

The Nominal Category in Defaka

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Abstract

Defaka is a tiny endangered Ijoid language with less than fifty fluent speakers, spoken on the island of Nkoroo. Nkoroo is community situated in the eastern fringe of the Niger Delta Region in River state, Nigeria. Although Defaka has lost much of its stylistic expressions due to its endangered state, much of its grammar is still intact. This paper seeks to describe the features of the nominal category in Defaka. Defaka is an isolating language with minimal inflectional morphology. This paper therefore adopts structuralism as a theoretical framework to describe the structural and distributional characteristics of nouns in Defaka. The data for this work was got through elicitation sessions based on the Lingua Descriptive Questionnaire. Elicitation sessions were held with fluent native speakers of the language between ages 45 to 80. The basic word order of Defaka is SOV, Subject Object Verb, which ranks Defaka as a head final language, although it exhibits some characteristics of head initial languages. The definite article precedes its complement, quantifiers and numerals are both pre and post nominal. The noun is an open class in Defaka. They are generally not marked for singular and plural, neither are they marked for subjecthood or objecthood. Some nouns however exhibit sex gender distinction, while a few show inherent plurality. A plurality marker **a** is also observed in prenominal numeral modifiers. Nouns in Defaka may be derived through compounding or some syntactic processes. The structure of nouns in Defaka falls very much in place with that of Ijo.

Key Words: Defaka, Nominal, Number, Gender.

Introduction

The Defaka people are a small speech community sharing an island with a dominant population of the Nkɔrɔɔ (traditionally known as Kirika by its indigenes), whose linguistic relatives are the Kalabari, Okrika and Ihanj. The immediate neighbours of Nkɔrɔɔ are the Opobo, Andoni, Ogoni and the Bonny people of Rivers State. A fragmented portion of the Defaka speaking community live on an island called Iwoama and some fishing settlements around Nkoroo. The Defaka are bilingual. They speak Defaka and Kirika. For some political reasons, there has been a heavy language shift from among the Defaka speaking community. Intergenerational transmission has long ceased and the language has reduced in its functional domains over the years. Defaka is barely spoken within the Defaka ward in Nkɔrɔɔ. The Defaka engage in similar economic pursuits as the Kirika. They trade in such sea products as crayfish, periwinkles, crabs, oysters

and several kinds of fishes. They engage in basket weaving, net making, thatch making, petty trading and subsistent farming. Trading activities are carried out with their surrounding neighbours-the Andoni, Ogoni and Opobo. Their involvement in trading with these neighbours, facilitate the speaking of a number of these languages, Nigerian pidgin and Igbo, (the Opobo variety) ranking top most on the list.

The population of Defaka speakers as cited by Ethnologue is put at 2000 Lewis, (2009). Recent field research estimates the number of Defaka speakers within and outside Nkɔrɔɔ to be between 50 to 100, and fluent speakers to be less than 50.

Review of Related Studies.

Essien, 2013, 'A Grammar of Defaka' appears to be the only detailed grammatical description of Defaka presently. Jenewari (1989, pp8-9) however, examined lexical items in Defaka and its six linguistic neighbours for the purpose of

linguistic classification, viz, (1) Ijo group, (2) Lower Niger group, (3) Delta Edo group, (4) Ogoni group, (5) Central Delta group and (6) Lower Cross group and came with a comparative work which placed Defaka within the same broad group of Niger Congo and its neighbours. For Defaka shares with these languages, taken as a whole, a fairly large number of apparent cognates. To subgroup Ijo and Defaka, he provided substantial lexical evidence, even when obvious borrowings were excluded. Some of the grammatical similarity that provided evidence for the claim are the following: Defaka has an SOV word order; other generalizations consistent with typical SOV languages such as modifiers preceding their heads, tense markers occurring finally. Defaka like other Ijo lects has sex gender distinction in its pronominal system. These structural evidence gave credence to the classification of Defaka as an Ijoid language. Ijoid is all of the Ijo language cluster and Defaka

Methodology

This paper is part of a larger work on the grammar of Defaka. The data was got through elicitation based on the 1700 SIL Comparative African Word List, and partly based on the Lingua Descriptive Questionnaire. Our primary consultants were: Rev Henry Igbikiberesima, 78 years old, and Senibo Gladdy I. Miller, 45 years old. Others are Mr Blessing Igbikiberesima, 75 years old and Chief Richard Nyaako 59 years old. Defaka does not have an approved orthography, so data presented in this work are transcribed using IPA symbols. The Leipzig glossing convention has also been adopted.

