

# Aspects of Ninzo Morphology Revisited\*

Oloso Yeseera Omonike

Kwara State University, Malete, Nigeria

The Ninzo Language is an endangered Niger-Congo language spoken in the Northern Nigerian states of Kaduna, Nassarawa, and Plateau. Like many minority languages in Nigeria, Ninzo has not enjoyed robust research and documentation. Besides the lack of a rich documentation, the language is highly endangered as a large number of its native speakers abandon it in favor of the Hausa Language (the majority language in Northern Nigeria). This paper has two aims: One is to reverse the unhealthy trend of endangerment by contributing to the documentation process of the Ninzo Language and to also revitalize the language through a study of its morphology. Through unstructured, one-on-one interviews, data used in the course of the study was gathered from three native speakers of the language. The informants interviewed are from two of the three Ninzo speaking states. This paper investigates aspects of Ninzo Morphology such as the structural position of its bound morphemes, its numbering system, its morphological processes, and morphological typology. Findings revealed that bound morphemes in the language are prefixes and interfixes; the numbering system uses a rich compounding mechanism; morphological processes found in the language are affixation, reduplication, refashioning, borrowing, compounding, lexical extension, and desententialization. The morphological typology of the Ninzo Language is agglutinating.

*Keywords:* endangered, morphology, documentation, morphological processes and revitalization

## Introduction

The Ninzo<sup>1</sup> Language is a Plateau Language in the Niger Congo sub-phyla. It is spoken in different regions in Kaduna, Nassarawa, and Plateau states with subtle degrees of variations across the three states but these variations are not so significant as to make the different variants mutually unintelligible. That is, the different dialects of the language spoken across the three states are mutually intelligible. Kaduna State has the largest concentration of speakers while Kaduna and Plateau rank second and third respectively. Presently, the Ninzo Language does not have any particular dialect chosen or accepted as the standard language. The Ninzo Language is a definitely endangered language because it is barely transmitted by older generation of speakers to the younger generation.

Morphology is the branch of linguistics which studies the structure of words. It is the branch of grammar that studies the structure or forms of words primarily through the use of the morpheme construct (Amfani, 2011). Morphological research aims to describe and explain patterns of human languages. The sub-goals of

---

\* **Acknowledgements:** A work like this should not be concluded without a show of appreciation to the language helpers who willingly gave the needed data in the course of this research. I wish to acknowledge the following people: (1) Pastor Aminu Gaya, 42 years old, Police Officer, Nassarawa State; (2) Mrs. Deborah Isiaku, 40 years old, Housewife, Kaduna State; and (3) Mrs. Tina Thomas, 50 years old, Housewife, Kaduna State.

Oloso Yeseera Omonike, assistant lecturer, master, Department of Linguistics and African Languages, Kwara State University.

<sup>1</sup> The Ninzo Language is also known as the Ninzam Language.

morphology have been identified as: elegant description, cognitively realistic description, system-external explanation, and a restrictive architecture for description (Haspelmath & Sims, 2010/2012).

The morpheme is the basic unit of structure in morphology. The morpheme cannot be further broken down in morphological analysis. Universally, morphemes come in two types and these are the free and the bound morphemes. Bound morphemes though meaning bearing, do not have independent existence and they usually have to rely on the free or independent morpheme for existence while free morphemes are independent and can exist in isolation.

### Morphemes in the Ninzo Language

The Ninzo Language attests both free and bound morphemes with the bound morphemes performing a wide range of functions such as marking tense and number. The following are examples of free morphemes in the Ninzo Language:

NINZO	GLOSS
(1) /it <sup>h</sup> u/	“head”
(2) /iʃi:ʃi/	“eye”
(3) /kpandé/	“chin”
(4) /mɛʃi/	“water”
(5) /jamba/	“woman”
(6) /iza/	“leg”
(7) /ila/	“food”
(8) /uki/	“room”
(9) /iwa/	“snake”
(10) /iko/	“house”

Bound morphemes in Ninzo indicate number and tense while interfixes are also used in between morphemes in some cases of compounding involving numbering. In essence, Ninzo bound morphemes are mostly prefixes. Though, interfixes occur, they are not commonplace. The Ninzo Language marks the progressive aspect and the future tense. Bound morphemes which indicate plurality in Ninzo do not have a specific or predictable phonetic form. What this means is that, there are variations in the types of prefixes that precede different nouns to mark plurality and these variations are not rule-governed. One observable trait of these plural markers however is that one pattern has a wider range of distribution than the others. Let us consider the following examples:

