

Variation in Edo Personal Pronouns: A Case of Grammaticalization?

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.60787/jolan.vol29no1.458>

Perpetual Usenbo¹, Oye Paul Taiwo²

University of Benin, Nigeria, University of Ibadan

perpetual.usenbo@uniben.edu.ng; oyepaultaiwo@gmail.com

Abstract

Previous studies contend that the Edo language possesses thirty personal pronouns, using structural case as a primary distinguishing feature. However, because case is not morphologically marked in Edo and many pronouns occur freely across different structural case positions, this paper re-examines the language's pronominal system to account for its plethora of personal pronouns. Drawing on primary data from naturalistic observations and key informant interviews, alongside content analysis of textual and audiovisual media, the study analyses personal pronouns through the framework of thematic roles. The analysis demonstrates that theta roles - rather than structural case - determine pronominal selection in Edo. Consequently, the study proposes that the grammaticalization of theta roles accounts for the language's multiplicity of personal pronouns. These findings contribute to syntactic and semantic variation studies by demonstrating how theta roles function as a key parameter for differentiating pronominal variants.

Keywords: *Edo language, Grammaticalization, Pronouns, Theta Roles, Variation*

Abstract in Edo

Ebe na guan kaan utaeni egbe, ɔni ɔre abo ɛmwẹ ɔta ne Ebo tiere *personal pronouns*. Avbe ebe nikaro khaare wẹ Ẹdo mwẹ ɛmwẹ utaeni ɔgban. Oru ɛre iran looro ya gie alughan ne ɔ rro. Aro evba a miẹ vbe oru: ne ɔ rhie egbe ladian vbe ikpẹmwẹ debaa ne ɔ lele emwamwa ifiẹmwẹ. Sokpan, vbe ɛvbo nibun utaeni egbe ma sẹ ekesugie. A i miẹ oru vbe ikpẹmwẹ Ẹdo. Ọ khẹke ne a werriegbe zanzan abo ɛmwẹ ɔta na, rhumwunda ena. Inota eva ɛre ima ya ru ene ezanzan. Owo, de-aro inwina ne avbe utaeni ru vbe ifiẹmwẹ Ẹdo? Eva, de-evbene odun ɛmwẹ ya hannọ inwina ne ɔmwandẹ utaeni ru? Ma ghee vbene ivbi Ẹdo loo utaeni hẹ; a vbe nọ iran eso ɔta. Debaa edata ne ɔ ke isi na ladian, ma viọ igiemwi vbe ebe ne enikaro gbennenren kevbe errekođu ẹkpẹtin ughe. Ezanzan lele iro kpataki eva ne a tiere "*theta role*" kevbe "*grammaticalization*". Ebe na miẹ wẹ Ẹdo mwẹ ɛmwẹ utaeni ughunghan ne ɔmwandẹ "*theta role*". Ọna ɛre ɔ si ɛre ne utaeni Ẹdo na bun sẹriọ. Emwi ne ebe na rhie baa irẹnmwi ore wẹ ɔ gie vbene a ya odun ɛmwẹ ghaẹ utaeni ye ɔmwandẹ inwinna ne i rre ifiẹmwẹ hẹ.

1 Introduction

This study investigates pronominal variation in the Edo language with the aim of accounting for its plethora of personal pronouns. Edo belongs to the Edoid language family (Elugbe, 1989) within the Benue-Kwa subgroup of African languages (Güldemann, 2018;

Williamson & Blench, 2000). The language is indigenous to seven Local Government Areas of Edo State, Nigeria, as well as the Oza n'Ogogo community in Delta State. Regarding speaker communities outside the South-South geopolitical zone, Imasuen (1998, p. 40) notes that native speakers also reside among migrant populations in the Okitipupa, Akotogbo, Okenuhen, Idoani, and Akure areas of Ondo State. According to Eberhard et al. (2022), the national speaker population stands at approximately 2,030,000.

Pronouns constitute a word class whose members possess minimally specified meanings and typically substitute for noun phrases (Matthews, 2007). Although pronouns exist across all natural languages, the semantic distinctions they encode vary significantly. Typically, personal pronouns distinguish meaning based on participant roles in discourse (first, second, and third person), number (singular and plural), and gender (masculine, feminine, and neuter).

Cross-linguistically, pronouns belong to a closed functional class characterized by a limited membership that rarely admits new items; instead, existing forms generally undergo historical shifts in representation, as seen in the evolution of English *thou*, *ye*, and *you*. However, as Usenbo (2023, p. 162) demonstrates, the inventory of Edo personal pronouns indicates that even sub-categories within a closed class can be surprisingly large. If theoretical assumptions rely strictly on the premise that closed classes are inherently small, cross-linguistic variations in pronominal inventory size remain difficult to explain.

Our preliminary survey reveals that Edo differs from many languages in offering multiple variant forms to express a single pronominal concept. While intra-language variation of this nature is widely observed in natural languages (Christensen & Jensen, 2022; Weiß, 2024), what makes Edo particularly significant is that the choice among variants is driven neither by stylistic preferences nor individual speaker idiosyncrasies. Rather, pronominal selection is governed by formal syntactic processes and semantic concepts, including negation and thematic roles.

To address these empirical patterns, this study re-examines Edo personal pronouns to provide a systematic explanation for their multiplicity of forms. The paper pursues two specific objectives: one, to identify the grammatical functions of Edo personal pronouns; and two, to explain how semantic interpretation underlies these functions. Fulfilling these objectives provides crucial evidence supporting the premise that the proliferation of Edo pronouns stems from systematic linguistic variation. Although previous studies did not explicitly employ the framework of variation, they acknowledged that

identical pronominal information could be realized through distinct forms, attributing these choices either to structural case (Omoregie, 1983) or phonologically conditioned allomorphy (Imasuen, 1996). The present study departs from prior work by focusing on theta roles, demonstrating that thematic relations govern pronominal selection. Consequently, this study proposes that the grammaticalization of theta roles is responsible for the multiplicity of personal pronouns in the language. This proposal offers a key contribution to syntactic and semantic variation studies by illustrating how thematic roles can be grammaticalized to condition variant forms.

