

A Descriptive Analysis of Nominal Modifiers in Gokana

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ABSTRACT

A principled analysis of the form and function of modifiers in the structure of noun phrases is necessary for a proper understanding of language structure. This paper described nominal modifiers in Gokana within a formal linguistic framework. The paper identified ten distinct nominal modifiers in the grammatical structure of Gokana. Six of the modifiers were classified as pre-head modifiers while four of the modifiers occurred as post-head modifiers. The paper found that apart from the co-occurrence of each modifier with the head noun, all the modifiers can simultaneously co-occur with the head noun in the noun phrase structure except the numeral modifier. The study noted that the definiteness modifier is not a suffix as was previously analyzed as it is possible to have an intervening element between it and the modified head noun. The paper showed that the demonstrative modifier co-occurs with the head noun in the maximal expansion of the NP structure in mutually exclusive distribution with either the PP modifier or the definiteness modifier. The study identified the structural categories of the modifiers as grammatical morphemes, lexical items, phrases and clausal elements. And recommended a detailed study of the quantifier phrase.

KEYWORDS: *Gokana, Modifiers, Categories, Structure, Analysis, Pre-Head, Post-Head, Co-Occurrence Restriction, Nominal.*

1. Introduction

Gokana is spoken in Gokana Local Government Area of Rivers State, Nigeria by approximately 200,000 people. It is closely related to Baan, Eleme, Tee, and Kana. These languages form a genetic unity and Williamson and Blench (2000:33) classify them in Delta-Cross of Cross River within the Bantoid-Cross of the East Benue-Congo branch of Benue-Congo. This paper described nominal modifiers in Gokana within a formal linguistic framework.

2. Defining Nominal Modifiers

According to Crystal (1997:245) modification is a term used in syntax to refer to the structural dependence of one grammatical unit upon another. The precise interpretation of the term is dependent on particular approaches to syntax.

Some approaches reserve the term for structural dependence within endocentric constructions that distinguished pre modification and post modification respectively while some linguists use the term for the pre modifying structures only.

Huddleston (1988:85) recognizes two types of modifying structures within the noun phrase. He refers to these structures as dependents of the noun phrase. An NP will consist of a noun as head alone or accompanied by one or more dependents. He claims that some dependents precede the head while others follow. He distinguishes these dependents as pre-head and post-head dependents. He argued that the pre-head dependents are of two main types, determiners and modifiers while he recognizes complements, modifiers and peripherals as post-head dependents.

Ndimele (1996:44) describes modifiers as elements which limit or specify the reference of a noun. He asserts that an NP may consist of a noun alone as head or accompanied by one or more modifiers. He acknowledges that modifiers which occur before the head are pre-head modifiers while those that follow the head are post head modifiers.

Carnie (2006:49) asserts that modifiers are always attached within the phrase that they modify. In essence, the modifier must share spatial contiguity with the modified in a basic construction. Thus, the movement of a modifier from its source position is often the consequence of the application of a given transformational rule to the kernel structure.

A number of studies (e.g. Quirk and Greenbaum) (1977), Radford (1988), Jenkins (2003) and Radford (2003) agree that modification is a crucial syntactic relation within language structure. Radford (2003:19) argues that the linear directionality between the head and its complements determines the head (position) parameter in more recent syntactic theory. Thus, the present study attempts a description of the grammar of nominal modification in Gokana.

3. Methodology

The researcher collected data from fluent native speakers of Gokana with the help of field assistants. The researcher also relied on his intuition as a native speaker of the language but where any given set of data contradicted his intuition, direct oral interview was used to elicit comparative data from other native speakers of the language. Secondary sources of data such as texts and library materials were also utilized.

4. Analyzing Gokana Nominal Modifiers

Two types of nominal modifiers are attested in the grammatical structure of Gokana: pre-head modifiers and post head modifiers. The pre head modifiers occur before the head element while the post head modifiers occur after the head element. These modifiers can also co-occur as it is possible to have both pre-head and post-head modifiers in the same noun phrase. In what follows, we describe each of these modifiers.

4.1 Pre-Head Modifiers

This term best describes the modifiers that occur before the noun in a noun phrase structure. A number of pre-head modifiers occur in Gokana and each of these modifiers are analyzed in this study.

4.1.1 Possessives

A possessive shows ownership or possession. In Gokana, the possessive cannot be used alone in a noun phrase. It must co-occur with the noun whose ownership is indicated. This modifier is variable in form. It may occur as in (1a-c) or as in (2a-c)

- 1a) ndáá kpá
 poss book
 'my book'
- b) ndóó kpá
 poss book
 'your book'
- c) ndẹ́ẹ́ kpá
 poss book
 'his/her book'
- 2a) nà kpá

- poss book
'my book'
- b) o kpá
poss book
'your book'
- c) a kpá
poss book
'his/her book'

The difference between (1) and (2) is that the possessives in (1) are emphatic, whereas those in (2) are non-emphatic. The forms in (1) and (2) have their plural counterparts, as shown in (3a-c) and (4a-c):

- 3a) béérè kpá
poss(pl) book
'our book'
- b) bóórò kpá
poss(pl) book
'your book'
- c) báárà kpá
poss(pl) book
'their book'
- 4a) bẹẹ kpá
poss(pl) book
'our book'
- b) bọọ kpá
poss(pl) book
'your book'
- c) ba kpá
poss(pl) book
'their book'

4.1.2 Adjectives

Adjectives are words whose main function is to modify a noun which express a characteristic quality or attribute (Crystal 1997:7).

In Gokana, an adjective must always precede a noun when it co-occurs with a noun in an NP linear sequence. But adjectives can be used attributively or predicatively. Adjectives that typically occur within noun phrases are functionally attributive, as in (5a-b):

- 5a) dí kàn
dirty cloth
'a dirty cloth'
- b) bẽ pábia
ugly woman
'an ugly woman'

On the other hand, adjectives that occur in the other parts of a sentence, such as after a verb are

functionally predicative adjectives, as in (6a-b):

- 6a) Ledum dú dí
 PN be dirty
 ‘Ledum is dirty’
- b) Biale dú bē
 PN be ugly
 ‘Biale is ugly’

Gokana adjectives are variable in form. They do not show contrasts of degree through affixation as in English (e.g. Ugly, uglier, ugliest). But adjectival nominal modifiers can achieve contrasts of degree through the use of intensifiers, as in (7):

- 7) kà bē pábia
 int ugly woman
 ‘a very ugly woman’

4.1.3 Intensifiers

Crystal (1997:189) describes an intensifier as “a word which has a typically heightening effect on the meaning of another word”.

In Gokana, intensifiers cannot directly modify a noun but they usually co-occur with an adjective in order to enable the adjective achieve contrasts of degree, as in (8a-c):

8) Degree of contrast: Positive Comparative Superlative

- | | | |
|------------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| a) bē pábia | b) ka bē pábia | c) gbere bēpábia |
| ugly woman | int ugly woman | int ugly woman |
| ‘the ugly woman’ | ‘the uglier woman’ | ‘the ugliest woman’ |

Observe that (8b) and (8c) differ in the degree of modification. The intensifiers **kà** ‘comparative intensifier’ and **gbere** ‘superlative intensifier’ increase the strength of the meaning of the following adjective **bē** ‘ugly’ to the comparative and superlative degrees. Thus, the modification effect in (8c) is stronger than (8b) while (8a) is simply positive.

4.1.4 Quantifiers

Quantifiers are modifiers that express the idea of quantity. They usually precede the head noun that they modify within the noun phrase structure.

Examples:

- 9a) dédéé nen
 quan person
 ‘everybody’
- b) buùka be
 quan compound
 ‘each compound’
- c) gãbug to
 quan house
 ‘many house’
- d) sigà múú
 quan water

‘some water’

In Gokana, there is no distinction between mass and count nouns in the use of quantifiers. Consider this data:

- 10a) sìgà tɔ
 quan house
 ‘many houses’
- b) sìgà muu
 quan water
 ‘some water’
- 11a) gãbug to
 quan house
 ‘many houses’
- b) gãbug múú
 quan water
 ‘much water’

Observe that in (10-11), the quantifiers **sìgà** and **gãbug** can freely co-occur with count and mass nouns. Thus, in Gokana, there is no difference between the quantifiers ‘many’ and ‘much’. The gloss of the quantifiers **sìgà** and **gãbug** as ‘some’ ‘much’ and ‘many’ merely depends on the English distinction between mass and count nouns. Since Gokana makes no such distinction in the use of quantifiers **sìgà** may freely gloss as ‘many’ or ‘some’ and **gãbug** can also freely gloss as ‘many’ or ‘much’.

In Gokana, numerals are regarded as a type of quantifier. Thus, the quantifier and the numeral cannot co-occur in a single noun phrase or co-modify a single nominal head.

4.1.5 Numerals

Numerals are words used for counting entities. A numeral names a number. Numerals occur as pre-head modifiers in Gokana. But while many pre-head modifiers in Gokana can directly precede the head noun, numerals cannot. Although in Kana, a close relative to Gokana, numerals can directly precede the head noun as Ikoro (1996:85) reports “all numerals precede the modified noun”.

Two types of numerals are distinguished in the linguistic literature: cardinal and ordinal. It is striking to note that only cardinal numerals are morphologized in Gokana. Gokana cardinal numerals can, however, only directly modify nouns that refer to units of time (e.g. dee ‘day’, kpónèdee ‘week’, ã ‘month’ and gbàá ‘year’), as illustrated in figure 4.1:

Fig 4.1: Cardinal Numerals and Time Units in Gokana

CARDINAL NUMERALS		CARDINAL NUMERAL+ TIME UNITS		
ène	‘one’	ène	è	‘one month’
bàà	‘two’	bàà	è	‘two months’
taa	‘three’	taa	è	‘three months’
téni	‘four’	téni	dee	‘four days’
vòò	‘five’	vòò	dee	‘five days’
òq̄rè	‘six’	òq̄rè	dee	‘six days’
àràbà	‘seven’	àràbà	gbàà	‘seven years’
aatáá	‘eight’	aatáá	gbàà	‘eight years’
sîna-òp	‘nine’	sîna-òp	gbàà	‘nine years’

òp	‘ten’	òp	gbàà	‘ten years’
tup	‘twenty’	tup	gbàà	‘twenty years’
bóó	‘four hundred’	bóó	gbàà	‘four hundred years’

By contrast, only the ordinal numeral for ‘first’ is morphologized in Gokana. The word for ‘first’ is *túá*, as in (12a-c)

- 12a) *túá* e
first month
‘first month’
- b) *túá* gbaa
first year
‘first year’
- c) *túá* nvin
first child
‘first child’

Unlike the cardinal numeral, there is no semantic restriction on the single ordinal numeral morphologized in the language. It can directly modify any head noun within a noun phrase. The non-morphologized numerals can, however, be expressed periphrastically in Gokana but we may not describe their usage in the present study since it is outside the scope of nominal modification.

4.1.6 Pluralizers

Nouns in Gokana lack grammatical means of showing singular/plural contrasts as in English (e.g. boy/boys, chair/chairs). In other words, there are no specific grammatical forms to designate nominal plurality. Reference to the category of number is lexicalized in the language through the use of lexical pluralizers. These pluralizers are also a type of nominal modifiers as plurality is achieved in the language through the lexicalization process of modification.

Two lexical items **gbò** and **pá** occur as pluralizers in Gokana. Both items are modifiers and directly precede the head noun that they modify.

i) The Pluralizer **gbò**

The plural modifier **gbò** occurs as a general plural marker in the noun phrase. Whenever **gbò** directly modifies any noun, the noun acquires a plural reading.

Examples:

- 13a) *gbò* *ból*
pl goat
‘goats’
- b) *gbò* *ikpè*
pl spoon
‘spoons’

Without the plural modifier *gbò* in (13a-b), the nouns may freely hover between a singular and plural reading as in (14a-b)

- 14a) *ból* as in : *bà* *dómà* *ból*
goat they bring goat
‘goat/goats’ ‘they brought a goat’

‘they brought goats’

- b) ikpè as in: bà dómà ikpè
 spoon they brought spoon
 ‘spoon/spoons’ ‘they brought spoon/they brought spoons’

ii) The Pluralizer **Pá**

Unlike **gbò**, the plural modifier **pá** has a limited application as a result of certain semantic restrictions. It can be used in specifying plurality for only nouns that name a group of people acting as an indivisible unit (henceforth collective noun). In addition, its referents must be [+HUMAN].

