
Plural-Marking Strategies in Etulo

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Abstract

This paper discusses the plural marking system of Etulo (an Idomoid language of Niger Congo). It describes the number marking strategies employed for categories such as the noun, pronoun, demonstratives and the verb/copula. It is observed that Etulo lacks an inflectional plural. Etulo expresses nominal plurality via the use of the plural morpheme ‘èmi’, reduplication, quantifiers, and vowel substitution. Number marking in nouns may be obligatory or optional depending on the animacy feature of the noun. Most animate [-human] and inanimate nouns may, but need not be marked for number while most animate nouns [+human] are obligatorily marked for number. Etulo makes a dual distinction between the singular and plural in its pronominal paradigm. Pronominal number is marked by suppletion. For the verb category, some type of number marking and agreement is observed with specific verbs such as the copula dzè ‘be’ (SG), to ‘be’ (PL), gbε/kie ‘take’. Etulo demonstratives are marked for plurality using the morpheme ‘ntō’. The data for this research are obtained via field work and are analysed using the descriptive approach.

Keywords: Etulo, plurality, number agreement, pronominal number

1. Introduction

Etulo is an Idomoid language spoken in Benue and Taraba states located in the North Central part of Nigeria. It shares striking similarities with other Idomoid languages (Idoma, Alago) within the Benue Congo subgroup of the Niger Congo language family. Etulo is a tone language with a predominant SVO word order. It is basically an isolating language with little agglutinative features. It is therefore, not unusual that the category of number is not inflectionally marked in Etulo. Number distinction in Etulo is observed in categories such as the noun, pronoun, verb/copula and demonstratives. They show a two way contrast between singular and plural.

Across languages, a typological variation is observed with respect to number marking on nouns in terms of obligatoriness vs optionality of marking, the formal properties of plural marking, semantic distinctions on which classes of nouns get marked for plurality (see Naess 2018). Also, languages vary in terms of the number of values expressed by lexical categories (noun/pronoun). For instance, in English and some other European languages, a dual distinction is made between singular and plural while in languages like Karko (a Nubian language), number values attested by nouns include: singular, plural, singulative, pluralative, collective and associative (see Jakobi & Dimmendaal 2019).

This paper gives a description of the strategies adopted in marking number number distinctions in Etulo. It also discusses the relatively rare instances of number agreement especially between the Etulo copula and the NP subject. The rest of the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 gives a review of related literature on plurality and number marking. Section 3 discusses nominal plurality, pronominal number, pluralisation of demonstratives,

verbal number agreement. Section 4 gives the summary of findings and conclusion.

The data for this research are obtained (via interview) from 3 native speakers of Etulo using a structured questionnaire. A descriptive approach is adopted in the analysis of the language data. The Etulo data are represented using the International Phonetic Alphabets (IPA) and the tones are fully marked.

2. Plural Marking across Languages

The number category is assumed to be language universal although there is considerable variation across languages on the means of expressing it. The basic evidence for the category of number is found in the distinction between singular and plural in relation to nouns and other categories. Crystal (2003) notes that number is a grammatical category that covers word classes displaying such contrasts as singular, plural, dual, trial or apical (few). Plurality applies to not only nouns, but also to other categories such as the pronoun, determiner/demonstratives, and verbs when they encode the number value of more than one.

For the noun, Dryer (2013) identifies two ways of indicating plurality. The first involves changing the morphological form of the noun via affixation, stem change, partial or full reduplication of the stem and tone. The second involves coding of plurality by means of a morpheme that occurs somewhere else in the noun phrase. This morpheme could be a plural word or clitic. In Haiwailan (Elbbert & Pukui 1979), nominal plurality is coded by the plural word *mau* which has the same function as a plural affix but is a separate word modifying the noun as in the example below:

- 1) elua a'u mau i'a
two my PL fish

‘My two fish’

In languages such as English and other European languages, plurality is marked by an affix. In English for instance, a plural suffix is used in coding nominal plurality as in the following examples:

- 2) The girl (singular: one girl)
 The girls (plural: two girls)

For the pronoun, number distinction can vary in terms of the values encoded. Languages such as Igbo, a Niger-Congo language, make a two way distinction (SG/PL) for personal pronouns while other languages like Bouma Fijian (Austronesian, Oceanic; Dixon 1988) distinguish four numbers for the pronoun: singular, dual (2 participants), paucal (a small number of participants) and plural (a larger number of participants). Dalrymple (2012) also notes that number distinction can vary across the pronominal paradigm. For instance, pronouns in Biak (Austronesian language) make a four way distinction in the 3rd person but a 3 way distinction in the 1st and 2nd person.

