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A Note on the Grammatical Functions and Patterns of Use of the Function Word *Ol* in Written Tok Pisin (New Guinea Pidgin)

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to examine the chief aspects of the synchronic use of the multifunctional word *ol* (gloss: 3PL/PL) in its characteristic functions of a third-person plural pronoun and a plural marker in Tok Pisin¹, recorded in a small group of texts which represent the contemporary written register of Tok Pisin. It is hoped that the undertaken examination of a number of characteristic contexts modified by this particle will shed some light on a prominent aspect of multifunctionality within the nominal morphology of Tok Pisin.

1. Introduction: significance and definitions of multifunctionality with reference to Creole languages.

A number of scholars of Pidgin and Creole languages have singled out the grammatical phenomenon of multifunctionality as one of the characteristic features of creole grammar in general. For example, multifunctionality, understood as “the phenomenon of word-class change without overt marking” is sometimes mentioned as a characteristic feature of creole morphology (see e.g. Braun’s analysis of multifunctionality in Sranan wordformation, 2009, 91–108).

However, the available definitions of this phenomenon highlight both word-class alternations and development of grammaticalization patterns as the possible linguistic manifestations of this grammatical feature. Thus, Mühlhäusler (2008, 75) defines multifunctionality as “the use of a lexical item in more than one grammatical function.” He associates it with some specific grammatical properties of Tok Pisin, maintaining that a number of typological characteristics of “most English-derived Pidgins and Creoles, promote multifunctionality”, while the following ones command his particular attention - “the absence of a compulsory copula and tense – the absence of compulsory determiners – the reduction/loss of English inflectional morphology” (Mühlhäusler 2008, 99).

While Mühlhäusler developed his views on multifunctionality on the basis of his studies of English-based creoles, this linguistic process was also proposed as

one of the important general grammatical phenomena in the works of Lefebvre dealing with the French-lexified Haitian Creole (see in particular, Lefebvre 2004, 15, chap.6).

Choosing to focus on the issue of the theoretical significance of multifunctionality to the concept of “lexical entry” (Lefebvre 15), Lefebvre develops and documents her thesis that while “multifunctionality is a property of all human lexicons” and that “multifunctional items range across all syntactic categories”, she advocates the idea that a number of syntaxico-lexical changes involved in “grammaticalisation may be properly viewed as a process of creating multifunctional items” (Lefebvre 186). The definition of multifunctionality offered by the Canadian linguist, namely that “a lexical item that fulfills more than one grammatical function is multifunctional” (Lefebvre 186), while similar to the one given by Mühlhäusler, is perhaps more focused on the functional properties of individual lexical items, rather than on the development of more general ‘programs of multifunctionality’ which constitute an important part of the growing derivational complexity as postulated by Mühlhäusler (2008, 96–99) in the case of Tok Pisin.

It is pertinent to note that Mühlhäusler’s (1981, 47) description of the emergence of the category of number in Tok Pisin appears to link the emergence of the multifunctional particle *ol* with the phenomenon of grammaticalisation as envisaged by Lefebvre above. According to him, “the development of *ol* into a plural marker is comparable to the development of complementizers out of verbs, prepositions or adverbs (cf. Mühlhäusler 1976, 314ff) or the development of relativizers out of the adverb *hia* ‘here’ discussed by Sankoff and Brown (1976).” On the lexical plane, Romaine (1992, 151) underscored the contribution of multifunctionality to the lexical expansion of Tok Pisin, claiming that “the freedom from lexical specification increases the information content of each unit in the lexicon.”

2. Pronominal *ol* and the emergence of plural marking in Tok Pisin

The important work of Mühlhäusler (1981) traced the evolution of plural marking of personal pronouns and nouns in the historical predecessors of Tok Pisin, beginning with the jargon phase and the relevant data from Samoan Plantation Pidgin (SPP) with its three incipient indicators of the semantic plural expressed in an analytic manner with quantifying words such as: *plenty* (< Eng. ‘plenty’), *ol* (< Eng. ‘all’) and *olgeta* (< Eng. ‘all together’).

