



## A familiar definite article in Akan<sup>☆</sup>

Ruby Arkoh<sup>1</sup>, Lisa Matthewson<sup>\*</sup>

*Department of Linguistics, University of British Columbia, Totem Field Studios, 2613 West Mall,  
Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z4, Canada*

Received 12 August 2011; received in revised form 20 September 2012; accepted 24 September 2012  
Available online 26 November 2012

### Abstract

There is a long-standing debate on the nature of definiteness in natural language: does it involve familiarity, uniqueness, or both? This paper contributes to the debate by providing a semantic analysis of the definite article *nu* in Akan (Kwa). We provide evidence that *nu* strictly encodes familiarity; it introduces a presupposition that the relevant discourse referent is present in the common ground between speaker and hearer. In almost every respect it parallels German 'strong' definite articles as analyzed by Schwarz (2009), and thus provides cross-linguistic support for Schwarz's claim that there are definite articles which encode pure familiarity.

Following other researchers, we observe that *nu* can also be used as a third-person singular (animate) pronoun. We argue that in both its determiner and pronominal uses *nu* contributes the same core semantics: familiarity. This is in line with the close parallel between determiners and third person pronouns (cf. Postal, 1966).

© 2012 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Definiteness; Determiners; Pronouns; Akan; Kwa; German

### 1. Introduction

For many decades, researchers have been debating the correct analysis of definite noun phrases. One particular issue of controversy is whether definites encode familiarity, uniqueness, or both; see Frege (1892), Russell (1905), Christophersen (1939), Strawson (1950), Hawkins (1978, 1991), Prince (1981, 1992), Heim (1982, 1990), Kadmon (1987, 1990), Hawkins (1991), Birner and Ward (1994), Lyons (1999), Abbott (1999, 2000, 2001, 2003, 2004), Szabo (2000, 2003), Elbourne (2001), Farkas (2002), Roberts (2003, 2005), among many others, for discussion. One interesting recent advance is that of Schwarz (2009). Schwarz argues that German possesses a distinction between a 'strong' definite article – which enforces familiarity – and a 'weak' definite article, which enforces uniqueness (cf. also Ebert, 1971 for Fering, and see references in Schwarz, 2012 for various Germanic dialects).

The debate about the nature of definite articles has so far focussed largely on Indo-European languages.<sup>2</sup> In this paper we bring data to bear on the issue from Akan (Kwa, Niger-Congo). Akan possesses an article *nu*, which has been analyzed as a definite by Amfo and Fretheim (2005) and Amfo (2006), and which at first glance behaves similarly to

<sup>☆</sup> This paper is based on Chapter 4 of Arkoh (2011); the core analysis and much of the data are taken from that work. Sections 2.3.2, 2.4, 4.2, 4.3 and 5 of this paper are either entirely new, or significantly altered from Arkoh (2011).

<sup>\*</sup> Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 604 822 0415; fax: +1 604 822 9687.

*E-mail addresses:* [arkohru@yahoo.com](mailto:arkohru@yahoo.com) (R. Arkoh), [lisa.matthewson@ubc.ca](mailto:lisa.matthewson@ubc.ca) (L. Matthewson).

<sup>1</sup> Tel.: +1 604 822 0415; fax: +1 604 822 9687.

<sup>2</sup> A few exceptions to this are discussed by Schwarz (2012), including for example work by Wespel (2008) on Mauritian Creole.

English *the*. We see in (1) that discourse-initial mention of an orange disallows *nu*, while subsequent reference to the familiar orange requires *nu*.

- (1) Context: Beginning of conversation.  
*Mù-tó-ò èkùtú (\*nú). Èkùtú \*(nú) yè dèw pápá*  
 1SG.SUBJ-buy-PAST orange (\*FAM) orange \*(FAM) be nice good  
 'I bought an orange. The orange was really tasty.'