Examples:

- 15a) pá bòn
 pl village
 ‘villagers’
- b) pá be
 pl family
 ‘family members’
- c) pá tobàrì
 pl houseGod
 ‘congregation’

The choice of either **gbò** or **pá** as a modifier depends on whether the speaker intends to pluralize a collective or a non-collective noun.

4.2 Post-Head Modifiers

This term is used to describe all the modifiers that occur after the head noun in the noun phrase structure in Gokana. In what follows, we examine each of these modifiers:

4.2.1 The Definiteness Marker

The definiteness marker in Gokana is **á**. It delimits the reference of a noun with respect to definiteness. It can co-occur freely with all nouns.

Examples:

- 16) gbógó á
 dog the
 ‘the dog’

Unlike English, Gokana has the definiteness marker in post-head position within the NP. The Gokana definiteness marker is also optional in surface syntax. The definiteness marker has been previously analyzed as a suffix but it does not seem to be the case that **á** (the definiteness marker) should be analyzed as a suffix with the head noun, as it is possible to have an intervening element between the definiteness marker and the nominal it modifies as shown in (17):

- 17) gbógó [e ledum beè zari] á dú lé
 dog that PN PST buy the be good
 ‘The dog that Ledum bought is good’

Observe that the NP of the main clause in (17) contains a relative clause that serves as a post-head modifier of the noun **gbógó** ‘dog’. What interests us here is that the intervening clause (i.e. the CP

dominated by N) shows that **á** is not a suffix attached to the noun **gbógó** rather it is an independent functional word that modifies the noun. Thus, **á** takes as complement the N to form the NP which is the subject of the main clause.

4.2.2 The Demonstrative

The demonstrative functions as a nominal modifier in Gokana. Two demonstratives occur in Gokana grammar. They are realized as affixes, specifically suffixes: **-i** and **-á**. These suffixes specify the location of the noun to which they are attached with respect to the spatial location of the speaker or hearer, or both. The demonstrative **-i** makes proximal reference while **-á** makes distal reference.

Examples:

- 18a) Dumlebeè èb kpá. - i
 PN PST look book DM
 ‘Dumle looked at this book’
- b) Dumle beè èb kpá -á
 PN PST look book DM
 ‘Dumle looked at that book’

Unlike English demonstrative which change their form in response to number contrasts (e.g. this/these, that/those), Gokana demonstratives are invariable in form since the demonstratives are invariable, the nouns are also invariable in form as they do not show morphological contrast in response to changes in the grammatical category of number, as the notion of plurality is lexicalized in the language.

4.2.3 The Prepositional Phrase Modifier

The prepositional phrase occur in the Gokana NP structure as a post-head modifier.

Examples:

- 19a) bēè [ló èèrè]
 pear for road
 ‘a pear by the roadside’
- b) bel [mm tọ]
 talk in house
 ‘a matter for the family’
- c) tóm [ló dee]
 work for day
 ‘the work of a day’
- d) lósó [boo vái]
 discussion on bed
 ‘bed-time discussion’

Observe that the prepositional phrases that co-occur with the nouns in (19a-d) delimit the meaning of these nouns. The PP modifies the noun. The PP enters into construction with the noun to form the N-bar. The PP, however, is optional in the NP structure as it is not required for its grammaticality. It basically occurs to perform a modification function.

The prepositional phrase as a nominal modifier in Gokana can never precede the noun but always occur after the noun. Unlike the definiteness marker, there can be no intervening element between the PP and the noun it modifies. There must be strict spatial contiguity between the noun and the PP.

This is why the PP and the N are dominated by the same bar projection.

4.2.4 The Relative Clause Modifier

The relative clause occurs in the Gokana NP structure as a post-head modifier. Unlike the PP, there can be an intervening element between the relative clause and the noun it modifies.