Linguistic variation involves expressing identical underlying information through alternative structural forms, known as variants. This paper analyzes variant selection at the syntax-semantics interface, where variants maintain distinct structural representations in syntax while mapping onto identical semantic interpretations or theta roles (Adger & Smith, 2005). We argue that the vast pronominal inventory in Edo arises because these semantic roles have undergone Grammaticalization - a process whereby lexical items lose phonetic substance, structural independence, or referential autonomy (Fischer, 2009, as cited in Aboh, 2016, p. 2). Through grammaticalization, pronominal variants become cliticized and structurally restricted within the clause, often accompanied by a narrowing of their semantic scope.

The remainder of this paper is organized into five sections: section 1 introduces the background and articulates the research problem; section 2 reviews the relevant literature and previous empirical work; section 3 outlines the methodology and theoretical orientation; section 4 analyses the syntax and semantics of Edo personal pronouns and demonstrates how Grammaticalization accounts for pronominal variation; and section 5 summarizes the core findings and presents the conclusion.

2 Literature review

Previous research on Edo personal pronouns has primarily taken the form of descriptive grammar books (Imasuen, 1996, 2010; Omoregbe et al., 2023; Omoregie, 1983), which analyze pronouns within the framework of traditional word classes. For instance, Omoregie (1983) distinguishes between definite pronouns (Ataeni Netara) and indefinite pronouns (Ataeni Errɔ). Beyond establishing these primary sub-categories, Omoregie differentiates personal pronouns according to number (inu), person (urho), and case (oru). This classification yields a binary distinction in number (singular and plural), three categories of person (first, second, and third), and four case categories (nominative, accusative, dative, and genitive). Number remains unmarked in singular forms, whereas plural forms

are realized through replacive inflections (apophony). Person lacks independent morphological exponence, as the language expresses this feature cumulatively alongside number. Case also lacks overt morphological realization, relying instead on structural positions to determine specific case roles.

In addition to descriptive grammars, several published studies focus on specific pronominal sub-categories (Omoruyi, 1986), evaluate existing theoretical assumptions regarding personal pronouns (Usenbo & Taiwo, 2025), or examine pronominal variation driven by allomorphy (Usenbo & Taiwo, 2024). Omoruyi (1986) examines four types of definite pronouns: personal, possessive, relative, and reflexive. Distinguishing personal pronouns by their clause structure, Omoruyi categorizes them into subject pronouns and object pronouns. The author explains that Edo personal pronouns consist of underlying full forms (long pronouns) and conditioned variants (short pronouns) governed by strict distributional rules. Omoruyi illustrates this structural distribution using the following examples:

1. Ìrẹ̀ṣọ̀n/ò táma ìmẹ̀mwẹ̀/* mẹ̀
 3SG tell 1SG
 He/She tells me.
2. Ìrẹ̀ṣọ̀n/ rẹ̀n tíè ùwà/*wá
 3SG call 2PL
 He/She calls you.

Commenting on both examples, Omoruyi (1986, p. 85) remarks that

if we are right in proposing *ìmẹ̀mwẹ̀* and *ùwà* as the underlying forms for *mẹ̀* and *wá* respectively, we shall either need powerful constraints to block the occurrence of *mẹ̀* and *wá* in object positions or propose some morphophonemic rules that will account for their realisations.

Usenbo and Taiwo (2024) took up this suggestion and examined pronominal variation through the lens of allomorphy. Their study supports the premise that morphophonemic rules contribute to the multiplicity of pronouns; however, it demonstrates that phonological rules alone are insufficient and calls for subsequent research to offer an analysis with greater explanatory adequacy. Beyond this recommendation, data from existing literature highlights why alternative theoretical accounts - such as the one adopted in the present study - must be considered. For instance, our dataset contains no tokens in which *wá* occurs anywhere outside the subject position, whereas the aberrant form *mẹ̀* is

acceptable in both subject and object positions (Imasuen, 1996, 2010). Consequently, examples (3a) - (d) rule out the possibility of relying solely on structural position to constrain pronominal selection.

3. Acceptable positions for *mẹ*

- (a) Mè yà-òsà-yí
1SG believe-God-believe
I believe in God.
- (b) Mè yó nẹ
1SG go already
I have gone (already).
- (c) Wẹẹ èmwá hiá dòó mẹ
Say people all hello me
Say hello to everyone for me.
- (d) Rhìé nọrhírhí yẹẹ rùẹ mẹ
Give whichever please you me
Give me whichever (one) pleases you.

Beyond demonstrating the acceptability of *mẹ*, Imasuen (1996, 2010) documents additional pronominal forms not recorded in earlier works. These include *à* (a variant for the first-person plural), *á* and *ó* (variants for the second-person singular), as well as *ẹ* and *ọrẹ* (variants for the third-person singular). Incorporating these variants into the inventories established by earlier studies brings the total number of personal pronouns in Edo to thirty, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Edo Personal Pronouns (taken from Omoruyi 1986, Imasuen 1996 and 2010)

Person	Number	Long Pronouns	Short Pronouns
1st	Singular	ìmèmwẹ	ì, ìmẹ, mwẹ, mèm mwẹ, mẹ
	Plural	Ìmàmwà	à, ìmà, mwà, màm mwà, mà
2nd	Singular	ùwẹ	ù, wẹ, rùẹ, rùẹn, wùẹn, ùẹ, á, ó
	Plural	Ùwà	wà, rùá, ùá
3rd	Singular	ìrẹ̀n	ọ, ìrẹ̀n, rẹ̀n, ẹrẹ, ọrẹ, ọnrẹ̀n, ẹnrẹ̀n, ẹn, ẹ
	Plural	Íràn	Íràn

Previous studies contend that the short pronouns in Table 1 are surface realizations of underlying long forms; however, there is no consensus on the precise processes deriving

these short variants. While Usenbo and Taiwo (2025) propose clipping, this process fails to account for the complete inventory of short pronouns.

