Igbo® Verbs of Communication

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Abstract

This paper investigates the characteristics of Igbo verbs of communication. The study identifies seven sub-classes of Igbo verbs of communication. These classes can be grouped into two broad categories of verbs, that is, those used communicatively and those used non-communicatively. The verbs used communicatively are the Igbo verbs of communication par excellence. The verbs of communication in relation to Igbo vocabulary as a whole fall into the two major classes of Bound Complement Verbs and Inherent Complement Verbs (Nwachukwu, 1984; Emenanjo, 2005). This study establishes Igbo verbs of communication as a semantically coherent class with all the members sharing the meaning of the exchange of information. The study hopes to stimulate interest in this area of Igbo vocabulary.

Key words: Igbo verbs, lexical knowledge, communication, information

1.0 Introduction

Igbo is a major language in Nigeria with about 25 million people speaking it as a first language. The Igbo people are famous for undertaking trading adventures across the West African sub-region and this is why the language is spoken in large markets across the region (Emenanjo, 1998:43).
Igbo is a tone language with three basic tones viz High, Low and the phenomenon of downstep. The tone pattern of each lexical is provided to underscore the importance of tone. High tone is indicated by a raised accent thus /'/. Low tone is indicated by a grave accent /`/, while the phenomenon of downstep is indicated by a raised macron thus /'~/.

The language is classified as a Niger-Congo language, which belongs to the new Benue-Congo sub-branch of languages (Bendor-Samuel, 1989) or the West Benue-Congo (Williamson & Blench, 2000). The language consists of many dialects which are mutually intelligible. The current trend in Igbo linguistics is to classify Igbo dialects based on the common features associated with the States of origin of these dialects. Hence, there exists the Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, Imo and Rivers dialects. This classification is deemed to be more realistic and practical because “Igbo people today associate speakers of Igbo dialects with features common to their states” (Igboanusi & Peter, 2005:60).

The verbs of focus in this study include those verbs that denote how ideas are shared and/or transferred in human communication. For the Igbo language, a study of the syntactic and semantic properties of any class of its verbs can stand as a study of the language (Uwalaka, 1988; 1983). Emenanjo (2005) claims that the Igbo verb is the only source for the derivation of new words in the language. This contrasts with English where the nouns and verbs can be used to derive other words. Nwachukwu (1984) describes Igbo as a verb-language. The reason is that Igbo prepositions and Noun Phrases are ‘verb-forms’ unlike in English and other Indo-European languages where they appear as semantically empty ‘function words’.

The examples in this paper were taken mostly from the daily utterances by speakers of the Anambra and Enugu dialects of Igbo. The examples were tested for grammaticality by five native speakers of these dialects. The author is also a native speaker. The transcriptions follow standard Igbo orthography. The abbreviations are: TNS ‘tense’, IND ‘indicative’, PROG ‘progressive’, AGR ‘agreement’ 3SG ‘third-person singular pronoun’ 3PL ‘third-person plural pronoun’ BEN ‘benefactive’.

Levin (1983) makes the assertion that ‘the characteristic of lexical knowledge is easily illustrated with respect to verbs.’ This assertion aligns with the claims by Emenanjo (2005; 1984) and Uwalaka (1988; 1983). The centrality of the verb in any language study is incontestable. The basic clause of any language contains a verb with other grammatical categories subservient to the verb’s dominance of the structure of the clause. For Igbo, the knowledge of the meaning of a verb determines its syntactic properties. However, the knowledge of the verb by the Igbo speaker goes beyond its meaning to the possible array of words that can be derived from the verb, since the verb is the only source for the derivation of new words. In other words, the lexical knowledge of the Igbo speaker includes the meaning of the individual verb, the syntactic properties that are derived from...
the verb meaning and the relationship between verb meaning and morphosyntactic properties.

This study aims to investigate the aspects of the semantics of Igbo verbs of communication in terms of their position within the structure of Igbo vocabulary. Our hope is that this study may draw attention to the semantic interest of this area of the vocabulary in different languages.

The verbs of communication in Igbo identified for this study is a semantically coherent class with all the members sharing the meaning of the transferring ideas from an addressee to an addresser. The choice of this class of verbs for study is because of the role human language plays in communication and conceptualization and, also, its role in relation to the acquisition of knowledge and culture.

1.1 Methods of data collection

The methods of data collection include introspection as a native speaker, elicitation of data from ten native speakers of Igbo and consulting two linguistically adequate and prominent Igbo dictionaries. Williamson (1972) Igbo dictionary, with over 5000 entries from the Onisha dialect, has been very useful in identifying the Igbo verbs of communication for study. Echeruo (1998) Igbo dictionary has also been helpful. The verbs were isolated and our native speaker informants were asked to use them in basic sentences. These sentences were recorded, transcribed and edited to suit the aim of the study. Some data were derived from a number of Igbo literature texts.

