NON-PARTICIPANT PERSONAL PRONOUNS IN ESAN:
FEATURE GEOMETRY AND REFLEXES OF STRUCTURE

This paper presents a unified analysis of non-participant personal pronouns (i.e. 3rd person) in the Ogwa dialect of Esan (ISH) [Edoid, Benue-Congo: Southern Nigeria]. Non-participant pronouns \( \theta \) ‘he/she/it’ 3.SG and \( e \) ‘they’ 3.PL occur within a number of syntactic contexts as both referential and non-referential elements. This paper will unify these diverse contexts, having the following goals: (1) an analysis of the post-nominal pronoun construction in Esan (e.g. \textit{Omon; \( \theta \) kpolo uwa} Lit: “\textit{Omon; \( \theta \) swept the house}”), (2) an account of the morphosyntactic featural compositions of these pronouns, and (3) a unified account of Esan syntax with respect to pre-verbal positions.

Esan displays the personal pronoun system displayed in table 1, many pronouns displaying a full form and a reduced form, whose occurrence depends on a number of syntactic, phonological, and pragmatic contexts. Gender or case do not manifest in any domain in the language.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
<th>Gloss</th>
<th>Reduced Form</th>
<th>Gloss</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘I/me’</td>
<td>( i\eta )</td>
<td>1.SG.F</td>
<td>( i, \eta )</td>
<td>1.SG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘you (sg.)’</td>
<td>( \omega\eta )</td>
<td>2.SG.F</td>
<td>( \omega\eta )</td>
<td>2.SG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘he/she/it/him/her’</td>
<td>( \eta )</td>
<td>3.SG.F</td>
<td>( \eta )</td>
<td>3.SG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘he himself/she herself’</td>
<td>( \omega\eta\eta )</td>
<td>LOG</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘one’</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>( a )</td>
<td>GEN.PRO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘we/us’</td>
<td>( \omega\beta\eta )</td>
<td>1.PL.F</td>
<td>( \beta\omega ) – ( \eta\omega )</td>
<td>1.PL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘you (pl.)’</td>
<td>( \beta\omega ) – ( \beta\eta )</td>
<td>2.PL.F</td>
<td>( \beta\omega )</td>
<td>2.PL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘they/them’</td>
<td>( \omega\beta\omega )</td>
<td>3.PL.F</td>
<td>( \beta\omega )</td>
<td>3.PL</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1.¹

The third person pronouns above often occur within a “post-nominal pronoun construction”, seen in example 1 (over). The semantic contribution of the pronoun is very subtle and highly variable across speakers, often used in contexts providing confirmation, or with a non-perfect aspectual connotation.

I will argue that within the post-nominal pronoun construction, the “subject” is in a topic position, whereas the pronoun is in the syntactic subject position. Thus, the subject e ‘they’ is within the same subject position as examples 2 and 3 below:

2)  
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[they]  CONT happy
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“They were happy”

3)  
```
[eni  afia  na]  ghon  ghon
[DEF  bird  PROX]  CONT happy
```

“These birds were happy”

I argue that pronominal elements within a post-nominal pronoun construction, as in ex. 1 above, are true referential pronouns (rather than purely agreement markers), inserted to meet a pervasive constraint in the language against an empty subject position in the syntactic structure.

Such post-nominal constructions occur even when the item in the topic position is a pronoun itself, as in 4 below.

4)  
```
[mhan]  [he]  already start  CONT make  dance
```

“We started off dancing, (and then)…”

The selection of the pronoun that occurs in the post-nominal construction is dependent upon the morphosyntactic featural composition of the topic it is referential with. I show within that only third person plural nominals select the 3.pl e ‘they’, whereas all other nominal or pronominal topics select o ‘he/she/it’ 3.sg, including seemingly plural mhan ‘we’ and bha ‘you (all)’. This is shown in table 2 below:

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2 The first line in the examples indicates the spoken form after phonological elision processes. The second line indicates the unreduced syntactic form.
In order to account for this lack of “agreement” between topic and subject within first and second person plural, I argue that they are encoded not with a morphosyntactic feature [Plural], but rather with a feature [Mass]. Thus, these pronouns are better thought of as mass pronouns, akin to the more frequent distinction between mass and count nouns within nominals. In short, mass pronouns, like mass nouns in Esan (e.g. ize ‘rice’, elamẹn ‘meat’), trigger singular morphology, and must be morphosyntactically encoded distinct from countable plural elements.