Research on other languages offers solutions that generally fall into three theoretical approaches. First, some scholars argue that derivation is unnecessary because long and short pronouns are non-related, independent lexical forms (Abimbola & Taiwo, 2017; Taiwo, 2006, 2007, 2011). Second, multiple pronominal forms are posited to result from the distribution of morphosyntactic features (Japhet, 2012). Third, cross-linguistic studies suggest that long and short pronouns coexist due to a combination of morphosyntactic and discourse-related features (Howe, 2009).

Morphosyntactic features manifest in the internal structure of a word and govern the well-formedness of the constructions in which that word appears. These features are broadly categorized as either inherent or contextual (Kibort & Corbett, 2008). Inherent morphosyntactic features specify their values within the word itself, whereas contextual features receive their values through syntactic operations. As shown in Table 2, Edo exhibits both types of features.

Table 2: Morpho-syntactic Features of Edo Personal Pronouns (cf. Usenbo & Taiwo 2024)

Inherent Features		Contextual Features	
Number		Case	
Singular	✓	Nominative	✓
Plural	✓	Accusative	✓
Gender		Dative	✓
Masculine	✗	Oblique	✓
Feminine	✗	Genitive	✓
Neutral	✗	Affective	✓
Person			
First	✓		
Second	✓		
Third	✓		

Table 2 indicates the *number* distinction is binary; *gender* is non-distinctive and *person* has distinct forms for three participants. The only contextual feature is *case*; it has six values. *Nominative* is the case which encodes the single argument of an intransitive clause, or the argument which performs the action in a transitive clause. *Accusative* is the argument which undergoes the action in a transitive clause. *Dative* and *oblique* cases are for other arguments of a transitive clause. The difference is prepositions must introduce oblique objects, but dative objects do not occur with prepositions. The *genitive* case is for

arguments which function as possessors, while the *affective* case is for the sole argument of psych verbs.

Although the features in table 2 are distinctive in the language, Usenbo (2023) and Usenbo & Taiwo (2024) submit that they are insufficient for differentiating pronouns. For example, number associates with all participants, but it is impossible to pair all singular and plural forms. This lack of symmetry between inherent features and pronoun forms extends to case. Extant studies used this contextual feature to distinguish short pronouns. However, Usenbo & Taiwo (2025) show there are pronouns which are not restricted to structural positions.

3 Methodology

Primary data for the study were collected through participant observation and semi-structured key informant interviews, supplemented by secondary data obtained through content analysis of textual and audiovisual media. In total, the study analyzed 164 data tokens, comprising 120 tokens extracted from field notes and 44 tokens drawn from published literature, audiovisual materials, and religious texts (e.g., Adeola & Ogbomo, 2010; Agheyisi, 1986; Edionwe, 2016; Imasuen, 1996, 2010; Melzian, 1937; Omoruyi, 1986; United Bible Societies, 1980).

Data are presented using the standard Edo orthography, supplemented by tone markings and two additional graphemic conventions with the digraph *mw* representing the voiced labiodental nasal consonant (Agheyisi, 1986) while the digraph *ny* represents the palatal nasal consonant (Omozuwa, 2013). Although these digraphs have not yet been formally integrated into the official orthography, their inclusion aligns with recent recommendations in orthographic reform (Omozuwa, 2020; Omozuwa & Evbuomwan, 2021). Interlinear morpheme-by-morpheme glosses follow the Leipzig Glossing Rules. For data analysis, the study adopts the theoretical frameworks of thematic roles (theta roles) and grammaticalization.

3.1 Thematic roles

Thematic (or theta) roles represent the relation between arguments of a predicative part of speech and the event such words denote. These roles transmit information that is essential for the computation and interpretation of syntactic structure (Everaert, Marelj, and Siloni, 2012). Arguments are the range of lexical items required by a verb or other categories such as prepositions. Different theta roles have been established in the literature; this pa-

per uses some of the ones defined below. These definitions are from Haegeman (1994:49-50), Saeed (2016:150-151) and Fabregas (2024:9).

- AGENT: one who intentionally initiates the action expressed by the predicate.
 PATIENT: the person or thing undergoing the action expressed by the predicate.
 THEME: an entity whose location is identified, or one involved with the predicate in such a way that it neither causes nor gets affected by its action or state.
 STIMULUS: the entity which prompts sensory effect.
 EXPERIENCER: an entity experiencing some psychological state.
 BENEFICIARY: the one who benefits from the action expressed by the predicate.
 INSTRUMENT: a means used to perform some action.
 LOCATIVE: a place where something is situated or takes place.
 SOURCE: the entity from which something moves as a result of the predicate.
 GOAL: the entity towards which the activity expressed by the predicate is directed.

4. (a) ìràn lé èvbàré nè Ọmọyẹmwẹ
 AGENT THEME BENEFICIARY
 3PL cook food for Ọmọyẹmwẹ
 They cook for Ọmọyẹmwẹ.
- (b) ètísà yá ásán gbéléré ìràn nè ì gháà khòòn
 AGENT INSTRUMENT PATIENT
 teacher use cane hit.IT.PST 3PLREL RP IMPF fight
 The teacher used a cane to flog those who were fighting.
- (c) Ènọyáénmwà tòhán ìràn nè í yá òghò nè
 EXPERIENCER THEME
 one's_owner pity 3PL REL RP gift respect to 3SG
 The Lord has mercy on those who honour him.
- (d) àfiámà fián ìràn
 STIMULUS EXPERIENCER
 anxiety cut 3PL
 They are worried.

In example 4(a), *ìràn* is the AGENT who intentionally performs the action of cooking. The same pronoun refers to entities who are at the receiving end of a beating in 4(b). Here, the role of 3PL is PATIENT. Example 4(c) shows *ìràn* as a THEME. This argument represents the ones affected by the emotion of the EXPERIENCER. The clause in 4(d) expresses a psychological state. The referents of the pronoun are in a state of anxiety; this state arises from a STIMULUS and not the deliberate action of those who are worried. So, the thematic role of *ìràn* is that of an EXPERIENCER.