NINZO	GLOSS		NINZO	GLOSS
(1) /utu/	“ear”	→	/atu/	“ears”
(2) /iko/	“house”	→	/ako/	“houses”
(3) /uki/	“room”	→	/aki/	“rooms”
(4) /jamba/	“woman”	→	/amba/	“women”
(5) /iza/	“leg”	→	/aza/	“legs”
(6) /ila/	“food”	→	/ala/	“foods”
(7) /iʃi:ʃi/	“eye”	→	/aʃi:ʃi/	“eyes”
(8) /it <sup>h</sup> u/	“head”	→	/at <sup>h</sup> u/	“heads”
(9) /bikoni/	“ear ring”	→	/abikoni/	“ear rings”

(10) /uza/ “leg” → /aza/ “legs”

From these examples, one can observe how the initial sounds of the nouns changed to “a-” in the plural forms. This type of plural formation in the Ninzo Language is more common than any other type. Let us also consider the following set of examples:

NINZO	GLOSS		NINZO	GLOSS
(1) /agbugba/	“plate”	→	/igbugba/	“plates”
(2) /ŋuo/	“hand”	→	/iŋuo/	“hands”
(3) /ukpa/	“body”	→	/ikpa/	“bodies”
(4) /andzi/	“knife”	→	/indzidzi/	“knives”
(5) /isa/	“basket”	→	/isisa/	“baskets”

These examples show that the initial sounds of some Ninzo nouns can also change to “i-” in the plural form. Other ways through which the Ninzo Language marks plurality though not common are as follows:

NINZO	GLOSS		NINZO	GLOSS
(1) /ihu/	“mosquito”		/anihu/	“mosquitoes”
(2) /eyin/	“tooth”		/anyin/	“teeth”
(3) /itʃi/	“rat”		/nitʃi/	“rats”
(4) /iwa/	“snake”		/niwa/	“snakes”

In examples (1) and (2), one can observe that the plural marker is “an-” while the plural marker in (3) and (4) is “n-”. Besides marking plurality, bound morphemes in Ninzo also mark tense specifically, the progressive aspect and the future tense. The progressive tense marker is “a-” as shown in the examples below:

(1) Gaya	a-	rikpakri.	(Gaya arikpakri).
N	PROG	EAT YAM.	
Gaya is eating yam.			
(2) Ta	a-	tʃar.	(Ta atʃar).
1PL	PROG	WRITE.	
We are writing.			
(3) Nga	a-	riayaba.	(Ngaariayaba).
1SG	PROG	EAT PLANTAIN.	
I am eating plantain.			
(4) Ta	a-	so meʃi.	(Ta asomeʃi).
1PL	PROG	DRINK WATER.	
We are drinking water.			
(5) Azinta	a-	bla.	(Azintaabla).
N	PROG	READ.	
Azinta is reading.			

The future tense marker in Ninzo is “so-” as shown in the examples below:

(1) Nga	so-	so meʃi.	(Ngasosomeʃi).
1SG	FUT	DRINK WATER.	
I want to drink water/I will drink water.			
(2) Amaba	so-	riayaba.	(Amabasoriayaba).
N	FUT	EAT PLANTAIN.	

- Amaba will eat plantain.
- (3) Nga           so-           re           ila.                           (Ngasoriila).  
 1SG           FUT           BUY   FOOD.  
 I want to buy food/I will buy food.
- (4) Aninta       so-           blambré.                           (Anintasoblambré).  
 N           FUT           READ   TOMORROW.  
 Aninta will read tomorrow.

### Morphological Processes in the Ninzo Language

Morphological processes are word formation processes and are the means through which different languages bring to the fore, their creativity and productivity. Morphological processes include affixation, reduplication, compounding, refashioning, borrowing amongst others.

In affixation, a bound morpheme is adjoined before the free morpheme in which case it is known as a prefix. When an affix is adjoined after a free morpheme, it is known as a suffix. Furthermore, when an affix breaks up a single morpheme, it is an infix. The infix is an uncommon affix type and the Arabic Language has been cited as a good example of a language that attests it. Another type of affix is the interfix. The interfix unlike the infix is inserted between morphemes that have merged to form one word (Iloene & Yusuf, 2011).

#### Affixation

The Ninzo Language attests both prefixes and interfixes. Prefixes in the Ninzo Language are generally progressive aspect and future tense markers represented by the morphemes “a-” and “so-” respectively. Examples of the progressive aspect and future tense markers are given in (1) and (2) below:

- (1) Gaya           a-           rikpakri.                           (Gaya arikpakri).  
 N           PROG           EAT   YAM.  
 Gaya is eating yam.
- (2) Aninta       so-           blambré.                           (Anintasoblambré).  
 N           FUT           READ   TOMORROW.  
 Aninta will read tomorrow.

