

PLURALISATION IN THE UFIA LANGUAGE

By

Mary Ogah-Adejoh

Department of English

Benue State University, Makurdi

email: moogah9@gmail.com 08033511079

&

Augustine Ugwu

Department of Languages and Linguistics

Nasarawa State University, Keffi

E-mail: austin4legend@gmail.com

07039088023

Abstract

This paper investigates the strategies of plural formation in Ufia, a language spoken in Benue State (Nigeria). Pluralisation is the process of attaching number to persons, things and others to indicate that they are more than one. This is a fundamental feature of every natural language. Adopting a descriptive approach, the paper analyses data that were sourced through interviews, observation, intuition and introspection of fluent native speakers of the language. It reveals that Ufia language has five plural formation rules /strategies. These are vowel alternation, phoneme replacement/addition, reduplication, suppletion and ifa-suffixation. The paper reveals that the major plural markers in the language are /b-/ and /gb-/ prefixed to nouns. In some instances of vowel alternation, /o/ becomes /i/ and /e/ changes to /a/ in the pluralised forms. In phoneme replacement /addition, /b/ is prefixed to certain nouns to realise their plural forms. In these two strategies, it is observed that certain phonemes are completely deleted in the plural forms. While only a part of the word is copied in partial reduplication as pluralisation strategy in the language, it is copied wholly in full reduplication. It is further revealed that, in suppletion as a plural formation strategy, the pluralised forms are completely different from their singular counterparts. Moreover, it seems that zero affixation, as a plural formation strategy is not attested in the language. This needs further investigation.

Keywords: Pluralisation, Ufia, Morphology, Rules

1. Introduction

Pluralisation is a feature in language that refers to number and or quantity. Every language attests this linguistic feature in her morphological processes. However, the process varies from language to language. Pluralisation is marked overtly in several natural languages by inflectional affixes as prefixes, suffixes and interfixes. This has been defined variously by scholars. To Carnie (2007:42), plural refers to “quantity of individuals or things”, and Crystal (2007:321) defines it as “... a grammatical category used for the analysis of word classes displaying such contrasts as singular (SG, Sing), (plural, Pl, PL), dual (du) (‘two’), trial (‘three’). The concern of this paper is the investigation of this feature of language in Ufia. Still on the definition of plural, Sinclair, (1992:881), defines plural as the term used for either noun, pronoun, determiner or verb when it refers to two or more people, things or groups. On his own part, Corbett, (2000: 38), opines that the most widespread distinction as found in English and many other languages involves a simple two-way number

contrast between singular and plural. From the views of the linguists above, one can infer that pluralisation is a linguistic universal attested and represented in the morphology of natural languages. Taking Corbett's view above, the following examples are cited for the English language:

| | Singular | Plural |
|-------|----------|----------|
| i. | Boy | boys |
| ii. | Pen | pens |
| iii. | Child | children |
| iv. | House | houses |
| v. | Glass | glasses |
| vi. | Man | men |
| vii. | Goose | geese |
| viii. | Ox | oxen |

In the data above, the plural morphemes are 's', 'es', 'ren' 'en' and vowel replacement as in 'men', 'women' and 'geese' respectively.

2. The Ufia Language and Speakers

Ufia is the language of the Utonkon people in Benue state. It is grouped among the Upper Cross River language phylum of the East Benue Congo family of African languages (Anagbogu 2005, Nkamigbo 2012). The people and their language are called Ufia though clusters of them are found in Ebonyi (Ntezi, Effium, Okpoto), and (Ukele) in Cross River States (Echi 1986). The language is undocumented and unwritten with diminishing fluent speakers. Indeed, there is very little linguistic study of Ufia. This therefore, is the motivation for this study. In this paper, we restrict the term Ufia to the Ufia speaking people of Benue State and not to clusters who may speak closely related languages.

3. Conceptual Clarification

Pluralisation denotes the process of attaching number to persons, things, concepts, etc. It is a process that follows certain rules or principles in a language for plural formation, which must be observed for acceptable plural forms to be realised. Usually, only items in the noun class undergo pluralisation, though, other word classes such as verbs and pronouns also undergo pluralisation but with different processes. The concept 'pluralisation' is an aspect of morphology, the field of Linguistics that studies the formation of words in human language (Ndimele 1992:2). Buttressing the place of words in human language, Ndimele cites Brown and Miller for upholding the significance of morphology as a bridge between the syntax of a language and its morphology. This view is relevant to this study because, it focuses on a word formation process in Ufia.