2.0 Verbs of communication in Igbo

In the data available to us, the Igbo verbs of communication have eight sub-classes. These include: the verbs of the transfer of a message; verbs of speaking; chatter verbs; complain verbs; advise verbs; verbs of manner of speaking; oath-taking verbs; and consulting verbs. Section 2 below illustrates the examples of these verbs and their alternations.

2.1 Verbs of the transfer of a message

These verbs show the relay of information or messages from the addresser to a known addressee or to an addressee that is absent at the time of the utterance. The verbs also show the relay of a message from one individual to the general public. The examples of these verbs include:

1. 

a. ibú ámúmá ‘to prophesy’
b. íjú ėsè  ‘to inquire after someone’s health’

c. íjú ọ hà  ‘to inquire after someone’s family welfare’

d. ímá ókwà  ‘to give public notice; to announce’

e. íkpò ọ mkpụ  ‘to cry out in horror’

f. ígbá ảmà  ‘to leak a secret’

These verbs fall under the class of verbs identified as Inherent Complement Verbs (Nwachukwu, 1984). The transfer of the message usually involves a declarative statement by the addressee to the addressee. It could be done by the use of voice (cf 2, a, b, d, f and j) below or non-voice (cf 2g and i) below. There is no specific manner depicted by the addressee in the transfer of the message but the type of communicated information is usually a message from the addressee to the addressee. The number of participants in the event may be two or more. All the verbs in this subclass are used only in the context of communication. Since communication involves the acquisition of information, these verbs denote the change of possession of information from the addressee to the addressee.

The examples in (2) below show the use of these verbs in sentence constructions.

2.1.1 Sentence constructions involving verbs of the transfer of a message

2.

a. Adá bu-rù  ámúmá
   Ada carry-IND prophecy
   ‘Ada prophesied’

b. Adá bu-ù-rù  Obí ámúmá
   Ada carry-BEN-IND Obí prophesy
   ‘Ada prophesied for Obí’

c. Adá jù-rù  èsè  Obí
   Ada ask-TNS wellbeing Obí
   ‘Ada asked after Obí’

d. Adá jù-rù  Obí èsè
   Ada ask-TNS Obí wellbeing

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2.2 Verbs of communication of propositional attitudes

Verbs of communication of propositional attitudes in Igbo occur in utterances where one makes a claim, in speech, that may be true or false or even a guess. The following are verbs of communication of propositional attitudes.

3.  
a. ịgbà àkà àbè  ‘to give evidence’
b. ịkà  ‘to guess’
c. ğó  ‘to deny’
d. ịsà n’ọnụ  ‘to confess’
e. ịsị  ‘to lie’

These verbs belong to the class of verbs identified as Bound Cognate Verbs (Emenanjo, 1978; 2005). The mode of communication depicted by these verbs is done by the use of...
voice only. The utterances with these verbs usually carry an imperative force. The verbs can be used non-communicatively as shown in sentence (4a) and communicatively (cf. 4b-f). There is no specific manner in which these verbs are used in communication but the type of communicated information includes statement of reality from the perspective of the addressee. There is a change of possession of information in (4a, b and d) but none in sentences (4c and e). There seems to be only one participant (the addressee) in the events denoted by the verbs. The specific manner of communication is emphatic.

2.2.1 Sentence constructions involving the verbs of the communication of propositional attitudes

4.

a. Áyògu gbà-a-rà Êzè áká èbè
   Ayogu V-BEN-IND Eze hand evidence
   ‘Ayogu has given evidence in support of Eze’

b. Êzè kà-rà a-kà íhè Áyògu gbà-è-mè
   Eze say-IND AGR-say thing Ayogu FUT-AGR-do
   ‘Eze guessed what Ayogu will do’

c. Ò gò-rò ya
   3SG deny-IND 3SG (obj)
   ‘S/he has denied it’

d. Há sà-rà n’önụ
   3PL spread-IND in mouth
   ‘They have confessed’

e. Ò sì-rì àsì
   3SG say-IND lie
   ‘S/he lied’

2.3 Verbs of social interaction

The verbs of social interaction encode activities where there is a steady flow of informal conversation between two or more interlocutors. The conversation usually takes place in

The examples in our data include:

4.

a. íkápá nkàtà ‘to chitchat’
b. ikọ akúkọ ‘to tell story’

c. ímá njákiri ‘to throw banters’

d. ígbághá ‘to argue’

e. íhọ ihọ ‘to tell fables; folktales’

These verbs fall under the class of Inherent Complement Verbs. The mode of communication is by the use of voice only and there is no specific manner of communication since the atmosphere is informal. However, the verbs are always used communicatively. It seems the verbs can take one participant (addresser) as shown in examples (b, c, e, f and g) or two participants (addresser and addressee) as shown in (5a, d and h). Where the verb takes only the addresser, the addressee is understood by whoever hears the utterance. There is usually a change of possession of information between addresser and addressee, where these occur, and, the type of communicated information includes informal banters.