With respect to the emergence of *ol* as a marker of grammatical number Mühlhäusler (1980, 40) noted, however, that “the Tok Pisin plural indicator *ol* has no structural counterpart in English”, but he pointed to some research arguing for the East-Austronesian parallels of this grammatical construction. Further sociolinguistic studies of Romaine on the emergence and variation in plural marking

in Tok Pisin (see in particular Romaine 1992, 219–240) have concentrated on a statistically-informed examination of competing strategies of pluralization in the urban variety Tok Pisin.

The second grammatical function of *ol* is that of a personal pronoun. In Verhaar's (1995, 354) descriptive scheme, *ol* is termed 'a third person plural pronoun' (glossed as 3PL, 'they') that "fulfills a variety of functions, which may be distinguished as impersonal and anaphoric" (Verhaar 360) Also Dutton and Thomas (1985, 67) in their standard handbook of Tok Pisin observe that "In Tok Pisin the number of things spoken about is not indicated in the form of the noun as it generally is in English. When necessary, however, Tok Pisin speakers use (...) the pronoun *ol* 'they' to distinguish between singular and plural objects, for example *wanpela dok* 'a dog' versus *ol dok* 'the dogs.'" Similarly, Scorza and Franklin (1989, 145) in their description gloss *ol* as 'all; they.' This double grammatical function of *ol* is clearly recognized in Dutton and Thomas's handbook (372), where the entry of this lexical item lists two elements and reads:

- ol* - 1. they, them
ol i kolim – it's called
 2. the (plural marker)

As far as the synchronic grammatical nature of *ol* is concerned, Verhaar (1995, 346) states that "*ol* is a plural marker for nouns." Yet, as he explains, "it is not necessarily, and in fact is often not, "the same" as the English (plural) *the*." On the other hand, he notes that "*ol* marks the following noun as 'collective'" and that this collective meaning of *ol* + noun is often hard to express in English – so that the meaning of, e.g. *ol pikinini man* and *ol pikinini meri* is rather more similar to 'male offspring' and 'female offspring' than simply 'sons' and 'daughters', respectively. Moreover, nouns which are semantically plural are not necessarily marked with *ol* (see his examples 11–21, 1995, 347–348) – so that while English *the* is typically definite, *ol* need not be definite. Other points of English – Tok Pisin difference mentioned by Verhaar (1995) include optional marking of semantically plural nouns when number is "contextually irrelevant", and further optional marking when there is some quantifying element or another constituent in the plural – which induces the collective meaning of the following nouns (cf. Verhaar 1995). Consider, for example, one such context where semantically plural nouns lack marking with *ol*, due to the contextual reasons (cf. Verhaar 1995, 348, his example 19, with the relevant nominal expressions originally marked in bold print):

- (1) Marasin i stap insait kain kain samting olsem **lip** bilong **diwai**, **gras**, **plaua**, na **skin** bilong **diwai**.
 ['There is medicine in various things such as leaves of trees, grasses, flowers, and bark of trees.']

Here, as Verhaar puts it, “plural reading is obvious” (348). This is to be contrasted with, e.g. the collective use of *ol*, as in a sentence like *askim ol lapun*- ‘ask older people’ (cf. Verhaar’s example 10 on p. 347).

While the phenomenon of typological identity of the nominal plural marker and third-person-plural pronoun has been selected as a significant general parameter in both Atlantic and Pacific creoles (cf. *Atlas of Pidgin and Creole Language Structures*, Michaelis et al. 2013, -99), in the Pacific area this coalescence has been reported to occur “in three historically related English-based creoles, as identity in Tok Pisin and as overlap in Bislama and Norf’k” (Maurer 2013). The fact that this feature was found to occur in sixteen pidgin and creole languages has prompted Maurer to conclude that “the important fact is that in many creole languages, the third-person-plural pronoun can be used to express plurality in one way or another.”

