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Morphosyntactic Study of Dholuo Verb Phrase

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Abstract:

Dholuo is a Nilo-Saharan language spoken by about 4.06 million people according to the Kenyan census that was done in 2009 and the result formally released in 2010. The language is spoken by the Luo who are mainly living in Kenya. The Dholuo verb phrase, because of its agglutinative nature is very complicated. Tense and agreement in the Dholuo verb phrase was investigated because it had not been fully studied by earlier scholars. The purpose of the study was to analyze the agreement in pro-drop in Dholuo verb phrase. Principles and Parameters (Chomsky 1981) formed the theoretical framework of the study. The objectives of the study were: to describe the morphological elements of the Dholuo verb phrase and also to identify and explain features of agreement in the Dholuo verb phrase. The study was analytical and so the researcher intended to use analytical research design to study and account for the validity of Principles and Parameters to analyse Dholuo verb phrase. Permission to undertake the research was granted by Rongo University, NACOSTI, Ministry of education and the county government of Kenya. The study being done in the native language of the researcher, data was generated by the researcher and only purposely interviewed twenty native Dholuo speakers in Nyan'giela village for verifications. Non -probability sampling was used because the research was interested in the representativeness of the concepts in their varying forms this maximized the scope or range of variation of study. Purposive sampling of non-probability sampling was also used. The data generated by the researcher was studied according to the number, tense, voice, negation and person. Syntactic analysis was done in line with tenets of Principles and Parameters. The data was analyzed and after the presentation of data, the study concluded that Dholuo is a pro-drop language with features of agreements mainly marked by pronouns and affixes.

Keywords: Morphosyntax, pro-drop, agreement, verb phrase, tense and aspects

1. Introduction

Dholuo is one of the major languages spoken in Kenya. It is spoken by Luos who even though found in other states are dominating Kenya around Lake Victoria. Dholuo is a tonal language that agglutinates hence making its verb phrase complex. Researches had been done before but very little had been mentioned in agreements of Dholuo verb phrase. Elements of Dholuo verb phrase which make it complex had been suggested for further study and that was where this study grounded. Features of agreement in Dholuo verb phrase was studied and analyzed. Since most studies in Dholuo were done in the 1980s and 1990s for instance, Omondi (1982) studied Dholuo syntactic structures within the standard theory or transformation grammar, Okombo (1986) Dholuo constituent order, Creider (1989) studied syntax of Nilotic languages and Ochieng (2001) carried out semantic analysis of Dholuo nouns. Okombo (1986) and Omondi (1982) studied constituent order of Dholuo but it took long till 2004 that typography of the Dholuo verb phrase was studied to determine to what extent constituent order enables Dholuo to express its syntactic and semantic properties (Jowi, 2004:10). Out of these studies done in Dholuo, none of them had ever focused on agreement in the Dholuo verb phrase in general or agreement in the Dholuo pro-drop in particular.

Haegeman (1994:454-456) states that a Pro-drop is a cross-linguistic variation parameter that is observed in languages which allow a pronominal subject to be left unexpressed. He says that Italian has a rich verb inflection and so it is a pro-drop language. Using Italian language, he provided that rich INFL can identify an empty category in the subject position while a poor INF fails to do so. Grammatical feature of the subject can be recovered from those of INFL, especially from AGR in languages with rich verb inflection. For example:

ProSembrache Gianni siaammalato.

Seems that Gianni is (subj) ill (Haegeman 1994:452)

Subject position of the matrix clause is filled by *pro*, which is an on-over overt expletive pronoun. Spanish also is a pro-drop language while in English only third person singular can be identified on basis of verb inflection but for Dholuo, no such studies had been carried out to prove it.

Zwicky (1991) states: There are three indisputable agreement features; gender, number and person. The above features indicate that as morphology interfaces with syntax then agreement of these key features is important.

In Dholuo there is:

Singular	Plural
• Dhiang	dhok
• Nyathi	nyithindo
• Nyako	nyiri

Vowel change occurs such that you cannot tell by the form of the words that they are related and that process is referred to as suppletion. It is said that English does not have a clear case of suppletive plural, but other languages provide; In Scottish Gaelic, the word for 'wife,' has the plural mnaoi and Tlapanec (a mesoamerican native language) has the contrast a²d³ child with e³he³children (superscripted numbers represent different tones of the vowels). These indicate that actual morphological forms are rather different, but the general pattern is the same. These words cannot simply be stated in terms of morphological properties directly. This becomes actually even more obvious if we stop to think about other languages (Adger, 200:24).

1.1. Methodology and Theoretical Background

The study was based on facts and without altering any information on the state of Dholuo, a design that would give room for critical evaluation was used and it was analytical design (Kothari 2004) Principles and Parameters theory (Chomsky 1990) was used to study Dholuo verb phrase. Languages are considered to be universal in Principles and Parametrically different as stated by different scholars. For example: It is quite clear that although there are universal principles which determine the broad outlines of the grammatical structure of words, phrase and sentences in every natural language, there are also language-particular aspects of grammatical structure which children have to learn as part of the task of acquiring their native language (Radford, 1997: 16-17). It would have been insightful to see what another theory would reveal on some of the complex aspects of the Dholuo verb phrase (Jowi, 2004). That showed that there was a need to have a theory to analyse those aspects of a language which are general and as well the language specific ones.

1.1.1. Subjects and Predicates in Principles and Parameters Theory

The subjects and predicates which are elements of all languages are analyzed differently by different theories. The analysis of subject gives rise to different concepts. The concepts of null-subject or pro-drop finds a basis in the Principles and Parameters Theory. The major segment of a sentence is the predicate and that is what this study majorly concentrated in. Predicate bares many features good enough to describe a grammar of a given language sufficiently.

2. Results and Discussion

2.1. Dholuo Verb Phrase

A phrase is determined by the head in a grammatical construction therefore it is named after the word that stands out as the head. Dholuo phrases sound just like sentences because of an agglutination unlike in English. Phrases do not express a complete thought but in Dholuo they sometimes do as shown below:

Dholuo English gloss

- 1a.) kawo telo. taking leadership.
- 1b.) dhiro gari. pushing a car
- 1c.) chako miel. starting a dance.

It is important to note that Dholuo verb phrase displays verbs with strong final vowel. Dholuo verbs recover the content from the noun. This is what brings about the complexity in the Dholuo verb phrase. Verbs tend to dominate sentences and so a verb phrase carries more features. A verb phrase is even able to have more constituents. When one says;

Riembo gari manyien go kinyi e lam matek.

Driving a new vehicle in the morning on a tarmac road very fast.

It can be seen that Dholuo verb phrase can carry in it a verb, adjective, a noun, a preposition and adverbs. The order may at times vary with those of English language.

2.1.1. Type of Sentences in Dholuo

2.1.1.1. Interrogative Sentence

2a) *Idwa nango?* What do you want?

2b) *En in?* It's you?

2c) *Saa adi?* What is the time?

Some short form sentences are used as well as interrogative terms such as; bende?, nade?, donge?, iyie?, koso? and kama?

Interrogative sentences are used in greetings. This is at times done with some voice projections and stress.

2.1.1.2. Affirmative Sentences

3a.) *Odhi.* He/she goes.

3b.) *Bedi.* Sit down.

Affirmatives are mainly used in conversations and are very short in structure. They are used for emphasis. They do not have a lot of morphological adjustments. They have to agree in number and tense. Dholuo does not mark gender agreement.

2.1.1.3. Declarative Sentences

4a.) *Anyalo dhi.* I can go.

4b.) *Asetimo.* I have done.

Declaratives are used to declare state of events. It is normally the morpheme and tone that indicates this tense. Dholuo permits the use of this tense in all aspects of communication but mainly when meant to be ridiculous.

2.2. Tenses of Dholuo

There are different manifestations of tenses in Dholuo. Saeed (1997:114) says ‘...tense allows a speaker to locate a situation relative to some reference point in time, most likely the time of speaking.’ Otero (2010:81-82) states that since a tense reflects the human categorization of the world, different languages divide the time line differently, resulting in different tenses. Some languages will, therefore have two tenses; past and non past while others will have three tenses past present and future. This implies that a tense is parametrical as it varies per language.

