

# Plural Marking in the Kuna Pronominal System<sup>1</sup>

**Wikaliler Daniel Smith**  
The University of Texas at Austin  
wdsmith@mail.utexas.edu

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## 1. Introduction

Typological explorations of person and number systems in the world's languages have brought about some interesting cross-linguistic patterns that deserve attention. The observation of these patterns helps us evaluate to what extent these cross-linguistic person and number systems can inform the analysis of our research languages. For this paper, I am interested in providing a much-needed description of the pronominal system of Kuna, an alternative analysis to previous discussions of Kuna pronouns. In light of Cysouw's (2003) findings in his survey of known pronominal paradigms, I argue that Kuna pronouns only express person but not number, in opposition to the traditional approach of describing the paradigm in Kuna.

### 1.1. Background information

Kuna is a Chibchan language spoken in Panama and Colombia. Most of the Kuna population is now concentrated in two major areas within the country of Panama. First of all, the majority of the population (36,114) remains in communities in what is known today as Kuna Yala, a territory that extends for 232 miles across the northeastern coast of Panama. The second largest concentration of the Kuna population (25,236) is present in Panama City, the country's capital. According to the latest census, the total Kuna population is over 64,000 people throughout the Panamanian territory.

For this paper, my data consists mainly of the Kuna variety spoken by the coastal people (as opposed to the Colombian dialect); however, the central claim is not affected by this choice since the pronominal paradigm is the same in all dialects. The data represents this population for two reasons: a) the language I will call Kuna throughout this paper is the variety spoken by the vast majority of the Kuna population, so more data is readily available; and b) it is this variety with which I am most familiar with, given that both my parents and my other informants are originally from coastal villages.

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## 1.2. Typological characteristics

The next few paragraphs offer a brief overview of the language. There are four open classes in Kuna: nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs. The language has been characterized as an agglutinative, SOV language with a rich verbal morphology (Holmer 1947, Llerena 1987 and Sherzer 1990).

Kuna is an agglutinative language. Adjectives and adverbs do not carry either inflectional or derivational morphemes. The verb is the part of speech that allows the most morphological complexity. The verbal information that can be contained in the base verb are: causative morphology, passive morphology, tense, aspect, mood, evidentiality and positionals.

- (1) *namay-leg-o-suli-rgebe*                      namake – lege – oe – suli - ergebe  
sing-PASS-FUT-NEG-IND<sup>2</sup>  
'must not be sung' (future reading)
- (2) *noni-mar-bal-o-sundibe*                      noniki – mar – bali – oe - sundibe  
come-PL-again-FUT-COND  
'we may come again' (interpreted as third person)

As for the Kuna noun, the addition of a plural morpheme –mala (or its short form<sup>3</sup> –mar) indicates that the noun is plural. For a small class of nouns, the morpheme is –gana (-gan). In the literature, this has been called the 'collective.'

- (3) *nusa-mar*  
mouse-PL  
'mice'
- (4) *ome-gan*  
woman-PL  
'women'

Kuna doesn't mark grammatical case on the main arguments of a verb, but it marks different oblique cases with five enclitics. In (5), I show the five enclitics that function as case markers, each in their long and short forms.

- (5)     =gi, =gine                      instrumental, ablative, locative  
       =se, =sega                     allative  
       =ga, =gala                     dative, benefactive, translative

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<sup>2</sup> The abbreviations used in this paper are: 1, 2, 3 grammatical persons; PASS passive voice; IND indicative; CAUS causative; PST past; FUT future; PRES present; POS positional; S singular; PL plural; AL alative

<sup>3</sup> The use of the short vs. long form is a distinction between formal and informal speech (Sherzer 1983:37). Where long forms are used in more formal contexts, in colloquial speech the use of short-form morphemes is more common. However, the speaker may sometimes decide to use the long form in colloquial speech.



The main objective of his section on person marking is to provide a typology of singular and group person marking, be it affixed or free pronouns. My main concern here is to point out the relevant points that we can extract to use in the current analysis.