Theoretical Framework.

This paper is basically a morphosemantic description of the characteristics of the nominal category in Defaka. The description relies chiefly on the tenets of morphological theory. For the analysis of data, we have drawn insight from Spencer, (1992) and Payne, (1997). According to Payne (1997: p5) 'grammatical description commonly assume that language consists of form that people employ to 'mean' 'express' 'code' 'represent' or 'refer to' other things.' In this paper, our focus is to present the structural and distributional characteristics of nouns in Defaka as a means of contributing to language universals.

The framework adopted is structuralism. Structuralism views language as a communication system with discrete rather than continuous elements. It is the combination of these elements that form the structures, patterns or relations of language.....(Crystal 1992;32).

Preamble

Grammatical categories are also referred to as parts of speech in traditional grammar. All known natural languages have at least two major grammatical categories-noun and verb. Others like the adjective and adverb may belong to a close class as it is in Defaka. Although category membership may sometimes not have clear-cut boundaries, prototypical properties or characteristics can be identified. Category membership can also be given based on how that form is used in discourse. Therefore some morphosyntactic tests may be needed to determine the category membership of a form. Grammatical categories differ from formal relational categories such as subject, object etc. Prototypes can be identified semantically for nouns and verbs. Givón (1984, p51) states that the class of nouns in any language includes words that express the most time-stable concepts e.g., 'rock' 'tree', 'house' etc. they are concepts that do not vary over time. To determine whether a given word is a noun or not, the morphosyntactic characteristics of a typical noun in the language must be determined.

Morphosyntactic characteristics of nouns may be determined by their distributional or structural properties (Payne, 1997: p33). Traditionally, nouns serve as heads of noun phrases, arguments of verbs; structurally, they exhibit properties such as case marking, number marking and gender marking. Beyond these prototypical characteristics of nouns, languages have various grammaticalized ways of adjusting grammatical categories to function or look like nouns. Such devices are regarded as derivational processes. Defaka is an isolating language with minimal inflectional morphology. We will, in the following sections discuss the distributional and structural properties and the derivational processes that are exhibited by the nominal category in Defaka.

Basic Features of the Noun

The noun is an open class which may be preceded

or followed by an article or some quantifier or may be modified by an adjective, numeral, demonstrative and other nouns in associative construction. The basic word order of Defaka is SOV, Subject Object Verb, which ranks Defaka as a head final language. Defaka however, exhibits some characteristics of head initial languages. The definite article precedes its complement, demonstratives are pre-nominal, quantifiers and numerals are both pre and post nominal. Nouns in Defaka are generally not marked for singular and plural, neither are they marked syntactically for subjecthood and objecthood. They do not change their forms; hence grammatical relations are shown by word order.

1) a) à bòm à èbèrè báá-mà

DEF child DEF dog kill-FACT
 ‘The child killed the dog’

b) à èbèrè à bòm báá-mà
 DEF dog DEF child kill-FACT
 ‘The dog killed the child’

c) à sónó à báí ágbá-mà
 DEF ant DEF man bite-FACT
 ‘The ant bit the man’

d) à báí à sónó kókò báá-mà
 DEF man DEF ant all kill-FACT
 ‘The man killed the ants’

The examples in (1) show the occurrence of nouns in both subject and object positions. To capture the notion of plurality in (1d), the universal quantifier **kókò** ‘all’ is used.

Monosyllabic nouns usually have a VV structure. No CV nouns are attested in the database, they either bear high or low tones. Bisyllabic nouns exhibit four syllable types, CVV, CVCV, VCV and NCV. They exhibit the following tone patterns, LL, LH, HL, HH, H!H. Nouns in Defaka may be trisyllabic, and quadrisyllabic. Only one pentasyllabic noun is attested in the database. See (Essien, 2013) for details.

2) óó ‘salt’ zùù ‘ground’
 ó.òò ‘head’ è.bè ‘pig’ dží!mé ‘hair’ ń.gí ‘knife’
 í.só.ró ‘navel’ è.fè.rù ‘beard’ à.là.lá ‘plate’ à.gá.rà ‘lizard’
 ì.ti.ki.là ‘head pan’ ò.dù.mú.nò ‘lion’ à.là.pàm.bá ‘bedbug’ ò.lè.sì.á ‘dove’
 ákiábàrà ‘king fisher’

The examples in (2) present the syllable and possible tonal patterns of nouns in Defaka.

Marking Number in Nouns

Nouns in Defaka are generally not inflected for number. Nouns can however be broadly classified into [+HUMANN] and [-HUMAN] whereas the former are nouns that designate human entities, the latter designate non-human entities. According to Anderson (1985:154), most languages provide some formal ways of marking nouns and noun phrases as singular or plural. As with most categories, this may be done by any device of morphology including reduplication. The formal expression of plurality in the noun may be obligatory (as for most nouns in English) limited to certain categories, such as animates (as with the suffix –men in Mandarin)

In consonance with Anderson (1985), Defaka employs some formal ways of marking number with [+HUMAN] nouns which include compounding and suffixing –**mìní**, the human plural noun ‘people’ to the noun. Some human nouns however, form their plurals by forming a compound with the plural human noun

Number in [+ HUMAN] Nouns.

A [+human] noun in Defaka takes the high toned plural morpheme **míní** to mark plural. There is no other means of marking plural in human nouns except the mutated plural- child and children in (4) below.

3) èmènè ‘adult male’ èmènèmíní ‘men’
 éséré ‘adult female’ éséréfémíní ‘women’

The noun **bòm** ‘child’ has as its plural **èwèrè** ‘children’. **èwèrè** may also form a double plural with the plural noun **míní**, thus, **èwèrèmíní** ‘children’. When a double plural is formed with **míní**, the meaning of the compound is slightly modified to mean “a group of” some examples of such formatives are:

- 4) defàkàèwèrèminí 'children of Defaka'
 nàá!kòèwèrèminí 'children of Nyaako'
 ñsékéèwèrèminí 'a group of teenage female children'
 àgbàràèwèrèminí 'a group of male youths'

Gender.

The gender system of Defaka is reflected primarily in pronominal reference. There is no article agreement in the definite noun phrase and in demonstratives as is found in Ijo. We use Kalabari, an eastern Ijo dialect to represent Ijo in the examples in (5) below.

- | | |
|-------------------------|----------------------------|
| 5) Kalabari | Defaka |
| éremè má 'the women' | à éserémíní 'the women' |
| óyápú mé 'the men' | à èmènèminí 'the men' |
| àwòmè má 'the children' | à èwèrèminí 'the children' |

There are however a set of nouns in Defaka which mark gender and age, which form compounds with animate nouns. Those which form compounds with [+HUMAN] nouns. are: èmènè 'male', éseré 'female', àgbàrà, 'teenage male or youth' ñséké 'teenage female'. óbáí and ólúlá and ówóí and óróró form compounds with [-human] masculine and feminine animate nouns respectively as shown in the examples in (6)

- | | | | |
|------------------|---------------------------|----------------|-------------------------------|
| 6) báí 'man' | èmènèbáí 'adult male' | álà 'woman' | éséréálà 'adult female' |
| míní 'people' | èmènèminí 'adult men' | | éséréminí 'adult women' |
| bòm 'child' | èmènèbóm 'male child' | | éséré!bóm 'female child' |
| èwèrè 'children' | àgbàràèwèrè 'male youths' | | ñsékéèwèrè 'female teenagers' |
| óbáí 'male' | óbáíóbórí 'male goat' | ólúlá 'female' | ólúláóbórí 'female goat' |
| ówóí 'male' | ówóíèbèrè 'male dog' | óróró 'female' | óróróèbèrè 'female dog' |

The examples in (6) are compound nouns which manifest sex gender distinctions.

Derivation

Nouns in Defaka are not productive in terms of derivation through prefixation, suffixation or circumfixation. Compounding is the only derivational process that is somewhat productive in the language. These compounds are basically of two types-Root compounds which are basically a concatenation of noun + noun and verb + noun to form new words. According to Spencer (1992: p319), 'Root or primary compounds are easy to account for, since all we need is a grammatical device which concatenates words (and possibly roots). Such compounds are directly generated in the base and not constructed out of structurally distinct underlying forms by means of syntactic rules'. Examples of these are given in (7 & 8)

7) Noun +Noun Compounds

tóbò + ètèbàí → tóbòètèbàí
 'head' 'owner' 'master'

àwò + àkpà → àwòàkpà
 'child' 'bag' 'womb'

défàkà + áamá → défàkàámá
 'Defaka' 'town' 'Defaka town'

8) Noun + Verb Compounds

éwě + òlè → éwěòlè
 'breath' 'finish' 'tired'

ójò + èsè → ójòèsè
 'eye' 'see' 'love'

ibi + èsè → ibièsè
 'sleep' 'see' 'dream'

The other type are synthetic compounds which are formed by suffixing human nouns such as (**baí**, 'man' **ti**, 'person' **miní** 'people' and optionally **álà** 'woman') to a verb-based compound. These are basically agentive constructions with the reading 'one who does..'. Synthetic compounds are formed by means of various syntactic processes. Spencer (1992: pp324-326) discussed types of synthetic compounds such as compounds formed on passive participles, compounds based on adjectives, nominalization etc. the most productive types of synthetic compounds in Defaka is the verb based type and nominalization as shown in the examples in (9, 10, 11, 12 & 13)

- 9) ido 'farm' + kùrà 'cultivate' + baí 'man' → idòkùràbaí 'farmer'
 tinà 'fish' + àrì 'hold' + ti 'person' → tinààrì!ti 'fisherman'
 ónúmá 'bush' + tēì 'shoot' + baí 'man' → ónúmátēìbaí 'hunter'
 bòrì 'plaster' + kùrà 'cultivate' + baí 'man' → bòrìkùràbaí 'potter'
 àwò 'child' + èdžè 'birth' + àrì 'hold' + -álà 'woman' → àwòèdžèàrìálà → midwife
 àù 'fetish' + àrì 'hold' + baí 'man' → àùàrìbaí 'fetish priest'
 léé 'place' + ñpà 'walk' + álà 'woman' → lééñpàálà 'prostitute'
 jáà 'something' + -múndù 'beg' + ti 'person' → jáàmúndù!tí 'begger'

The synthetic compounds in (9) are agentive constructions with the reading 'one who does'

Synthetic compounds can also be formed by suffixing human nouns such as those mentioned in (5) to deverbal modifiers

- 10) móń!gí 'old' + míní 'people' → móń!gímíní 'elders'
 lùò 'weave' + baí 'man' → lùòbaí 'weaver'
 lèlè 'sell' + baí 'man' → lèlèbaí 'trader'
 àù 'fight' + baí 'man' → àùbaí 'soldier'
 bótò 'medicine' + baí 'man' → bótòbaí 'native doctor'
 íjóró 'sorcery' + ti 'person; or álà 'woman' → íjóró!tí/álà 'wizard/witch'

A noun may be derived by the addition of *naà* 'thing' to a verb

- 11) éé 'eat' + *naà* 'thing' → éénaà 'food'
 kùmà 'cover' + *naà* 'thing' → kùmànaà 'wrapper;

A noun may be derived by the addition of *naà* 'thing' to a noun-verb compound.

- 12) óm 'body' + gbíì 'sow' + *naà* 'thing' → ómgbììnaà 'dress'
 íá 'way' + bìò 'pass' + kpàrà 'close' + *naà* 'thing' → íábìòkpàrànaà 'door'

13) A verb may also be reduplicated and forms a compound with *naà* 'thing'

- màà 'do' mààmàànaà 'tradition'
 sèì 'be bad' sèìsèìnaà 'snake'

Plurality Marking in Numerals

A plurality marker identified as **a** occurs in complex derivations in numerals in Defaka. The first stage of complex derivations begin with the numerals seven to nine. This is done by combining two basic cardinal numerals. Here, five functions as the base to which other numerals are added.

- 14) túámà 'seven (túú 'five' (a) má 'two')
 túátùà 'eight' (túù 'five' (a) táá 'three')

túùnèì ‘nine’ (tùù ‘five’ nèì ‘four’)

The occurrence of the plurality marker **a** in the derivation of seven and eight cannot be readily accounted for since the plurality marker is usually found in complex derivations involving multiplication as we will see in (16) below.

The occurrence of the plurality marker is not peculiar to Defaka. It appears to be an Ijoid feature. Jenewari (1977: pp331 & 335) identified a similar occurrence in Kalabari, an eastern Ijo dialect. He identified prenominal numeral modifiers as having a plurality marker **a** suffixed to them while such other prenominal modifiers as adjectives and relative clauses do not have a plurality marker as **a** suffix. He suggested that, the reason for the above mentioned fact about the distribution of **a** plurality marker in prenominal numeral modifiers is that, the modifiers which have a plurality marker suffixed to them have number as an inherent feature, whereas those which do not have **a** plurality marker suffixed to them do not have number as an inherent feature. Some examples of the occurrence of the plurality in Kalabari are the shown in (15)

15a) sì sóná naira fídǵí
 twenty five PLM Naira be extra
 Twenty Five Naira

b) ínía naira fà sí
 four PLM naira be less twenty
 Sixteen Naira

c) naira à-tèsí ójí fídǵí
 naira PLM sixty ten be extra
 Seventy Naira

d) Naira à-mèsí
 naira PLM-forty
 Forty Naira

Note that we are not discussing numeration in this paper. We are concerned here with the occurrence of the plurality marker in prenominal numerals. Jenewari (1977) proposes that, this morpheme has always been found suffixed to the plural prenominal numerals in the surface structure. This proposal is based on the assumption that number is an inherent feature of the prenominal numerals just as it is of some nouns.

As we stated earlier in the explanation for the examples in (14), the occurrence of the plurality marker in the derivation of the numerals seven and eight cannot be readily accounted for, we therefor accept Jenewari (1977) assumption that number is an inherent feature of the prenominal numerals.

In Defaka however, the plurality marker **a** occurs consistently with derivations that involve multiplication of twenty and four hundred, and the addition of ten to give the required figure. Here, the plurality marker **a**, is attached to the lower unit which modifies the upper unit, which multiplies either twenty or four hundred as the case may be.

16) mààmà síì ‘forty’ (2 x 20)
 mààmà síì= tè ʔúóì= tè ‘fifty’ (2×20.10)
 táátá síì! ‘sixty’ (3×20)
 táátá síì= tè ʔúóì= tè ‘seventy’ (3×20.10)

néià síi	‘eighty’ (4×20)
néià síi= tè ʔúóì= tè	‘ninety’ (4×20.10)
túú!ná síi	‘one hundred’ (5×20)
óóóó=!té túú!ná síi	‘five hundred’ (400.5×20)
mààmà óóóó	‘eight hundred’ (2 ×400)
mààmà óóóó=!té ʔúóìà síi= tè	‘one thousand’ (2×400.10×20)
túú!ná óóóó	‘two thousand’ (5×400)

The conjunction **te** ‘and’ is a clitic. Like other clitics in the language, it bears a low tone when preceded by a low toned host and a down-stepped high tone when preceded by a high toned host. The final vowels of **táátó** ‘three’ and **túúnò** ‘five’ completely assimilate the plurality marker **a**.

Conclusion

Minority peoples’ languages are fast disappearing and at an alarming rate. For economic reasons and group solidarity, minority people are ceding their rights to the majority people around them and invariably losing what rightly identifies them as a people and that is their languages. This is the case of the Defaka people. The language has been grossly marginalized and intergenerational transmission has long ceased. Because, the cultural wisdom of a people is embedded in their language, the urgent need to preserve the structural features of every language in a proper descriptive framework for future linguistic theorizing and reference cannot be overemphasized. In this paper, the researcher has in some detail, described the manifestations and features of the nominal category in Defaka. Nouns

in Defaka are generally not marked for number, subjecthood and objecthood. Some nouns however exhibit sex gender distinction but these are a minute number. In terms of derivation, they are not also productive through prefixation and suffixation, compounding is the only productive means for deriving nouns. Nouns may be derived through some syntactic processes as well.

The remnant of a plurality marker is observed mainly in prenominal modifiers in numerals. Heine and Derek Nurse (2000, p23) observed similar features as characteristic of Ijoid nouns. ‘ **a** marks plural nouns preceded by modifier, some initial vowels; new human suffixes’. Although Defaka does not exhibit vowel harmony in nominal modification, human nouns take suffixes to form plurals. This is a further evidence for the Ijoid classification

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