

Possessive Pronoun Alternation as a Morphological Feature of the Gane Language in South Halmahera Regency

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Abstract

This study investigates the distinctive morphological characteristics of the Gane language spoken in Foya village, East Gane sub-district, South Halmahera Regency. A defining feature of Gane is the systematic alternation of possessive pronoun forms conditioned by the semantic class of the possessed noun. The analysis focuses on two primary possessive pronoun forms that reflect a semantic classification system based on nominal categories. This study aims to describe the morphological forms of Gane possessive pronouns and document their usage patterns within the grammatical and cultural context of the speech community. Data was collected through the observation and elicitation methods, employing direct elicitation; interviews, and direct transcription of Gane speech. Data analysis employed structural morphological analysis and distributional analysis to trace the distinctions between the two possessive pronoun forms. The findings reveal that the first form of possessive pronouns (e.g., *anik/nik*, *amam*, *iterir*, *anim/nim*, *ini/ni*, *siriri*) is used to express ownership of general objects such as houses or boats, while the second form (e.g., *anak/nak*, *inam/nam*, *ino/no*, *sirori*) is employed to indicate possession of food-related items. The morphological alternation phenomena (vowel shortening and morpheme substitution) indicate processes of phonological regularization and semantic categorization within the Gane possessive pronoun system. These findings demonstrate that Gane preserves morphological features characteristic of the Eastern Austronesian language family. These distinctive morphological traits not only provide evidence that the language spoken in Foya village is Gane rather than a separate "Foya language" as claimed by some local speakers but also constitute valuable data for future research into related languages across the region, potentially illuminating historical migration patterns and language dispersal.

Keywords:

Possessive Pronouns, Morphological Features, Gane Language, South Halmahera

INTRODUCTION

The genetic classification of languages spoken in North Maluku, particularly across the southern, central, and eastern Halmahera mainland, remains unresolved within historical linguistics. The grouping of related languages continues to be debated, with two competing family tree models in circulation. The most recent comprehensive study, conducted by Burhanudin et al. (2017), established the position of the Gebe language of Central Halmahera, which shares phonological features with the Maba language of East Halmahera. At the same time, Gebe shares morphological features with languages from the Proto-South Halmahera subgroup. Morphological markers such as the first-person plural inalienable possession marker in Gebe played a decisive role in revising the classification previously proposed by Kamholz (as cited in Burhanudin, 2017) in his doctoral dissertation. The present study does not address the broader question of language classification and genetic relationships in South Halmahera; rather, it examines the specific morphological features that are determinative for classifying languages across the Halmahera mainland, with particular focus on South, East, and Central Halmahera, including the Gane language of South Halmahera.

Languages of North Maluku have attracted increasing scholarly attention in recent years, as language vitality surveys indicate that these languages are undergoing accelerated decline. Regional Regulation No. 9 of 2009 of North Maluku Province mandates the preservation of regional languages and literature through continued instruction and maintenance. Nevertheless, data from the Language and Literature Diversity Laboratory (2020) indicate that several regional languages of North Maluku, including Gebe (Jalaluddin, 2023) and Gane itself, are experiencing decline or shift. This situation is corroborated by the language mapping conducted by the Ministry of Education and Culture research team. Furthermore, research and publications concerning languages of North Maluku and Halmahera remain scarce, particularly studies addressing grammatical structure. Motivated by this research gap and the limited publications on Gane, this study specifically examines the morphological characteristics of a language spoken in South Halmahera, North Maluku. Gane belongs to the Austronesian language family and is spoken by communities in Gane Sub-district, South Halmahera Regency. South Halmahera Regency itself comprises 29 sub-districts and 250 villages, with Gane distributed across 4 sub-districts and 38 villages (North Maluku Language Center). However, in Foya village, a portion of speakers claim that their language constitutes a distinct “Foya language.” The morphological evidence presented in this study can serve as a basis for comparing features with Gane spoken in other locations, thereby providing empirical grounds to adjudicate competing language identity claims.

The primary grammatical system characterizing Austronesian languages lies in basic clause structure. A defining feature of Gane is that its pronouns undergo systematic morphological alternation conditioned by the semantic category of the nominal head they modify.

Pronouns are defined as substitutes for personal referents (persona) as well as non-personal nominal referents (Alwi et al., 2003). Among their functions, pronouns serve

to increase syntactic efficiency and enhance communicative clarity. Their primary function, however, is to simplify discourse by avoiding lexical repetition. In addition to personal pronouns, languages also employ possessive pronouns—forms that encode ownership or association. An adequate understanding of pronoun forms and their contextual conditions is fundamental to effective communication analysis.

