
Nominal Plurality in Alago

Emmanuel Chukwunonso Ikeomu¹ Chikelu I. Ezenwafor-Afuecheta²

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

ikeomuchukwunonsoemmanuel@gmail.com¹

ci.ezenwafor@unizik.edu.ng²

Abstract

*There is a widespread distribution of nominal plurality in the world's languages. However, languages differ in their formal encoding of nominal plurality. Adopting a descriptive approach, this study investigates nominal plurality in Alago, an endangered Idomoid language spoken in Nasarawa state, Nigeria. It identifies and describes the plural formation strategies attested in Alago. It also discusses the morpho-phonological operations characterizing the identified strategies. Using a structured questionnaire, primary language data are elicited from three native speakers of Alago. In addition, secondary language data on Alago are drawn from Adagye & Abdullahi's 2011 dictionary of Alago. Findings from the analysis of data show that Alago adopts four strategies in the formation of plural nouns. These strategies include: vowel alternation for mostly human nouns/kinship terms, the plural morpheme *awo* for inanimate and animate nouns (animal nouns), zero marking for mostly non count nouns and post nominal quantifiers such as *lewa* and *nwashika*.*

Key words: plurality, nominals, Alago, Idomoid, vowel alternation, zero marking

1. Introduction

Pluralization is attested across languages. A plural is a form which refers to more than one. It is one of the grammatical values of the grammatical categories of number. It is not uncommon that a plural denotes two or more of something, although it may also denote more than fractional, zero or negative amounts. The basic evidence for the category of number is observed in the distinction between singular and plural in relation to nouns (see Lyons 1968, Robins 1971). Languages differ in the strategy adopted for encoding plurality. Some languages express plurality via morphological marking on nouns in form of affixation, stem change and the partial or full reduplication of the stem. Likewise, other languages encode plurality via the use of a plural tone, plural word, plural clitic or zero plural (Dryer 2013). A language could combine two or more methods in the encoding of plurality with one of the methods being the primary strategy.

Number can be marked in categories such as nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives and determiners. Languages tend to have distinct plural forms for categories which are used in agreement with the number value of the associated nouns. In French for instance, verbs often agree with the subject (noun) in number, person and gender. This work however focuses on the encoding of number/plurality on the noun category. Little or no research has been carried out on nominal plurality in Alago. This work therefore serves as a preliminary attempt at a descriptive study of pluralization strategies in Alago. The rest of the paper is structured as follows: Section 1.1 gives an ethnolinguistic background of Alago. Section 2 reviews the formal manifestations of plurality in a number of African languages. Section 3 discusses the strategies for encoding nominal plurality in Alago and section 4 gives a summary and conclusion of the research findings.

1.1 Ethnolinguistic Information on Alago

Alago is classified as an Idomoid language of the Benue Congo subgroup of the Niger-Congo language family. It is spoken in settlements such as Keana, Doma, Obi and Assakio in the present day Nasarawa state in the North Central part of Nigeria. Historically, the Alagos are said to have migrated from the defunct Jukun kingdom in the present day Taraba state, Nigeria. In Nasarawa state, the Alago language coexists with a more dominant Hausa language. Although Alago has over two hundred speakers, it is considered as endangered. It has no standard orthography. Ogaji & Abdullahi (2011), claim that the Alago language faces the danger of going into extinction.

2. Nominal Plurality

The number category is a universally attested feature in spoken and written languages. A plural is a form of noun which refers to more than one person or thing. Most commonly therefore, plurals are used to denote two or more of an entity. The plural of nouns typically denote a quantity other than the default quantity represented by a noun. The default quantity is assumed to be the singular form. As noted earlier, the basic evidence of the category number is observed in the distinction between singular and plural in relation to nouns.

Dryer (2013) states that there are basically two ways by which languages indicate plurality. In a sample of 1066 languages surveyed by Dryer, he observes that the most common strategy for encoding nominal plurality involves a change in the morphological form of the noun (affixation, reduplication, stem change). The second most common strategy involves the use of a plural word which has the same function as a plural affix but is a separate word modifying the noun. Other formal manifestations of plurality

attested in the survey include: plural tone, plural clitic and zero plural.