For the verb category, languages distinguish between verbal number and verbal agreement. Verbal number or pluractionality refers to the number of events in a complex event description while verbal agreement indicates concord between the verb and the noun on the basis of number. Karko (a Nilo Saharan language) distinguishes between verbal number and verbal agreement (see Jakobi & Dimmendaal 2019). Verbal number in Karko is realised by singular or plural stems while verbal agreement is realised as suffixes on the verb. Veselinova (2006) illustrates the notion of verbal number with data from Mpun (Chadic; Frajzygiel 1993). The

Mupun verb meaning ‘kill’ has two forms; one for a single event and the other for multiple killing events. Examples from Mupun:

3. a) n-tu joos
1SG-kill-SG rat
‘I killed a rat’
- b) n-tue joos (mo)
1SG-kill.PL rat PL
‘I killed rats’

Demonstratives typically encode the relative distance of an entity being referred to. They could be marked for number (SG/PL) and in many languages, demonstratives are known to agree in number with the nouns that they modify as in the English examples (4) and (5). In terms of number, a two way contrast is made for both proximal and distal demonstratives in English and some other languages. Examples:

- 4) a. this girl (proximal-SG)
b. these girls (proximal-PL)
- 5) a. that girl (distal-SG)
b. those girls (distal-PL)

In general, Dryer (2013) observes languages differ in the extent to which indication of plurality is required with semantically plural referents, even when a morphological form is available. Similarly, Haspelmath (2013) states that the occurrence of plural markers vary along two dimensions: animacy and obligatoriness. In the animacy dimension, a distinction is made between animate (especially humans) and inanimate nouns. In the obligatoriness dimension, the contrast is between non-occurrence, optional occurrence and obligatory occurrence of the plural marker. The

common generalisation made from cross-linguistic studies on number and plural-marking is that human nouns are more likely to have plural marking than non-human nouns.

In many West African languages such as Yoruba, Igbo, Alago, and Emai, plurality is encoded by a combination of different strategies. Also, the coding of plurality in these Niger-Congo languages is usually non inflectional and non-obligatory in some cases.

3. Plurality and Number Agreement in Etulo

In this section, we discuss the strategies for marking nominal plurality, the number values of the pronominal paradigm, demonstratives and the copula/verb. Also discussed are the number agreement features attested in Etulo.

3.1 Nominal Plurality

With respect to the noun category, Etulo makes a dual distinction between singular and plural. Plural marking on nouns is encoded via a number of strategies which include: vowel substitution (stem change), reduplication, plural morpheme *èmi* and quantifiers. Number marking may be optional or obligatory depending on the noun.

Many animate nouns with the feature [+human] are obligatorily marked for number via the process of vowel substitution. The word initial vowel of the singular noun which is typically /o/ is substituted by the vowel /e/ in the plural form (see 7-.). Animate nouns with the feature [-human] and inanimate nouns are rarely marked for plurality using the vowel substitution strategy. Except for the noun *úkê* ‘basket’ which has its plural form as *ákê* ‘baskets’, we do not find any other instance of vowel substitution with inanimate nouns. In contrast with examples (7) - (17) which involves the /o/→/e/

substitution, example (18) involves the /u/ → /a/ vowel substitution at the word initial position. Examples:

Table 1: Vowel substitution

	Singular		Plural	
7)	óbá	‘husband’	ébá	‘husbands’
8)	ònwè	‘child’	ènwè	‘children’
9)	òngiá	‘woman’	èngiá	‘women’
10)	òngiùlô	‘man’	èngiùlô	‘men’
11)	òwà	‘wife’	èwà	‘wives’
12)	òmgbé	‘little child’	èmgbé	‘little children’
13)	òwàkwádē	‘widow’	èwàkwádē	‘widows’
14)	ònwè òngiá	‘girl’	ènwè èngiá	‘girls’
15)	ònwè òngiùlô	‘boy’	ènwè èngiùlô	‘boys’
16)	ótsé ónwè	‘father’	étsé énwè	‘fathers’
17)	ónó ónwè	‘mother’	énó énwè	‘mothers’
18)	úkê	‘basket’	ákê	‘baskets’

There are certain contexts in which plurality is marked in Etulo by means of reduplication. The noun stem is fully reduplicated to mark entities that are more than one. However, for inanimate nouns, plural marking using the reduplication strategy is optional. Below are some examples:

- 19) a. òsé ‘grass’ òsé ósé ‘grasses’
 b. ígbé ‘bag’ ígbé ígbé ‘bags’
 c. mgwô ‘mountain’ mgwô mgwô ‘mountains’
 d. àbù ‘shirt’ àbù àbù ‘shirts’

They are further illustrated in the following sentences:

- 20) a. ánî gíá àbù àbù tá
 1SG buy-PST shirt shirt only
 ‘I bought only shirts’
- b. òkwò m̀gbí ìnàni lì òsé ósé
 farm of PN is bush bush
 ‘Inyani’s farm is full of bushes’

Another means of marking nominal plurality is by the use of the plural morpheme *èmi*. This strategy is restrictive. The plural morpheme only occurs with animate nouns, especially in possessive constructions as shown in (21-25). It is incompatible with inanimate nouns except perhaps, in the context of Etulo folktales where inanimate entities could be personified. The following examples are illustrative:

Table 2: The plural morpheme *èmi*

	Singular	Plural
21)	ónó ánî ‘my mother’	èmi ónó ánî ‘my mothers’
22)	òkà àdî ‘Adi’s friend’	èmi òkà àdî ‘Adi’s friends’
23)	̀ngisè ‘person’	èmi ̀ngisè ‘people’
24)	mdà m̀gbí ánî ‘my cow’	èmi mdà m̀gbí ánî ‘my cows’
25)	mtsè ‘witchcraft’	èmi mtsè ‘witches’

The co-occurrence of *èmi* with inanimate nouns results in ungrammaticality. In (26) for instance, an ungrammatical

construction results from the co-occurrence of the plural morpheme with the inanimate noun *àfè* ‘book’. To indicate plurality in (26), quantifiers may be used instead by specifying the number of books using a numeral.

- 26) **è mí àfè mgbí á nî*
PL book POSS 1SG
‘My books’

The plural morpheme also co-occurs with other quantifiers such as the numerals in encoding plurality as illustrated in (27a-b).

- 27) a. *è mí ó nǒ á nî è dá*
PL mother my five
‘My five mothers’
- b. *è mí ò kà à dí é fà*
PL friend PN two
‘Adi’s two friends’

The use of quantifiers is another means of marking plurality. Etulo uses the quantifiers, *kpákpá* and *kwùbà* ‘many’ to express nominal plurality. Both quantifiers are compatible with animate and inanimate nouns as shown in (28 -29).

- 28) *à dì nwó m dà kpákpá*
PN kill-PST cow many
‘Adi killed many cows’
- 29) *á nî g í á à f è kwùbà*
1SG buy-PST book many
‘I bought many books’

In addition, Etulo numerals function as quantifiers in encoding nominal plurality as shown in the example below:

- 31) 28) *ánî* *gíá* *àfè* *età*
 1SG buy-PST book three
 ‘I bought three books’

3.1.1 Optional vs Obligatory Plural Marking in Etulo

As noted earlier, plural marking in Etulo is obligatory with animate [+human] nouns. For instance, indicating plurality for the noun *òngiá* ‘woman’ compulsorily requires the /o/→/e/ vowel substitution. In contrast, plural marking is optional for inanimate and animate [-human] nouns. This is consistent with Dryer (2013); that languages differ in the extent to which indication for plurality is required with semantically plural referents, even when a morphological form is available. In relation to Etulo, it is observed that although strategies are available for the coding of plurality with inanimate and animate [-human] nouns, their use is usually not obligatory unlike some other languages like English. In sentence (32) for instance, the inanimate noun *àfè* ‘book’ is subject to two interpretations: singular and plural readings by default. Formal marking of plurality is only applicable when there is the need for specificity. However, this is not the case for animate [+human] nouns. In sentence (33a), the noun *òngiá* ‘woman’ receives one interpretation which is a singular reading while in (33a), the noun *èngiá* ‘women’ receives one interpretation which is a plural reading. Examples:

- 32) *Adi* *gi* *a* *afè*
 PN buy-PST book(s)
 ‘Adi bought a book/Adi bought books’

- 33) a. anɪ di ɔ̀ŋgiâ mì idû
 1SG see woman in market
 ‘I saw a woman in the market’
- b. anɪ di ɛ̀ŋgiâ mì idû
 1SG see women in market
 ‘I saw women in the market’

3.2 Pronominal Number

In this section, the pluralisation of personal pronouns and demonstratives is discussed.

