

## Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement in Mende

Claude Alusine Dimoh, Peter Mboh Muffuh, Josephus KL Libbie

Institute of Languages and Cultural Studies (INSLACS), Bo Campus, Njala University, Sierra Leone

### Abstract

The study revolves around meaning relations as anchored on the use of personal pronouns as reference elements in Mende. The relationship between a reference and its referent – the item it presupposes- with respect to personal pronoun antecedent agreement requires semantic explanations regarding certain characteristics owned by the referent or antecedent.

It is expected that personal pronouns and their antecedent must agree in the features: gender, person, case and number for want of clarity of meaning, cohesion, and precision of grammar. These features form the characteristics of nouns and pronouns alike. This strict matching order as dictated by semantics, does not obtain in the Mende language of Sierra Leone. This article looks at the semantic relationship between a personal pronoun and its antecedent in the Mende language of Sierra Leone.

A purposive sampling technique was used to identify a corpus of the grammar of the language from which reference elements were drawn. The study was largely qualitative, thus describing the meaning relations between personal pronouns and their referents.

The findings reveal useful information on the nature of the variety of grammatical elements that occur for case pronouns for the purpose of teaching and learning and for inclusion in the body of literature on the grammar of the language. Furthermore, it is evident that the personal pronouns in Mende do not cohere with the semantic features that are essential to interpreting the relationship between the referent and its referent. Therefore teachers and learners need to be aware of the nuances of personal pronouns in terms of their structure and function in the Mende language.

**Keywords:** referent, reference, antecedent, cohesion, personal pronoun

### Introduction

The Mende language is one of the most widely spoken languages in the south and part of the east of Sierra Leone. The language has a population of 1,939,055 according to the 2004 Population and Housing Census. The language has four dialects that are mutually intelligible. However, the dialect adopted for this study is the Sewama Mende dialect which is predominantly spoken in eight chiefdom of Bo district. The study focuses on the use of reference items such as personal pronouns with particular attention on their semantic relations with the nouns they substitute.

Languages have an inbuilt network of operative which makes them unique in their own right. These features usually help connect one idea to another without undue repetition. Had there been no such cohering elements, language would have been boring, monotonous and unpleasant to the ear. The key to enhancing this feature is regarded as cohesion by Halliday and Hasan. Cohesion, as understood by Halliday and Hasan (1976) <sup>[1]</sup>, is a semantic unit, in which the interpretation of some linguistic elements in a text depends on that of another element. According to these authors, cohesion is realized through the resources of reference, substitution, ellipses and conjunction which form the category of grammatical cohesion. This paper looks at personal pronouns as reference elements in the Mende language. Reference as a cohesive device used in a text is only interpreted with respect to some other parts of the same text. Lyon's (1987) <sup>[2]</sup>, believes that reference is the relationship which holds between words and the things, events, actions and qualities they represent.

Reference elements are common place in natural languages and Mende is no exception. One of many such reference items is the class of personal pronouns.

According to Anson and Schwegler, (1997) <sup>[3]</sup>, personal pronouns are used to replace nouns and make sentences less repetitive and easier to understand. Personal pronouns in themselves are meaningless unless they are seen referring to some aforementioned or would be stated noun- the antecedent. Therefore, a proper noun must share identical features or characteristics with the pronoun that restates it for want of clarity, paragraph coherence, as well as for style and grammatical precision. Glencoe (2001) <sup>[4]</sup>, argues that a pronoun must agree with its antecedent in number, gender, person and case. For example:

Mamie loves her father most that she bought him the latest car.

In the sentence above, the personal pronouns *her* and *she* are making backward reference to the proper noun *Mamie*, while *him* refers back to *father*. The relationship between the pronouns and the antecedent is consistent and coherent as they share identical semantic characteristics in the features stated above. In the area of gender, a unique morphological shape is accounted for. Thus: *she/her* for feminine; *him* for masculine. For person and number, they imply third person singular. For case, *she* serves as the subject while *her* occurs as both object and possessive. The argument therefore is that unique morphological shapes are used to capture all these characteristics to make learning easier. This matching relationship, which enhances meaning clarity is grossly undermined and diluted in the Mende language of Sierra Leone as gender specification remains unmarked.