Many African languages are known to encode nominal plurality via a combination of methods. In other words, some of these languages adopt a number of strategies in the formal marking of nominal plurality. In some cases, one of the many strategies is seen as the primary method of encoding plurality. In the study of pluralization in Eggon, Nkamigbo (2011) identifies four pluralization strategies namely: zero affixation, tonal permutation, vowel alternation, reduplication and prefixation. She illustrates with the following examples:

Table 1 Pluralization in Eggon

	Strategies	Singular	Plural
1.	zero affixation	ubing ‘ground’	ubing ‘many grounds’
2.	prefixation	ana ‘mother’	mo-ana ‘mothers’
3.	vowel alternation	onom ‘tongue’	enom ‘tongues’
4.	reduplication	aki ‘trees’	akiaki ‘trees’
5.	tonal permutation	àgá ‘lizard’	ágá ‘lizards’

Anagbogu (2005) studies nominal plurality in Koring. He identifies five formal manifestations of plurality which include the post nominal plural word *gbɔ̀dɔ̀rɔ̀*, the plural prefix *ghi* and zero affixation amongst others. He describes the plural word *gbɔ̀dɔ̀rɔ̀* as the primary and most productive strategy for the encoding of plurality in Koring. A large number of Koring nouns are marked for number using the plural word strategy. He illustrates with the examples given in table 2 below:

Table 2 Pluralization in Koring

	Strategies	Singular	Plural
6.	plural word	letɔ 'head'	letɔ gbɔdɔrɔ 'heads'
7.	prefixation	ilagba 'woman'	gbilagba 'women'
8.	zero affixation	araa 'father'	araa 'fathers'

The occurrence of plural markers may vary along two dimensions: animacy and obligatoriness. Haspelmath (2013) observes that the animacy dimension involves a contrast between animate (especially human) noun and inanimate nouns. In some languages for instance, the plural of animate/human nouns are marked differently from that of inanimate and animal nouns. In the obligatoriness dimension, Haspelmath distinguishes between non-occurrence of the plural marker, optional occurrence and obligatory occurrence. These manifestations of these broad dimensions are evident in many African languages.

In the study of plural formation in Igala, Omachonu (2003, 2008) distinguishes between the plural markers; the plural morpheme *ab* co-occurs with human specific terms while the plural morpheme *am* co-occurs with animate objects. Similarly, Ezenwafor (2017) identifies two plural marking strategies in Etulo (an Idomoid language), anchored on the two broad dimensions proposed in Haspelmath (2013). These strategies include vowel alternation and the use of the prenominal plural word *emi*. She observes that the plural of Etulo human nouns are marked differently from that of inanimate and animal nouns. Also, number marking in Etulo may be obligatory or optional depending on the category of the noun. Human nouns/kinship terms are obligatorily marked for number using the strategy of vowel alternation as shown in (9a-c). On the other hand, inanimate and animate nouns are optionally marked for number using the prenominal plural word *emi* and other

quantifiers such as *kwùbà* ‘many’ and numerals as shown in (10a-c). She illustrates using the following examples:

		Singular		Plural
9)	a.	ònwè ‘child’	ènwè	‘children’
	b.	óbâ ‘husband’	ébâ	‘husbands’
	c.	óngiâ ‘woman’	éngiâ	‘women’
10)	a.	ṅgísè ‘person’	emi ṅgísè	‘people’
	b.	áfê ‘book’	áfê kwùbà	‘many books’
	c.	òkà àdî ‘Adi’s friend’	èmí òkà àdî	‘Adi’s friends’

3. Nominal Plurality in Alago

Nominal plurality in Alago as discussed in this work is restricted to the noun category. From the available data, four major pluralization strategies are attested in Alago. They include: vowel alternation, prefixation of the plural morpheme, zero marking and postnominal quantifiers. The occurrence of some Alago plural markers varies along the dimensions of animacy and obligatoriness. In the following subsections, the attested strategies are further discussed.

