referred to as agreement in grammar. It basically has to do with the agreement found between nouns, and the variable morphemes that modify them. Ndimele (1993:165) talks about concord as:

... a term used to refer to a grammatical relationship existing between elements of the sentence, whereby the form of one of the elements necessarily requires a corresponding form of another. It is a grammatical phenomenon by which the appearance of one item in a construction in a particular form requires a second term which is grammatically linked with it to also appear in a particular form.

Terms like gender (grammatical gender) are often referred to when discussing grammatical relations of nouns and their modifiers. Katamba and Stonham (1993:229) say that nouns in a language are often classified by gender or class and that the kind of classification tends to have a residual semantic basis. He went further to state that the linguistic gender is essentially a grammatical rather than a semantic classification of nouns. In describing the relationship between head nouns and their dependent morphemes, Paul de Wolf (1971: 41) says it is one in which the classes of nouns influence their modifiers or substitutes in such a way that they must agree as to the class of nouns which they refer to or which they replace.

This paper uses different forms of constructions to illustrate the different types of concord markers observable in the language. They are;

- (a) Adjectival constructions
- (b) Relative clause constructions
- (c) Demonstrative clause constructions
- (d) Associative constructions
- (e) Possessive pronoun constructions
- (f) Adjectival phrase

The adjectival constructions in Ogbia can serve attributively and predicatively.

4.1 Attributive Adjectival Concord

Class	Examples	Adjectival concord	Concord markers
Prefix			
e-	e-mu'da-ba'i ni	'a head that is good'	da
i-	i-mu'ze-ba'i ni	'heads that are good'	ze-
o-	o-nu' a'-ba'i ni	'mouth that is good'	a'-
e-	e-nu' e-ba'i ni	'mouths that are good'	e-
o-	o-gidi da-ba'i ni	'a machete that is good'	da-
i-	i-gidi ze-ba'i ni	'machetes that are good'	ze-
a-	a-like a-ba'i ni	'a leg that is good'	a-

ə-	ə'-likè ɛ-bàì ni	'legs that are good'	ɛ-
a-	à-gùò da- bàì ni	'a hand that is good'	da-
a-	à-gùò zɛ'- bàì ni	'hands that are good'	zɛ'

4.2. **Predicative Adjectival Concord**

Class Prefix	Example	Meanings	Concord Markers
e-	è-mu'-ə a'-bàì	'the head is good'	-ə, a'-
i-	ì-mu'-zə wa'-bàì	'the heads are good'	-zə, wa-
ɔ-	ɔ-nò-a a'-bàì	'the mouth is good'	-a, a'-
ɛ-	è-nò-za wa'-bàì	'the mouths are good'	-za, wa-
o-	ò-gìd-əa'-bàì	'the machete is good'	-ə, a'-
i-	ì-gìdì-zəwa'- bàì	'the machetes are good'	-zə, wa'
ə-	ə'-lik-ə a-bàì	'the leg is good'	-ə, a
ə-	ə'-likè-zə wa-bàì	'the legs are good'	-zə, wa-
a-	à-gù-à a-bàì	'the hand is good'	-a, a-
a-	à-gùò-za wa-bàì	'the hands are good'	-za, wa-

For the predicative adjectival concord, two markers are observed. It is important to note that in Ogbia, the definite article in Ogbia is a suffix and not a prefix. It marks for singular and plural nouns in a construction.

