

Singular, Plural, Generic, and  
Individualized Categories in Kpelle.

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0. Kpelle nouns have sometimes been described (as in Westermann and Melzian, The Kpelle Language in Liberia; Westermann and Bryan, The Languages of West Africa) as having singular and plural forms, with the implication that these forms have functions generally parallel to those of singulars and plurals in English or other European languages. This is misleading.

0.1. From the viewpoint of number and other categories which have been confused with number, Kpelle nouns fall into two major classes: personal and impersonal.

0.2. This classification intersects the classification of free and dependent nouns (which was not recognized at all by the above-mentioned authors); this classification is based on the fact that some nouns (those labelled dependent) require an expressed possessor, and that the possessive pronoun forms for first and third person singular are different from those for free nouns. This classification has implications also for the problem of number. Thus four types of nouns, in a two-by-two scheme, must be considered.

1. The stem form of an impersonal free noun has a generic reference. The question of number is irrelevant. The fact that English equivalents tend to use a singular in most cases but a plural in some cases reflects only the physically or culturally determined probability of the appropriateness of one of these obligatory categories in English. E.g.:

séle káa à sua kánc. 'An elephant is a big animal.'  
or 'Elephants are big animals.' or 'The elephant  
is a big animal.' ("The elephant" may be generic in

in English, or may refer to a known individual; only the latter is reflected by the specific form /zélei/ in Kpelle.)

núu tòno aâ pá à tés. 'one person (someone) has brought a chicken (or chickens).' (Here the singular would be the more common English version, for purely statistical reasons in the culture.)

gaméne sé gbôloī sū. 'It is oranges (or an orange) in the basket.' (Here the English plural would be the usually suggested translation.)

ná kóli kàa ñcoi sū. 'I saw a leopard in the bush.' (Seeing more than one would be so unusual that the number would ordinarily be specified; yet the generic rather than singular reference is so strong that Kpelle people speaking English often say "I saw leopard in the bush.")

nápérsi ká ví. 'This is my house.' (The specific suffix -i indicates that the total of the category is referred to; and one does not usually have more than one house.)

è pá à nògbêvaī. 'He brought his cutlass.' (The singularity of the subject normally implies that the noun in the complement is also to be interpreted in the obligatory singular category in English.)

dí pá à dígbêvaī. 'They brought their cutlasses.' (Conversely, the plural subject normally implies that the cutlasses are also plural.)

1.1. Singularity or plurality can be made explicit by an enumerator used with the stem form:

- |           |                     |
|-----------|---------------------|
| tés tòno  | 'one chicken'       |
| tés lóolu | 'five chickens'     |
| tés támaa | 'a lot of chickens' |

1.2. Impersonal free nouns also occur compounded with a morpheme which does not occur in isolation; its form in compounds is /-nà/ (automatically /-nâ/ after mid tone). It is this form which has sometimes been described as "plural". It is true that this form cannot have a singular reference. But that its reference is more than bare plurality can be illustrated vividly by an anecdote. I once asked two informants (both fifth-grade students) to give a Kpelle equivalent for "There are potatoes on the veranda". One informant immediately said: "/kwíen-nà káa bérsi lá/". The second informant laughed and said (and after seventeen years the English parts of the quotations are probably not verbatim, but they are faithful to the general tenor of the conversation), "No, you should say /kwíen káa bérsi lá/." The first informant objected, "No, the man said 'potatoes', which is plural. So I said /kwíen-nà/, not /kwíen/. /kwíen/ is singular." (It is significant here that he was using grammatical terminology; he did not claim outright that /kwíen/ means 'a potato' and nothing else.) The second informant replied, "No. If you say /kwíen-nà/, it means that there is one potato here, and one potato there, and some more over there, all over the veranda. I think the man meant that someone brought a basket of potatoes. For that you must say /kwíen/." The first informant agreed that /kwíen/ was preferable. This and many comparable uses suggest that forms with /-nà/ do not indicate mere plurality as opposed to singularity, but rather individualized plurality -- a number of items viewed as discrete and to be considered one by one -- rather than the generic substance viewed without regard to numerical quantification.

1.3. The contrast of generic reference with individualized (not merely numerical) plurality can be fur-

ther illustrated by an effort to express an English syllogism in Kpelle; the informant was Mr. John Wealar. The English original was "Some animals in the bush are black deer. I have seen some animals in the bush. Thus I have seen black deer." (The syllogism was, of course, deliberately fallacious.) Mr. Wealar's Kpelle version, with a more precise retranslation, is:

sua ta-nâ káa ñoci sũ, gáa à tsê. nyán, naâ sua ta-nâ káa ñoci sũ. maa-mêni mà, naâ tsê káa.

