

Definiteness in Sɛlɛɛ

Yvonne Agbetsoamedo

Reginald Akuoko Duah

University of Ghana, Legon

Humboldt–Universität zu Berlin

2nd Meeting of DFG-funded network

“Definiteness across domains”

December 15–16, 2022 | University of Potsdam

We discuss preliminary results of fieldwork on definiteness marking in Sɛlɛɛ.

Sɛlɛɛ deploys a morpheme *nwu*, which occurs with unique and anaphoric referents.

However, the form *nwu* may be ambiguous between definite and demonstrative meaning (1).

- (1) N-ye osuɔtɔ **nwu**.
1SG-know man DEF/DEM
'I know **the/that** man.'

Sɛlɛɛ is classified as a Na-Togo (Ghana-Togo Mountain) Kwa language (14 in total) (cf. Blech 2009; Kropp-Dakubu 2009).

Sɛlɛɛ is spoken mainly in Santrokofi (Oti Region) by 14,000 people.

Sɛlɛɛ has three tone registers: high, mid, and low

The basic word order is SVO agglutinative morphology; it has a prefixal noun class system (8 classes).

Grammatical subjects occur with subject cross-reference markers referred to as Lexical Subject Markers (LSM), which may also mark tense/aspect (Agbetsoamedo 2014).

Fieldwork with 5 native speakers

A new referent is expressed with a bare noun.

(2) [context: at the beginning of a conversation. . .]

La-nya **awu**

1 SG.PHOD-see dress

'I saw a dress.'

A pre-mentioned referent is expressed with a post-nominal determiner.

(3) [context: I saw a dress. . .]

awu nwu latɔɔ-lɛ onyu

dress DEF LSM.PRF-be.good beautiful

'The dress was beautiful.'

nwu can be used with globally unique referents, e.g., *sun*, *moon* (cf. Schwarz 2009, 2013)

- (4) Context: Ami woke up late at night. When she woke up, . . . (Grubic 2022)

Kɔ-wentɛ nwu latoopu futututu
 CM-month DEF LSM.PHOD.PRF-shine brightly
 ‘The moon was shining brightly.’

- (5) **Ku-fi nwu** latɔpɛ osie ka-nya
 CM-sun DEF LSM.PHOD.PRF-beat strong CM-mouth
 ‘The sun was very hot.’

Larger situation use (Grubic 2022)

- (6) Context: Ami has been away from home for some months. When she comes back, her mother says:

Weewee #(nwu) la-kpi kɔ-wɛntɛ ko
 dog DEF LSM.PHOD-die CM-moon PRT
 nia-bafe nii
 REL.PHOD-pass PRT

‘The dog died last month.’

- (7) Context: After watching the national day parade, I say:

President (nwu) la-wa
 president DEF LSM.PHOD-come

‘The president came.’

Anaphoric use

- (8) Context: Ami and I saw a woman and a man:

ɔ-sanko **nwu** le-sɛɛsa wo
CM-woman DEF LSM.HOD-greet 1PL.OBJ
'The woman greeted us.'

- (9) Context: Ami and I saw a woman and a man:

Ami le-sɛɛsa **ɔ-sanko** **nwu**
Ami LSM.HOD-greet CM-woman DEF
'Ami greeted the woman.'

Bridging

The determiner *nwu* was not used in relational bridging (cf. Schwarz 2013)

- (10) Context: Ami is telling Kofi what she heard on the news. . .
- Yu le-biε ee-buo di car.
thief LSM.HOD-break 3SG.HOD-enter PREP car
- Ee-yu **kakate** ee-sifi-ko
3SG.HOD-steal steering wheel 3SG.HOD-leave-ASSOC
- 'A thief broke into a car. He stole the steering wheel.'

Bridging

The determiner *nwu* was not used in relational bridging (cf. Schwarz 2013)

- (11) Context: After a heavy rain, Ami says to Kofi. . .
Fɛɛnya soleme le-yo. Afɛɛfo
2SG.HOD-see church CM-house wind
lɛtaka-tɛ-sa ni
LSM.HOD-blow-CAUS it
'Have you seen the church building, the wind blew the roof.'

Bridging

The determiner *nwu* occurs in producer-product bridging (cf. Schwarz 2013)

(12) At the beginning of a conversation. . .

Le-kpomii nwu koole onyu.

CM-chair DEF LSM.PRES.PRF-be.good beautiful

Fa-ye **carpenter nwu?**

2SG-know carpenter DEF

'The chair is beautiful. Do you know the carpenter.'