Examples:

20a) bēè [e Ledum beè kààna nyèna]
 pear that PN PST pluck lastyear
 ‘The pear that ledum plucked last year’

b) bēè [ló èèrè] [e Ledum beè kààna nyèna]
 pear for road that PN PST pluck last year
 ‘The pear by the roadside that ledum plucked last year’

In (20b), there is an intervening PP between the head of the NP and its modifying relative clause. Observe that while the relative clause modifies the N-bar (bēè ló èèrè), the PP (ló èèrè) directly modifies the noun (bēè). Thus, the relative clause modifies the N-bar and not just the noun.

4.3 Co-Occurrence Restrictions of Nominal Modifiers

The grammar provides a pattern for the modification of the noun. Although all the modifiers freely occur with the noun, there is a constraint on the maximum number of modifiers that the noun can take at a time within a single NP configuration. The NP can accommodate a maximum of five pre-head modifiers and three post-head modifiers at a time, as shown in (21):

21) Sìgà gbò ndàà gberè bira bēè ló èèrè
 QN PL Poss int adj pear for road
 ‘some of my very dark roadside pears’
 e ledum beè kààna a
 that PN PST pluck DET
 that ledum plucked’

The modifiers in (21) do not follow one another in a random order. Within the Gokana noun phrase, the relative position of certain word classes is fixed. The linear order is as follows:

- i) Pre-Head Modifiers
 - a) Quantifiers
 - b) Pluralizers
 - c) Possessives
 - d) Intensifiers
 - e) Adjectives
- ii) Post-Head Modifiers
 - a) Prepositional Phrase/Demonstrative
 - b) Relative Clause
 - c) Definiteness Marker/Demonstrative

From our analysis, ten nominal modifiers are attested in the grammar of Gokana, out of these, six occurs as pre-head modifiers while four are post-head modifiers. And eight of the modifiers can co-occur with the head noun maximally at an instance.

The demonstrative occurs in the maximal expansion in mutually exclusive distribution with either the prepositional phrase or the definiteness marker.

The absence of the numeral modifier from the maximal expansion of the NP is explained by the fact that the numeral modifier does not directly co-occur with the head noun in an NP structure. Again, numerals occur in their own designated constructions: the numeral construction. The numeral construction occurs within a Quantifier Phrase (QP). The Quantifier Phrase directly precedes the head noun, and together with the head noun forms an NP: the Numeral Noun Phrase.

4.4 Structural Categories of Gokana Nominal Modifiers

Gokana nominal modifiers occur in the following structural categories:

i) **Affix/Morpheme**

The demonstrative modifier –i and –á occur in this category.

ii) **Lexical items**

The adjectives, the possessives, the intensifiers, the quantifiers, the numerals, the pluralizers and the definiteness marker occur as lexical items.

iii) **Phrases**

Only one phrase occurs as a nominal modifier: the prepositional phrase.

iv) **Clauses**

The relative clause is attested as the only canonical clausal modifier in the language.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, we have described nominal modifiers in Gokana. The paper identified ten distinct nominal modifiers in the grammatical structure of the language. Six of the modifiers were classified as pre-head modifiers while four of the modifiers occurred as post-head modifiers.

The paper found that apart from the individual instances of usage, all the modifiers can simultaneously co-occur with the head noun in the noun phrase structure except the numeral modifier. The paper attributed this exception to the fact that the numeral usually occurs in its own designated construction, the numeral construction, which occurs within a quantifier phrase (QP) that directly precedes the head noun, and together with the head noun forms an NP.

The paper observed that there is no distinction between mass and count nouns in the usage of quantifiers; and that the definiteness marker is not a suffix as previously analyzed as it is possible to have an intervening element between it and the modified head noun. The study equally found that there can be no intervening element between the PP and the modified head noun.

The paper noted that the demonstrative can only co-occur with the head noun in the maximum expansion of the NP structure in mutually exclusive distribution with either the prepositional phrase or the definiteness marker. In the structural categorization of the nominal modifiers, the study found that the Gokana nominal modifier can be a grammatical morpheme, a lexical item, a phrase or a clausal element in grammatical structure.

6. Recommendation

Given the complex structure of the numeral construction and its nested nature in the Noun Phrase, the study recommended a detailed study of the Quantifier Phrase (QP) in Gokana in order to determine the objective status of the numeral with respect to its function as a modifier or head element.

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