### Statement of the Problem

Speaker of natural languages have unique ways of expressing or communicating their views and feelings. Clarity of meaning

is, however, the underlying virtue of all successful communication. The meaning relation between a personal pronoun and its antecedent needs to be accounted for as this enriches meaning. The desire for meaning clarity with respect to pronoun-antecedent agreement in the Mende language demands extreme attention.

### Purpose of the Study

The study aimed at providing an examined list of personal pronouns and their nuances in the Mende language for teachers and scholars to be aware of their usage. It is also worthy of note that personal pronouns occur in complementary distribution; have diverse morphological shapes that bear very little semantic relations with their antecedents. Also, the study hopes to create an understanding of how these reference items occur and the reason for choosing one as against the others, an information which might be useful to teachers and learners of the language.

### Research Questions

The following research questions were raised:

- Do personal pronouns occur as reference elements in Mende?
- Do personal pronouns cohere with their antecedents in number?
- Do personal pronouns agree with their antecedents in gender?
- Do personal pronouns match with their antecedents in person?
- Do personal pronouns have unique morphological shapes for case?

### Significance of the Study

The study throws light on the grammatical elements of personal pronouns and their meaning content, so as to enlighten teachers and learners about the working of the grammar of the language. It is hoped that the findings will be of invaluable importance to linguists and those interested in studying the language for the purpose of communication.

### Methodology

The design of this study is descriptive and qualitative, as it critically examines meaning, textual coherence and clarity of pronouns- antecedent agreement in Mende.

### Instrument

Unstructured interview schedules were used to collect data on a corpus of the language, which was subsequently recorded and transcribed for analysis.

### Subjects of the study

The subjects of the study included ideal native speakers of the Sewama Mende language who served as samples purposively drawn from eight chiefdom headquarter towns in Bo district. The respondents from each chiefdom headquarter town were homogeneously identified based on their population strength as determined by the 2004 Population and Housing Census and pre-occupation. The table below shows the sample size based on the population of the chiefdom.

**Table 1:** Subjects of the Study

	Chiefdom	Targeted Population	Sample size
1	Baoma	15	5
2	Bumpeh	15	5
3	Bagbo	15	5
4	Jaiama Bongor	15	5
5	Kakua	15	5
6	Lugbu	15	5
7	Tikonko	15	5
8	Wonde	10	3
	Total	115	38

The sample population was determined on the basis that not all chiefdoms in Bo District predominantly speak Sewama Mende even though the dialect spoken by the selected speakers is mutually intelligible with that of the other dialects left out. These dialects maintain the same syntactic relation but with slight phonetic variation. Eight chiefdoms out of fifteen speak the Sewama Mende dialect; the remaining seven speak the Kpaa Mende dialect. The chiefdoms with a population below ten thousand speakers had ten speakers targeted, while those with a population above ten thousand had fifteen speakers targeted. In entirety, 115 ideal native speakers were identified as respondents out of which 38 were selected. The selection of this region was done for a variety of reasons among which was that the Sewama Mende is the most widely spoken dialect in the city of Bo and the dialect used for broadcast.

### Data Collection

Unstructured interviews in the form of open-ended discussions were held with ideal native speakers in which respondents recounted their experiences in an epic.

### Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using qualitative and descriptive approaches with phonemically precise transcription of some of the sentences, stories and discussions. Also, a text analyzer including native speaker's intuitive knowledge was used to identify the reference elements in the discourses recorded.

### Findings of the Study

The personal pronouns of the Mende language have confusing and misleading morphological appearances which implicate their function and learning. It is expected that as in English, a unique morphological shape be used for all three case forms - subjective case, objective case and possessive case- and also a unique form for all three persons-first person, second person, and third person. This will help learners with ease of identification of the respective personal pronouns and their usage in the process of learning the language. Morphologically, it is however, argued by O'Grady et al, (2004) <sup>[5]</sup> that every word must have an ideal shape or spelling which makes it unique among other and which renders it exceptionally different in meaning from other words. For example:

Abu built several houses and he depended on them for his post work survival.