Pronouns are characterized by their prototypical occurrence in subject position, though they may also appear in object position; their distribution is context-sensitive, and their forms may alternate accordingly.

Possessive pronouns, also termed possessive determiners, encode the grammatical relation of ownership or inalienable association between a possessor and a possessed noun.

Examples of possessive pronoun alternation in Gane as spoken in Foya village, based on preliminary fieldwork:

Indonesian	Gane
My plate is on the table	<i><u>anag</u> yofene po mejange lo</i>
My car is black	<i><u>nig</u> otonye ni warna beblote</i>
My foot is sore	<i>sow<u>gene</u> pisek</i>
My child is named Ito	<i>antigenye ngosno Ito</i>

The examples above illustrate systematic alternation in possessive pronoun forms, each conditioned by the semantic category of the following noun. Personal pronouns are defined as pronominal forms used to substitute for personal nominals or the names of individuals (Alwi et al., 2003). Siewierska (as cited in Fitriana, 2024) further notes that person markers may be subject to modification or deletion. Changes in pronouns were discussed by (Agustina, 2018) in the Sasak language, namely changes in the first-person plural pronoun /ite/, which varies depending on four aspects or characteristics.

However, out of those four characteristics, phoneme changes occur in the verb and noun word classes depending on the referenced context, but not in pronouns (possessives). This serves as a characteristic or linguistic feature of a different family.

Possessive pronouns are a particularly productive object of morphosyntactic inquiry, as they often encode typologically distinctive features of a given language—as exemplified by Gane in South Halmahera, North Maluku. Morphosyntax, as defined by Kridalaksana (in Abbas, 2021, p. 3), is the branch of linguistics that treats morphology and syntax as a unified organizational system. Morphology examines word structure and the effects of morphological change on grammatical category and meaning, while syntax studies grammatical relations above the word level within the sentence (Verhaar, as cited in Supriyadi, 2014, p. 1). Previous research on personal pronouns includes a study of pronoun forms in the Bima language in the film *La Hila*, which found that first- and second-person singular and plural pronouns were employed to reflect Bima cultural values and social status. While that study shares a thematic focus, its object differs substantially. More directly relevant is Duwila & Jalaludin (2022). That study shares with the present research a focus on person

marking, but differs in its object language—Gebe and Gane are classified as belonging to distinct proto-languages (Kamholz, as cited in Burhanudin, 2017, p. 3). Burhanudin et al. (2020) also examined Gane as spoken in Central Halmahera, but Burhanuddin, dkk (2020) focused exclusively on internal phonological and lexical innovations, emphasizing historical, geographical, and contextual differences that characterize South Halmahera Gane. The majority of language research in North Maluku has concentrated on external aspects such as sociolinguistics (vitality and language shift), leaving a significant gap in morphosyntactic documentation. The present study specifically addresses how nominal semantic class conditions the alternation of possessive pronoun forms in Gane, yielding novel findings on a pronoun system organized around the semantic class of nouns in Gane. The distinctive feature lies in possessive pronoun alternation conditioned not only by person category, but also by the semantic category of the possessed noun (general objects, food-related items, and body parts/kinship terms). This reflects the typological phenomenon of alienability distinctions in possession (alienable vs. inalienable). Hemblerch (2015) Click or tap here to enter text. observes that the definition and characterization of personal pronouns constitutes a well-established practice in the linguistic literature and reflects the prototypical use of personal pronouns. There are also instances of personal pronouns used in ways that deviate significantly from their prototypical patterns.

METHOD

This morphosyntactic study employs a qualitative descriptive approach within a structural linguistic framework, with the aim of describing each form of possessive pronoun alternation in Gane according to grammatical category and semantic context. As formulated by Lindlof (in (Wawan, n.d.), 2024), qualitative descriptive research is characterized by naturalistic inquiry. This approach enables the collection of qualitative data, presented systematically with reference to patterns emerging from fieldwork. This study thus adopts a qualitative descriptive approach combined with morphological analysis. Data collection: Linguistic data containing Gane possessive pronouns were collected from native speakers in three principal Gane-speaking communities in South Halmahera. Data were collected using the observation method (observation) employing spontaneous speech monitoring and direct transcription, and elicitation; situational contexts were constructed to elicit naturalistic data through observation of spontaneous speech and the ethnolinguistic experience of primary speakers. Interview techniques were employed to obtain valid data on pronoun usage. Interview instruments consisted of simple sentence frames to facilitate informant responses. Informants were selected based on linguistic criteria, specifically speakers aged 25–60 years, following established linguistic fieldwork criteria. Data analysis employed formal and informal analytic techniques, together with translation, to describe each pattern of possessive pronoun alternation. The analytical process proceeded through the following stages: classification of possessive pronoun forms, morphological analysis (identification of base morphemes, affixes, and reduced forms); distributional analysis to determine usage contexts

