

Quasi-names in Akan – New semantic fieldwork on definite bare nouns

Summary. We present an analysis of definite bare nouns in Akan as quasi-names – nouns which, like *Mum* in English, can be used as proper names but have a descriptive content (Yip et al. 2023). The analysis is based on original fieldwork with 8 native speakers of Akan. The availability of quasi-names points to a new source of variation for definites in Akan that goes beyond the weak-strong article dichotomy (Schwarz 2009).

Background. Akan (Kwa) has been at the center of a heated debate on definiteness typology. The language has three definite forms: the bare noun (BN), the definite article *no*, and the (distal) demonstrative *saa...no*. While there is broad consensus on their basic distribution, there is disagreement on which denotations they express (Schwarz 2009):

- (1) $\llbracket D_{\text{weak}} \rrbracket = \lambda s. \lambda P. \iota x [P(x)(s)]$ (2) $\llbracket D_{\text{strong}} \rrbracket = \lambda s. \lambda P. \lambda y. \iota x [P(x)(s) \wedge x=y]$

Analysis 1: Arkoh and Matthewson (2013) and Owusu (2022) argue that *no* is a strong article as in (2), i.e., that it requires an explicit or implicit antecedent; and that the BN is a weak article as in (1) and merely presupposes uniqueness. The main evidence is that *no*, but not the BN, is available in anaphora. *Problems:* To capture uses of *no* in non-anaphoric cases, the antecedent presupposition of the strong article has to be relaxed, modifying the essence of (2). **Analysis 2:** In Bombi (2018) and Bombi et al. (2019), *no* is a uniqueness definite as in (1), and the demonstrative *saa...no* encodes the denotation in (2). *Problem:* It is unclear where to fit the BN, which appears to be in free variation with the definite *no* in uniqueness contexts. **General Issues.** The BN distribution was never investigated in depth; the previous literature focusing on a restricted set of nouns and reporting mixed judgments on the competition with *no*. (cf. Owusu 2022 vs. Bombi 2018).

Quasi-names. In Yip et al. (2023)’s analysis, quasi-names have three main properties:

- (3) a. Quasi-name: Each time we went to a family party, *Dad* baked a cake.
b. Definite description: Each time we went to a family party, *the dad* baked a cake.
- (4) **QUASI-NAME (QN) PROPERTIES:**
1. *Rigidity*: In (3a) *Dad* takes wide scope and refers to the same individual in all situations, in (3b), *the dad* co-varies with each family situation.
 2. *Relation to Speaker and Hearer*: The referent of *Dad* in (3a) is the father of the interlocutors; in (3b), the interlocutors have no relation to the referent(s) of *the dad*.
 3. *Lexical restrictions*: QNs are lexically determined, with certain cross-linguistic tendencies (preference for titles, professions, globally unique nouns).

Current study. Based on Bombi et al. (2019), Yip et al. (2023), Coppock & Bonney (2024), the present study tests the hypothesis that definite BNs in Akan are quasi-names.

Questionnaire 1: The goal was to establish whether definite BNs in Akan can be QNs at all, and which nouns can be QNs, based on property 2 (*Relation to interlocutors*) and property 3 (*Lexical restrictions*). To this end, it tested two competing hypotheses:

- (5) **H1:** The Akan BN is a uniqueness definite (cf. Analysis 1).
Predictions: no lexical restrictions, no effect of relation to Speaker and Hearer
H2: The Akan BN is a quasi-name (cf. Bombi et al. 2019, Coppock & Bonney 2024)
Predictions: BN is only possible with certain nouns, and only if there is a relation to Speaker and Hearer.

We tested 33 prototypically unique nouns in on-to-one interviews with 8 native speakers.

The target nouns were presented in two contexts, one in which the referent had a relation to the interlocutors and one where it did not, see (6). Speakers were asked to first provide a translation of the target sentence and then judge whether the other possible option (the BN or the definite *no*) was also possible in that context.

- (6) a. **Context A [+Relation]**: Maame Ama and Akosua have a woman who regularly supplies them with fish every evening. It’s always the same one. Today, she comes in the morning. Akosua tells Maame Ama:
 b. **Context B [−Relation]**: Maame Ama is visiting a friend in a different town. It is 5am and food is ready. Maame Ama is surprised and asks why. Her friend says:

Namwura (no) ba-a ntɛm ennɛ.
 fish-seller DEF come-PFV early today
 ‘The fish-seller came early today.’

The results are mixed but generally supported H2. A set of nouns were consistently rejected in their bare noun form, regardless of the relation to the interlocutors (*child* in a naming ceremony, *fridge* in a house, *driver* in a bus, *lead singer* in a band). For these nouns, the definite *no* was found to be obligatory. Another set of nouns showed speaker variation, but was sensitive to [+/−Relation]: When the BN was accepted, it involved some relation to the interlocutors (*president* of interlocutors’ country, *headmaster* in interlocutors’ school, *teacher* of interlocutors’ class). Thus, lexical restrictions were observed (property 3) and the relation to the interlocutors played a role (property 2), supporting H2 - the quasi-name hypothesis.

Questionnaire 2 (ongoing): Having established which nouns make good QNs in Akan, we are currently testing the scopal properties of these nouns (property 1 – *Rigidity*). Preliminary evidence suggests that BNs indeed refer rigidly, and *no*-DPs do not:

- (7) Mpremprem mu ɔ**manpanyin** #**(no)** yɛ obarima. Bre bi bɛ-ba
 right-now in president DEF COP man time INDF FUT-come
 ɔ**manpanyin** #**(no)** be-yɛ obaa.
 president DEF FUT-COP woman.
 ‘Right now, the president is a man. A time will come when the president is a woman.’
 Comment: *The “no” has to come in [for it to make sense]*

Discussion. For a long time, definiteness systems were defined exclusively in terms of weak vs. strong articles (in the semantic literature) or demonstratives vs. definite articles (in the typological literature). The availability of quasi-names in Akan points to a new source of variation for definiteness, which hinges not on the forms that are available (since QNs also exist in English), but rather on how productive and widespread they are in a language. In the talk, we will discuss the formal definition of QNs provided by Yip et al. (not presented here) and evaluate whether it is appropriate for the Akan case.

References: Arkoh, R. & L. Matthewson. (2013). *A familiar definite article in Akan*. *Lingua* 123. 1–30. Bombi, C.. (2018). *Definiteness in Akan: Familiarity and uniqueness revisited*. *Proceedings of SALT 28*. 141–160.. Bombi, C., M. Grubic, A. Renans & R. A. Duah. (2019). *The semantics of the (so-called) clausal determiner no in Akan (Kwa)*. In *Proceedings of Sinn und Bedeutung 23*, 181–200. Coppock, E. and Bonney, R. D. (2024). *Existence, uniqueness and familiarity*. Talk presented at the 5th meeting of ‘Definiteness Across Domains’, University of Ghana, Accra, Ghana, March 2024. Owusu, A.. (2022). *Cross-categorical definiteness/familiarity*. PhD dissertation. Rutgers. Yip, K., U. Banerjee & M. C. Y. Lee. (2023). *Are there “weak” definites in bare classifier languages?* In *Proceedings of SALT 33*, 253–275.