

IGBO VERB CLASSES AND THEIR LEXICOGRAPHIC RELEVANCE

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Abstract

This paper advocates a change in the grammatical category labels used for classifying verbs in Igbo dictionaries. The need for this change is compared with the change that has taken place in the characterisation of Igbo dictionary users in some dictionaries of the language, whereby the initial focus on an external audience has finally shifted to an internal, well-delineated audience. A similar change in the grammatical category labels in Igbo dictionaries should also involve a shift away from 'external labels' that have arisen from the description of other languages to grammatical category labels arising from the description of the Igbo language. One of such labels is the transitive/intransitive classification of Igbo verbs. With the example of the SOS verbs, the paper advocates the elimination of some of the grammatical categories in the dictionaries and the adoption of other categories that have been established for the language.

1. Introduction

A dictionary article provides linguistic and extra linguistic information about the headword. This fact could sometimes occlude some aspects of the features of a language like Igbo, whose lexicography is emerging under the influence of the English lexicographic tradition.

The information categories to a verb in most Igbo dictionaries can easily be divided into the well-established formal and semantic comments on a Lemma, but their semantic comments, especially on the grammatical semantics of the verb, could raise confusing issues for the user. Take for example, the *transitive/intransitive* distinction in the three different dictionaries of the language by native speakers. This distinction was introduced into Igbo lexicography by Igwe (1999), followed by Eke (2001) and Emenakọ (2005).

With the gap of five years between Igwe and Emenako, one can already begin to speak of an emerging tradition of the tr./intr. distinction of Igbo verbs in Igbo dictionaries, although none of the lexicographic works ventured to explain the meaning of the distinction or justify its usage. The excerpts from the three dictionaries in this regard are reproduced and discussed below:

(1) Igwe (1999, p. 190)

gba 1. v.t./intr. eject forcibly; shoot; spout out; spray; sprinkle; spit; burst; explode; jet; kick; slap vigorously (inf. simple **ìgbā**; ger. inf. **ìgbùgba**)
ìgbā aka to hit with the hand
ìgbā aka n'anya to slap vigorously in the face
ìgbā akụ to shoot an arrow; to shoot with an arrow

(2) Eke (2001, p. 362)

Sink/vi, vt = mie. *Go down in water or liquid.*

In the above examples Igwe's lemma **gba 1** is the first headword of a sub-group of the entries headed by the verb root **gba** (which has up to **gba 10**). It is not clear whether the v.t./intr. refers to the English equivalents or to the Igbo lemmata and their sublemmata. The category could be applied either to the author's list of English equivalents to **gba 1** that have a mixture of transitive and intransitive meanings, or also to the Igbo lemmata and their sublemmata whose English equivalents also have a mixture of apparently transitive and intransitive senses. Eke's dictionary is not better, neither is Emenako's explanation:

(3) Emenako (2005, p. ix)

"The infinitive verb, transitive or intransitive, is formed by prefixing the letter **ì** or **i**, according to the nature of the verb root."

The above words from the dictionary's introduction takes it for granted that the language has a binary tr./intr. division of verbs. Emenako's dictionary entries are not much different from Igwe's:

(4) Emenako (2005, p. 168)

ima (i-ma) v. *inf. tr.* (with n. comp. **akwa** or **nja**, wrapper, cloth) to wear, put on cloth by wrapping it round the waist.

These dictionaries seem to be signalling a growing trend in the use of the tr./intr. categories in Igbo lexicography, but without any form of explanation to justify the use of the categories.

This work goes into this issue as follows. The next section goes generally into the issue of the relation between information categories in dictionaries and linguistic theorization or categorization in general. Section 3 goes more specifically into Igbo lexicography, looks at some Igbo dictionaries, and examines the extent to which specific linguistic categories and the theorizing connected with them have contributed to the type of information categories available in Igbo dictionaries. Section 4 concludes the paper.

2. Information Categories in Dictionaries and Linguistic Theory

Linguistic information categories in dictionaries subsume a great deal of linguistic issues many of which to the non-linguist might seem already well defined. In fact, these categories are generally taken as established linguistic phenomena. That could perhaps explain the easy adoption of the tr./intr. distinction in Igbo lexicography.

Starting with Urdang (1963) who spoke more for a linguistic theory that should be interpretable within the practical problems/issues addressed in dictionary making, others have in one way or the other also made similar comments on the relationship between linguistic theory and lexicography (Gouws and Prinsloo 2005 cited in Chabata 2009, p. 3). Chabata's conclusion for example, is that every aspect of a dictionary stands to benefit from research in theoretical linguistics. This remains a fact, so long as the particular linguistic concept that should form an information category in a dictionary is already so well worked out that it might not confuse the dictionary user.

In their discussion of the relationship between linguistic theory and practical lexicography, Sue and Rundell (2008, p. 130) argue that the awareness of linguistic theory can help lexicographers work more effectively and also with greater confidence. Along this line, one of the areas they identified that should help sensitize lexicographers to their work is the concept of 'lexicographic relevance' which they divided into: inherent properties of words, contextual features of words, properties of the source text, and summary.