In the example above, it is clear that the personal pronoun ‘he’ renames ‘Abu’ and functions as the subject, while ‘them’ refers to ‘houses’ and clearly implies number (plural) which also functions as the object of the preposition ‘on’. ‘His’ typifies ownership or possession and refers to ‘Abu’. As illustrated, all three personal pronouns have different shapes based on the structural appearance which dictates the role

performed by each pronoun. This logical relationship among personal pronouns with respect to case, person, gender, and number, makes learning easier as it were in the case of learning English personal pronouns.

In Mende, as discovered by Dimoh (2013)<sup>6</sup>, quite the reverse obtains, as identical personal pronouns are used for all three cases. See tables below for detailed explanation.

**Table 1.1:** Singular Personal Pronouns

Person	Subjective case	Objective case	Possessive case
1 <sup>st</sup>	ngi, nga, nge, nge nya, nyaye (I)	nyaye nya, nge (me)	nya, (my) nyawo (mine)
2 <sup>nd</sup>	bia, bi, ba, be, biye (you)	bie, bia, bi, biye (you)	bi (your) biwo (yours)
3 <sup>rd</sup>	taa, I, a, e, ngye (she/he, it)	taa, ngi, ngye (him, her)	ngi (his, her) ngiwo (his hers)

**Table 1.2:** Plural Personal Pronouns

Person	Subjective case	Objective case	Possessive Case
1 <sup>st</sup>	mua, mu, ma, muye (we)	mue, mu, muye (us)	mu, (my) muwo (ours)
2 <sup>nd</sup>	wia, wa, wu, wuye (you)	wue, wu, wuye (you)	wu (your) wuwo (yours)
3 <sup>rd</sup>	tia, ta, ti, te, tiye (they)	ti, tie, tiye (them)	ti (their) tiwo (theirs)

The first person personal pronouns in Mende vary a great deal with confusing appearances and functions. Some of the morphological units used for the subjective case are also employed in both the objective and possessive cases. These nuances of personal pronouns in Mende pose a learning threat to non native speakers of the language who might be interested in learning the language. Personal pronouns in Sewama Mende lack the characteristics of gender, person, number and case. This information is largely contextual and meaning clarity hinges on this contextual background.

The personal pronoun ‘nya’ occurs in all three categories as subject, object and possessive, a situation which constitutes huge learning challenges for non-native speakers of the language. Similarly, ‘bi’ has an ambivalent appearances, as it is seen occurring as second person singular subject, object, and possessive. What compounds the situation further is the variety of grammatical elements that occur for each person and case. The question then is: How does the learner know which option is appropriate, because these occur in complimentary distribution? The same holds for the first person plural pronoun ‘mu’ which occurs as subjective, objective and possessive case. ‘wu’ (you) which is second person plural does occur in all three contexts as second person plural subject, object and possessive case.

Also, there are varied forms that occur as persons-first, second, and third person. What makes learning glaringly and apparently difficult is that these many forms that correspond to case and person are not arbitrarily employed. Rather, their choice of usage is based on mood, tense, and aspect. The first person singular personal pronoun in Mende has six morphological shapes and the occurrence of one as opposed to the other is based on the features mentioned above as expressed by the speaker:

- a) **Nya wama a ndomii**  
I [PROG] come with cloth the  
I am coming with the cloth. (Positive)
- b) **Ngi wama a ndomii**  
I not [PROG] come with cloth the  
I am not coming with the cloth. (Negative)
- c) **Nge wa a ndomii**  
I [FUT] come not with cloth the  
I will not come with the cloth. (Negative)

- d) **Nga walɔ a ndomii**  
I [FUT] come with cloth the  
I will come with the cloth. (Positive)
- e) **Yɔɔ a nge?**  
Who am I?

The data above imply that the first person singular can occur as one of many forms based on tense, mood and aspect. The data above imply that ‘nya’ and ‘nga’(I) are used to express certainty, ability and positive progressive action, while ‘nge’ and ‘ngi’ occur with verbs that express uncertainty, negative or past action. Case is not clearly marked in Mende since identical grammatical units are used to capture the subjective case, objective case and possessive case of all three persons whether singular or plural. For example:

The first person singular personal pronouns *nge* and *nya* (I, me, my) function as subject (I), object (me) and possessive (my). Both *nge* and *nya* occur as subject and object devoid of change of morphological shape, while *nya* occurs as both object and possessive forms.