The examples above show four thematic roles for the third person plural pronoun. They are AGENT, PATIENT, THEME and EXPERIENCER. In the literature, some authors (see for example, van Gelderen, 2017:78) conflate THEME with other roles. Other authors (see for example, Saeed, 2016: 150-151) distinguish between PATIENT, THEME, and STIMULUS. Fabregas (2024) presents a detailed discussion on whether one should mark a distinction and how these roles should be distinguished. The study marks a distinction between THEME and PATIENT. This is because the data shows some variants perform both functions; yet, other variants with the same feature values only serve one role.

3.2 Grammaticalization

Grammaticalization has been defined as “the increase of the range of a morpheme advancing from a lexical to a grammatical or from a less grammatical to a more grammatical status, for example from a derivational form to an inflectional one” (Kuryłowicz 1975 as cited in Narrog & Heine 2021:3). In other words, grammaticalization refers to the change of a linguistic expression from lexical to grammatical form and the development of further grammatical functions in specific contexts and constructions (Narrog & Heine 2021:1).

Hopper & Traugott (2003:1) describe grammaticalization in two ways: as a language phenomenon and a framework. As a linguistic phenomenon, grammaticalization refers to the changes through which linguistic units become fixed to particular functions. As a research framework, grammaticalization addresses issues such as the manner lexical words and constructions function in certain contexts, as well as the ways non-lexical words develop new grammatical roles. Its primary goal is to describe why grammar and functional categories are structured the way they are (Heine and Narrog, 2010).

This restriction to specific functions is not a one-time event. Heine & Reh (1984:15-17) explain that grammaticalization involves an evolutionary loss of semantic

complexity, pragmatic significance, syntactic freedom and phonetic substance. They outlined thirteen processes through which it occurs in African languages. This study found that Edo language employs three of them, namely *permutation*, *adaptation* and *cliticisation*. They are briefly discussed and illustrated using the second person singular (i.e. 2SG) in the examples below.

5. Permutation

- (a) Ólágá wẹ̀ né ìmà mú ágá khẹ̀ rùẹ̀
Chairman say that 1PL carry chair to_await 2SG
The chairman said that we should reserve a seat for you.
- (b) Ùwẹ̀ ẹ̀ré ìmà mú ágá khẹ̀
2SG FOC 1PL carry chair to_await
It is you we reserved a seat for.

6. Adaptation

- (a) Òkó, vbè ìrán tìé rùẹ̀
buddy QM 3PL call 2SG
'Buddy, what do they call you?'
- (b) Ì gha khàmàárùén
1SG AUX tell 2SG
'I will tell you.'

7. Cliticisation

- (a) Té ọ̀ lògh=ùẹ̀ (Té ọ̀ lòghọ̀ rùẹ̀)
QM 3SG be_difficult=2SG
'Is it difficult for you?'
- (b) Òwá=á nà khín (Òwá rùẹ̀ nà khín)
House=2SG this be
Is this your house?

From these examples, permutation can be understood as a change in the form of a morpheme following changes in the sentential constituent order. Adaptation refers to the changes a morpheme undergoes when it is adjacent to other structural units, while cliticisation refers to the loss of morphological independence.

4 Edo personal pronouns

Personal pronouns are words which one can use in place of nouns. Unlike nouns, these pronouns lack descriptive content and identify referents without antecedents. Wiese & Simon (2002:13) observe that their reference comes directly from world knowledge, the syntactic constructions which include such pronouns, morpho-semantic distinctions such as animacy, as well as morpho-syntactic features like person, number and gender. This observation succinctly captures the study's findings on Edo personal pronouns. In the following sub-sections, the paper first looks at constructions which include personal pronouns and discusses how morphological variation arises from their functions. Then, the paper considers the semantic distinctions which these pronouns encode, and how such distinctions determine the alternate realisation of their forms. Last, it proffers grammaticalization as an explanation for the large inventory of personal pronouns in the Edo language.

4.1 Grammatical functions of Edo personal pronouns

Grammatical functions refer to the role of constituents in a sentence. Examples of these roles include subject and predicate. The *subject* is the topic about which the rest of the sentence says something. The *predicate* refers to all other constituents besides the subject. Its obligatory element is a lexical verb; so, it also referred to as the verb phrase. Depending on the nature of the verb, the predicate may also contain other constituents generally referred to as *objects*. These are required for transitivity. There are three kinds: the direct object, which immediately follows the verb; the indirect object, which comes after the direct object, and the oblique object, which follows a preposition. Consider the following examples.

8. (a) Ì rrí òwá
1SG go home
I am going home.
- (b) Ù hòó nè dè èmwìrhòkpà rà
2SG want COMP buy anything QM
Do you want to buy anything?
- (c) Ò yé èsé
3SG be_like fine
It is fine (I am doing alright).

- (d) È í yé èsé
3SG NEG be_like fine
It is not fine (I am not doing alright).
- (e) È í kpé ókpán
3SG NEG wash plate
He or She do/does not wash plate.
- (f) Ò má kpé ókpán
3SG NEG wash plate
He or She did not wash plate.

Example 8 shows singular pronouns that are restricted to subject position. The first person ì and second person ù in 8 (a) and (b) may be used subjects of both declarative and negative sentences. For third person, it is the construction that determines whether the pronoun will be realized as ò or è as shown in examples 8 (c) and (d).

Observe that the type of construction remains constant in 8 (e) and (f); yet, there are variant realisations of third person. What changes is tense. This interaction between negation and tense supports the idea that morpho-syntactic conditioning plays a role in the variation evident in Edo personal pronouns. In addition, the study found that the semantics of adjacent constituents also determine how pronouns are spelled-out. Consider the following sentences.

9. (a) Oghoghò rrìé íghó m̀è
Oghoghò give money 1SG
Oghoghò gives me money.
- (b) Oghoghò rrìé íghó nè ìm̀è or giè ìm̀è
Oghoghò give money to 1SG to 1SG
Oghoghò gives money to me.
- (c) Oghoghò rrìé íghó gù mẁè
Oghoghò give money to 1SG
Oghoghò gives money to me.