Similarly, Lyons (1981: 19), defines morphology as the "...the study of words and the rules leading to their formation" He opines that the analysis of morphology enhances the observation and description of the grammatical construction in a language; in this case the Ufia language. Many linguistic scholars have studied this phenomenon in natural languages. For instance, Anagbogu (2005), reveals that in Koring, five pluralisation rules are attested. According to him, a great majority of the nouns are pluralised by adding gbòdòró' (many) after the noun; i.e. N + gbòdòró'. Examples include:

1. i zéj eye zéj gbòdòró' 'eyes'

- ii zóí nose zóí gbòdóró 'noses'
 iii iètsóí heart iètsóí gbòdóró 'hearts'

Phoneme Alternation

Phoneme alternation results in plural formation in the language. He cites the following examples among others:

- 2.i wàduím man gbàduím 'men' /w/ → /gb-/
 ii wàati child gbùati 'children' /w/ → /gb/
 iii ilágbá woman gbilágbá 'womwn' /i/ → /gb/

Zero Affixation

These do not take any inflectional affixes as they retain their forms and sounds in both singular and plural forms.

3. i. àràà father àràà 'fathers'
 ii. āssá/aká mother āssá/aká 'mothers'
 iii. étété baby étété, and others. 'babies'

In Eggon, a language of the Plateau language group, Nkamigbo identifies six pluralisation rules. These include:

Zero Affixation:

| Singular | Gloss | Plural |
|-----------|--------|-----------------|
| 4i. Ubing | ground | ubing 'grounds' |
| ii agbi | farm | agbi 'farms' |

Vowel Affixation

| Singular | Gloss | Plural |
|------------|--------|----------------|
| 5i. Onom | tongue | enom 'tongues' |
| ii Ozhé | road | ezhé 'roads' |
| iii Ongbre | rock | angbre 'rocks' |

Reduplication. This could be complete or partial.

| Singular | Gloss | Plural |
|----------|-------|-------------------|
| 6i. aki | tree | akiaki 'trees' |
| ii ekon | knife | ekonekon 'knives' |

Partial Reduplication/Vowel Insertion

- iii. ashko spoon asheshko 'spoons'
 iv. arogo throat ararogo 'throats'

Tonal Permutation

- 7i. agá lizard ágá 'lizards'
 ii. édzu' housefly édzu' 'houseflies'

Vowel Insertion

| | | |
|-------------|----------|---------------------|
| 8i. mada | flute | amada ‘flutes’ |
| ii. kpatu | box | akpatu ‘boxes’ |
| iii. kpazhi | compound | ekpazhi ‘compounds’ |

Mo- Prefixation

| | | |
|-----------|--------|--------------------|
| 9i. ana | mother | moana ‘mothers’ |
| ii. anwye | child | moanwye ‘children’ |
| iii. asi | thief | moasi ‘thieves’ |

From the discussion above, it would appear that Koring and Eggon languages share some pluralisation rules. Still on pluralisation, in Igala, Omachonu (2008), identifies two plural formation rules in nouns which could take the following forms: the use of àm(a), àb(o’). He gives the following examples:

| | | |
|------------|--------|---------|
| 10i. àtá’ | father | àmàtá’ |
| ii. ìyè’ | mother | àmìyè’ |
| iii. ògìjò | elder | àbògìjò |

He explains that while àm(a) as plural morpheme is used for both human and non-human animates, the use of àb(o) is human specific. Similarly, Adejoh (2012) examined the pluralisation processes in Idoma and observed that pluralisation strategies in the language include prefixation, morpheme addition, use of adjectives to indicate number and position, reduplication, mutation and others. In what follows, the paper describes the processes of plural formation in Ufia language.

4. Pluralisation Strategies in Ufia

The following are the pluralisation strategies attested in Ufia:

- i. Vowel Alternation
- ii. Phoneme Replacement/Addition
- iii. Reduplication
- iv. Suppletion
- v. Ifa- suffixation

A. Vowel Alternation

This is a very productive strategy in the language. The initial or succeeding vowel sounds of the nouns in their singular forms are replaced with other vowel sounds. Consider the examples below:

/o/ → /i/

| Singular | Gloss | Plural |
|---------------|-------------|------------------------|
| 11i. Òkóróbìà | boy | Ìkóróbìà ‘boys’ |
| ii. Ogrìnyà | elder | Ìgrìnyà ‘elders’ |
| iii. Odià | girl | Ìdià ‘girls’ |
| iv.. Oloṅ | chief/king | Iloṅ ‘chiefs/kings’ |
| v. Òtógó | shirt/dress | Ìtógó ‘shirts/dresses’ |