3.1 Vowel alternation

The process of vowel alternation involves the substitution of a vowel with another. In the case of Alago, the plural of human nouns is exclusively marked by vowel alternation. The word initial vowel of a singular noun differs from that of the plural form. The /o/ vowel found in the word initial position of Alago singular human nouns is substituted with vowel /a/ in the plural form. This means that the singular and plural forms of the noun are the same in every respect except at the word initial position as a result of vowel alternation. It

is also observed that the formal marking of nominal plurality is obligatory for Alago human nouns. Table 4 illustrates instances of vowel alternation in Alago:

Table 4 Vowel alternation in Alago

	Alternating vowels	Singular	Plural
11)	o → a	onyia ‘woman’	anyia ‘women’
12)	o → a	omhuo ‘man’	amhuo ‘men’
13)	o → a	oyinomhuo ‘boy’	ayinomhuo ‘boys’
14)	o → a	oyinonyia ‘girl’	ayinonyia ‘girls’
15)	o → a	oyigine ‘brother’	ayigine ‘brothers’
16)	o → a	oyimeme ‘baby’	ayimeme ‘babies’

3.2 Zero marking

The zero marking strategy mostly applies to uncountable nouns such as *òyí* ‘urine’ and *ola* ‘fire’¹. Exceptions to the applicability of zero marking on uncountable nouns could be seen with count nouns such as *oka* ‘chair’ and *efu* ‘firewood’. The zero marking method is described as a pluralization strategy in which the singular form of the noun is neither phonologically nor morphologically altered. In other words, the plural noun has the same form with the singular

¹ The disambiguation of number related meanings in constructions involving Alago uncountable nouns may require the grammatical encoding of number via other means such as the use of grammatical contexts, numeral modifiers/quantifiers, and measurement units.

noun by default. There seems to be no overt marking of nominal plurality. More instances of zero marking in Alago nouns are given in table 4.1 below:

Table 4.1 Zero marking

	Singular	Plural
17)	òyí ‘urine’	òyí ‘urine’
18)	umwua ‘salt’	umwua ‘salt’
19)	èfú ‘leaf’	èfú ‘leaves’
20)	éfū ‘firewood’	éfū ‘firewoods’
21)	inyo ‘water’	inyo ‘water’
22)	ola ‘fire’	ola ‘fire’
23)	oka ‘chair’	oka ‘chairs’
24)	òyí ‘blood’	òyí ‘blood’

3.3 Prefixation of *Àwó*

The prefixation of the plural morpheme *àwó* is the most common, productive and primary method of nominal plurality in Alago. The plural morpheme is prefixed to the singular form of the noun to indicate plurality. Many Alago nouns are marked for plurality using this strategy. It is applicable to inanimate and animate (-human) nouns. Consider the following examples:

Table 4.2 Prefixation of *Awo*

	Singular	Plural
25)	emu ‘nose’	awemu ‘noses’
26)	oba ‘key’	awoba ‘keys’
27)	ikhoho ‘pigeon’	awikhoho ‘pigeons’
28)	oyi ‘picture’	awoyi ‘pictures’
29)	iyimebe ‘mirror’	awiyimebe ‘mirrors’

30)	ogwudu	‘bed’	awogwudu	‘beds’
31)	obaraba	‘matchet’	awobaraba	‘matchets’
32)	ewaba	‘sword’	aweaba	‘swords’
33)	ana	‘dream’	awana	‘dreams’
34)	abho	‘hand’	awabho	‘hands’
35)	okpa	‘book’	awokpa	‘books’
36)	iwo	‘dog’	awiwo	‘dogs’
37)	inyoho	‘star’	awinyoho	‘stars’
38)	inyi	‘nail’	awinyi	‘nails’
39)	arika	‘ring’	awarika	‘rings’
40)	oda	‘bridge’	awoda	‘bridges’
41)	igbe	‘gun’	awigbe	‘guns’
42)	itimi	‘car’	awitimi	‘cars’
43)	ewa	‘knife’	awewa	‘knives’
44)	ikpowu	‘goat’	awikpowu	‘goats’
45)	ikpomu	‘lamp’	awikpomu	‘lamps’
46)	ole	‘house’	awole	‘houses’
47)	onyikpenu	‘camel’	awonyikpenu	‘camels’
48)	opu, opunu	‘door’	awopu, awopunu	‘doors’
49)	oturubasa	‘bottle’	awoturubasa	‘bottles’
50)	igweyi	‘razor’	awigweyi	‘razors’