2.3.1 Sentence constructions involving the verbs of social interaction

5.

a. Adá ná Obí ná á-kpá nkátá
   Ada and obi PROG AGR-stir conversation
   ‘Ada and Obi are having a conversation’

b. Há kpä-rà nkátá
   3PL stir-IND conversation
   ‘They had a conversation’

c. Ó kọ-rọ ákúkọ
   3SG tell-TNS story
   ‘S/he told a story’

d. Ó kọ-ọ-rọ há ákúkọ
   3SG tell-BEN-IND 3PL story
   ‘S/he told them a story’

e. Adá ná Obí ná a-má njákiri
   Ada and Obi PROG AGR-throw banter
   ‘Ada and Obi are exchanging banter’
2.4 Complain verbs

The complain verbs denote situations where the addressee feels bad about an occurrence and whines about it to the addressee.

6.

6. a. íkpésá mkpésá ‘to complain openly’
   
   b. ichí ichí ‘to warn’
   
   c. ínyó ónyinyọ ‘to complain loudly’

The defining feature of these verbs is the specific manner of anger that comes with their usage in utterances. They belong to the class of Bound Cognate Verbs. Their mode of communication is through the use of voice only and the type of communicated information is the lodging of a complaint. When they take only one participant in the clause, it is usually the addressee (7a and c) but they can also take two participants (7b and d). The verbs are always used communicatively in speech.

2.4.1 Sentence constructions involving complain verbs

7.

7. a. Adá kpésá-rà mkpésá
   Ada complain-IND complaint
   ‘Ada complained’
   
   b. Obí chí-ri Ézè íchí
   Obi warn-IND Eze warning
Advise verbs denote the giving of advice by the addresser to the addressee. There are only two examples of these kinds of verbs in our data as shown in (7) below.

7. 
   a. ídụ ọdụ ‘to advise’
   b. itú álọ ‘to confer’

They belong to the class of Bound Cognate Verbs and their mode of communication is only by the use of the voice. These verbs carry declarative force in the utterances they occur. They always take two participants (addresser and addressee) and are always used communicatively. The type of communicated information is usually a piece of advice from the addresser to the addressee. There is no specific manner in which this communication is transmitted. The sentences in (7) below indicate the use of these verbs in the language.

2.5.1 Sentence constructions involving advice verbs

7. 
   a. Áyọgụ du-rụ Obi ọdụ
      Ayogu poke-IND Obi advice
      ‘Ayogu advised Obi’
   b. Áyọgụ tọ-rụ Obi álọ
      Ayogu contribute-IND Obi confer
      ‘Ayogu conferred with Obi’
The verbs of the manner of speaking encode in them specific manners of transferring of ideas or messages from the addresser to the addressee.

8.  
   a. ítámũ ñtámũ ‘to mutter’  
   b. íbá mìbá ‘to scold’  
   c. ísú nsú ‘to stammer’  
   d. ítú ìlá ‘to speak in proverbs’  
   e. ikú akúkú ‘to make snide remarks’

These verbs belong to the class of inherent complement verbs and the mode of communication is by voice only. Each of the verbs in (8) above encodes a specific manner of the communication of information. In (9a) below, the information is whispered but it is used non-communicatively. In (9b) there is an exchange of information between the addresser and addressee hence the verb is used communicatively. The verb in (9c) depicts a manner of shouting in anger. The verb is always used communicatively because the shouting and anger is directed to the addressee. For (9) the specific manner of speaking is a stuttering of speech. The verb can be used communicatively (9d) and non-communicatively (9e). The verb in example (9f) is used in a manner depicting performance in the language. The Igbo people speak a lot in proverbs and those who can are adept in the use of proverbs are highly respected. The verb in (9f) is always used communicatively. The verb *ikú akúkú* ‘to make snide remarks’ in (9g) is always used in a mocking manner to the addressee. This addressee is usually understood by the hearer of the utterance.