As to the position of *ol* in a sentence Mühlhäusler (1981, 56) noted: “My own data suggest that the position of *ol* in the noun phrase is not fixed in creolized Tok Pisin and that variation is found not only across creolized varieties in different localities but also within the speech of individual speakers.” However, he also observed a distinct preference for a phrase-initial position of *ol* within a Noun Phrase (Mühlhäusler 1981, 56) expressed in the following way -

[*ol* ADJ N] [ADJ *ol* N] [*ol* ADJ *ol* N]

However, the alternative positioning of the plural morpheme did not seem to affect the meaning of the resulting expressions in any identifiable way (cf. Mühlhäusler 1981, 57).

3. Multifunctional marker *ol* and its uses in a sample of written Tok Pisin

The data examined in the remaining part this paper draws on seven short daily Internet news reports of Radio Australia Tok Pisin Service, coming from one week of August, 2013. A concordance listing the occurrences of the word *ol* in context as well as some basic quantitative information about the corpus of texts were obtained using the Toolbox (SIL)² linguistic data management and analysis program (cf. Buseman and Buseman 2007). The complete wordlist wordcount of the seven texts contained 1241 lexical items (tokens), with the following top five words in the count ranking as follows:

Table 1. Wordcount ranking

Rank	Word	Count
1	long	107
2	ol	70
3	na	47
4	blong	43
5	i	40

Not surprisingly, the five topmost items are among the basic grammatical words of Tok Pisin, being: (1) the multipurpose preposition, (2) personal pronoun/plural marker, (3) basic conjunction (roughly, ‘and’), (4) complementizer/preposition, and (5) predicate marker particle (gloss: PM).

The Tok Pisin particle *ol* described below ranks second, after the universal preposition *long*, the most frequently occurring word in the texts. The alphanumerical abbreviations included in the translations of the language examples below identify their occurrence (or multiple occurrences) in the concordance.

3.1. *Ol* as the marker of plural number in Tok Pisin

The following section presents an overview and exemplification of the grammatical contexts containing the morpheme *ol* in the examined corpus of texts. The first group to be examined is a set of contexts where *ol* can be identified as the marker of plurality. The encountered patterns of using *ol* in this function encompass both English words and Tok Pisin words. As far as the English language items in their original (retained) spelling are concerned, the texts contained the following constructions:

- (2) tok ples oa **ol language** blong Papua New Guinea (39)
 [‘vernaculars, that is languages of Papua New Guinea’]
 ol problem (4, 51) [‘problems’]
 ol refugee (43, 52, 53, 54) [‘refugees’]

It can be observed that the particle can also appear before an ADJ + N (pl) sequence, as in the following item:

- (3) ol rural areas (55) [‘rural areas’]

The following group of words consists of constructions containing nouns whose spelling identifies them as nativized Tok Pisin elements. Of particular interest

is the element (48) where *ol* serves as a marker of definiteness, doubling as the grammatically redundant expression of plural number in the case of an inherently (i.e. semantically) collective noun *pipol* (< Eng. ‘people’):

- (4) *ol* anthropologist (2) ‘anthropologists’, *ol* autoroti (9) ‘authorities’, *ol* boda (12) ‘borders’, *ol* bot (14) ‘boats’, *planti* tausan *ol* wantok blong en (15) ‘many thousands of his mates’, *ol* haus (24) ‘houses’, *ol* kantri (35) ‘countries’, *ol* kwestin (37) ‘questions’, *ol* pikinini (47) ‘children’, *ol* offisa (46) ‘officers’, *ol* pipol (48) ‘the people’ -definite, *ol* sas (58) ‘charges’, *ol* sumatin (59) ‘students’, *ol* tokples (62) ‘vernaculars’, *ol* wantok (64) ‘mates’, lit. ‘speakers of one language’

