Towards a theory of (c)overt object pronouns in Kwa

Sampson Korsah
sampson.korsah@ucc.edu.gh
(University of Cape Coast; Visiting Researcher, Ghent University)

In this paper, I argue that the distribution of null versus overt object pronouns in Kwa (Niger-Congo) languages can be reduced to their structural position in syntax; all overt object pronouns are realized in a specifier position while their null counterpart is deleted in a complement position.

Kwa languages like Akan, Baule, Gã, Nzema, a.o. exhibit a null object pattern whose profile does not seem to fit any of the types traditionally discussed in the literature (see, e.g. Huang 1995). In these languages, the possibility of dropping an object pronoun is not linked to (i) agreement marking (contra Rizzi 1986), (ii) topicality (contra Huang 1984), or (iii) the morphology of their pronominal systems (contra Neeleman & Szendroi 2007). In Gã, for instance, the realization of non-local person object pronouns is subject to the following conditions. A pronoun with an animate antecedent is always overt (a). However, pronouns whose antecedent is inanimate is always null (b), except when the antecedent is an argument of a change of state (CoS) predicate (c), or it precedes a clause-final adverb(ial), as in (1d).

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'.		
d.	Ama na	*(lɛ)	mrã.
	A see	3SG.OBJ	early
	'Ama saw it early'.		

Apart from the contexts in (c-d) inanimate object pronouns that occur as an argument of a depictive secondary predicate is also obligatorily pronounced. Thus, we seem to be confronted with a new kind of null object, i.e., one that appears to be conditioned by either clausal-finality and or animacy. An interesting question here: What accounts for the natural class involving (a, c, and d), as well as the depictive secondary predicate context, to the exclusion of (b)?

I argue that we can relate the distribution of null and overt object pronouns in these languages to the differences in where the relevant object pronouns end up in the structure at the point of linearization. I show that the overt-null distinction is a reflection of a specifier-complement asymmetry (a la Kayne 1994) in the grammar of Kwa.

References: Huang, J. C.-T. (1984). On the distribution and reference of empty pronouns. Huang, Y. (1995). On null subjects and null objects in generative grammar. Kayne, R. S. (1994). The Antisymmetry of syntax. Neeleman, A. & K. Szendroi. (2007). Radical pro drop and the morphology of pronouns. Rizzi, L. (1986). Null objects in Italian and the Theory of pro.