Note that the occurrence of the plural morpheme *àwó* is characterized by the phonological processes of assimilation and elision. The word final vowel of the plural morpheme realized as /o/ is assimilated by the word initial vowel of the singular noun to which it is affixed. This triggers an elision of the of the assimilated word final vowel of the plural morpheme (see 51a-c). In spoken and fast speech therefore, the plural morpheme *àwó* is perceived as *aw* + the

word initial vowel of the noun to which it is attached. The following examples are illustrative:

àwó + singular noun → assimilation → elision = plural

- 51) a. àwó + ebwu
 aweebwu → awebwu ‘spoons’
- b. àwó + igweyi
 awiigweyi → awigweyi ‘razors’
- c. àwó + abwa
 awáabwa → awabwa ‘calabash’

3.4 Postnominal Quantifiers

In addition to the primary pluralization strategy, quantifiers such as *lèwà*’ and *’nwàshikà* are used to express plurality. They are equivalents of the English quantifiers *many* and *plenty*. The Alago quantifiers, *lèwà*’ and *’nwàshikà* occur in post nominal positions in relation to the nouns that they modify for number. They co-occur with a large number of Alago nouns much like the plural morpheme *àwó*. The *lèwà* and *’nwàshikà*’ quantifiers are used interchangeably. Consider the following examples:

Table 4.3 Alago postnominal quantifiers

	Singular	Plural
52)	okposhi ‘stick’	okposhi lewa/ nwashika ‘many sticks’
53)	ikwiri ‘money’	ikwiri lewa/ nwashika ‘plenty money’
54)	ekah ‘masquerade’	ekah lewa/ nwashika ‘manymasquerades’

55)	opu, opunu ‘door’	opu, opunu lewa/ nwashika ‘many doors’
-----	-------------------	---

4. Conclusion

Alago, just like many West African languages adopt a number of methods in the expression of nominal plurality. Findings from this study indicate that Alago adopts four luralization strategies for the noun category. These strategies include: vowel alternation, zero marking prefixation and the use of quantifiers. The prefixation method is considered the primary and most productive strategy for nominal plurality. Vowel alternation and zero marking have a more restricted application. Vowel alternation typically applies to human nouns while zero marking is mostly applicable to uncountable nouns. Our findings support the general idea that plural markers may vary along two dimensions: animacy and obligatoriness.

References

- Anagbogu P. (2005) Pluralisation in Koring. *Journal of Linguistics and Languages*.132-140.
- Crystal, D. (1980) *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics*. USA: Blackwell.
- Dahl, Osten. (1979) Typology of Sentence Negation. In: *Linguistics*, vol. 17, 79-106.
- Dryer Matthew, S. (2013) Coding of Nominal Plurality, In: Dryer Matthew, S. & Haspelmath, Martin (eds) *The World Atlas of Language Structures Online*. Leipzig: Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology.
- Ejele, P. (1997) The Expression of nominal Plurality in Esan. In: *Nigerian Language Studies*. 62-67.
- Ezenwafor, C. I. (2017) *A Grammatical Sketch of Etulo* PhD

- Dissertation. Scuola Normale Superiore, Pisa, Italy.
- Haspelmath, Martin (2013) Occurrence of Nominal Plurality. In: Dryer, Matthew S. & Haspelmath, Martin (eds) *The World Atlas of Language Structures Online*. Leipzig: Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology.
- Nkamigbo, Linda C. (2011) The Expression of Nominal Plurality in Eggon. In *Unizik Journal of Arts and Humanities*. 154-160.
- Ogaji, Ozegya O. & Abdullahi Mbalo M. (2011). *A Dictionary of Alago Names*. Lafia: His-Grace Printing Productions.
- Omachonu G. (2004) Animacy Hierarchy: A Case for Noun Plural Formation in Igala. In: M.E Attah (ed.) *Language and Literature in Education for a Better Society*.