The author first addresses the possible patterns of singular person pronouns that occur in the languages of the world. He points to three attested ‘persons’ that he calls ‘Speaker’ (for 1<sup>st</sup> person), ‘Addressee’ (for 2<sup>nd</sup> person), and ‘Other’ (for 3<sup>rd</sup> person). Even though the three-morpheme paradigm (like the Latin type) occurs frequently, many languages code some of the three categories by the same morpheme. He uses the term ‘homophony’ to refer to morphemes that mark for different categories. The possible types of singular homophony are summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1. *Attested persons in the world’s languages according to Cysouw*

	(Sa)	(Sb)	(Sc)	(Sd)	(Se)
Speaker	A	A	A		
Addressee	B	B	B	A	A
Other	C		A	B	

He presents four theoretically possible kinds of homophony within the three singular persons. The basic case, here represented by (Sa) where the capital letters are variables that represent different morphemes, is the most common. The other types (Sb – Se) represent some kind of homophony combinations. The one that concerns us is the first type (exemplified in his paper by Latin) since Kuna is of this type. We will explore this in section 3 below.

The next criterion that the author considers in establishing the pattern of pronominal systems concerns the specification of the number of participants. Non-singular pronouns make reference to more than one person or object; the traditional approach of discussing ‘more than one’ number in the marking of person is to use the term ‘plural’. However, as the author points out, a problem arises with the use of this term: the meaning of plural in the pronominal domain is different from the standard notion of plural. Whereas plurality in the nominal domain is marked to refer to a group of objects in which every object within this group falls into one class, such is not the case prototypically of first person or of certain interpretations of second person. Wechsler (2008), in describing the universals of person and number citing Bobaljik (2008), notes that no language distinguishes 1+1 from 1+3 or 2+2 from 2+3; that is, there is no language that has a special morpheme for a true first person plural (choral *we*) or a true second person plural (to refer to more than one addressee but not others). Based on these observations, Wechsler notes that the meaning of the first and second ‘plural’ pronouns has an associative meaning. He argues that first person (during speech-production) and second person (during hearing-comprehension) are self-referential (they denote the *self*), rather than referring to ‘speaker’ and ‘hearer’ respectively, thus accounting for the absence of 1+1 and 2+2 (there cannot be more than one *self*).

Cysouw points out on page 70 that this notion can be supplemented with an empirical observation. He observes that it is rare to find pronominal paradigms that use

nominal strategies to mark plurality. He claims that for the great majority of languages the plural in the pronominal domain is marked differently from the plural of nouns in the language. In those that it is found, it is found only in part of the paradigm or it is functionally superfluous, that is, if the plural were removed, the singular and plural forms would be different anyway. He further claims that it is really uncommon for a pronominal paradigm to use a nominal plural marker as the only identification of plurality. Cysouw presents an instance of the rare cases where the pronominal marking is an extension of the nominal number marking.

This overlap of number marking in pronouns and nouns is attested in Trumai, a genetically isolated language from Brazil. The pronouns for first and second person are *ha* and *hi* respectively. These are combined with the plural *uan* to form ‘we’ and ‘you-plural’. This same plural marker is used with nouns. The author further claims that this pluralizer is used obligatorily with pronouns and human nouns, but not with non-human nouns.

Interestingly, Kuna is one of such rare cases that Cysouw mentions. Given what we now know about how person and number marking pattern in the pronominal paradigms of the world languages, it becomes important to establish how Kuna may fit the typology provided by the author. Section 3 outlines how we can analyze the Kuna pronominal system, an alternative analysis to the traditional view of pronouns of the language. More specifically, I argue that Kuna pronouns only mark person, and that number is not part of the pronominal system per se. I present examples from the syntax to support this analysis. As a result, the rest of Cysouw’s representation of number marking is not relevant for the analysis.

### 3. Kuna pronominal system

Following Cysouw’s typology (2003), Kuna pronouns mark ‘Speaker’, ‘Addressee’, and ‘Other’ with three individual morphemes. As a result, we observe that Kuna is of type (Sa) in Cysouw’s characterization of singular person marking. The left-most section of Table 2 shows this to be the case; this is rather uncontroversial.

It is the right part of Table 2 that concerns this paper. The pronominal system in Kuna, as has been described in the literature by Holmer (1947), Erice (1981) and Llerena (1987) is represented below. These forms code subject (of transitive and intransitive clauses), object, and can also function as obliques (with the respective case enclitic) and possessive pronouns.

Table 2. *Kuna pronominal paradigm*

Singular		Plural	
1 person	an	1 person	anmala (anmar)
2 person	be	2 person	bemala (bemar)
3 person	we	3 person	wemala (wemar)

The system described above does not account for one fact: the Kuna noun marks plurals with the same morpheme –mar (or its long form –mala) that we see in the pronouns.

- |     |    |   |    |                                       |
|-----|----|---|----|---------------------------------------|
| (9) | a. | <i>nusa-mar</i><br>mouse-PL<br>'mice'   | b. | <i>achu-mar</i><br>dog-PL<br>'dogs'   |
|     | c. | <i>machi-mar</i><br>boy-PL<br>'boys'    | d. | <i>goe-mar</i><br>baby-PL<br>'babies' |
|     | e. | <i>sapi-mar</i><br>plant-PL<br>'plants' | f. | <i>akwa-mar</i><br>rock-PL<br>'rocks' |

The question that arises from this fact is how to analyze the plural marker on the pronouns given the rarity of the Kuna pronominal system according to Cysouw's observations. The following sections will explore how this plural marker interacts in the pronominal system and the syntax of Kuna, thus, paving the way for analyzing this marker as an enclitic, separate from the pronominal form.

### 3.1. Intransitive clauses

I want to first explore the possible Kuna 'plurality' markings of pronouns in intransitive clauses. The current section shows that 'plurality' of the pronominal system can be expressed even without the 'plural' pronouns described by previous analyses of the pronominal paradigm. The purpose of showing the intransitive clauses is that only one argument of the verb exists, thus making straightforward the interpretation of the subject of the clause.

Sentence (10) is an intransitive clause with a singular first person pronoun as the subject.

- (10) *An gabi-sa*  
1S sleep-PST  
'I slept'

Interestingly, the plurality of the first person pronominal subject can be expressed in two ways, shown here in (11a) and (11b).

- (11) a. *Anmar gabi-sa*  
1PL sleep-PST  
'We slept'

- b. *An gabi-s-mala*  
 1S sleep-PST-PL  
 ‘We slept’

It is much more common for the plural marker to be ‘attached’ to the pronoun, thus rendering (11a) as the unmarked form (in elicitation, this sentence is always given). However, (11b) is also possible, but it is rarely given. The next set of sentences show that this is also possible with second person pronouns.

- (12) *Be gadi alle*  
 2S a.lot laugh  
 ‘You laugh a lot’

Just as in (11), (13a) and (13b) are possible clauses that express a plural subject. Note that the marker *-mar* (or *-mala*) can be attached to either the pronoun or to the verb (13b).

- (13) a. *Bemar gadi alle*  
 2PL a.lot laugh  
 ‘You (PL) laugh a lot’
- b. *Be gadi alle-mala*  
 2S a.lot laugh-PL  
 ‘You (PL) laugh a lot’

The clauses expressed in (14) and (15 a and b) are evidence that this is also possible of third person pronouns. Thus, the way to express a plural pronoun on the verb instead of on the pronoun extends to the whole pronominal paradigm in Kuna.

- (14) *Nue we gabi-sa*  
 good 3S sleep-PST  
 ‘He/she slept well’

‘Plurality’ in the third person pronoun can also be expressed on the verb instead.

- (15) a. *Nue wemar gabi-sa*  
 good 3PL sleep-PST  
 ‘They slept well’
- b. *Nue we gabi-s-mala*  
 good 3S sleep-PST-PL  
 ‘They slept well’

However, this strategy for denoting ‘plurality’ only on the verb is not available for nominals. As we can see in the clauses in (16) and in (17), marking the plural simply on the verb is not a sufficient condition to express plurality in the subject. The ungrammaticality of (16b) and (17b) show the impossibility of such a construction. These clauses show that this is not possible with human NPs (16) or with non-human animates (17).

- (16) a. *Goe-mar yer gabe*  
 baby-PL good sleep  
 ‘Babies sleep well’
- b. \* *Goe yer gabe-mala*  
 baby good sleep-PL
- (17) a. *Achu-mar nek=se aparmak-sa*  
 dog-PL house=ALL run-PST  
 ‘The dogs ran home’
- b. \* *Achu nek=se aparmak-sa-mala*  
 dog house=ALL run-PST-PL

Given these facts, I’ve shown that the strategy for marking plurality of the subject on the verb and not on the subject is only available for pronominals. This generalization of not marking plurality directly on the pronoun includes transitive sentences; nevertheless, it is interesting to explore which of the two arguments in a transitive clause would be interpreted as plural.

### 3.2. Transitive clauses

Further evidence that this may be a possible way of analyzing Kuna is that the plural marker may appear on the verb but not on the pronoun in transitive clauses also. However, the presence of two pronouns renders some interesting possibilities. Remember that Kuna has an SOV word order, as discussed in the introductory section. Clauses (18) and (19) show the unmarked manner by which to express plurality of the pronouns. When elicited, the speakers showed a strong preference for these clauses.

- (18) *Anmar be edarb-oe*  
 1PL 2S wait-FT  
 ‘We will wait for you (S)’
- (19) *An bemar edarb-oe*  
 1S 2PL wait-FT  
 ‘I will wait for you (PL)’

In (20), where the plural marker is on the verb and not on either pronoun, the clause is interpreted as having a plural second person object, not a plural subject.

- (20) *An be edarbe-mal-oe*  
 1S 2S wait-PL-FT  
 ‘I will wait for you (PL)’

In clause (20) the second person pronoun is interpreted as being plural. In clause (21), the second person pronoun is still interpreted as being plural, even with the person values of the arguments reversed, where the second person pronoun now functions as the subject of the clause.

- (21) *Be an edarbe-mal-oe*  
 2S 1S wait-PL-FT  
 ‘You (PL) will wait for me’

Clause (21) allowed the plural on the verb to be interpreted as making reference to a plural subject (there would be an apparent restriction on interpreting first person as plural, whether in subject or object position; more on this below). Such is not the case in clauses (22a) and (22b), where the interpretation of plurality always falls on the object pronoun, regardless of what pronoun it might be.

- (22) a. *Be we o-gabi-s-mala*  
 2S 3S CAUS-sleep-PST-PL  
 ‘You (S) made them sleep’
- b. *We be o-gabi-s-mala*  
 3S 2S CAUS-sleep-PST-PL  
 ‘He/she made you (PL) sleep’

To complicate matters, the interpretation of the plural marker on the verb with first and third person unmarked pronouns as the main arguments of the clause is different from what we have seen in previous clauses. First of all, all my informants reported that clause (23) is ungrammatical.

- (23) \**An we o-gabi-s-mala*  
 1S 3S CAUS-sleep-PST-PL  
 ‘I made them sleep’ or ‘We made him/her sleep’

On the other hand, clause (24) is a perfectly acceptable sentence. However, which of the two pronouns is interpreted as being plural seems to be speaker-dependent<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Speakers A and B are both from different Kuna communities. Although dialectal differences are minimal because of constant contact from one community with another, there are some small differences that have not

- (24) *We an o-gabi-s-mala*  
 3S 1S CAUS-sleep-PST-PL  
 speaker a: ‘They made me sleep’  
 speaker b: ‘He/she made us sleep’

The clause in (24), again with the plural marker only on the verb, had the two possible interpretations. Speaker A reported that this clause meant that the third person pronoun in subject position was plural; Speaker B reported the contrary, that the first person in object position was plural.

What I have noticed in exploring clauses in (20) – (24) is that these show no discernible pattern; there seems to be an asymmetry in the interpretation of unmarked pronouns with plural-marked verbs in these clauses. For ease of viewing, these findings are summarized in Table 3 below. The left column shows the possible transitive clauses with different person pronouns in SOV-*mala* word order, where the main arguments are unmarked with regards to plurality. The right column shows on which argument the plural interpretation falls on in the clause even without this marker.

Table 3. *Interpretations of the plural marker on the verb in transitive clauses*

Unmarked S and O pronominal arguments with V+plural			Plural interpretation
1	2	V- <i>mala</i>	object
2	1	V- <i>mala</i>	subject
2	3	V- <i>mala</i>	object
3	2	V- <i>mala</i>	object
1	3	V- <i>mala</i>	ungrammatical
3	1	V- <i>mala</i>	subject and object

An observation is needed here. As I mentioned previously, the use of a plural marked verb with unmarked pronominal arguments is marked (in terms of markedness); therefore, it is more common to find ‘plural’ pronouns in clauses. Given the time constraint of the current project, I have not explored the possible discourse implications of the use of different forms. This gives rise to another possibility; there are transitive clauses where the plural *-mala* appears on both the verb and on one of the pronominal arguments. Their interpretation, however, is ALWAYS straightforward. The plural on the verb seems to work like an agreement marker where the marked verb is always interpreted as agreeing with the plural marked pronoun.

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been studied. The interpretation of the clause in discussion could be due to this difference. The previous clauses did not present this ‘problem’.

- (25) a. *Anmar be edarbe-mal-o*  
 1PL 2s wait-PL-FT  
 ‘We will wait for you (S)’
- b. *An bemark edarbe-mal-o*  
 1S 2PL wait-PL-FT  
 ‘I will wait for you (PL)’
- c. *Anmar bemark edarbe-mal-o*  
 1PL 2PL wait-PL-FT  
 ‘We will wait for you (PL)’

Finally, I would like to discuss cases where clauses only have one surface argument but the verb is a transitive verb. Kuna, as is the case with other Chibchan languages (Quesada 2000), has null anaphora, a topic continuity strategy in which the subject of transitive and intransitive sentences can be suppressed in running discourse and whose interpretation is a third person subject, yielding a  $\emptyset(O)V$  structure. These structures with transitive verbs illustrate some interesting possibilities. If the plural marker is on the verb, and the only argument in the clause is unmarked, the subject will be interpreted as the unmentioned plural subject (some people) of the clause. This is true of object pronouns and full NPs. Therefore, clauses (26) – (30) are interpreted as having some plural subject not mentioned in the clause.

- (26) *An ogabi-s-mala*  
 1S make.sleep-PST-PL  
 ‘(People) made me sleep’
- (27) *Be ogabi-s-mala*  
 2S make.sleep-PST-PL  
 ‘(People) made you (S) sleep’
- (28) *We ogabi-s-mala*  
 3S make.sleep-PST-PL  
 ‘(People) made him sleep’
- (29) *Achu gu-cha-mala*  
 dog eat-PST-PL  
 ‘(People) bit the dog’
- (30) *Goe dak-sa-mala*  
 baby see-PST-PL  
 ‘(People) saw your baby’

### 3.3. Re-examining Kuna pronominal ‘plurals’

Now that I have shown the behavior of pronouns in a clause, where an unmarked pronominal can be interpreted as a plural pronoun in the presence of a plural morpheme on the verb, I would like to re-examine what previous authors considered plural pronouns in Kuna. This section will double as a summary since it will bring together the main discoveries in the paper to help us discuss and reanalyze the pronominal paradigm of Kuna.

The strategy to mark plurality on the verb (*V-mala*) but not on its arguments is only available if the argument to be interpreted as plural is a pronoun. Given the possibility of *-mala* attaching to either a pronoun or a verb or on both, I suggest that plurality of pronouns is expressed by means of an enclitic; this enclitic may or may not be attached to the pronoun. As a result, the pronominal paradigm for Kuna that I propose is a simple three-pronoun paradigm that differentiates the three persons observed in Cysouw (2003) and Bobaljik (2008), but does not specify number. In the absence of the plural marker, these forms will be interpreted as singular by default. Table 4 is the alternative paradigm to Table 2 presented at the beginning of section 3.