/ẹ/ → /a/

| | | |
|------------|--------|----------------|
| vi. Rẹ̀tọ̀ | head | Ràtọ̀ ‘heads’ |
| vii. Rẹ̀ḍa | tongue | Ráda ‘tongues’ |

/k/ Deletion

/ɔ/ → /i/

viii. kòbɔ́ hand

Ìbɔ́ ‘hands’

ix. Kòtuɔ́ ear

Ìtuɔ́ ‘ears’

/e/ → /i/

x. Égwíèninɔ́ nail

Ígwíèninɔ́ ‘nails’

B. Phoneme Replacement/Addition

Using this strategy, the initial phonemes of the nouns affected are either changed, replaced or added to.

| Singular | Gloss | Plural |
|------------|---------|-------------------|
| 12i. Wáítí | child | Bwáítí ‘children’ |
| ii. ɔ́nɔ́ | person | banɔ́ ‘persons’ |
| iii. ùdim | husband | bàdim ‘husbands’ |
| iv. wàdim | man | bwàdim ‘men’ |
| v. kíkɔ́ | leg | bùkɔ́ ‘legs’ |

From the data above, we observe that /b/ is the main plural marker. In addition, the initial vowel sounds of the singular nouns are replaced with /a/. This means that /ɔ/ and /ù/ become /a/ in (ii) and (iii) respectively. Also in (iv), we observe addition of the phoneme /b/ in the plural forms.

C. Reduplication

This is another pluralisation strategy in Ufia. This could be partial or complete. Partial reduplication may involve copying only the consonant or vowel and putting this in prefixal position or adding it to the root in suffixal position. Complete or full reduplication on the other hand involves total copying of the root word. These are exemplified in the language below:

| Singular | Gloss | Plural |
|------------|--------------|-----------------------------------|
| 13i. Banyi | river/stream | banyianyí ‘rivers/streams’ |
| ii. kẹkẹf | bone | kẹkẹfkẹkẹf ‘bones’ |
| iii. Ríché | sand | ríchéríché (heaps/plenty of sand) |

D. Zero Affixation

Nouns in this group do not take any inflectional affixes to form their plural forms. Both the singular and plural forms retain their forms. But in the Ufia language, this phenomenon has not been attested. This is because supposed nouns in this group in other languages have their plural forms in Ufia. For instance:

| Singular | Gloss | Plural |
|-----------|-------|-----------------|
| 14i. Kílú | Hair | gbùtulú ‘hairs’ |
| ii. ríché | sand | rache’ ‘sands’ |
| iii. érié | meat | írié ‘meats’ |

E Use of Cardinal and Ordinal Numerals

These involve the use of numerals to indicate plurals. In the cardinal approach, definite numerals such as one, two, three, etc are used to indicate number or quantity of the noun. On the other hand, the ordinal approach indicates position of the noun by using first, second, third, etc. By attaching

numbers to the following nouns, plurals are formed. This is also referred to as the ordinal approach (see Crystal 2007:321). This indicates position as exemplified below:

| | | |
|------|---|---|
| 15i. | Ólój werivo Chief/king first 'First chief/king' | Ólój ógbífà chief/king second 'Second chief/king' |
| ii. | Ónó werivo Person first 'First person' | Ónó ógbífà Person second 'Second person' |
| iii. | Kilú serivo House first 'First House' | Kilú ógbichà House third 'Third house' |
| iii. | Kètòfó serivo Cap/hat first First Cap/hat' | Kètòfó ogba kúbùò Cap/hats fifth 'Fifth Cap/hat' |
| iv. | Ọdià gwan Girl one 'one girl' | Idià ichà girl three 'three girls' |
| vi. | Òkóróbìà gwan Boy one 'one boy' | Ìkóróbìà ínán boys four 'four boys' |
| vii. | Kètòfó gwan Cap/hat one 'one cap/hat' | kètòfó branẹ cap/hat six 'six caps/hats' |

While nos (i-iv) show the ordinal approach, nos (v-vii) show the cardinal approach to indicate plural forms. We note in the data above that the language observes animacy hierarchy as 'werivo' (first) is used for animates and 'serivo' (first) is used for non-animates. We observe also that both the cardinal and ordinal numerals occur post nominally.