Comrie (1985:2) showed a time line for a tense I human languages as illustrated here:
(Now)

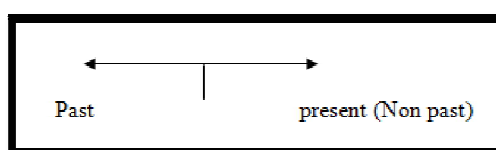


Figure 1: Representation of Time
(Adapted from Comrie (1985:2) Cited in (Otero 2008))

Portner (2005:138) maintains that a tense refers to the position of situation in time. Some languages do not have any tense at all, some languages distinguish past tense from non past (present or future) tense; and some languages have; past, present and future tenses. This therefore further supports that a tense is a feature that is language specific. Verbs play major role in determining the tense of a language such that in Dholuo the following time lines can be explained:

2.2.1. Dholuo Present Tense

5a.) *Adhi school sani.*

I go school now

I am going to school now.

5b.) *Wakadho.*

We pass.

We are passing.

From the examples above it can be deduced that apart from the adverbials such as ‘sani’, Dholuo uses intonation to mark the present tense. It is gender insensitive and cannot display any gender. However, there is a strong agreement of number that must be obeyed. This also has the person agreement;

a wa
I u

a is a first-person plural in singular while its plural is *wa*. *I* become *u* while *o* becomes *gi* to mark second and third person respectively.

2.2.2. Dholuo Past Tense

In dholuo, reporting a situation that occurred before the time of mentioning takes three forms. One of what happened just hours ago, recent past and distant past. They are expressed with help of different morphologies as shown below:

2.2.2.1. Past Tense of a Short While Ago

This is the past tense reporting what happened within some hours in the past but less than a day. For example:

6a) *kok odonjo ka.*

Now enter here.

He/she has entered here.

Dholuo morphosyntactically organizes itself to solve the problem that is brought about by intonation. 6a the *kok* is just a time reference used to clarify the degree of past time activity.

The concept of pro-drop comes out clearly here that instead of saying Odongo has arrived apro is used. The pro also shows agreement because it must correspond to the number. In order to make it clear, Dholuo uses some morphemes such as *jo* for instance:

Onyango gi Akuba josebiro

Onyango and Akuba have come.

It is ungrammatical for any Dholuo speaker to say *Onyango josebiro* if only one person is expected. We will expect a speaker to say *Onyango osebiro*. From here it is deduced that the morpheme of person comes before that of a tense in Dholuo and that they have a pro drop that must always show some agreements of number.

2.2.2.2. Recent Past Tense

This tense is used to refer to an occurrence which has not been so long from the reporting time. It can be a day or few days but not less than a day:

7a.) *Nyocha omiel e yo.*

He danced on the way.

7b.) *Nobiyo nyoro.*

He/she came yesterday.

It can be noted that some adverbials are used to mark agreement in these tenses. Words such as *nyocha*, *no* and *tinde* can be grouped as free morphemes of time used in recent past tense to mean an activity that since happened has not taken long.

2.2.2.3. Distance Past Tense

Odero (2008:88) states that '... a distant past tense describes an event that occurred in the past, within time frame stretching from one month into infinite past...' In Dholuo grammatical tone and adverbials can be used to mark distance past tense as shown:

8a.) *Negibiro.*

They came.

The tone used in pronouncing the adverb 'ne' will give different meanings. If the first syllable is stressed, the tense become distance past but if not, it almost appears as recent past.

8b.) *Nomuke chon.*

It was destroyed long time.

Dholuo is a language that tend clarify its ambiguity by the help of some morphemes such as *no*, *chon*, *gilala* and *nende*. There are special terms used to make references in Dholuo distance past. Without the morphemes mentioned here, it is not possible for Dholuo speaker to mark tenses in the distance past.

3. Aspects

In order to fully understand the nature of Dholuo verb phrase, studying of both tenses and aspects is important because they are very much closely related. Comrie (1976:3) in Odero (2008:39) states that '...different ways of viewing the internal temporal of a situation.' He further states that internal temporal of a situation can be complete or incomplete and gives the following classifications.