4.3 **Relative Pronoun Concord**

Prefix Class	Examples	Meaning	Concord Markers
e-	é-nə ɔ́pə-bənə	'the fish which she has'	ɔ́p-
i-	í-nə-zə ízu'-əbənə	'the fish(pl) which she has	-zə, ízu'-
ɔ-	ɔ'-fílɔ' ɔ́p-əbənə	'the soup which she has'	ɔ́p-
ɛ-	é'-fílɔ'-za ízu'-əbənə	'the soups which she has'	-za, ízu'-
o-	ó-ren-ə ɔ́p-əbənə	'the stick which she has'	-ə, ɔ́p-

i-	i-ren-zə ɔ́p-əbənə	‘the sticks which she has’	-zə, ɔ́p-
ə-	ə-lik-ə ɔ́p-əbənə	‘the leg which she has’	-ə, ɔ́p-
ə-	ə-lik-zə ɪzu-əbənə	‘the leg which she has’	-zə, ɪzu-
a-	a-guɔ́ɔ́p-əbənə	‘the hand which she has’	ɔ́p-
a-	a-guɔ́ɔ́-zə ɪzu-əbənə	‘the hand which she has’	-zə, -ɪzu-

4.4 Associative Constructions

Class Prefix	Examples	Meaning	Concord Maker
e-	e-mu' ɔ́nɔ́-mà	‘the head of the man’	-mà
i-	i-mu' əwu'nom-zə	‘the heads of the men’	-zə
ɔ-	ɔ-nana ɔ́nɔ́-mà	‘the sheep of the man’	-mà
ɛ-	ɛ-nana-za ɔ́nɔ́-mà	‘the sheep of the man’	-mà
o-	o-lolò o'ýèl-ə	‘the bottle of the boy’	-ə
i-	i-lolò ɪyèl-zə	‘the bottle of the boy’	-zə

4.5 Demonstrative Concord

Class Prefix	Examples	Meanings	Concord Markers
e-	e-gu' ɔ́-mana	‘this door’	ɔ́-
i-	i-gu' zi- zenə	‘these doors’	zi-
ɔ-	ɔ-βɪ ɔ́-mana	‘this river’	ɔ́-
ɛ-	ɛ-βɪ zi- zenə	‘these rivers’	zi-
o-	o-ze ɔ́-mana	‘this drum’	ɔ́-
i-	i-ze zi' zenə	‘these drums’	zi'
a-	a-guɔ́ ɔ́-mana	‘this hand’	ɔ́-
a-	a-guɔ́ zi-zenə	‘these hands’	zi-
ə-	ə-like ɔ́-mana	‘this leg’	ɔ́-

ə- ə'-likèzi'-zenə 'these legs' zi'-

4.6 Possessive-Pronoun Concord

Class Prefix	Examples	Meanings	Concord Marker
e-	è-kpóm ə'-mìnì	'my basket'	ə-
i-	i-kpóm zə'-tim	'my baskets'	zə'-
ɔ-	ɔ'-già' a-mìnì	'my knife'	a-
ɛ-	ɛ'-già' za'-tim	'my knives'	za'-
o-	o-wu ə'-mìnì	'my canoe'	ə-
i-	i-wu zə'-tim	'my canoes'	zə'-
a-	a'-gbaká' a-mìnì	'my shoes'	a-
a-	a'-gbaká' za-tim	'my shoes'	za-
ə-	ə'-ruə' ə'-mìnì	'my dress'	ə-
ə-	ə'-ruə' zə'-tim	'my dress'	zə-

4.7. Adjectival Phrase Concord

Adjectives that act as the head of a phrase in Ogbia also show agreement between singular and plurals to which they are attached to. They take the same vowel prefix as well as tone pattern with the vowel prefix of the stem noun. For example;

Class Prefix	Examples	Meaning	Concord Marker
ɔ-	ɔ'-zòzò' ɔ'-bɛlɛ'	'black pot'	ɔ'-
ɛ	ɛ'-zòzò' ɛ'-bɛlɛ'	'black pots'	ɛ'-
o-	ò-wéwéi' o'-tù	'tall building'	o-
i-	ì-wéwéi' i'-tù	'tall buildings'	i-
ə-	ə'-du' ə'-dīén	'small eye'	ə-
a-	a'-dú' a'-dīza	'small woman'	a-

5. Noun Classes

The classification of nouns into groups has not been one without controversies and that is why certain criteria are given to aid researchers who are interested in the

phenomenon which is not universal. From the criteria stated in the introduction of this work, it means the definition of a noun class language is not one that displays singular/plural prefix alternation only, but as one that also displays concord. However, the primary criterion for grouping nouns in this work is based on the neat prefix alternations which distinguish between singular and plural nouns in the language of study. The semantic and concordial criteria are secondary since the markers do not seem to be consistent even though they are able to distinguish between singular and plural meanings, besides the definite article ‘the’ occurs as a suffix in the language as seen in the associative constructions and the relative pronoun constructions. Certain nouns are also classified arbitrarily. The table below summarises the analysis given here and will help us to number the nouns into different classes.

Noun stem prefixes and concord markers

Pref	Adj. (attr)	Adj. (pred)	Rel. prons	Asso. cons	Dem. cons	Poss. cons	Adj. phr
e-	da-	-ə, a-	ɔ́p-	-mà	ɔ́-	ə-	-
i-	ze-	-zə, wa-	izu-	-zə̀	zi	zə́-	i-
ɔ-	a'-	-a, a-	ɔ́p-	-mà	ɔ-	a'-	ɔ-
ε-	ε-	-za, wa-	izu-	-mà	zi-	za'-	ε-
o-	da-	-ə, a'-	ɔ́p-	-ə̀	ɔ-	ə'-	o-
i-	ze-	-zə̀, wa'-	izu-	-zə̀	zi-	zə́-	i-
ə-	a'-	-ə, a-	ɔ́p-	-ə̀	ɔ-	a-	ə-
ə-	ε-	-zə, wa'	izu'	-zə̀	zi-	za-	-
a-	da-	-a, a-	ɔ́p-	-a	ɔ-	a-	a-
a-	ze'	-za, wa-	izu-	-za	zi-	zə-	a-

From the alternate prefix markers and the concord markers discussed, the nouns of Ogbia have been grouped into different classes as shown in the table below.

Noun Class of Ogbia

Class Number	Class Prefix	Concord marker	Example	Meaning
1.	e-	ə'-	è-mu'	‘head’
2.	i-	zə́-	ì-mu'	‘heads’

3.	ɔ-	a'	ɔ-nɔ	'mouth'
4.	ɛ-	za'	ɛ-nɔ	'mouths'
5.	o-	ə'	o-ren	'stick'
2a.	i-	zə'	i-ren	'sticks'
6.	ə-	ə'	ə-dien	'eye'
6a.	ə-	zə-	ə-dien	'eyes'
7.	a-	a-	a-gɔɔ	'hand'
7a.	a-	za-	a-gɔɔ	'hands'

The possessive marker is taken to be appropriate in the marking of nouns especially to account for the sub-classes. The sub-classes are given that status because there is an agreement for number when they occur in larger constructions even though there is no prefix alternation to account for number.

1.6 Conclusion

The description of nouns in Ogbia has shown that it can be classified as a noun class language. Welmers (1973:184) tries to state that some West African languages cannot be seen as having functional noun class systems. According to him, "In some West African languages, there are a number of noun prefixes which distinguish singulars and plurals, and some having some semantic correlation, but which do not participate in concordial relationships such as those described for Bantu"

In this sense the Ogbia language can be placed as a vestigial noun class system since the concordial system cannot be compared to the classic Bantu languages. What is relevant here is the fact that the language can be seen as having dominant characteristics of a noun class language and could pass as one.

It is also obvious from the data used in this work that, consonant sounds do not begin noun stems in the language. The language is established to have ten (10) vowels but three out of the ten do not occur at stem initial positions. They are the back vowels /u/ and /ʊ/ and front vowel /i/. The definite article also shows concordial relationship marking for number, but it is rather a suffix and not a prefix. This is not discussed as a separate concord marker in this work.

It is believed that this research will aid further language studies generally and specifically to interested scholars in the Ogbia language.

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