The same holds for the second person singular personal pronouns *bia* and *bi* (you/your) both of which occur as subject and object with no alteration of the grammatical unit, while *bi* does the roles of object and possessive as in the examples that follow:

- a) **Ngi feilɔ bi wɛ.**  
I give [past] you to.  
I gave it to you.
- b) **Bi lomii lo**  
Your cloth this is  
This is your cloth.
- c) **Bi womia a ndomii ji**  
You own cloth this  
You own this cloth.

Furthermore, the third person singular personal pronoun *taa* and *ngi* occur both as subject and object, while *ngi* occurs again as possessive.

- a) **Taa wama a ndomii.**  
He [PROG] come with cloth the  
He is coming with the cloth. (Subject)

- b) Ngi fei taa wɛ.**  
I give [Past] him/her to  
I gave it to him/her. (object)
- c) Ngi feni ngi wɛ**  
I did not him/her give  
I did not give it to him/her. (object)
- d) Ngi lomii lɔ a ji.**  
His/her cloth is this  
This is his/her cloth. (possessive)

What compounds the situation further is the grammatical unit *ngi* which occurs as both first person singular subject and at the same time third person possessive. Thus *ngi* alone functions as first person subject (I), third person object (him/her) and third person possessive (his/her).

The plural personal pronouns in Mende exhibit the same conflicting situation as evident in the examples below in which ‘mu’ functions as first person plural subject, object and possessive:

- a) Mu waa pɛɛla**  
We come house  
We have come to the house.
- b) Kɔwei ve mu wɛ**  
Shoe the give us to  
Give the shoe to us.
- c) Mu wɛɛ lɔ a ji.**  
Our house is this  
This is our house.

In example (a) ‘mu’ functions as the subject of the sentence, while in (b) it functions as object of the verb ‘give’ and in example (c) it functions as possessive.

The same applies to the second person plural ‘wu’ (you) which functions in all three categories as subject, object, and possessive.

- a) Wu waa pɛɛla.**  
You [ASP] come house.  
You have come to the house.
- b) Mu Kɔwei veilɔ wu wɛ.**  
We shoe gave you to.  
We gave the shoes to you
- c) Wu wɛɛ lɔ a ji.**  
Your house is this  
This is your house.

The third person plural personal pronoun ‘ti’ (they) does function in all three capacities as subject, object. These inconsistent appearances lead to eventual learning difficulty as the same word is used to mark all three roles

- a) Ti waa pɛɛla.**  
They [ASP] come house.  
They have come to the house.
- b) Mu Kɔwei veilɔ ti wɛ.**  
We shoe gave them to.  
We gave the shoes to them
- c) Ti wɛɛ lɔ a ji.**  
Their house is this  
This is their house.

Gender marking is absolutely lacking in the expression of reference by personal pronouns in Mende. None of the third persons mark gender for ease of meaning. Third person

personal pronouns in Mende don’t express gender. No gender specification is accounted for; this leaves room for doubt as to whether the referent is masculine, feminine or neuter as would be in the case of animate, inanimate and non human Noun Phrases. Generally, the forms: *taa*, *I*, *a*, *ngi*, *ɛ*, *ngiye* (she/he, it) all occur as third person regardless of gender specification. This undermines meaning clarity except for contextual background. The following examples explain better.

- I waa* (s/he, it has come)  
*A waa* (s/he, it will come)  
*ɛ wa* (s/he, it will not come)  
*Yɔɔ a ngiye* ( who is she/he/it)

### Conclusion

The findings reveal that pronouns in Mende are rich in form and are therefore used based on mood, tense and aspect. The proliferation of these pronouns for each specific case poses serious teaching and learning difficulties particularly for teachers and learners of the language who are actually none native speakers. The issue of gender is glaringly lacking in Mende grammar as there is nothing to show for it morphologically with respect to word shape. Meaning clarity is only enhanced as result of contextual background.

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