The variant in 9 (a) can function as an indirect object, but never as the object of a preposition. Examples 9 (b) and (c) show two variants which occur with prepositions; their form depends on the morpho-semantic features of the preposition. In the examples above, there are three prepositions: nè, giè and gù. All of them are equivalent to the English 'to',

but there are differences in their interpretation. The preposition *nè* conveys a sense of proximity as in a physical transfer of the direct object; the others imply something similar to a wire transfer or the use of an emissary. So, when one uses either *giè* or *gù*, the subject and the object of the preposition are not in the same physical space. This suggests that the features proximate and distal have effects on pronoun realisation.

The pronouns in example 9 are all free morphemes; but Èdo also has pronouns that are bound morphemes¹, specifically clitics. A clitic is a bound morph that is neither an affix nor a root (Haspelmath 2023:1). Previous studies (Omoruyi 1986 and Imasuen 1996) explain that clitic pronouns are morpho-phonologically conditioned forms.

10. (a) Ì rrée dòó mié=ò
1SG come INC see=2SG
I came to see you.
- (b) Ọ̀nì nyá=à òbó dé nẹ
DEM yank.PST=2SGhand fall already
That (issue) is now out of your hands.
- (c) Ọ̀giè mwà, mà ghà rhié èkpómwẹ nè=ùẹ
Ruler 1PL 1PL will give thanks to=2SG
Our king, we will give thanks to you.
11. (a) Ọ̀wá=á nà khín
House=2SG DEM be
This is your house.
- (b) Ọ̀sẹ̀=ó nà khín
friend=2SG DEM be
This is your friend.

As shown in the examples above, the realisation of *ó*, *ùẹ* and *á* depends on the phonological features of the preceding words; the exact features and the processes by which the conditioning applies have been discussed in Usenbo & Taiwo (2024). In terms of their syntactic distribution, clitic pronouns serve as direct and oblique objects as shown in 10

¹ Haspelmath (2023) distinguishes two kinds of bound morphemes: affixes and clitics. An affix is a bound morpheme that always occurs with words from the same class, e.g. nouns, verbs, or adjectives. Clitics, on the other hand, can occur adjacent to different classes of words.

12. (a) ìmà mwàmwá ágá
1PL arrange chair
We are arranging the chairs.

(b) Èdrrévà sẹ̀-ìmà-ràé-ø yè èsúkù
driver leave-1PL-leave-PST LOC school
The driver left us at school.

Long pronouns are considered emphatic and serve discourse related functions such as focus construction and question formation. Agheyisi's dictionary states *imà* and other short forms can also be used to mark emphasis. This may be the reason *imà* performs the same grammatical functions as *imàmwà*. Furthermore, this study observed that discontinuous verbs like the one² in 12(b) select emphatic variants and the ones which occur with prepositions.

(a) Òkóró mú-ègbèrè-màá-ø èvbo
Prince show-3SG.REFL -to-PST people
The prince showed himself to the people.

(b) Mè yàyi
1SG believe
I believe.

(c) Mè yà-ìrèn-yí
1SG believe-3SG-believe
I believe him/her.

From the foregoing, one can state that the plethora of personal pronouns in the Èdo language are real. Each pronoun form has a grammatical role which distinguishes it from others. However, this distinction is limited, because there is a lack of correspondence between grammatical roles and the forms which perform them. This observation confirms the position that subject-object distinction does not adequately explain pronoun variation in this language.

4.2 The thematic functions of Èdo personal pronouns

The second objective of the study seeks to explain how interpretation underlies grammatical function. This involves examining the mapping of thematic roles to syntactic structure. Data suggests this information influences the realisation of pronouns.

13. (a) **Ò** sètín nòó ìmè / mwè / *mè
 3SG AUX ask 1SG
 He/she can ask me.
- (b) **Ò** sètín nòó *ìmè / *mwè / mè
 3SG AUX ask 1SG
 He/she can enquire on behalf of me.

From the pair of sentences in 13 above, one would observe a distinction in the interpretation of three pronoun variants glossed as 1SG. In example 13 (a), 1SG is the person from whom one makes enquiries; and in example 13 (b), 1SG is the person for whom one makes enquiries. Although the three variants occur in the same structural position, the proposition of the sentence makes *mè*, *ìmè* and *mwè* unacceptable in 13(a) and (b) respectively. Thus, one can infer that the form of personal pronouns depends on the theta roles of their referents.

To examine this connection between theta roles and pronoun variation, the study elicited sentences in which the verb belongs to one of the main classes identified in Chafe (1970). The ones relevant to this study are state, process, and action-process verbs. *State verbs* describe the condition of a single argument. *Process verbs* express a change in condition, while *action-process verbs* describe the actions of the external argument (i.e. the subject of the sentence) and the processes that internal arguments (i.e. objects in the sentence) undergo. In the following sets of examples, the paper shows how theta roles influence variation using three first person singular forms: *ìmè*, *mwè* and *mè*.

14. AGENT

- (a) ìmè / *mwè / mè tié èbé
1SG read book
I study.
- (b) ìmè / *mwè / mè mié ọnrèn vbè ọdẹ
1SG see 3SG on way
I saw him/her on the way.
- (c) ìmè / *mwè / mè lé èvbàré nè=ùé
1SG cook food for=2SG
I cook for you.

15. PATIENT

- (a) Té Òzó gbé ìmè / mwè / *mè
QM Ozo hit 1SG
Does Ozo hit me?
- (b) Ọvbókhàn nà fi-ló úgbé gbè ìmè / mwè / *mè
child DEM throw-IT stone at 1SG
This child is throwing stones at me.
- (c) Ékítà ìràn fián - ìmè / mwè / *mè - ré
dog 3SG cut-1SG-eat
Their dog bit me.

16. THEME

- (a) ìmè / *mwè / mè rré ọwá
1SG be_LOC house
I am at home.
- (b) Ìrèn má rẹ̀n ìmè / mwè / *mè
3SG NEG know 1SG
He/she does not know me.
- (c) Íyè-nókhuà tián ìmè / mwè / *mè
mother-large praise 1SG
Grandma praises me.