2.6.1 sentence constructions involving the verbs of the manner of speaking

9.  
   a. Obí támú-rú ñtámũ  
      Obí mutter-IND muttering  
      ‘Obi muttered (emphatic)’

   b. Obí támú-u-rú Ézê ñtámũ  
      Obi mutter-BEN-IND Eze muttering  
      ‘Obi muttered to Eze’

   c. Obí bâ-râ Ézê mìbá  
      Obi scold-IND Eze scolding  
      ‘Obi scolded Eze’

   d. Obí sù-rù mì nsú  
      Obi speak-IND 1SG stammering
‘Obi stammered to me’

e. Obí sụ-rụ  nsụ  
   Obi speak-IND stammering  
   ‘Obi stammered’

f. Obí tù-rụ  ílụ  
   Obi throw-IND proverb  
   ‘Obi said a proverb’

g.  A’dá nà-à-kú ṣàkụkụ  
   Ada PROG-AGR-hit snide remarks  
   ‘Ada is making snide remarks’

2.7 Swear verbs

Swear verbs encode situations where the participants in an event swear to an oath that is binding on them or meant to harm the addressee. There are few swear verbs in the language and we have identified three of them in example (10) below.

10.

a. Ìnú iyì  ‘to take an oath’

b. Ìkpó iyì  ‘to curse someone’

c. Ìgbá ndụ  ‘to bind with an oath’

Swear verbs are inherent complement verbs and their mode of communication is by the use of voice and non-voice. The voice is used to make the pronouncement of an oath, and, the non-voice mode occurs when the addressee drinks a magical concoction to bind him to the pronouncement. The illocutionary force is usually imperative. The verb is always used communicatively as there is an exchange of information in the usage of the verb. The specific manner of transmission of this information is grave and the type of communicated information is a solemn pronouncement by the addressee. The number of participants the verb takes varies. In (11a and c) the verbs take only one participant in the clause while in (11b) there are two participants.

2.7.1 Sentence constructions of swear verbs

11.

a. Obí ūù-rù  iyì
Obi drink-IND oath
‘Obi swore to an oath’

b. Ọ kpọ-rọ ṁ̀ ọ̀̀ ì̀ ẹ̀
3SG call-IND 1SG oath
‘S/he cursed me’

c. Há gbà-rà ńdù
3PL V-IND life
‘They bound their lives with an oath’

Figure 1 below illustrates a summary of this attempt to characterize the sub-class of Igbo verbs of communication.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verbs class</th>
<th>Mode of communication</th>
<th>Illocutionary force</th>
<th>Class of verbs</th>
<th>Specific manner of the transmission of information</th>
<th>Used communicatively or not</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transfer of message</td>
<td>Voice and non-voice</td>
<td>Imperative</td>
<td>ICV</td>
<td>varied</td>
<td>Used both communicatively and non-communicatively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication of propositional attitude</td>
<td>Voice only</td>
<td>declarative</td>
<td>BCV</td>
<td>varied</td>
<td>Used only communicatively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social interaction</td>
<td>Voice only</td>
<td>Declarative</td>
<td>ICV</td>
<td>cheerful</td>
<td>Used only communicatively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complain verbs</td>
<td>Voice only</td>
<td>Varied</td>
<td>BCV</td>
<td>anger</td>
<td>Used only communicatively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advice verbs</td>
<td>Voice only</td>
<td>Declarative</td>
<td>BCV</td>
<td>solemn</td>
<td>Used only communicatively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manner of speaking</td>
<td>Voice and non-voice</td>
<td>Declarative</td>
<td>BCV</td>
<td>varied</td>
<td>Used both communicatively and non-communicatively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swear verbs</td>
<td>Voice and non-voice</td>
<td>Imperative</td>
<td>ICV</td>
<td>Grave</td>
<td>Used both communicatively and non-communicatively</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1

3.0. Verbs of communication in the vocabulary of Igbo as a whole

In this paper the verbs of communication in Igbo have been considered from the viewpoint of their classification into the major class of verbs as described in the works of Nwachukwu, (1984) and Emenanjo, (2005). We notice that Igbo verbs of communication fall into the two classes of Inherent Complement verbs and Bound Complement Verbs (cf
The verbs can further be classified into two classes of verbs: the verbs that are used only communicatively and the ones that can be used both communicatively and non-communicatively. Therefore, the verbs that are used only communicatively are Igbo verbs of communication par excellence. These include the verbs of communication of propositional attitudes, social interaction, complain verbs, and advise verbs. (cf Fig.1). The verbs of the transfer of a message and manner of speaking can be said to include other forms of applicability in the vocabulary of Igbo.

In terms of the mode of transmission of information the verbs fall into the class of the use of voice only and the use of both voice and non-voice.

A further classification of these verbs in relation to Igbo vocabulary is based on the illocutionary force. In this regard, they fall into two major classes; imperative and declarative. Igbo interrogative clauses require movement rules that are beyond the scope of this work.

In conclusion, the semantic characteristics of the verbs treated in this paper illustrate their applicability as operational verbs of communication and their relationship to the vocabulary of Igbo as a whole.

References


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