Moreover, within this paper I configure such pronominal morphosyntactic features [Singular], [Plural], and [Mass] (among others) within a feature geometry employing dominance and underspecification, stemming from ideas in Ritter & Harley (1998), Harley & Ritter (2002), Heap (2002), and Cowper (2005). I do not assume, however, any universal set of features which languages draw from, in line with Mielke (2005, 2008), Haspelmath (2007), among others, who argue against innate linguistic features and categories. Although mhan ‘we’ and bha ‘you (all)’ are glossed with PL, this is merely to facilitate a less complicated description of such words for non-specialists.

Ultimately, this analysis of the post-nominal pronoun construction allows for greater unification of Esan pre-verbal syntax with respect to a number of distinct phenomena. For instance, within relative clauses we find a resumptive pronoun in subject position which agrees with the relativized nominal.

5) **enawai ea nọmẹ ne; kpọlo na ghea**  
   eni  awai [ea]   [ni ọmẹ]   [ni ẹl kpọlo]   [na]   [ghea]  
   DEF  dog  [three]   [REL 1.SG.POSS]   [REL 3.PL big]   [these]   [all]  
   “all three of these big dogs of mine”

   (Lit. the dogs [three] [that mine] [that they are big] [these] [all])

6) **ọnokpiai, ọnio donebe**  
   ọni  okpiai  [ni ọi  de  ọni ebe]  
   DEF  man  [REL 3.SG buy]  DEF  book  
   “the man [that bought the book]” (lit. the man [that he bought the book)
Although this resumptive pronoun is optional, it is highly robust, and is a part of the canonical structure of relative clauses. Such is not the case with respect to objects in relative clauses: here we find no resumptive pronoun in an object position, even optionally.

7) ọnokhu ọ nonokpia mu ona awa na (*ôle)
    oni okhui ni oni okpia mu oni awa na *(ôle)
DEF woman REL DEF man carry DEF dog to *(3.SG.F)
“The woman that the man gave the dog to”
(Lit. The woman, that the man gave the dog to (*her))

Other phenomena to be discussed which relate to this issue include the following: (1) lack of pro-drop, (2) use of pronouns as expletives, and (3) pronouns in negative imperatives.

The paper which I will present will be structured as follows: §1 outlines the personal pronoun system in Esan, providing an exposition as to their distribution and use (e.g. the full vs. reduced form mentioned above). §2 presents the post-nominal pronoun construction, focusing on three areas: §2.1 will explain the morphosyntactic featural compositions of these pronouns in terms of a feature geometry, §2.2 will illustrate its syntactic structure, and §2.3 will explore how this construction ties into a general constraint in Esan against subject-less clauses, using tree diagrams to illustrate. §3 presents preliminary cross-linguistic evidence from related Edoid languages for comparison sake (Emuekpere-Masagbor 1997, Schaefer & Egbokhare 2007), as well as to particular Romance varieties which manifest a similar post-nominal pronoun construction (e.g. discussion of left dislocation, subject clitics, agreement genesis, etc. in Rizzi 1986, Roberge 1990, de Cat 2007, Cournane 2008).

These efforts stem from my Master’s Thesis “Non-participant personal pronouns in Esan”, to be completed August 2010. They are also part of a larger documentation project at the University of Toronto, aimed at producing the first comprehensive description of the Esan language, under the co-ordination of University Professor Keren Rice. This is scheduled for submission for publication in 2011.

**Working references for paper:**


Rizzi, L. Ms. “Locality and left periphery”.