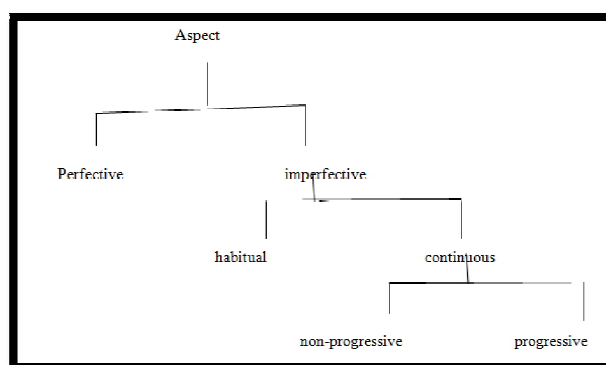


Figure 2: The Classification of Aspectual Oppositions
(Adapted from Comrie 1976:25) Cited in (Odero, 2008)

The verb is pivotal in a grammar of any language. The everyday use of a language which must involve a tense or aspect is based on a verb. 'It is a grammatical category that primarily refers to the way grammar marks the duration or a type of temporal activity denoted in the verb.' (Odero 2008:40). Dholuo verbs also denoted different forms of aspect as shown below. The use of tone sometimes enables the distinction between a tense and aspect. The concept of aspect though tends to relate so much with a tense. Aspect is clearly explained to be a perfective or imperfective. Comrie (1976:25) states '...Perfectivity (completive) and imperceptivity (incompletive) are the two major sub divisions of aspect in the languages of the world.' This shows that aspects whether completive or incompletive is further subdivided to express an event at different durations of speaking.

3.1. The Perfective Aspect

This aspect means an event has been completed. The duration it takes once an event has happened can either be recent or distant from the reporting time. Dholuo is able to express all these aspects.

3.1.1. Perfective Aspect in Present

9a.) *Jane osemiel.*

Jane has danced.

9b.) *Jane osemiel sani.*

Jane has danced now.

As seen above, this aspect of is marked with a specific morphology *o*, *se* and *se* are prefixes mainly person and time. The dropping of a noun does not change any meaning for in 14a *Osemiel* is still grammatical and has no problem of agreement. If you say that *wan* then the agreement morpheme become *wa*. These are pro and they agree.

3.1.2. Perfective Aspect in the Past

1a.) *Jane nosehi.*

Jane had gone.

10b.) *Nosepuro.*

He/she had dug.

Dholuo is able to express perfective aspect in the past with the help of an auxiliary verb *nose* and *ose*. They serve as morphemes of agreement in this case because without them there is nothing to mark the difference. In this aspect another construction can be realized that just deal with a pro-drop. One can simply say *nosechopo* meaning had reached, without mentioning anything with the subject. In such constructions there must be agreements because if the subject dropped is in plural then the pro must also be plural for example, *an asechopo* become *wan wasechopo* and after dropping the subject we remain with *wasechopo*. This clearly shows the agreement in the pro-drop and some good order of morphemes noted. *Wa* followed with *se* and that order cannot be altered anywhere.

3.1.3. Perfect Aspect in the Future

There is projection of events to occur continuously and completely in the future before second events are realized.

11a.) *Wabiro wuok ka useling.*

We will go out once you have kept quiet.

11b.) *Abiro kendo ka aseyudo tich*

I will marry after getting a job.

In this case two events must be brought out clearly. The first, being to express future activities. Auxiliary verb *biro* is very important here and for the perfection in the tense to be, morpheme *ka* must be included.

4. Morphological Elements of Dholuo Verb Phrase

From the study done on the tenses, aspects and constituent structures above, there are some elements of morphology which have been observed. Words are made of different morphemes.

It can be seen, from the data below, that Dholuo uses pronouns as morpheme markers and these pronouns can be prefixed or suffixed.

12a.) *kowna.*

Bring me

Kow-na

3rdpsn 1stpsnsngl

The root verb 'kow' and 'na' are the morphemes. The 'na' morpheme has gender marking but here it serves as a case marker.

12b.) *Kelnegi kom*

Bring for them a chair.

Kel-ne-gi kom.

V pprnobject

Here the morphological elements are 'ne' and 'gi.' They serve as bound morpheme because they express their complete meaning only when are attached to root words.

The morphemes such as: na, gi, nenwa, dwa and go are quite parametrical such that only seen to be Dholuo specific. They work in line with persons. It is also displayed that affixes which are mainly pronouns function as morphological element. There are also some morphological elements which can help in marking the time though they are sounding like words for example:

Gikaoga tinde

They take always nowadays.

They usually take.

'Ga' is simply a morpheme of time marking the frequency.

4.1. Features of Agreement in Dholuo Verb Phrase

It has been realized that most of African languages use pronouns as agreement markers and such pronouns serve as morphology of agreement in both subject verb agreement marker and object verb agreement marker. Dholuo as one of the African languages exhibits morphemes of agreement as shown below:

13a.) *O -biro-kadho-kamano.*

He/she/it will pass like that.

O- birokadh -o kama n o.

3Psn aux future verb main Agradvtns

The above sentence illustrates some morphemes used to mark agreement. It is ungrammatical to write as shown below if the meaning of the sentence to be maintained:

O -biro kadhakamano.

He /she/it will pass me like that.

The post verbal pronoun 'o' and 'a' mark the agreement and their alteration affects agreement hence a change in the meaning of the sentence. This is also found in Tugen which is also a Nilotic language as shown below:

4.2. Tense and Agreement

In Dholuo Tense and agreement appears as shown below:

14a.) *Be i -se-bayowach?*

Auxiliary psttns v n

Tense is a category that marks the time at which the action denoted by the verb took place. Agreement is a category that marks the syntactic relation between words and phrases which are compatible in a given construction. It may have features of person, number and gender

15a.) *Ne wakadhonyocha.*

Past we pass yesterday

We passed yesterday.

The sentences above show that Dholuo is a SVO language that marks its agreements and tenses according to its parameter

15b.) *Wa-dh-i-urukanyo.*

Istpsnplrv agr n(obj)

Us go there.

With the illustration above it should be noted that even though Dholuo is an agglutinating African language, it has a way of expressing its agreement in different aspects of time number but not person. Pronouns are commonly used as agreement markers and their inflection best bring about the agreement. For instance,

Wa-dh-i-urukanyo.

Istpsn plrv agr n(obj)

4.3. Dholuo Pro- Drop

It is the concept of parameters that gives rise to a pro drop because it is language specific. A pro drop is highly inflected verbal morphology and verbal inflection indicates person and number of the subject therefore referential of null subject can be inferred from the grammatical inflection on the verb. Chomsky lectures on Government and Binding 1981 states that a pro drop is a predicate rather than a subject.

Robert (1998:85) states that:

Given the assumption that subjects are obligatory...for Principles and Parameters, it will have exactly the same kind of subject...it will have a phonetically empty pronoun as subject. Such pronoun is often referred to as *pro*.

Languages which allow sentences like this are commonly known as null-subject or pro-drop languages. A word level head does not assign a theta role to its subject, that is, it has no external theta role.

Dholuo has a pro-drop that tends to show an agreement. It is the agreement in these sentences that will be studied in details to illustrate how Dholuo displays its pro drop.

16a.) *Dhi Nairobi.*

Go Nairobi.

From the sentence above, it is shown that the noun has been dropped. Nouns or pronouns could be but has been dropped without altering the meaning of the sentence. Not all languages can allow this except those with strong inflection. The agreement in the pro-drop was also studied and analysed. Dholuo verb phrase is tonal and any interference to the tone affects the meaning of the phrase directly. Dholuo verb phrase has a linear arrangement that carries a lot of elements. It has the verb, preposition, pronouns, adjectives, adverbs and nouns.

5. Conclusion

Dholuo is a pro-drop language that marks agreements by affixation. The Dholuo verb phrase is linearly arranged with pronouns forming affixes. It was also noted that the available morphemes which are mainly pronouns do reoccur to play different roles and so tend to be free morphemes most of the time in the verb phrase. There are some morphemes playing roles in agreement marking and are always found mainly either before or after the main verb. Dholuo marks agreement well except that of gender that is not marked. The morpheme for agreement markers appear before the main verb only.

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