An important grammatical issue is the position of the plural marker *ol* in sequences of nouns – for example, in the sentences containing enumeration, as in the following examples where *ol* is placed in front of a sequence of the listed nouns:

- (5) ‘Emi tok *planti* West Papua *papal* iwok *olsem ol dokta*,
3P.PM say many West Papua people PM work as PL doctor
enginia, tisa, nurse na oli helpim gut developman long
engineer teacher nurse and 3P.PM help good development UP
PNG.’ (19wpapua 5)
Papua New Guinea

[‘He says that many Western Papuans work as doctors, engineers, teachers, nurses and that they help the development of PNG well.’]

While *ol* is placed before the enumeration only once, it should be noted that *ol* phrases can co-occur with *-s* plural (cf. also example 3), as in the following sentence:

- (6) *Olsem* na wari long bringim hait ***ol gans, drags na pipol***
As and concern UP bring hidden PL guns drugs and people
istap olsem bikpela wari long autonomous rijon. (21boda03)
PM.exist as big problem UP autonomous region

[‘Thus, the concern over smuggling in guns, drugs and people remains a big problem in the autonomous region.’]

However, the morpheme *-s* can be dropped from the noun *drags* (< Eng. ‘drugs’) in the adjacent sentence of the same text, which does not seem to have any influence on the interpretation of this phrase in the same sentential context.

- (7) **Ol gans na drag** pipol isave bring hait ikam insait long
 PL guns and drugs people PM.HAB smuggle PM.come inside UP
 Bougainville. (22, 9boda03)
 Bougainville
 [‘Guns and drugs, which people smuggle into Bougainville.’]

Moving now to the question of the multiple positions of *ol* within a nominal phrase, one is faced with the existence of variant marking examined by Mühlhäusler (1980, see above). This has to do with the existence of such variant coordinative constructions as the ones below, for example:

- (8) **ol** ‘high power’ **gan na katress** (25)
 PL high-power gun and cutlass
 [‘high-power guns and cutlasses’]

where there is only a single, phrase-initial marking with the pluralizing *ol*, as opposed to the following context containing the double marking of the nominal items coordinated with the conjunction *na* (‘and’):

- (9) **pasin bilong bringim hait ol gan na ol katress** (21)
 custom POSS smuggle PL gun and PL cutlass
 [‘custom of smuggling in guns and cutlasses’]

However, the most prominent position of *ol* as far as the nominal modification is concerned is the singular placement of the plural particle at the head of the phrase, which corresponds to the first pattern described by Mühlhäusler (1980, see above), as in the following expressions identified in the present data:

Pattern: [*ol* ADJ N]:

- (10) *ol* autsait laen (2, 10) ‘outsiders’, *ol* as peles (3) ‘locals’, *ol* asailam sika (4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 69) ‘asylum seekers’, *ol* bikpla wok (11) ‘big projects’, *ol* narapela kantri (12, 42, 45) ‘other countries’, *ol* boda eria (13) ‘border areas’, *ol* bush kemp (15) ‘bush camps’, *ol* dispela boda eria (16) ‘these border areas’, *ol* dispela refugee (17) ‘these refugees’, *ol* ditensen senta (6, 18) ‘detention centres’, *ol* West Papua pipal (29, 66) ‘Western Papuans’, *ol* kain kain samting nogut (32) ‘various bad things’, *ol* trutru refugee (63) ‘real refugees’, *ol* narapla kantri (65) ‘other countries’ (spelling variant)

To be mentioned is also the observed collective meaning of *ol*, where the particle modifies the following adjective:

- (11) **ol yangpla** iken tok Inglis (59)
 PL young PM.can speak English
 ['the young ones can speak English']

3.2. *Ol* as a personal pronoun in Tok Pisin

Another major function of the marker *ol* recorded in the analyzed data is that of a third person plural pronoun (glossed as 3PL). In the examined group of texts this grammatical element has been found in the positions of the subject and object as well as in the possessive function:

- (12) Sapos yumi lukautim gut mama na papa igo taem **ol**
 If we take.care good mother and father PM.go when 3PL
 i lapun **ol** i nidim kaikai na marasin, yumi lukautim
 PM old 3PL PM need food and medicine we take.care
ol (27, tokples)
 3PL

['If we properly take care of our parents when they are old, when they need food and medicines, we take care of them']

Where the two initial occurrences refer to the plural (3PL) subject, while the third one marks the plural object (3PL).