3.2.1 Pluralisation of Personal Pronouns

The number values of the Etulo personal pronouns comprise the singular and plural. Besides these two number values, no further distinction is made with respect to number or gender. The pronouns are not inflectionally marked for number. Their pluralisation is coded by means of suppletion as shown in table 3. The singular personal pronouns are wholly replaced by other forms in their pluralisation. The 3rd person plural pronoun is realised by three forms conditioned by case. For the nominative case (subject), the plural forms á/ámá ‘they’ are used while for the accusative case, the form má ‘them’ is used.

Table 3: Personal pronouns

	Singular Pronoun	Plural Pronoun
1 st person	ánî ‘I’	éjî ‘We’
2 nd person	ábû ‘You’	émâ ‘You’
3 rd person	ó ‘He/She/It’	á/ámá/má ‘They/Them’

3.2.2 Demonstratives

Etulo distinguishes between distal and proximal demonstratives. Proximal demonstratives point to entities that are close in relation to the speaker, while distal demonstratives point to entities that are far off in relation to the speaker. Two number values are assigned to Etulo demonstrative: singular and plural. The demonstratives agree in number with the nouns that they modify. They also function as nominal plural markers as shown in the examples below:

- 34) a. òkwò nê ‘this farm’ òkwò ñtónê
 ‘these farms’
 b. òkwò nénĩ ‘this farm’ òkwò ñtónénĩ
 ‘these farms’
- 35) a. m̀dà nâ ‘that cow’ m̀dà ñtónâ
 ‘those cows’
 b. m̀dà nánĩ ‘that cow’ m̀dà ñtónánĩ
 ‘those cows’

The demonstrative determiners in (34a) and (35a) are used interchangeably with the ones in (34b) and (35b). Etulo demonstratives also function as pronouns. As a pronoun, the proximal demonstrative is realised as *nεnε* ‘this’ (see 36a) while the distal demonstrative is realised as *nana* ‘that’. They share the same plural forms as their adjectival counterparts.

- 36) a. Néné li m̀gbẽn
 this is POSS:1SG
 ‘This is mine’
 b. Ǹtonê li m̀gbẽn
 these are POSS:1SG

‘These are mine’

- 37) a. Náná li mǎgbě̀n
 that is POSS:1SG
 ‘That is mine’
- b. N̄tónâ li mǎgbě̀n
 those are POSS:1SG
 ‘Those are mine’

Table 4 Etulo demonstratives

Type		Singular	Plural
Proximal (adjective)	demonstrative	nɛ /nɛ ni	ntone /ntone ni
Distal (adjective)	demonstrative	na/nani	ntona/ntonani
Proximal pronoun	demonstrative	nɛ nɛ	ntone
Distal demonstrative pronoun		nana	ntona

3.3 Verbal Number Agreement

Typically, Etulo verbs do not express number agreement with an NP argument except for few verbs such as the copula *dzɛ̀/tó* ‘be’ and the verbs *kié* ‘take’ and *gbé* ‘pack’. In this section however, we focus on number agreement between the copula and the NP argument.

Number can be co-specified by the noun and verb, whereby, a singular NP subject requires a singular verb, and a plural NP subject requires a plural verb. As shown in examples (38)-(39), the Etulo locative copula has two forms: the singular form *dzɛ̀* ‘be’

occurs in agreement with singular NP subjects such as *òṅgíá* ‘woman’, while the plural form *tó* ‘be’ co-occurs with plural NP subjects such as *èṅgíá* ‘women’.

Examples:

38) *òṅgíá mà dzè ilégòsì*
woman the COP:SG Lagos
‘The woman is in Lagos’

39) *èṅgíá mā tó ilégòsì*
women the COP:PL Lagos
‘The women are in Lagos’

Etulo constructions that violate the number agreement between the copula and the NP subject argument are considered ungrammatical as illustrated in (40) below.

40) **ánî tó ilégòsì*
1SG COP:PL Lagos
‘I am in Lagos’

4. Conclusion

This paper has examined the plurality in Etulo with emphasis on the number values encoded in nominals, personal pronouns, and demonstratives. It also discussed the Etulo verbal number agreement features with respect to the copula *dzè/tó* ‘be’. It is observed that Etulo combines multiple strategies in the marking of plurality. These strategies include: vowel substitution, reduplication, use of plural morpheme, quantifiers, demonstrative determiners and suppletion. For all the categories studied, a two way number distinction between singular and plural is made. It is shown with supporting examples that plural marking is obligatory for animate [+human] nouns but optional for inanimate and animate [-human] nouns.

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