# A theory of (c)overt object pronouns in Kwa:
# Evidence from Gã

**Claim:** This paper argues that the distribution of null versus overt object pronouns in Gã (and several other Kwa languages) is as a result of their structural position; all overt pronouns are realized in a specifier position while null object pronouns are deleted in a complement position.

**Background:** 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 acknowledged in the literature; the possibility of dropping an object pronoun is not linked to (a) agreement marking (contra Jaeggli 1982; 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  *(**lɛ**).
         A    see  3SG.OBJ
         'Ama saw him/her'.
     b.  Ama na  (***lɛ**).
         A    see  3SG.OBJ
         'Ama saw it'.
     c.  Ama ku    *(**lɛ**).
         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 problem data so far is summarized in (3).

(2)  a.  Ama na *(**lɛ**)     shii etɛ.
         A    see  3SG.OBJ early times three
         'Ama saw him/her/**it** times three '.
     b.  Ama hé  (***lɛ**)     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. But a bigger question arises: What accounts for the natural classes; what explains the uniform realization of the object pronouns in (3-b,c,d) and animate object pronouns in (3-a), to the exclusion of the inanimate object pronoun in (3-a). The answer to this question does not seem obvious at first sight. However, I claim that we can trace the distribution of null versus overt object pronouns

in (3) to the differences between where the object pronoun ends up in the structure at the point of linearization; the overt-null pronoun distinction is a reflection of a specifier-complement asymmetry in the grammar of the language.

**Analysis:** Suppose, following Kayne (1994), that linearization is regulated by the Linear Correspondence Axiom (LCA), then we can show that all instances where the object pronoun is overt involve a configuration where the pronoun is or ends up in a specifier position, in which case the needed structural asymmetry is created for a successful linearization. Conversely, the only instance where the object pronoun is null can be argued to involve a configuration where the pronoun is in a complement composition, a situation that leads to the deletion of the object pronoun in order to create the necessary asymmetry. There are independently-motivated assumptions that make this analysis plausible for the Gã data presented above.

First, following Embick (2004) analysis that the theme argument of a CoS predicate is base-merged in Spec-vP, we can argue that the object pronoun in (1-c) is base-generated in a specifier position. Second, regarding (2-b), following standard assumptions about the syntax of secondary predicate constructions (see, e.g., Citko 2011 ), we can assume that the pronominal argument of the DSP is base-merged in a specfier position. Third, with respect to object pronouns that precede clause-final adverbs, as in (1-c), there is empirical basis to assume that the pronoun ends up in an ex-situ position. If Cinque's (1999) analysis that stacked adverbs crosslinguistically reflect a strict c-command relation, and the standard assumption that adverbs are base-merged in left specifiers are on the right track, then (4) suggests that the position of the object pronoun in (2-a) is a derived one; the pronoun has moved to a higher specifier position.

(4)  a.  Ama na *(**lɛ**)   **jogbaŋŋ shii   étɛ́**.
        A    see  3SG.OBJ  well        times three
     b. *Ama na *(**lɛ**)    **shii   étɛ́  jogbaŋŋ** .
        A    see  3SG.OBJ   times three well
        'Ama saw it well three times.'

The analysis so far takes care of the patterns in (3b-d). For (3-a), we can assume, following Woolford (1999) and Richards (2015) a.o. that animate arguments (here, pronouns) have unique features, something that their inanimate counterparts lack. In the present analysis, we can interpret this to be a movement-triggering property that allows animate pronouns in a complement position to move. If this is correct, then the animate pronoun in (1-a) is in an ex-situ specifier position, where it satisfies the LCA. The (null) inanimate object pronoun in (1-a), which does not move can, therefore, be argued to undergo obligatory deletion because it is in a complement position.

**Consequences:** The above analysis makes two crucial predictions. First, all local person (which are invariably animate) object pronouns will always be overt. Second, languages which do not allow null objects must have independent mechanisms that ensure that object arguments always end up in a derived position. The first prediction is indeed borne out, as first and second person object pronouns are always overt. The second prediction is (as least) borne out in Kwa languages like Ewe (see, Aboh 2005) and Tuwuli (see, Harley 2008).

**Selected References:** Aboh, E. O. (2005). Object shift, verb movemnet and verb reduplication. In *The Oxford handbook of comparative syntax*. ●Huang, J. C.-T. (1984). On the distribution and reference of empty pronouns. *Linguistic Inquiry* 15.●Kayne, R. S. (1994). *The Antisymmetry of syntax*.●Neeleman, A. & K. Szendroi. (2007). Radical pro drop and the morphology of pronouns. *Linguistic Inquiry* 38.●Richards, M. D. 2015. Defective agree, case alternations, and the prominence of person. In *Scales and hierarchies*.● Rizzi, L. (1986). Null objects in Italian and the Theory of pro. *Linguistic Inquiry* 17.● Woolford, E. (1999). Animacy hierarchy effects on object agreement. In *New dimensions in African linguistics and languages*.