according to nominal category (general objects vs. food-related items); and semantic function interpretation and explanation of possessive pronoun alternation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Research Personal Pronouns: Personal pronouns are pronominal forms used to substitute for the name of person, including the speaker, the addressee, and third parties. Personal pronouns may be singular, referring to one individual, or plural, referring to more than one person.

Personal pronoun types are classified according to the person they reference. First Person Pronouns: These refer to the speaker or writer. Singular forms are *aku*, *saya*, and *daku*; plural forms are *kami* (exclusive, not including the addressee) and *kita* (inclusive, including the addressee). Second Person Pronouns refer to the addressee. Singular forms include *engkau*, *kamu*, *anda*, and *kau*; plural forms are *kalian*, *kamu sekalian*, and *anda sekalian*. Third Person Pronouns refer to individuals being discussed who are not directly participating in the conversation. Singular forms are *dia*, *ia*, and *beliau* (honorific); the plural form is *mereka*.

Personal pronouns in Gane similarly distinguish singular and plural forms according to person. As stated by Siewierska (Fitriana, 2024), personal markers can change or disappear.

Table 1 presents the Gane personal pronoun form:

Personal Type	Pronoun	Singular	Plural
First Person		Ake	Am (Exclusive) It (Inclusive)
Second Person		Aw	Mew
Third Person / In animate / animal		I	Si

The Gane personal pronoun forms are morphologically related to their corresponding possessive pronoun forms. Possessive pronouns encode the relation of ownership, indicating that something belongs to a particular individual or group. The initial phase of this research identified the following Gane possessive pronoun forms:

1. First form of Gane Possessive Pronouns

Possessive Pronoun	Gane Possessive Pronoun Form
1st Person Singular (-ku)	<i>anik (nik)</i> <i>amam (exclusive)</i>
1st Person Plural	<i>iterir (inclusive)</i>
2nd Person Singular (-mu)	<i>anim (nam)</i>
2nd Person Plural	<i>menimi</i>
3rd Person Singular (-nya)	<i>ini (ni)</i>
3rd Person Plural (-mereka)	<i>siriri</i>

The possessive pronoun forms in the first column constitute the form used to express possession over the majority of Gane nouns. These include nouns such as house (**um**), chair (tarapesa), boat (**yel**), wife (**mepin**) and other kinship terms excluding **anak**).

Table 2. First form of Gane Possessive Pronouns

Possessive Pronoun	Gane Possessive Pronoun Form	Example Possessive Constructions
1st Person Singular (-ku)	<i>anik (nik)</i>	<i>anik um / nik um</i> <i>anik tarapesa / nik tarapesa</i> <i>anik yel/ nik yel</i> <i>anik mepin/ nik mepin</i>
	<i>amam (exclusive)</i>	<i>amam um / mam um</i> <i>amam tarapesa/ mam tarapesa</i> <i>amam yel/ mam yel</i> <i>amam mepin/ mam mepin</i>
1st Person Plural	<i>iterir (inclusive)</i>	<i>Iterir um</i> <i>iterir tarapesa</i> <i>Iterir yel</i> <i>Iterir mepin</i>
2nd Person Singular (-mu)	<i>anim (nim)</i>	<i>anim um/ nim um</i> <i>anim tarapesa/ nim tarapesa</i> <i>anim yel/ nim yel</i> <i>anim mepin/nim mepin</i>
2nd Person Plural	<i>menimi</i>	<i>menimi um</i> <i>menimi tarapesa</i> <i>menimi yel</i> <i>menimi mepin</i>
3rd Person Singular (-nya)	<i>ini (ni)</i>	<i>ini um / ni um</i> <i>ini tarapesa / ni tarapesa</i> <i>ini yel/ ni yel</i> <i>ini mepin/ ni mepin</i>
3rd Person Plural	<i>siriri</i>	<i>siriri um</i> <i>siriri tarapesa</i> <i>siriri yel</i> <i>siriri mepin</i>

Several possessive pronoun forms in the table above may be used in their full form or in a reduced form; for example, *anik um* meaning 'my house' is reduced to *nik um* without change in possessive meaning. This reduction is conditioned by the degree of possessive emphasis required in a given sentence. The four nouns illustrated represent the majority of Gane nominal vocabulary. For plural possessives (except the exclusive first-person plural), reduction is rare in natural Gane speech. For inanimate objects and animals, possessive forms follow the third-person form. For example, "cat's head" is expressed as *-boki ni uto-*. For plural possessives (except the first-person exclusive plural), reduction is rare in natural Gane speech. For inanimate objects and animals, possessive forms follow the third-person form (singular and plural). For example, the possessive for "cat's head" is expressed as *boki ni uto*.