- (13) Em I tok i gutpla long **ol** autsait laen olsem **ol**
 3P PM say PM good UP PL outside group like PL
 anthropologist i givim halvim blong **ol** long raitim na
 anthropologist PM give help POSS 3PL UP write and
 rekodim tokples. (2, tokples)
 record vernacular

['He says it is good for the outside groups like the anthropologists to give their help to write down and record local languages.']

The two nominal expressions 'outside group' and 'anthropologist' (note the altered spelling of the Tok Pisin word) receive the plural interpretation, while the preposition *blong* modifies *ol* to signal the possessive meaning.

- (14) Narapela wari tu em polis long South Bougainville
 another problem also 3P police UP South Bougainville
 ino planti long halivim **ol** offisa blong Kastom na
 PM.NEG plent UP help PL officer POSS Custom and

Boda autoroti long mekim wok blong **ol**. (1, boda)
 Border authorities UP make work POSS 3PL

[‘Another problem is that the South Bougainville police are not numerous enough to help the officers of the Customs and Borders authorities to do their job.’]

The plural interpretation is linked to the first occurrence and possessive interpretation to the second occurrence of *ol*, preceded by the possessive marker *blong* (< *bilang* < Eng. ‘belong’).

- (15) Despla tingting blong Australia long salim **ol** asailam sika
 this thinking POSS Australia UP send PL asylum seeker
 igo long Pacific na lukautim **ol** sapos **oli** lukim olsem
 PM.go UP Pacific and take.care 3PL if 3PL.PM look as
oli trutru refugee. (7, willyjimmy)
 3PL.PM real refugee

[‘This idea of Australia to send the asylum seekers to the Pacific (countries) and take care of them if they look like genuine refugees.’]

While the two plural sentential objects are marked with *ol*, also to be acknowledged is the double occurrence of *oli* (a graphic coalescence of 3PL+PM) as the subject of the following clause (cf. the comments to the example 16 below)

- (16) Em i tok em ting PNG Gavman bai lukluk long
 3P PM say 3P think PNG government FUT look.at UP
 mekim **ol** i go stap long Port Moresby na Lae na
 make 3PL PM go exist UP Port Moresby and Lae and
 ino long **ol** rural areas bilong kantri. (26, haus)
 PM.neg UP PL rural areas POSS country

[‘He says he thinks that the PNG Government will consider making them (*ol*) stay in Port Moresby and Lae and not in the rural areas of the country.’]

The above sentences contains an example of the use of *ol* as the object of the causative verb *mekim* (gloss: ‘make.TR’) and a plural marker placed in front of a pluralized English phrase (*rural areas*, ADJ + N).

- (17) **Oli** lus tingting long **ol** West Papua papal em planti long
 3PL.PM lose thinking UP PL West Papua people 3P many UP
ol istap pinis long PNG moa long faifpla ten
 3PL PM.exist PERF UP PNG more UP five ten
 ya.
 year (29, wpapua)

['They forget about the people from West Papua many of whom have stayed in PNG for more than fifty years.']

To be noted is the occurrence of the coalescence *oli* (3PL.PM) in the initial subject position and the two subsequent uses of *ol*: as a redundant plural marker expressing definiteness of the expression '(the) people from West Papua', and a partitive meaning in the phrase *planti long ol* ('many of them').