As shown in examples 14 (a), (b) and (c), one of the differences between these pronouns is that *ìmè* and *mè* can serve as AGENT. In example 15, *mè* is unacceptable as a PA-

TIENT. This contrasts with example 16 where all three variants function as THEME. Observe that in 16 (a) the pronouns are in the structural position for subjects; hence, *mwè* is unacceptable there. Another observation is that 16(a) identifies the location of the THEME argument. In examples 16(b) and (c), there is a change in structural position and interpretation. The acceptable forms *ìmè* and *mwè* are not deliberately causing anything to happen; they are also unaffected by the subjects' knowledge and praise. Since *mè* is unacceptable in both 16(b) and (c), it means that variant can only serve as a THEME when the location of the entity is described.

Differences in the usage of *ìmè*, *mwè*, and *mè* validates this study's position that theta roles have distinct pronoun forms. This distinction can also be inferred from other roles as shown with the EXPERIENCER and BENEFICIARY in the examples below.

17. EXPERIENCER

- (a) Èmwí nè ò sùnú dàá rùè
 Thing COMP RP happen towards 2SG
 í kpàá ìmè / mwè /*mè/ ùdù
 NEG lift 1SG heart
 What is happening to you does not surprise me.
- (b) Òvbé hún ìmè / mwè /*mè
 sleep have_feeling_for 1SG
 I feel sleepy.
- (c) Òhán í mú ìmè / mwè /*mè
 fear NEG catch 1SG
 I am not afraid.

18 BENEFICIARY

- (a) Òrhùè gú ìmè / mwè /*mè gbèn-né èbé
 Orhue help 1SG write-IT letter
 Orhue writes letters for me.
- (b) Òrhùè gbèn-né èbé *ìmè / *mwè /mè
 Orhue write-IT letter 1SG
 Orhue writes letters for me.
- (c) Èvbàvbá rhìé - íghó khérhé - gbàkhuá *ìmè / *mwè /mè
 Father save - money small - save 1SG
 Daddy saved a small amount of money for me.

- (d) Èvbàvbá rhìé - íghó khérhé - gbàkhuá khèè ìmè / mwè / *mè
 Father save - money small - save wait_for 1SG
 Daddy saved a small amount of money for me.

Examples 17 (a) - (c) show *ìmè*, *mwè*, and *mè* as entities experiencing different psychological states. In 17(a), the state is expressed with a discontinuous, phrasal verb *kpàá - ùdù*; in the (b) and (c) examples, we have simple verb roots. All three examples show that *mè* cannot function as an EXPERIENCER. One can compare this to the thematic role in examples 18 (a) - (d). There, one finds that acceptability depends on the structural context. In 18 (a), the variants are positioned within the verb *gú - gbèn* and *mè* is unacceptable as BENEFICIARY. When the particle is removed as in 18(b), *ìmè* and *mwè* become the unacceptable variants³. This influence of structure on interpretation is also illustrated in 18 (c) and (d). In the latter examples, it is presence/absence of the preposition *khèè* that determines acceptability. This influence of structure on interpretation is also evident in other theta roles, as the following examples show.

19. GOAL

- (a) Ólákpa rhìé èbé-ímù giè ìmè / * mwè / *mè
 police take letter-arrest to 1SG
 The police brought an arrest warrant to me.
- (b) Ólákpa rhìé èbé-ímù gù *ìmè / mwè / *mè
 police take letter-arrest to 1SG
 The police brought an arrest warrant to me.
- (c) Ólákpa rhìé èbé-ímù *ìmè / * mwè / mè
 police take letter-arrest 1SG
 The police brought an arrest warrant to me.

³ There is a sense in which *ìmè* and *mwè* can be considered acceptable in the same sentence.

Òrhuè gbèn-né èbé ìmè / mwè / *mè
 Orhue write-s letter 1SG
 Orhue writes my letters.

Unlike the reading we have in 18(b), the role of *ìmè* and *mwè* is that of a POSSESSOR. This role is for an entity which stands in a relationship with another entity referred to as possesum (or possessee). The relationship may be one of legal ownership or kinship among other options.

20. SOURCE

- (a) *ìrán* *mòmórè* *èbé* *vbè* *òbó* *ìmè /mwè / *mè*
 3SG borrow.PST book from hand 1SG
 They borrowed books from me.
- (b) *ìmè /mwè / *mè* *èré* *ìrán* *mòmórè* *èbé* *vbè* *òbó* *órè*
 1SG FOC 3SG borrow.PST book from hand RP
 I am the one from whom they borrowed books.

Examples 19 (a), (b) and (c) show that all three variants can represent the entity toward whom something is directed. Observe that the presence of the preposition matters as much as its phonological form, as shown in the alternation between *ìmè* and *mwè* in 19 (a) and (b). In constructions without a preposition, *mè* serves as the GOAL as shown in 19 (c). Besides the absence of prepositions, the type of construction is also significant for explaining variation in terms of theta roles. As illustrated in example 20, all three variants function as SOURCE; but their usage depends on structural factors. In 20(a), the variants are part of a noun phrase; there, *mè* is unacceptable. When the same proposition is expressed with a different structure as in 20 (b), *mè* becomes acceptable.

In this sub-section, the paper has shown that one can use the forms *ìmè*, *mwè* and *mè* to express an array of semantic relations. The difference between these variants is the number of roles they perform. The analysis reveals that *ìmè* has the widest range, as it is acceptable in every thematic role. On the other hand, there is *mè* which is used for only four of the functions discussed here. The differences in acceptability per thematic function suggest that the Edo language has theta roles encoded in its pronoun inventory.

4.3 Grammaticalization as an Explanation for Pronominal Variation

The preceding subsections demonstrated that distinct pronominal variants in Edo can perform identical grammatical and thematic functions. However, systematic patterns emerge in how these functions overlap across different pronominal forms. This paper accounts for these distributional patterns through the framework of the grammaticalization of theta roles.

Grammaticalization refers to a gradual, progressive process of language-internal development (Miller, 2000, as cited in Mensah, 2012, p. 168). Languages adopt various mechanisms to drive grammaticalization; three specific strategies are central to accounting for the present data: permutation, adaptation, and cliticization.

Permutation is a morphosyntactic mechanism whereby the phonological form of a word shifts to reflect structural changes within the clause. Permutation is driven by several interacting factors, including the analogous deployment of a single unit across distinct functional roles, the assignment of specific semantic interpretations to structural positions, and a language's preferred constituent order. The following set of examples illustrates the analogous use of pronominal variants across different theta roles:

22. (a) Ozo nwìná mè
Ozo work 1SG
'Ozo works for me'.
- (b) Ozo nwìná nè ìmè
Ozo work for 1SG
'Ozo works for me'
- (c) Ozo gú- ìmè / mwè -nwìná
Ozo PART- 1SG - work
Either 'Ozo works with me' or 'Ozo works for me'.

The sentence in 22(a) and (b) follow the order of constituents in the Edo language. In terms of theta roles, *mè* in example 22 (a) and *ìmè* in 22(b) can only be interpreted as BENEFICIARY. Example 22 (c) has a discontinuous verb; it consists of a root *nwìná* "work" and the particle *gú* which is equivalent to the prepositions "with" and "for". The gloss provides two possible interpretations for the sentence. The first is the sense in which 1SG and Ozo are colleagues; in this case 1SG is a THEME. In the second reading, 1SG is an employer and as such the BENEFICIARY of Ozo's actions.

Adaptation refers to the adjustment of a morpheme to units in its environment. It is the process where sounds copy the features of neighbouring sounds. In the following pair of examples, one can observe near identical forms of the second person singular. They only differ in terms of whether or not the pronoun ends with an oral or nasal vowel as in 23(a) and (b).

23. (a) Ọ̀sẹ̀ rùẹ̀ nà khín
friend 2SG DEM be
This is your friend.

- (b) Òtẹ̀n rùẹ̀n nà khín
 relative 2SG DEM be
 This is your relative.

The alternation between *rùẹ̀* and *rùẹ̀n* shows adaptation of 2SG to the final vowels of their preceding constituents. This example typifies the morphophonemic conditioning alluded to in Omoruyi (1986:85). Besides personal pronouns which function as POSSESSOR, this study also found adaptation in personal pronouns which serve as resumptive pronouns.

24. (a) ìrẹ̀n ẹ̀ré ọ rrié èvbàré nè ìrà̀n
 3SG FOC RP give food to 3PL
 It is he/she who gives food to them.
 (b) ìrà̀n ẹ̀ré ìrẹ̀n rrié èvbàré ná
 3PL FOC 3SG give food to
 They are the ones he/she gives food to.
25. (a) Èmwá nè í rée nọ èmwẹ̀ rùẹ̀n
 People REL RP.PL came ask word 2SG
 The people that came asked after you.
 (b) È í ùwẹ̀ èmwá nè í rée nọ èmwẹ̀ ónrẹ̀n
 3SG NEG 2SG people REL RP.PL came ask word RP
 It is not you the people that came asked after.

A resumptive pronoun (RP) refers to any pronominal constituent that duplicates the semantic or syntactic role of a co-referential phrase (Matthews, 2007, p. 346). In Edo, resumptive pronouns are obligatory when movement operations target subject positions, as illustrated by the agent argument in (24a). For non-subject positions, the retention of structural remnants and their constituent categories govern the realization of a resumptive pronoun. For instance, in (24b), the goal argument undergoes movement while a prepositional variant remains *in situ*; notably, no resumptive form occupies the extraction site of *ìrà̀n*.

Contrast (24a–b) with the constructions in (25a) and (25b), which illustrate movement of a theme argument (the second-person singular) for the purpose of negation. Here, the extraction site (or external merge position) of the argument is obligatorily

filled by the resumptive pronoun *ónrèn* (25b). This resumptive form initiates with a nasal vowel and assimilates to the tongue height of the preceding lexical item.

Cliticization serves as an umbrella term for processes wherein an underlyingly free morpheme becomes phonologically or syntactically dependent on adjacent elements within the same construction. This process is illustrated by the pronominal variants in the following examples:

27. (a) Ò ghá sẹ́=ó òbó
3SG AUX reach=2SG hand
It will get to you.
- (b) Ò má rẹ̀n wẹ̀rẹ̀ ù gbé ibiékà;
3SG NEG know COMP 2SG hit children;
è ghẹ̀ dàmwẹ̀=ùé ghèé
3SG NEG taste=2SG see
He/She does not know you beat children;
he/she would not have dared you.
- (c) Òvbé hún=én
Sleep be_sleepy=3SG
He/she is sleepy.

The examples above illustrate pronominal variants that exhibit distinct morphological statuses compared to other forms sharing identical feature specifications. These clitic forms are strictly restricted to the object position, occurring exclusively within the predicate phrase. Crucially, despite their shared structural position, these clitics fulfill distinct thematic roles. In (27a) and (27b), second-person singular variants function as themes, whereas in (27c), the clitic serves as an experiencer. In all three cases, the pronominal arguments attach directly to the verb stem; however, cliticization in Edo is not restricted to verbal hosts, as other syntactic categories, including nouns and prepositions, likewise license clitic forms.

5 Conclusion

This study re-examined the Edo pronominal system to provide a systematic account for its plethora of personal pronouns. To achieve this, the paper pursued two core objectives: describing the grammatical functions of personal pronouns and demonstrating how semantic interpretation underlies these functions. The investigation drew on primary data gathered through field observations and interviews, alongside secondary data extracted from textual and audiovisual sources.

On grammatical functions, the analysis confirms the findings of previous studies namely, that structural positions can be used to describe variations among Edo personal pronouns. However, because there is no one-to-one mapping between specific pronominal variants and syntactic functions, structural position alone provides an incomplete explanation. Addressing the second objective resolves this limitation by examining pronominal selection through the lens of thematic roles. The analysis revealed that distinct variants correlate with specific theta roles. Based on these empirical patterns, the paper proposed that the multiplicity of personal pronouns in Edo stems from the grammaticalization of thematic roles, mediated through three specific mechanisms such as permutation, adaptation, and cliticization.