2. Second form of Gane Possessive Pronouns

Possessive Pronoun	Gane Possessive Pronoun Form
1st Person Singular (-ku)	<i>anak (Nak)</i> <i>amam (Exclusive)</i>
1st Person Plural	<i>iteror (Inclusive)</i>
2nd Person Singular (-mu)	<i>anam (Nam)</i>
2nd Person Plural	<i>menomi</i>
3rd Person Singular (-nya)	<i>ino (No)</i>
3rd Person Plural	<i>sirori</i>

The second form of Gane possessive pronouns, presented in the table above, is used to express possession of food-related nouns. For example, the nouns *fos* 'rice', *sesna* 'sago', *loke* 'banana', *tit* 'fireplace', *gow* 'plate'

Table 3. Second form of Gane Possessive Pronouns

Possessive Pronoun	Gane Possessive Pronoun Form	Example Possessive Constructions
1st Person Singular (-ku)	<i>anak (nak)</i>	<i>anak fos / nak fos</i> <i>anak sesna / nak sesna</i> <i>anak loke / nak loke</i> <i>anak tit / nak tit</i> <i>anak gow / nak gow</i>
	<i>amam (exclusive)</i>	<i>amam fos / mam fos</i> <i>amam sesna / mam sesna</i> <i>amam loke / mam loke</i> <i>amam tit / mam tit</i> <i>amam gow / mam gow</i>
1st Person Plural	<i>iteror (Inclusive)</i>	<i>iteror fos</i> <i>iteror sesna</i> <i>iteror loke</i> <i>iteror tit</i> <i>iteror gow</i>
2nd Person Singular (-mu)	<i>Anam (Nam)</i>	<i>Anam fos / nam fos</i> <i>Anam sesna / nam sesna</i> <i>Anam loke / nam loke</i> <i>Anam tit / nam tit</i> <i>Anam gow / nam gow</i>
2nd Person Plural	<i>Menomi</i>	<i>Menomi fos</i> <i>Menomi sesna</i> <i>Menomi loke</i> <i>Menomi tit</i>

3rd Person Singular (- nya)	Ino (No)	Menomi gow
		Ino fos/ no fos
		Ino sesna / no sesna
		Ino loke / no loke
		Ino tit / no tit
3rd Person Plural	Sirori	Ino gow / no gow
		Sirori fos
		Sirori sesna
		Sirori loke
		Sirori tit
		Sirori gow

As shown in Table 2, the Gane possessive pronoun forms in the second form undergo systematic sound alternation from the forms in Table 1. The alternations are: *anik* → *anak*, *anim* → *anam*, *ini* → *ino*, *iterir* → *iteror*, *siriri* → *sirori*. These vocalic changes mark possession of food-related nouns in Gane. A particularly illustrative contrast involves the noun *kabeng* 'goat' when the referent is the goat as a livestock animal, the first- form possessive is used, as in:

anik kabeng piteng i po bete lo

'my goat is tied up in the garden'

When the referent is goat meat (a food item), the second- form possessive is used:

anak kabeng po mejang lo

'my goat meat is on the table'

The first-person exclusive plural does not undergo sound alternation between the two forms. It is used uniformly for both food-related and non-food-related possession, as illustrated for the goat example, retaining the form *amam*. This is illustrated with the goat noun used both for livestock and meat contexts.

amam kabeng piteng i po bete lo

'our goat are tied up in the garden'

amam kabeng po mejang lo

our goat meat is on the table

With regard to food-related possessive marking, fish—although animate—follow the second form in everyday Gane speech, as shown in Table 2.

anak in

'my fish'

Although fish can in some contexts be kept as pets rather than consumed as food, in the everyday practice of the Foya community fish are conceptualized primarily as a food source, and thus their possessive marking follows the second form.