Table 4. *Kuna pronoun paradigm*

1 person	an
2 person	be
3 person	we

Using the glossing conventions used in Kuna traditionally, I had been glossing the non-singular pronoun as a full form (*anmar*) and the plural on the verb as a plural affix (*-mala*) in previous sections. Given this new proposal, the plural (on either pronoun or verb) must be glossed as an enclitic. Example (31) shows the alternative glossing of clause (25a) following this new assumption.

- (31) *An=mar be edarbe=mal-o*  
 1=PL 2s wait=PL-FT  
 ‘We will wait for you’

Lastly, the irregularity of the plural interpretations of unmarked pronouns observed in transitive clauses, which were summarized in Table 3, deserve mention. As I pointed out, there does not seem to be a discernible pattern to the attested clauses. The ‘plural’ as an enclitic offers a plausible explanation. Enclitics are said to be a grammaticalization middle ground, a form that stands between a full word and an affix; as such, enclitics are subject to asymmetric and dialect-related behaviors and interpretations. The interpretation irregularity, then, is caused by the fact that the pronominal system to express plurality is going through a grammaticalization process which may later result in plural affixes or full pronominal ‘plural’ forms.

#### 4. Conclusions

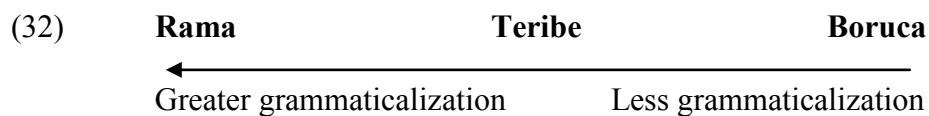
The relevant typological data of the pronominal paradigms in the world's languages points to an uncommon marking of the plural in the Kuna pronominal system; as such, it is necessary to closely explore the descriptive merit of previous descriptions that other authors have presented for Kuna in the literature. Two major factors were considered to justify a re-analysis of this system: a) the peculiarity of marking the 'plural' pronouns with a plural morpheme also seen in the nominal system, and b) the seemingly erratic behavior of this morpheme in the syntax and subsequent asymmetric interpretation of the plurality of the arguments in transitive clauses in the absence of a plural morpheme in the pronoun.

I concluded that Kuna does not factor number in its pronominal system, unlike most languages in the world which have a separate form for plural pronouns. Instead, Kuna has a simple three pronoun paradigm that distinguishes the three persons observed by Cysouw, among others.

Interestingly, the data in this paper may also allow avenues for future research. A diachronic analysis of the pronouns in Chibchan languages is possible thanks to work by other authors on the grammaticalization of pronouns, person and number marking of different Chibchan languages, mainly Quesada (2000). The asymmetric interpretation, mentioned previously, of the plurality of the arguments in transitive clauses in the absence of a plural morpheme in the pronouns points to some type of grammaticalization process of the pronominal system in Kuna. In an article about the supposed ergativity in Teribe, Quesada compares three different Chibchan languages ( Rama, Boruca and Teribe) with respect to the extent of grammaticalization in their agreement system (participant encoding in the verb).

According to Quesada, Teribe uses a combination of agreement morphology and word order to encode the participants (Agent-patient). The use of person markers on the verb depend on the discursive needs of the speaker. Rama uses bound and free pronouns in its agreement paradigm to encode its participants. Direct objects use only free pronouns; however, we see that most intransitive clauses prefix the subject on the verb. Boruca, like Kuna, presents a set of pronouns that encode subject, object, obliques and possessives. The difference is the presence of a focus marker *aŋ* that can be attached to the pronouns, which then become verbal suffixes.

To summarize his findings, Quesada presents the chart that I have reproduced in (32) below, in which he suggests different stages of grammaticalization of subject-object agreement morphology on the verb.



It is clear that Kuna does not have a grammaticalized agreement system that encodes subject and object on the verb. However, as we saw in (27) in cases of zero anaphora, there might be a rudimentary number agreement system in some clauses. This would suggest an earlier grammaticalization stage than what we observe in Boruca. It would be of interest to the study of Chibchan to explore in future research how this Kuna characteristic relates diachronically to its sister languages.

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