Symbols and Abbreviations

The following are the symbols and abbreviations used in this paper.

-	Morpheme boundary	DEM	Demonstrative	PL	Plural
=	Clitic boundary	FOC	Focus marker	PST	Past tense
1	First person	IMPF	Imperfective	QM	Question marker
2	Second person	INC	Inceptive	REFL	Reflexive
3	Third person	IT	Iterative	REL	Relativiser
AUX	Auxiliary	LOC	Locative	RP	Resumptive Pronoun
COMP	Complementizer	NEG	Negation marker	SG	Singular
COP	Copular	PART	Particle		

References

- Abimbola, O., & Taiwo, O. P. (2017). A minimalist description of Aika pronouns. *Journal of the Linguistic Association of Nigeria*, 20(1), 28–39.
- Aboh, E. O. (2016). Grammaticalization: A population factor. In A. Bannink & W. Honselaar (Eds.), *From variation to iconicity: Festschrift for Olga Fischer* (pp. 1–16). Uitgeverij Pegasus.
- Adeola, T. (Producer), & Ogbomo, E. (Director). (2010). *Aigbedion* [Film]. Prolens Movies.
- Adger, D., & Smith, J. (2005). Variation and the minimalist programme. In L. Cornips & K. Corrigan (Eds.), *Syntax and variation: Reconciling the biological and the social* (pp. 149–178). John Benjamins. <https://doi.org/10.1075/cilt.265.08adg>
- Agheyisi, R. N. (1986). *An Edo-English dictionary*. Ethiope Publishing Corporation.
- Chafe, W. L. (1970). *Meaning and the structure of language*. University of Chicago Press.
- Christensen, T. K., & Jensen, T. J. (2022). Introduction: Analysing and explaining syntactic variation. In T. K. Christensen & T. J. Jensen (Eds.), *Explanations in sociosyntactic variation* (pp. 1–10). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108914697.001>
- Eberhard, D. M., Simons, G. F., & Fennig, C. D. (Eds.). (2022). *Ethnologue: Languages of the world* (25th ed.). SIL International. <http://www.ethnologue.com>
- Edionwe, O. A. (Producer). (2016). *Benin ascension rituals* [Film]. Butterworth Productions.
- Elugbe, B. O. (1989). *Comparative Edoid*. University of Port Harcourt Press.
- Everaert, M. B. H., Marelj, M., & Siloni, T. (2012). The theta system: An introduction. In M. B. H. Everaert, M. Marelj, & T. Siloni (Eds.), *The theta system: Argument structure at the interface* (pp. 1–19). Oxford University Press.

- Fábregas, A. (2024). Theories of argument structure: The connection between lexical information and syntactic structure. *Borealis: An International Journal of Hispanic Linguistics*, 13(2), 1–126. <https://doi.org/10.7557/1.13.2.7302>
- Güldemann, T. (2018). Historical linguistics and genealogical language classification in Africa. In T. Güldemann (Ed.), *The languages and linguistics of Africa* (pp. 58–444). De Gruyter Mouton. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110421668-002>
- Haegeman, L. (1994). *Introduction to government and binding theory* (2nd ed.). Blackwell.
- Haspelmath, M. (2023). Types of clitics in the world’s languages. *Linguistic Typology at the Crossroads*, 3(2), 1–59. <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2785-0943/16895>
- Heine, B., & Narrog, H. (2010). Grammaticalization and linguistic analysis. In B. Heine & H. Narrog (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of linguistic analysis* (pp. 401–424). Oxford University Press.
- Heine, B., & Reh, M. (1984). *Grammaticalization and reanalysis in African languages*. Buske.
- Hopper, P. J., & Traugott, E. C. (2003). *Grammaticalization* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Howe, S. (2009). Pronoun morphology. *The Bulletin of the Central Research Institute, Fukuoka University*, 9(7), 1–13.
- Imasuen, E. O. (1996). *Edo course for schools and colleges* (Book 1, 2nd ed.). Aisien Publishers.
- Imasuen, E. O. (1998). Languages in contact: The case of Edo and Portuguese. *Journal of West African Languages*, 27(2), 39–49.
- Imasuen, E. O. (2010). *Edo course for schools and colleges* (Book 2, 2nd ed.). Aisien Publishers.
- Japhet, A. S. (2012). *The morphosyntax of pronouns in the Ìlàjẹ dialect of Yorùbá* [Unpublished MPhil dissertation]. University of Ibadan.

Kibort, A., & Corbett, G. G. (2008). *Grammatical features inventory: Typology of grammatical features*. University of Surrey. <https://doi.org/10.15162/SMG.18/1.16>

Matthews, P. H. (2007). *Oxford concise dictionary of linguistics* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.

Melzian, H. (1937). *A concise dictionary of the Bini language of Southern Nigeria*. Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co.

Mensah, E. (2012). Grammaticalization in Nigerian Pidgin. *Íkala, Revista de Lenguaje y Cultura*, 17(2), 167–179.

Narrog, H., & Heine, B. (2021). *Grammaticalization*. Oxford University Press.

Omogbe, E. M., Evbuomwan, O. O., & Aigbedo, W. I. (2023). *Omuso oghe egiranma Edo*. Edukate Publishers.

Omogbe, O. S. B. (1983). *Edo grammar for schools and colleges*. Thomas Nelson (Nigeria) Limited.

Omoruyi, T. O. (1986). Pronominalization and reflexivization in Edo. *Afrika und Übersee*, 69, 81–93.

Omozua, V. E. (2013). *Edo phonetics and phonology*. AMBIK Press.

Omozua, V. E. (2020). *Wa gia gha gbɛn Edo ɛse*. Ambik Press.

Perpetual Usenbo¹, Oye Paul Taiwo²

¹Department of Linguistics Studies, University of Benin, Nigeria

²Department of Linguistics and African Languages, University of Ibadan

¹<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6546-2802>

²<https://orcid.org/0009-0003-5577-4097>