3. Third form of Gane Possessive Pronouns

Possessive Pronoun	Gane Possessive Pronoun Form		
1st Person Singular (-ku)	a	g	→
1st Person Plural	amam (mam/m) → mame (exclusive)		

	<i>Iteri</i>	<i>re</i> (Inclusive)	
2nd Person Singular (-mu)	<i>anim/An/</i>	<i>me</i> →	
2nd Person Plural	<i>Me</i>	<i>nimi</i> →	
3rd Person Singular (-nya)	<i>-i-</i>		
3rd Person Plural	<i>Siriri</i>	<i>re</i> →	

The third form of Gane possessive pronouns presents a distinct morphological pattern used to express possession of body part nouns. Body part nouns include *mtō* 'eye', *pow* 'hand' and *sumo* 'mouth'.

Possessive Pronoun	Gane Possessive Pronoun Form
1st Person Singular (-ku)	<i>a-mto-ge/ mto-ge</i> <i>a-pow-ge</i> <i>amam/ (mam)-mto-mame</i> (Exclusive)
1st Person Plural	<i>amam-pwo-mame/mpowmame</i> <i>Iteri-mto-re (Inclusive)</i> <i>Iterir-mow-re</i>
2nd Person Singular (-mu)	<i>anim/m-mto-me/ mto-me</i> <i>anim/m-pow-me/ mpowme</i>
2nd Person Plural	<i>me-mto-nimi</i> <i>me-pow-nimi</i>
3rd Person Singular (-nya)	<i>i-mto</i> <i>ini-pow/i-pow</i>
3rd Person Plural	<i>siriri-mto-re</i> <i>siriripowre</i>

In contrast to the patterns in the preceding tables, where possessive pronouns consistently precede the possessed noun, Table 3 demonstrates that Gane body-part possessives undergo a distinct morphological process: the base possessive pronoun form is converted into an affixal form, functioning simultaneously as a prefix and a suffix flanking the body-part noun, as illustrated in table 3.

For example, the second-person plural possessive *menimi*, when used for body-part possession, is split so that the body-part noun is inserted within it. For the noun 'hand' *menimi* is inserted within the possessive, as illustrated in Table 3; for example, the noun hand (*pow* which may be reduced from *mepownimi* (*me-pow-nimi*) meaning "your (plural) hand." In addition to this infixal pattern, another morphological process applies: the possessive pronoun is reduced and a suffix is added. For the first-person singular, for example, the change is: *anik* → *a* then suffix *ge*. The underlined 'a' is the first-person singular possessive marker, which then receives the suffix *ge*. The same pattern applies to the second-person singular possessive form *anim* to *anim* through phonological reduction of *anim* → *m*, followed by insertion of the body-part noun and the suffix *me*. For the exclusive plural *amam* may be shortened to *mam*,

followed by insertion of the body-part noun and the suffix *mame* and the inclusive plural *iterir* is followed by body-part noun insertion and suffix *re*. For the third-person plural possessive *siriri* no reduction occurs; the pronoun *siriri* is followed directly by the body-part noun and suffix *-re-*. The one exception among third- form possessives—the only form that does not take a suffix—is the third-person singular possessive */ini/*. This form */ini/* may be used in its full form or reduced to the single sound [i] followed by the body-part noun.

The morphological pattern illustrated in Table 3 also applies specifically to the kinship term for “child” in Gane */ntu/*, while all other kinship terms follow the first- form possessive pattern, as shown in the table below:

wawanIndonesian	Gane
My child	antige
Our child (incl.) / our child (excl.)	Iteririnture / amamentumame
Your child	Antime
Your (plural) child	mentunimi
His/her child	intu
Their child	siririnture

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The findings of this study demonstrate that the Gane possessive pronoun system is organized into three main forms first form is used to express possession of general objects (houses, boats, tools, and non-child kinship relations). The second form is specific to nouns or concepts related to food (staple foods, eating utensils, and cooking ingredients). A third form governs body-part and kinship possession through affixal morphology. Beyond their relationship to nominal vocabulary, these forms are also conditioned by the pronoun's person-number category. Given the multilingual environment of North Maluku, and South Halmahera in particular—where contact with Central Halmahera languages is documented—further research is warranted on the distribution of the Austronesian family across the Halmahera mainland, specifically in South, Central, and East Halmahera. The morphological features of Gane do not differ substantially from those of Gebe and several other languages of Central and East Halmahera. The present findings may either reinforce or complicate the genetic grouping proposed by Kamholz (2014), given both the similarities and specific differences in morphological features across the respective proto-languages. Evidence of language contact and cross-linguistic influence is found in the case of Gebe (Central Halmahera), which shares phonological features with Maba (East Halmahera) yet shares morphological features with languages of South Halmahera.

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