- (18) Em itok embai isi moa long **ol** kam long Australia
 3P PM.say 3P FUT easy more UP 3PL come UP Australia
 we igat pipol blong planti **ol** narapela riligion na
 where PM.exist people POSS many PL another religion and
ol kainkain kantri na kalsa long wol i stap pinis
 PL various country and culture UP world PM exist PERF
 longen. (44, haus)
 UP=3P

['She says it will be easier for them to come [to Australia where there have been people of many different religions and people from different countries and cultures of the world living in it.']

Where the first occurrence of *ol* marks the plural third person subject of the sentence ('the newcomers'), while the remaining two mark the plural number of their host nominal phrases.

- (19) Taim **oli** givim **ol** sanis long stap, **oli** no laik
 when 3PL.PM give 3PL chance UP stay 3PL.PM NEG want
 stap olgeta ta long kantri ia na i muv go long
 stay always UP country here and PM move go UP
 narapela kantri. (56, nauru)
 another country

['When they (*oli*, reference 1) give them (*ol*, reference 2) a chance to stay, they (*oli*, reference 2) never want to stay in this country and (they, Ø) move to another country.']

Similarly to some previous examples, number (19) contains an occurrence of *oli* in the subject position, which contrasts with the object expressed by *ol* – to be noted is thus the binding of *oli* to the function of the subject and *ol* to the function of object.

An interesting issue – which is only to be signalled in this note – is the emerging grammatical status of the complex grammatical marker spelt in the examined variety of Tok Pisin as *oli* (gloss: 3PL.PM). One can observe that in the examined data, this element appears only in the subject position (e.g. in the examples 15

and 17). While the emergence of *oli* as a recently grammaticalized plural subject marker in the closely related creole language Bislama has been reported by Crowley (1990, 60–64), the appearance of *oli* in Tok Pisin might tentatively be linked to a tendency to decrease the multifunctional load of the third-person pronoun/plural marker *ol*.

3. Conclusions

Introductory analysis of the multifunctional grammatical element *ol* performed on the language sample representing the contemporary urban variety of Tok Pisin used by the writers of the Tok Pisin Section of Radio Australia allows one to observe the following linguistic features in the usage of the function word *ol*:

- The data described in this study appears to corroborate Mühlhäusler's (1981) expectation as to the stabilization of the preferred placement of the plural number marker *ol* in the initial position of the nominal phrase. In fact, no other position of the plural number marker has been found in the analyzed texts.
- To be noted is also the occurrence of the English plural *-s* morpheme in Tok Pisin. In addition to the grammatical exponent *ol*, Tok Pisin has also incorporated the English *-s* plural marker (see, e.g. the examples 6 and 7). This fact appears to confirm the informal impressions of some native users that the *-s* suffix plural quite often appears in their speech. (Rona Nadile, p.c.).
- Gradual emergence of the *oli* (3PL.PM) particle as a marker of plural subject along the lines suggested by Crowley (1990) for Tok Pisin's close cousin, Bislama.

Notes

- 1 I would like to thank two anonymous reviewers for their critical comments which led to an improvement of the content and presentation of my description.

Tok Pisin is an English-lexified creole language spoken in Papua New Guinea. It is also known by its alternate names such as: Melanesian English, Neomelanesian, New Guinea Pidgin English, Pidgin, and Pisin which include both exonyms (the first three names) and endonyms (the latter two names). The issue of different names given to Tok Pisin by different groups of speakers of the language is described in detail by Verhaar (1995, 1–4) and in a more general context of the historical and sociolinguistic patterns of contact languages by Vellupilai (2012, 23–28).

- 2 Toolbox (*Field Linguist's Toolbox*) is a freeware (SIL Freeware EULA) data management and analysis computer program for field linguists developed by the Summer Institute of Linguistics that is particularly useful for maintaining and manipulating lexical data and interlinearizing vernacular texts. Grammatical glosses used in the analyzed examples derive from Vellupilai (2012, 8–9).

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