Interim summary

- In Sɛlɛɛ, *nwu* has the distribution of a definite determiner
- It may be used with globally or situationally unique referents (similar to Akan-**no** (see Amfo (2007), Bombi (2018))
- *nwu* behaves as a strong definite (à la Schwarz 2009, 2013; Arko & Mathewson 2013)

However, *nwo* has other uses different from definite

Kwa paradigm for demonstratives

Table 1: Kwa demonstratives

	Pre-N	Post-N	Function
AKAN	saa	no _{DEF}	DEM _{dist}
		yi	DEM _{prox}
	saa	yi	DEM _{dist}
EWE		ma	DEM _{dist}
	nenem	ke	DEM _{prox}
GǺ	nakai		DEM _{dist}
	nεkε		DEM _{prox}

DP-**nwu** is used as a demonstrative

- (13) Context: Kofi and Ami are watching TV. Ami recognizes one of the presenters on the TV. She points to the TV and says:

N-ye o-suɔtɔ **nwu**

1 SG-know CM-man DEF

'I know that man!'

Distal demonstrative has a different form

- (14) Context: Ami is expecting a package from someone. A visitor arrives with a package in hand and says:

Papa nii aɛ nɸũ lemle nwako
 father 1SG.POSS say that 1SG.bring DEM 1SG-come-ASSOC
 fɔ
 2SG.OBJ

'My father asked me to bring you this gift'

Distal demonstrative has different noun class prefixes:

kɔtɛ komle	'this soil'
sisɪ semle	'these yams'
ɔklɛ wɔmle	'this pepper'
kapamii kamle	'this knife'
abulaa yamle	'these onions'

Consistency test (Lobner 1985)

- (15) [This/*the dog] is sleeping, though [this/*the dog] is not sleeping
- (16) Wewee **wɔ̃mle** kə-kyɔ̃sii kafɔ̃ɔ̃ nɔ̃wɔ̃ **wɔ̃mle**
dog DEM LSM.PROG-sleep but PRO DEM
dɪlɔ̃ɔ̃-kyɔ̃sii
LSM.NEG.PROG-sleep
'This dog is sleeping but this dog is not sleeping.'

Consistency test (Lobner 1985)

(17) [This/*the dog] is sleeping, though [this/*the dog] is not sleeping

(18) *Wewee **nwu** kə-kyɔsii kafəɔ nwə **nwu**
 dog DEM LSM.PROG-sleep but PRO DEM
 diləɔ-kyɔsii
 LSM.NEG.PROG-sleep

'This dog is sleeping but this dog is not sleeping'

[Comment: Could the meaning be that dog is sleeping though that dog is not sleeping? If this is possible, then nwu is acceptable]

We decided to test some contexts from the Field Manual on Demonstratives (Grubic, Hinterwimmer, Duah, Simonenko, Radek, Marianne, Mathewson)

Two anaphoric demonstratives cannot co-occur in one sentence, while two definite DPs can.

(19) Context: Last night, a dog chased a cat in front of my house.

(20) Disilalɛ alɛ puusu **nwu** alɛ aa-wɛ sɛwa
 fortunately COMP cat DEF COMP 3SG.HOD-do fast
 kafoɔ weewɛ nwu dita-wɛ sɛwa
 but dog DEF 3SG-NEG-do fast
 ‘Fortunately, the/that cat was pretty fast, while the/that dog was rather slow.’

A demonstrative cannot pick up one of two discourse referents that have been introduced as a plurality, i.e. in a conjoined DP, while definites can.

(21) Context: Last night, a dog and a cat fought with each other in front of my house.

(22) Disilalɛ alɛ weewee **nwu** la-ta di-si pla
fortunately COMP dog DEF LSM-give CM-head quick
aa-toso aa-sifi
3SG.HOD-run 3SG.HOD-go
'Fortunately, the/that dog gave up pretty soon and ran away.'

Demonstratives can also differ wrt whether joint attention is already previously established (salient in non-linguistic context or anaphoric) or whether the expression establishes this joint attention (via gestures/pointing)

(23) Context: Paula and Dennis are chatting when suddenly a guy walking three dogs on leashes passes them by, one of which is a labrador, while the other are golden retrievers. Paula notices that Dennis is looking at the dogs and says the following, without pointing at the labrador:

(24) Weewee **nwu** si-nwini kɔɛ onyu
dog DEF CM-hair ? beautiful
'The labrador has really beautiful fur.'

(Preliminary) Conclusion

Bare nouns are unique definites; anaphoricity is expressed with *nwu*

nwu behaves like a strong definite (Schwarz 2009, 2013)

Sɛlɛɛ seems different from other Kwa languages that have different forms for definites and demonstratives

Methodological issue

Language choice in elicitation