F. *Ifa* - Suffixation

The Ufia language also uses quantifiers (adjectives) to indicate plural forms. /ifà/ (many) is suffixed to an already pluralised noun. It has been stated that one of the plural morphemes in the language is /gb-/ , hence /k-/ in (16i) becomea /gb-) in the plural form even as the vowel /i/ is replaced with /u/ also in the plural form. Consider below:

| | | |
|------|--------------------------------------|---|
| 16i. | Kilú chéj House one One house | Gbùlú ifa Houses many Many houses |
| ii. | Òtógó gwan Dress one One dress | Ìtógó ifa Dresses many Many dresses |
| iii | Rogwà dan Book one One book | Ragwà rafa Books many Many books |

It has already been stated that the Ufia language observes animacy hierarchy. That explains why it is ‘ragwa rafa’ because, while all the other nouns are related to the human body, ragwa (book) is not.

G. Suppletion

Another pluralisation strategy in Ufia is suppletion. This is used to indicate plural sense in nouns and some verbs, and is achieved in such a way that there is a complete change of the plural form from the singular. Suppletion according to Ndimele (1999:62), is a grammatical concept which is used to refer to a situation where there is neither a morphological resemblance nor a phonetic similarity between a root morpheme and its variants. In other words, the root morpheme and its variants look so different that one might be forgiven if one thinks that they are different words. Consider the data below:

| | Singular | Gloss | Plural |
|------|----------|--------|------------------|
| 17i. | Éné | mother | Ìchamè ‘mothers’ |
| iii | Ùrágwá | woman | Brábá ‘women’ |
| ii. | Édé | father | Ìràmə ‘fathers’ |
| iii | Nkènéé’ | is | ebaŋ are |

H. Pronoun

“Person refers to a category used in grammatical description to indicate the number and nature of participants in a situation” (Crystal: 2007: 344). Participants could be first, second, third, etc. Personal pronouns are used when it is clear who or what is being talked about (Leech, Cruickshank and Ivanic in Omachonu 2008). In Ufia, personal pronouns have different forms, each performing different functions. These are exemplified below.

18.

| Person | Singular Subject | Plural Subject | Singular Object | Plural Object |
|-----------------|-------------------|-----------------|-----------------------|-----------------|
| 1 st | <u>Anim I</u> | <u>anyor We</u> | <u>Anim We</u> | <u>Anyor Us</u> |
| 2 nd | Aniya You | <u>Anó You</u> | <u>Anó You</u> | <u>Anó You</u> |
| 3 rd | <u>Ūŋ S/he/it</u> | <u>Ábè They</u> | <u>Ámè Him/her/it</u> | <u>Ábè Them</u> |

I. Genitive Case

The genitive case expresses possessive relationship (Crystal 2007:200). This is demonstrated in Ufia below:

| Person | Singular Genitive | Plural Genitive |
|-----------------|--------------------------|-----------------|
| 1 st | Danim/Wanim Mine | Wamnyor Ours |
| 2 nd | Wammé/dammé/chammé Yours | Wanim Yours |
| 3 rd | Wa/Chammé His/hers/its | Wabé Theirs |

J. Demonstratives

| Singular | Gloss | Plural |
|----------|------------|---------------|
| Ọwaŋ | this | ẹbẹnyen these |
| agbẹŋ | that/those | agbẹŋ |
| Òkóròbìà | ọwaŋ | |
| boy | this | |

| | |
|--------------|-------|
| ‘this boy’ | |
| Ìkóróbbià | eyen |
| boys | these |
| ‘these boys’ | |

Conclusion

This paper has described plural formation strategies in Ufia language. From the discussion, the paper concludes that the plural markers in the language are /b-/, gb-/, *ifa* and others. In phoneme replacement strategy, /o/ and /u/ change to /a/ and /i/ changes to /u/. We observe that vowel alternation also takes place as evident in 11 (iv) and (vi) respectively. In the two strategies, phoneme deletion is an added form. While only the second syllable of the noun is copied in partial reduplication, the whole syllable is copied in complete reduplication. In addition, in suppletion as a pluralisation strategy, the pluralised forms are completely different from their singular counterparts. Moreover, it seems that zero affixation as a plural formation strategy is not attested in the language. This is because nouns in this category unlike in other languages all have plural forms in Ufia. This needs further investigation.

It has been stated earlier that Ufia is an undocumented and unwritten language with very little linguistic study. This paper therefore, sheds light on the language with the hope that it will attract more linguistic studies. Also, the paper contributes not only to the study of minority languages but to African linguistics in general.

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