

Object drop in language: Theoretical insights from Kwa

This paper argues that the distribution of null versus overt object pronouns in Kwa languages is attributable to their structural position; all overt pronouns are realized in a specifier position while null object pronouns are deleted in a complement position.

Kwa (Niger-Congo) languages like Akan, Baule, Gã, Nzema, a.o. exhibit an (object) *pro* drop pattern whose profile does not seem to fit any of the types traditionally discussed in the literature (see, e.g. Huang 1995); the possibility of dropping an object pronoun is not linked to (a) agreement marking (contra Rizzi 1986), (b) topicality (contra Huang 1984), or (c) the morphology of their pronominal system (contra Neeleman & Szendroi 2007). In Gã, for instance, the realization of non-local person object pronouns is subject to the following conditions. In clause-final position, a pronoun with animate antecedent must be overt (1-a), but one with inanimate antecedent is always null (1-b) except when the antecedent is an argument of a change of state (CoS) predicate (1-c).

- (1) a. Ama na ***(Iɛ)**.
 A see 3SG.OBJ
 ‘Ama saw him/her’.
- b. Ama na ***(Iɛ)**.
 A see 3SG.OBJ
 ‘Ama saw it’.
- c. Ama ku ***(Iɛ)**.
 A break 3SG.OBJ
 ‘Ama broke it’.

Apart from (1-c), an inanimate third person object pronoun is also obligatorily overt when it precedes a clause-final adverbial (2-a), and when it occurs as the argument of a depictive secondary predicate (DSP), as in (2-b). The empirical picture presented in (3).

- (2) a. Ama na ***(Iɛ)** shii etɛ.
 A see 3SG.OBJ early times three
 ‘Ama saw him/her/**it** times three’.
- b. Ama hé ***(Iɛ)** ofoo.
 A buy 3SG.OBJ cheap
 ‘Ama bought **it** cheap.’

(3) *Distribution of object pronouns in Gã*

CONTEXT	+ANIM	-ANIM
a. Clause-final	overt	null
b. Arg. of CoS pred.	overt	overt
c. Before adverbs	overt	overt
d. Arg. of DSP	overt	overt

From (3), it is apparent that we are confronted with (what appears to be) a new kind of null object, i.e., one that seems to be conditioned by clausal-finality and animacy. An interesting question would be what accounts for the natural classes in (3).

I argue in this paper that we can relate the distribution of null versus overt object pronouns above to the differences between where the object pronoun ends up in the structure at the point of linearization. I show that the overt-null pronoun distinction is a reflection of a specifier-complement asymmetry (a la Kayne (1994)) in the grammar of Kwa.

References: •Huang, J. C.-T. (1984). On the distribution and reference of empty pronouns. •Huang, Y. (1995). •On null subjects and null objects in generative grammar. •Kayne, R. S. (1994). *The Antisymmetry of syntax*. •Neeleman, A. & K. Szendroi. (2007). Radical pro drop and the morphology of pronouns. •Rizzi, L. (1986). Null objects in Italian and the Theory of pro.