However, Akan *nu* behaves unlike English *the* in certain respects. For example, *nu* is absent on both 'person' and 'moon' in (2), while omitting *the* in the English translation is impossible.

- (2) *Ámstròŋ nyí nyímpá àà ó-dzí-i kán tú-ù kó-ò òsirán dù*  
 Armstrong is person REL 3SG.SUBJ-eat-PAST first fly-PAST go-PAST moon top  
 'Armstrong was the first person to fly to the moon.'

In this paper we provide a semantic analysis of *nu*, and investigate the theoretical consequences of the analysis. Following Arkoh (2011), we show that *nu* is very similar empirically to the German strong (familiar) article as discussed by Schwarz (2009). This provides cross-linguistic support for the claim that definites exist which encode purely familiarity, rather than uniqueness.

While we concentrate mainly on the determiner uses of *nu*, we also briefly address its other uses. As pointed out by Amfo and Fretheim (2005), Fretheim and Amfo (2005) and Amfo (2006), *nu* also functions (albeit with different tonal realizations) as a third-person singular animate pronoun, and as a subordinate clause marker. In line with Amfo and Fretheim (2005), Amfo (2006) and Arkoh (2011),<sup>3</sup> we argue that the determiner and the pronominal uses of *nu* are formed from one underlying morpheme; we further argue that the tonal differences between the two uses are the predictable result of syntactic position. Our analysis thus also provides cross-linguistic support for Elbourne's (2001, 2005) proposed close connection between third person pronouns and determiners (see originally Postal, 1966).

The paper is structured as follows. In the remainder of the introduction we provide background on the Akan language, our methodology, the three distinct syntactic functions of *nu*, and the theoretical notion of familiarity. In Section 2 we argue that the determiner *nu* requires that the hearer be familiar with the referent of the noun phrase; it crucially does not merely require that the referent be uniquely identifiable (as argued by Fretheim and Amfo, 2005; Amfo, 2006, 2007). We also show that the determiner *nu* is almost identical to the German strong article of Schwarz (2009), and that the main empirical difference between *nu* and the German strong article results from the absence in Akan of an alternative weak definite article. In Section 3 we show that pronominal *nu*, just like determiner *nu*, requires familiarity, and in addition requires salience (as well as animacy). In Section 4 we take steps towards a unification of the determiner and pronominal uses. We argue (following Amfo, 2006) that the tonal differences between determiner and pronominal *nu* are predictable: *nu* bears high tone when it functions as a determiner, but is inherently toneless when it functions as a pronoun (pace Amfo, 2006). We suggest that *nu* itself does not occupy the D position; instead, high tone activates a null D head (cf. Manfredi, 2011, and pace Arkoh, 2011). In Section 5 we briefly compare the Akan facts to those of some other Kwa languages. We show that Akan differs from its relatives in obligatorily marking definiteness via an overt article. Thus, unlike in e.g. Yorùbá (Ajiboye, 2005), a bare noun in Akan cannot be used to refer to a familiar individual. Section 6 concludes.

### 1.1. Akan

Akan belongs to the Kwa sub-family of the Niger-Congo family. It is spoken mainly in the southern part of Ghana and part of Ivory Coast. In Ghana approximately 44% of the population speaks Akan as a native language. This group comprises about 7,753,830 people, according to Osam (2004).

Akan has three main dialects and many sub-dialects. The three main dialects are Akuapem Twi (spoken mainly in the Eastern Region of Ghana), Asante-Twi (spoken mainly in the Ashanti Region), and Fante (spoken in the Central Region and some parts of the Western Region). The dialects are mutually intelligible, with only slight variations. The dialect we will focus on most closely here is Fante.

When presenting Akan data, we represent vowels according to their pronunciation in the IPA. Consonants are given as in the standard orthography of the language. Where we cite data from other sources, we preserve the original spelling.

<sup>3</sup> but unlike Fretheim and Amfo (2005).

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/935749>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/935749>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)