Interfixes in Ninzo are richly espoused in the numbering system. Here, the numbering system is the base-10 positional notation. This means that the numbers are counted in tens. Examples are cited below:

- (1) Wur       -m-       idzi (wurmidzi)  
 Ten       and       one.  
 Eleven.
- (2) Wur       -m-       iha (wurmiha)  
 Ten       and       two.  
 Twelve.
- (3) Soha       -m-       idzi (Sohamidzi)  
 Twenty   and       one.  
 Twenty-one.

#### Compounding

Dimmendaal (2006) describes this process as referring to grammatical units involving two or more lexical

roots which tend to function as single words grammatically, even though they may contain forms otherwise functioning as independent words. This morphological process is arguably the one with the most universal appeal. The following are examples of compounding in the Ninzo Language:

- |     |           |           |                    |
|-----|-----------|-----------|--------------------|
| (1) | yambautfu | →         | Yambautfu          |
|     | Wife      | King      | → Queen            |
| (2) | ikokiku   | →         | Ikikiku            |
|     | House of  | God       | → Church           |
| (3) | ikokibla  | →         | Ikokibla           |
|     | House of  | read      | → School           |
| (4) | ntokitru  | →         | Ntokitru           |
|     | Place of  | injection | → Hospital         |
| (5) | ampriitsa | →         | ampriitsa          |
|     | pot       | water     | → water pot/fridge |

### Reduplication

This morphological process copies segments from the stem into the affix. The stem could be completely copied in which case, it is known as full reduplication while the one in which only a part of the stem is copied is known as partial reduplication. Partial reduplication is used in Ninzo in the process of the plural formation of certain nouns. Below are some examples:

- |     |         |          |            |           |
|-----|---------|----------|------------|-----------|
| (1) | /indzu/ | “horn”   | /indzudzu/ | “horns”   |
| (2) | /andzi/ | “knife”  | /indzidzi/ | “knives”  |
| (3) | /isa/   | “basket” | /isisa/    | “baskets” |
| (4) | /ikla/  | “hoe”    | /ikikila/  | “hoes”    |

### Refashioning

This involves the use of description to name a foreign word or concept. The following are examples from Ninzo:

- |     |           |       |                  |               |
|-----|-----------|-------|------------------|---------------|
| (1) | nike      | -ni-  | ujuju            | → nikeniujuju |
|     | something | that  | blows            | → fan         |
| (2) | nike      | -ni-  | kye              | → nikenikye   |
|     | something | that  | can be looked at | → television  |
| (3) | nja       | -nufu |                  | → njanusu     |
|     | horse     | sky   |                  | → aeroplane   |
| (4) | nja       | -n-   | -aza- iha        | → njanazaha   |
|     | horse     | with  | legs two         | → bicycle     |
| (5) | nto       | -ki-  | -pa- azo         | → ntokipazo   |
|     | place     | of    | collect money    | → bank        |

### Borrowing

This refers to a situation whereby a language borrows a lexical item foreign to it from another language. Where the sound systems of the borrowing language are not the same as that of the lending language, the borrowed word is modified to conform with that of the borrowing language. The following are examples of borrowing from the Ninzo Language:

ENGLISH	NINZO	GLOSS
(1) [tʃʌtʃ]	[tʃɔ: tʃ]	“church”
(2) [teɪbl]	[tebu]	“table”
(3) [taɪə]	[taya]	“tire”
(4) [kæləndə]	[kalenda]	“calendar”
(5) [bʌkɪt]	[bɔkɛti]	“bucket”

HAUSA	NINZO	GLOSS
(1) [fɪtɪla]	[fɪtɪla]	“lamp”
(2) [nu:nu]	[nu:nu]	“milk”
(3) [suya]	[suya]	“barbecued meat”
(4) [malami]	[malami]	“teacher”
(5) [madubi]	[madubi]	“mirror”

### Desententialization

This morphological process according to Awobuluyi (2001, p. 64) involves the turning of a sentence into noun. The Ninzo Language exemplifies this process in the aspect of naming as shown in the following examples:

(1) Adzi	-ani-	nta	(Adzianinta usually shortened as Aninta)
God	gift	us	→ God’s gift.
(2) Adzi	-azi-	nta	(Adziazinta usually shortened as Azinta)
God	help	us	(God helped us).
(3) Adzi	-taa-	yar	(Adzitaayar shortened as Taayar)
God	we	thank	(We thank God).
(4) Adzi	-wen-	ta	(Shortened as Wenta)
God	hear	us	(God heard us).
(5) Adzi	-tʃe		(Shortened as Adzitʃe)
God	exists.		(Proof of God’s manifestation)

### Lexical Extension

This refers to a situation whereby a language uses the name of an item that exists in its culture to refer to another (but, similar) item from another culture rather than creating a new word for such an item. Consider the following examples:

(1) /anyen/ used to refer to only palm oil but now refers to vegetable oil and petrol as well. The language differentiates by adding other morphemes to each of them so that palm oil is fully called /anyen sɛn/ when such is necessary. Vegetable oil is called /anyen fi/ while petrol is called /anyen kar/;

(2) /amasir/ used to refer to water but now refers all soft drinks too. The language differentiates by adding other morphemes to each of the new items. The Coke brand is called /amasirsisir/ roughly corresponding with “black water” and /amasirkikla/ also corresponding with “white water”;

(3) /ampriitsa/ used to refer to water pot but now refers to fridge as well.

### Morphological Typology of Ninzo Language

The term typology refers to a classification based on the comparative study of types, and morphological

typology was the first systematic method used by linguists in the 19th century to compare the structures of different languages. The basic typologies identified in morphology are: (1) isolating or analytic languages, (2) agglutinating languages, and (3) inflectional or fusional languages.

A language is isolating if the words in the language can be separated one from the other. Isolating languages usually exhibit compounding as a morphological process. There are no derivational or inflectional processes of any kind in such languages. Mandarin (Chinese) and Vietnamese are good examples of isolating languages. Isolating languages usually have a unit of meaning per word.

An inflexional or fusional language is one in which a number of morphemes are so fused that the underlying meanings in the composition of the word cannot be neatly and easily segmented into the component morphemes. Latin is a very good example of an agglutinating language.

An agglutinating language like Turkish or Hungarian has affixes but they are strung out quite separately, each expressing a single notion and easily identified. Languages in this typology are built up of a long sequence of morphemes with each unit expressing a particular grammatical meaning in a clear one to one way. Turkish, Japanese, Swahili, Ninzo amongst others are examples of languages that are agglutinating. The Ninzo Language has been classified as agglutinating because of the correspondence between morphemes and meaning making it possible to have more than one meaning component per word. Consider the examples below:

- |     |        |        |         |   |           |
|-----|--------|--------|---------|---|-----------|
| (1) | a      | +      | ri      | → | ari       |
|     | PROG   |        | EAT     |   | eating    |
| (2) | so     | +      | bla     | → | sobla     |
|     | FUT    |        | read    |   | will read |
| (3) | [itʃi] | “rat”  | [nitʃi] |   | “rats”    |
| (4) | [ŋuo]  | “hand” | [iŋuo]  |   | “hands”   |

From the data, one can easily tell the meanings of the composition by merely knowing the meanings of the individual morphemes.

### Conclusion

The Ninzo Language has been shown to be an interesting language for linguistic study. Obviously, there is more to the morphology of any language than all that we have examined above and the Ninzo Language is not an exception. However, this work considers aspects of Ninzo Morphology and we hope that African Linguists will beam their searchlights on less researched and documented languages such as this so that we can save such languages from endangerment.

### References

- Amfani, H. A. (2011). Hausa morphology. In O. Yusuf (Ed.), *Basic linguistics for Nigerian languages*. Ijebu-Ode: Shebiotimo Publications.
- Aronoff, M., & Nurse, D. (2012). *What is morphology?* (2nd ed.). West Sussex, United Kingdom: Wiley Blackwell.
- Awobuluyi, O. (2001). Yoruba morphology. In O. Yusuf (Ed.), *Basic linguistics for Nigerian languages*. Ijebu-Ode: Shebiotimo Publications.
- Dimmendaal, J. G. (2006). Morphology. In B. Heine & D. Nurse (Eds.), *African languages. An introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Haspelmath, M., & Sims, A. D. (2012). *Understanding morphology* (2nd ed.). London: Hodder Education, Hachette United Kingdom.

- Heine, B., & Nurse, D. (Eds.). (2006). *African languages. An introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Iloene, M., & Yusuf, O. (2011). Morphology. In O. Yusuf (Ed.), *Basic linguistics for Nigerian languages*. Ijebu-Ode: Shebiotimo Publications.
- Musa, Y. O. (2003). *Aspects of Ninzo morphology* (Unpublished B.A. project). University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria.