Reflexive Marking and Related Functions in Akan

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Akan has a morphological means of marking reflexive constructions. Apart from the use of the marker in coding direct reflexive, there are other functional features of the marker. There are verbs classified into body care action verbs, nontranslational motion verbs and attitudinal verbs. These semantic categories of verbs employ the form used in reflexive marking in the syntactic constructions they occur in. It is shown that the marker in question is derived from the Akan word for ‘body,’ confirming the already established fact that body part nouns are frequently used in African languages as sources for the reflexive marker.

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1. Introduction

The study of reflexives is one area of syntax-semantics analysis that has been given attention in virtually all theories of grammar. Since the cross-linguistic and theoretical literature on reflexive is so widespread and diverse, I am not going to attempt to provide even the minimum overview in this paper. This paper has a very straight forward goal: to examine the structure in Akan that can be appropriately classified as reflexive and to discuss the other functions of the form that permits us to identify structures as such. By implication, therefore, the paper is restricted to morphological reflexivity, with no attempt at examining lexical reflexivity. In terms of framework, this paper is functionally biased, as the references underpinning the study will make clear.

Regarding studies in Akan, not much has been done in the area of reflexivization. Two of such studies, though, are Saah (1989) and Carden (1987). These studies adopt the Government and Binding principles to analyze reflexive constructions in Akan. Of

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course, there is also Christaller’s (1875) descriptive overview of Akan reflexives. Keeping the functional orientation of the paper in mind, it would be seen that the approach adopted here tilts more to the semantics of reflexives than to the constraints on the syntax of Akan reflexives.

Faltz (1985, pp.3–4) offers the following parametric description of what he calls “an archotypical reflexive context.”

...given any language, we can isolate a class of simple clauses expressing a two-argument predication, the arguments being a human agent or experiencer on the one hand and a patient on the other. Such clauses will consist of a verb, denoting the predicate, two noun phrases, referring to the arguments, and any tense-aspect, modal, agreement, or other grammatical material required by the syntax. ... Now, if the language has a grammatical device which specifically indicates that the agent/experiencer and the patient in such clauses are in fact the same referent, then that grammatical device will be called the primary reflexive strategy of that language. (1985, pp.3–4).

Lichtenberk (1985, p.26) defines it as a situation in which “a participant stands in some relation to himself/herself/itself rather than to any other”. Kemmer (1993), proceeding from a predominantly semantic perspective, describes the reflexive as when “a referential entity is involved in an event in which it is predicated in relation to itself.” (1993, p.43) Givon (1990, p.628) also says that in terms of a syntactic definition, a reflexive is a structure in which “the subject is coreferent with the object, and thus acts upon itself.” Thus, the notion of coreferentiality is very central to the phenomenon of reflexivization. This should be kept in mind as we move into the discussion of the reflexive form in Akan.

2. Reflexive Marking

One parameter that can be used in the typological classification of languages is the system of reflexive marking. While some languages have only one form, there are languages that have more than one form. (Kemmer 1993; Frązyngier 2000) Akan is a one-form language. As the discussion below will make clear, this single form is used for what has been described as the “direct reflexive” (Kemmer 1993; Waltereit 2000) as well as other functions.

2.1. Direct Reflexive Marking

In Akan, the reflexive is morphologically marked through a combination of a possessive pronoun (POSS) and the morpheme ho ‘self’ (POSS + ho). Sentences (1a) and (1b) illustrate reflexivization in Akan.
1a. Kofi  ku-u  no  ho
    Kofi  kill-COMPL  3SG POSS  self
    Kofi killed himself.

b. Ama  e-pira  no  ho
    Ama  PERF-hurt  3POSS  self
    Ama has hurt herself.

When the two participants in an event or action have the same referent, the POSS + ho construction will be used. As has been pointed (Faltz 1985, Givon 1990, Kemmer 1993), the crucial parameter in reflexivization is coreference. According to Kemmer (1993, pp.43–44), “coreference is an entirely semantic notion, defined in terms of participants rather than linguistic expressions such as pronouns. Coreference ... means that two participants in a single event frame designate the same entity in the described situation.” When a language has the linguistic resources to mark this coreferentiality, it is said to have reflexive marking. (Kemmer 1993, p.44)

The sentences in (1) illustrate the use of the reflexive marking in Akan. Syntactically, the reflexive form occupies the direct object position with the antecedent in the subject position. As pointed out in Saah (1989), the syntactic restriction that has been referred to as the “clausemate condition” applies to Akan. This means that in Akan the scope of reflexivity is limited to the clause; that is, the reflexive marker and its antecedent must occur within the same clause.

Semantically, the agent responsible for the action is also the same as the entity that is the target of the action—the theme. In other words, the two semantic roles of agent and theme are integrated in the same entity. Kemmer uses the labels Initiator and Endpoint in place of agent-theme (or agent-patient). The characterization of the reflexive given above represents what Kemmer calls the direct reflexive. This is the prototypical reflexive.

Typically, the verbs which permit the direct reflexive construction are those that would normally allow two NP arguments (2a and 2b) that are not coreferential.

2a. Kofi  e-ku  Yaw
    Kofi  PERF-kill  Yaw
    Kofi has killed Yaw.

b. Ama  e-pira  Araba
    Ama  PERF-hurt  Araba
    Ama has hurt Araba.

2.2. Body Care Actions

Besides the direct reflexive, the POSS + ho construction is used in other situations. One of these is what Kemmer (1993) calls “grooming or body care actions.” These are
actions related to the cosmetic preparation, broadly construed, of the body like washing, dressing. In Akan, the following words referring to grooming actions are used with POSS + ho: *tutuwu* ‘wash’ (with sponge/wash cloth), *siesie* ‘dress’, *pepa* ‘wipe’ (as after a shower), *sera* ‘smear, apply oil to the skin’, *twerew* ‘scratch’. These can be used in sentences as in (3).

3a. Kofi siesie-e no ho
    Kofi dress-COMPL 3SG POSS self
    Kofi dressed.

b. Ama sera-a no ho
    Ama smear-COMPL 3SG POSS self
    Ama smeared oil on her body.

c. Araba pepa-a no ho
    Araba wipe-COMPL 3SG POSS self
    Araba wiped herself (after showering).

Such verbs have been described as coding “actions carried out by an individual on him or herself.” (Kemmer 1993, p.16) There are some languages which mark such actions separately from the reflexive. In Kemmer’s study, she states, based on her cross-linguistic data, that such actions “represent situation type that is very frequently, if not universally, middle-marked in languages with middle markers.” (Kemmer 1993, p.55) For this reason, she calls these “body action middles.”

As can be seen from the examples in (3), Akan marks these actions the same way as proper reflexives. This puts Akan in the category of languages which use the same form to mark reflexives as well as middle events, what Kemmer calls the “one form languages.” (see also Frązynger 2000, p.128)

The sentences in (3) do not represent the prototypical reflexive construction because when these actions are carried out by one person on another, the same coding mechanism, (POSS + ho), is used, as illustrated in (4).

4a. Kofi siesie-e Ebo no ho
    Kofi dress-COMPL Ebo 3SG POSS self
    Kofi dressed up Ebo.

b. Ama sera-a Esi no ho
    Ama smear-COMPL Esi 3SG POSS self
    Ama smeared oil on Esi.
c. Araba pepa-a Aba no ho
   Araba wipe-COMPL Aba 3SG POSS self
   Araba wiped Aba (after giving her a bath).

When the NPs Ebo (4a), Esi (4b), and Aba (4c) are removed, leaving the POSS + ho forms in the postverbal position, we will be left with the same sentences as in (3). This creates ambiguities regarding the referents of the possessive pronouns. In other words, the referents of those pronouns could be the entities in subject position or some entities who may have been mentioned in the discourse context.

The argument that (3a-c) are not true reflexives comes out stronger if the theme NPs are plural, as shown in (5) and (6). In (5a) and (5b), the post-verbal NPs are plural. Consequently, the possessive pronouns that combine with the reflexive marker ho are also in the plural. Obviously, there is no coreferentiality relationship between the agent and theme NPs even though the reflexive coding is used, implying that the POSS + ho coding strategy used here does not encode true reflexivity.

5a. Kofi siesie-e Ebo na Akosua hɔn ho
    Kofi dress-COMPL Ebo and Akosua 3PLU POSS self
    Kofi dressed up Ebo and Akosua.

b. Ama sera-a Esi na Ato hɔn ho
   Ama smear-COMPL Esi and Ato 3PLU POSS self
   Ama smeared oil on Esi and Ato.

6a. Kofi siesie-e hɔn ho
    Kofi dress-COMPL 3PLU POSS self
    Kofi dressed them up.

b. Ama sera-a hɔn ho
   Ama smear-COMPL 3PLU POSS self
   Ama smeared oil on them.

2.3. Nontranslational Motion

Another situation in which the POSS + ho is used is in relation to what Kemmer calls “nontranslational motion.” Nontranslational motion involves verbs “which denote actions of motor manipulation of the body or a body part without any particular change of location of the body.” (Kemmer 1988, p.56) In Akan, these include dan ‘turn’, tua ‘turn’, tuo ‘pull’. When combined with POSS + ho we have sentences such as in (7).
7a. O-twa no ho
   3SG-turn 3SG POSS self
   He turns (him/herself).

b. o-dan no ho
   3SG-turn 3SG POSS self
   S/he turn (her/himself).

Though these are body movements, there is no trajectory, meaning that the body does not travel along a path from one location to another. For example, the action conveyed by (7a) involves changing the orientation of the body without a pathway. Kemmer describes such actions as follows:

Verbs in this class may be characterized as actions denoting change in configuration of the body or part of the body. These actions are manipulations of the physical shape of the body... The body functions as the endpoint of an action initiated by the volitional aspect of the person carrying out the action. (1993, pp.67-68)

Even though, generally, these verbs do not involve a travel along a path, it should be pointed out that for a verb like twe as exemplified in (8), there could be a limited trajectory.

8a. Ama twe-e no ho
    Ama withdraw-COMPL 3SG POSS self
    Ama pulled herself/Ama withdrew.

This sentence reports a situation where may be Ama must have been standing in the way of another person. To make the other person’s path unencumbered, Ama needed to move aside. The degree of movement, however, does not have to involve an extended path. For this reason, this verb can be maintained as a nontranslation one.

Nontranslational actions are semantically in the same category as the body grooming actions and contrast with the true reflexive in the same way. These actions are such that the body takes part in the process and does so “specifically as part of the self.” This means that in the nontranslational actions, there is no conceptual separation between the Initiator and the Endpoint of the action because the action encompasses the body as an active participant.

Syntactically, in constructions involving nontranslation verbs, there has to be a coreferential relation between the subject of the clause and the reflexive marker.

9a. Ekua twe-e no ho
    Ekua pull-COMPL 3SG POSS self
    Ekua pulled herself/Esi withdrew.
b. Ekua twe-e abofra no
    Ekua pull-COMPL child DEF
    Ekua pulled the child/ *Ekua withdrew the child.

The semantics of *tue ‘pull’ primarily involves an agent who acts on a theme which is separate from the agent. However, when the agent and the theme refer to the same entity, then it has reflexive meaning.

The parameter of coreferentiality demanded by the nontranslational verbs sets them apart from the body care verbs. In examples (4) and (5) I showed that where body care verbs are concerned, there is no coreferential restriction on the reflexive marker and the subject of the sentence.

2.4. Attitudinal States

The POSS + ho is also used in what I call Attitudinal actions, but referred to as Emotional middle by Kemmer. The verbs occurring in this category are limited; they include nu ho ‘repent’, kyere ho ‘be haughty’, bu ho ‘respect’, as illustrated in (10).

10a. Banyin no nu-u no ho
    man the repent-COMPL 3SG POSS self
    The man repented.

b. Banyin no kyere no ho
    man the show 3SG POSS self
    The man is haughty.

Since these attitudinal actions are essentially mental, it means that the states they denote are located in the same individual. There is no conceptual separation between the Initiator and the Endpoint. Like the body grooming and nontranslational actions, the attitudinal actions are less transitive than the regular reflexive.

In terms of diachronic development, the use of POSS + ho in a number of situations can be explained in terms of the process of co-lexicalisation. In other words, the combination POSS + ho has become part of some lexical items. In addition to the examples such as twa ho ‘turn (around)’, twe ho ‘pull (withdraw)’, and dan ho ‘turn (around)’ given so far, I can also cite the combination dwen ho ‘think about.’ This co-lexicalised verb contrasts with the root form dwen ‘think.’ The former is used with two NP arguments whereas the latter is used with only one NP argument as shown in (11). This demonstrates a situation of valence change. Whereas the root verb is a one place predicate, in combination with POSS + ho, the valence of the verb is increased to two.
11a. Kofi re-dwen
   Kofi PROG-think
   Kofi is thinking.

b. *Kofi re-dwen Ama
   Kofi PROG-think
   Kofi is thinking about Ama.

c. Kofi re-dwen Ama no ho
   Kofi PROG-think Ama 3SG POSS self
   Kofi is thinking about Ama.

12a. Kofi re-dwen no ho
     Kofi PROG-think 3SG POSS self
     Kofi is thinking about himself.

b. Kofi re-dwen mo ho
     Kofi PROG-think 1SG POSS self
     Kofi is thinking about me.

The use of ho, therefore, is a case of grammaticalization where a lexical item has come to be used as a grammatical item, in this case to mark reflexivization. Of course, as pointed out, some of the verbs that take ho do not have a reflexive meaning. For this second class of verbs, ho has been extended to be part of existing lexical items in a process of co-lexicalisation.

3. Historical Source

Within the framework of grammaticalization, a number of studies, adopting a cross-linguistic typological perspective, have examined the source and development of reflexive markers. Studies such as Kemmer (1993), Heine (2000), and Schladt (2000) have approached the issue with fairly good emphasis on the sources of reflexive markers in African languages. A notable finding from these studies, as clearly articulated by Schladt (2000, p.110), is that “In Africa, body parts are almost exclusively the source of reflexive markers.” Indeed, body parts as sources of reflexive markers appear to be an areal property of African languages.

The case of the source of the reflexive marker in Akan follows this areal body part dominance. As the discussion and examples in the main body of this paper have hinted, the reflexive form in Akan, ho, derives from the word for body. As pointed out by Christaller (1933, p.77, originally 1881), ho refers to “the human frame; the whole body; the whole person.” In Akan, if someone wanted to express the fact that they have bodily
pains, they would say:

13a. Me ho-nam ye me yaw
1SG POSS body-flesh be 1SG OBJ pain
I have bodily pains.

Similarly, if you wanted to know how someone was feeling, you would ask:

13b. Wo ho te den?
2SG POSS body be how
How is your body?/How are you?

So obviously that the source of the reflexive form is situated in the noun ‘body’ is not in doubt. A more interesting dimension, however, is the path of development of this noun form into a grammatical marker. From its meaning as a noun, the form ho ‘body’, has developed to become a reflexive marker. In its use as a reflexive marker, it maintains the possessive form that goes with it as a noun. This has been amply demonstrated in the earlier discussion. Its use to mark reflexivity has been extended into uses that are modelled on the direct reflexive but which do not mark reflexive meaning. This is what we saw in the discussion of the body care actions, nontranslational motion and the attitudinal states.

An examination of the historical source of the reflexive in Akan leads us into a discovery that has a supporting implication for an aspect of the theory of grammaticalization. As explained earlier, ho ‘body’ has developed from a noun into the reflexive marker, a grammatical form. At the same time, it has developed into a postposition which refers to the outer form or outside of something. This meaning comes through in the following example:

14a. Abofra no no ho a-yɛ fi
child DEF 3SG POSS body PERF-be dirty
The child’s body is dirty/The child is dirty.

b. Adaka no no ho a-yɛ fi
box DEF 3SG POSS body PERF-be dirty
The box (its outside) is dirty.

c. Adaka no no mu a-yɛ fi
box DEF 3SG POSS inside PERF-be dirty
The inside of the box is dirty.

As a postposition, ho contrasts with a postposition like mu ‘inside.’ This is evident
when we compare (14b) and (14c).

Among linguists involved in the study of grammaticalization, it has been argued that the process of grammaticalization involves chains:

Recent studies in grammaticalization suggest that the development of grammatical categories is the result of an interaction between cognitive and pragmatic operations, and that this development may lead to the rise of continuous linguistic structures which have been referred to as grammatical chains. (Heine 1992, p.335)

Within the concept of grammatical chains, it has also been recognized that in addition to lexical items developing into grammatical items along a single cline, there are cases where the development of grammatical forms from lexical sources takes place “along two or possibly more different clines.” (Hopper and Traugott 1993, p.112) The term polygrammaticalization, introduced by Craig (1991), has been adopted to characterize this phenomenon. Craig (1991, p.486) defines polygrammaticalization as “a multiplicity of grammaticalization chains that may originate in one particular lexical morpheme.” Heine (1992, p.354) explains that polygrammaticalization is when “one and the same morpheme is the source of more than one chain.”

Craig (1991) provides an extensive discussion of a case of polygrammaticalization in Rama, a language spoken on the Atlantic coast of Nicaragua. In Rama, the verb bang ‘go’ is identified as being the source of relational preverbs in the argument-marking domain and at the same time contributing grammatical forms in the aspect/modality domain. (Craig 1991, pp.480-488)

Heine also shows that in Ewe, a language that stretches from the south-eastern border of Ghana into Togo, the auxiliary le ‘be at’ instantiates polygrammaticalization:

On the one hand, it has given rise to a multipurpose preposition whose main function is to introduce adjuncts or oblique cases roles... On the other hand, the auxiliary le has been employed in periphrastic locative constructions which have developed into verbal aspect categories... and has assumed the function of a present progressive and a present ingressive aspect marker... (Heine 1992, pp.354-355)

The case of ho in Akan is an example of the process of polygrammaticalization. As the evidence shows, ho ‘body’ originally a noun (and still so, reflecting the Hopperian principle of divergence (Hopper 1991)), has developed reflexive and postpositional meanings.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined the nature of the morphological form that marks reflexives in Akan. As laid out in the paper, Akan uses the possessive pronoun and the form ho (POSS + ho) to mark reflexives; that is, the constructions in which the initiator and
the endpoint of an action are embodied in the same participant. In syntactico-semantic terms, the reflexive requires coreferentiality between the subject and the direct object of the sentence. It has also been shown that as has been established for many languages, the form used to mark reflexives in Akan, is used to mark situations that are not strictly reflexive. This is why in Kemmer’s terms, it is important to make a distinction between verbs that code direct reflexives and others that code non-direct reflexives as such body care action verbs, nontranslational motion verbs and attitudinal verbs.

The paper also explored the historical source of the form used to mark reflexives in Akan. The discussion in Section 3 of the paper confirms what has been established about African languages: that body part items are frequently employed in marking reflexivity. Furthermore, it has been shown that the noun ho ‘body’ which has developed grammatical function as a reflexive marker, has, at the same time, also developed a postpositional meaning. This information provides justification for the study of grammaticalization phenomena as a legitimate area of linguistic inquiry.

References