Animacy distinction in object pronominalization in Kwa: Insights from Nkami, Kaakye and Akan

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Abstract

This paper discusses animacy distinction of object pronouns in three Kwa language: Nkami, Kaakye and Akan, based on natural data from both primary and secondary sources. It looks at the nature of animacy hierarchy of the 3SG.OBJ in three main syntactic domains: clause-final, non-clause-final and after ambitransitive verbs. Among others, it is observed that all three languages are similar in upholding animacy distinction of 3SG.OBJ pronouns in clause-final object position, as (1) exemplifies.

(1)   Nkami (Asante & Akanlig-Pare 2015: 73)

   a.   Kofi   bɛ-sɔ   **ɔkplɪ/ɔfɔdʒɪ   amʊ**.
        Kofi   FUT-buy   dog/broom DET
        'Kofi will buy the dog/broom.'

   b.   Kofi   bɛ-sɔ   **mʊ/ø**.
                             3SG.ANIM.OBJ/3SG.INANIM.OBJ
        'Kofi will buy it.'

Thus, in all three languages, an animate object NP is replaced with an overt pronoun (1a), but an inanimate object NP is dropped (1b). In non-clause-final object position, whereas Nkami and Kaakye uphold animacy distinction of 3SG.OBJ pronouns (though with different strategies), Akan does not (cf. Osam 1996:161). Thirdly, whereas animacy distinction is upheld in Kaakye when 3SG pronouns occur in a clause that is predicated by an ambitranstive verb, it is compromised in both Nkami and Akan since an inanimate object pronoun is overtly realized with the same form that is used to pronominalize animate antecedents. (2) summarizes the behavoiur of the 3 languages.

(2) Summary: Animacy distinction of 3SG.OBJ pronouns

Language	Animacy distinction is upheld…		
	at clause-final object position	at non-clause-final object position	after ambitransitive verbs
Akan	YES	NO	NO
Nkami	YES	YES	NO
Kaakye	YES	YES	YES
Other Kwa languages	??	??	??

Evidently, (2) shows that the constraint on animacy distinction of the 3SG.OBJ pronouns is higher ranked by Kaakye than Nkami and Akan: While Kaakye upholds animacy distinction in all three domains, Akan and Nkami respectively uphold it in one and two domains only. Judging from these revealing findings from only three out of the tens of Kwa languages, it may not be wrong to argue that studies on the pronominalization of object arguments, particularly, in relation to animacy distinction has just begun. There is the need for more studies in these and other Kwa languages to reveal the remarkable resources they employ in expressing animacy distinctions as well as in contributing significantly, as a language family, to the cross-linguistic typological discussions on the topic.

Keywords: animacy distinction, object pronouns, pronoun drop, ambitransitive verb, animacy neutralization

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