'Some individualized animals which are in the bush, it (species) is black duiker. I have seen some individualized animals in the bush. Because of it, I have seen (species) black duiker.'

Here "animals" are referred to as an indefinite (/ta/) individualized plurality, not merely a lot of generic animal (/sua támaa/), but kinds of animals considered individually. Black duiker, on the other hand, is considered without reference to number; seeing one would have been adequate if the syllogism were valid, and seeing several would have proven no more. All that is important is that the species as such be represented.

1.4. Final proof that /-nâ/ indicates more than bare numerical plurality is found in the contrast of a noun without and with this addition, when numerical plurality is already explicitly expressed by a numeral:

nápérs saasai ní 'these my three houses' (these may be considered as a group, or are all that have been discussed, or are all the houses I own)

nápérs-nâ saasai ní 'these three particular houses of mine' (here three houses are selected for individual attention, with the implication that I own others which are excluded from attention)

2. Personal free nouns must be further subdivided for our purposes into simple and compound types. Simple personal nouns are not numerous; further (as in many languages even distantly related, like most Bantu languages), the word for "chief" does not belong in this grammatical category, but functions as an impersonal noun. Compound personal nouns include primarily terms for tribal affiliation and occupation or activity.

2.1. Simple personal free nouns have two forms which may legitimately be described as "singular" and "plural".

2.1.1. However, the "singular" or stem form is used before enumerators, whether singular or plural:

núu tòno	'one person'
núu feere	'two people'
núu támaa	'a lot of people'

2.1.2. Where number is not so expressed, the stem form of the noun indicates singularity, and there is an irregular plural form (perhaps with some complicated historical relationship to /-nà/, but this is irrelevant):

núu	:	núa		'person	:	people'
surôn	:	sinâ		'male	:	males'
nenî	:	nayâ		'female	:	females'
lôlon	:	nîa-pêls		'child	:	children'

2.2. Compound personal nouns have specifically singular and plural forms with a somewhat different distribution.

2.2.1. In the singular, the final member of the compound (with a very few exceptions which may be archaic or special in some other way, but which are irrelevant to the overall structure) is the noun /núu/ 'person'. The corresponding plural uses either /-nà/ or /-sèla/ as the final member of the compound, replacing /núu/; these mor-

phemes do not occur in isolation, but /-nà/ may probably be identified with the compounding element used for individualized plurals of impersonal nouns; /-sèla/ may possibly be the verb stem /séla/ 'split' (?). In general, it appears that /-nà/ is used primarily with tribal terms, and /-sèla/ with other terms, particularly (but not exclusively) those in which the preceding morpheme is a verb. An example of each type is:

toâ-nùu	:	toâ-nà	a Loma person	:	Loma people
tíi kè-nùu	:	tíi kè-sèla	a workman	:	workmen

2.2.2. These nouns are distinguished from their simple counterparts in that it is the plural form which is used before enumerators higher than one:

toâ-nùu tònò	one Loma person
toâ-nà feere	two Loma people
tíi kè-nùu tònò	one workman
tíi kè-sèla feere	two workmen

3. Impersonal dependent nouns are only rarely found in any but a single form. Number (whether in the form of plurality or individualization) is generally irrelevant.

3.1. A large number of these nouns indicate unique properties in any case.

(daai) sù	the inside (of the town)
(gonii) mà	the surface (of the stone)
(núu) nun	the head (of a person)

3.2. Some of these nouns indicate body parts that occur in pairs or possibly larger numbers. Even here, the stem form is normally used for either one or the totality. It would only be in the unusual circumstance of referring to something like smears of red paint on sundry individualized hands of several people that anything

else might be appropriate; in such a case, these nouns operate like the corresponding free nouns, using the individualized plural form compounded with /-nà/. But ordinarily:

- pala káa nyée mà 'I have a sore on my hand' or 'I have sores on my hands' (or 'arm/arms')
- pala káa nyée tònò mà 'I have a sore on one hand'
- vala káa nyée feere mà 'I have sores on both my hands'

4. Personal dependent nouns have specific singular and plural forms with a distribution like that of compound personal free nouns (2.2 above).

4.1. The stem is specifically singular. Several of these nouns have plurals formed with a suffix /-nì/; by a regular alternation, stem-final /p/ plus this suffix combines as /-nii/. There are a few irregular plurals similar to those for simple personal free nouns (2.1.2 above).

- íliá : íliáni 'your older sibling : ... -s'
- íléve : íléveni 'your younger sibling : ... -s'
- ílon : ílonii 'your child : your children'
- ísarâp : ísarâa 'your companion : your companions'

4.2. The plural forms are used with enumerators higher than one.

- íliá tònò 'your one older sibling'
- íliáni feere 'your two older siblings'

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