Of major interest to our effort here is the 'inherent properties of words' which the authors identified as: the word class, the word form (morphological and phonological),

grammatical behaviour, and semantics. Generally, majority of dictionaries provide phonological information about spelling, pronunciation, prosodic features of consonants and vowels, or even adopt a phonemic spelling system. Some dictionaries also provide information about syllable structure, primary or secondary stress or tone in tone languages, among other categories. With regard to the inclusion of grammatical information, Jackson (1985, p. 50) argues that "grammar and dictionary are parts of the overall description of a language". Al-Kasimi (1977, p. 50) gives more 'grammatical concession' to the dictionary in his explanation that "a dictionary should provide the learner with the grammar he needs without referring him to a grammar handbook". In support of the importance of grammatical information in the dictionary, Jackson and Ze Amvela (2007) also explain that the dictionary provides grammatical description and includes information about individual lexemes as against the general lexical description found in grammar books. In addition, there is also the general view that grammatical information included in any dictionary is determined, to a large extent, by the type and purpose of the dictionary proposed (Al-Kasimi, 1997; Singh, 1982; Jackson, 1988; Svenson, 1993; Landau 2001; and Jackson, 2002).

The above declarations do not negate the fact that "dictionary compilers consciously or unconsciously depend on previous linguistic studies" (Chabata, 2009). Hence, it is not always the case that the dictionary compiler consciously decides on the particular information categories he/she includes in the dictionary, but may well be under the influence of the prevailing 'linguistic atmosphere'. Igbo dictionary writers seem also to have been working under the influence of a prevailing linguistic atmosphere: the linguistic atmosphere of the English language. The paper argues for a shift away from this influence, especially in the use of grammatical category labels in Igbo dictionaries. The next section uses the example of the shift in focus that has taken place in the area of user characterization in Igbo dictionaries to argue for a similar shift in the use of grammatical category labels in Igbo dictionaries.

3. The Shift in Characterizing Igbo Dictionary Users

It is a given in modern lexicography that every dictionary is compiled with a particular kind of user in mind. Al-Kasimi (1977, p. 19) notes that lexicographers generally agree that: "dictionaries should be designed with a special set of users in mind and for their specific

needs. E.g., an English-Arabic dictionary for American users for help in speaking Arabic ..." Busane (1990, p. 19) also rightly observes that: "the purpose and intended users of a dictionary should indeed be the guiding principles in handling materials in lexicography". Within the context of Igbo lexicography, however, a fluctuation in the nature of the target audience has been identified. According to Uchechukwu (2011) there was a shift from an initial, external, European audience/user to an internal, native speaker audience

First, the pragmatic nature of the dictionary makes it imperative for a lexicographer to design a dictionary with the specific needs of their intended users. This is usually evident in the prefaces or introductions to the dictionaries. The early dictionaries of most African languages adopted this age-old practice. But the dictionaries were written by Europeans, and were meant for an European audience. This approach/practice in early African lexicography has been designated *Foreign Culture Lexicography* by Ayivi, who also explains it as follows:

Ein Lexikon, das den Anspruch erhebt, seinem Benutzer eine fremde Kulturbzw. eine ihm bislang unbekannte Welt in ihrer Ganzheit zu erschließen. Diese Ganzheit umfaßt die Einführung in die Fremdsprache sowie in die Disziplinen der Religion, Philosophie, Anthropologie, Ethnologie, Botanik, Zoologie usw. (Ayivi, 2000, p. 16)

[A dictionary that makes claims to opening up to its user the entirety of a foreign culture i.e. the entirety of a world that is hitherto unknown to him. This entirety includes the introduction to the foreign language as well as the disciplines of religion, philosophy, anthropology, ethnology, botany, zoology, etc. (Translation)]

In contrast to the *Foreign Culture Lexicography*, Uchechukwu (2011) proposes the *Native Culture Lexicography* which has its roots in the effort of the native speakers to emphasize their culture and also correct the wrong presentation of their culture by the Europeans. Nevertheless, the audience of the native culture lexicography remained the same European audience. This focus on an outside, European audience, led to early Igbo dictionaries (meanwhile not written by native speakers) being bilingual. Towards the end of the last century, the first, most comprehensive Igbo dictionary from a native speaker, Igwe (1999), made efforts to overcome this divide in the audience by explicitly advocating the usefulness of his dictionary to both native and non-native speakers. As he claims in his preface, the dictionary "will meet the need of many Igbo and non-Igbo who are interested in the Igbo

language". Igwe's achievement in this 'advocacy' lies in his exact delineation of the different user groups within the Nigerian context: primary school, secondary school, higher institutions, teachers and lecturers.

This shift to more easily identifiable users did not lead to a shift in the choice of linguistic information categories in Igwe's dictionary. Instead, Igwe (1999) applied in his dictionary the grammatical categories from English lexicography. The shift in Igwe's dictionary could therefore be described as incomplete. The next section examines some of the linguistic category labels in Igbo dictionaries.

3.1 Linguistic Labels in Igbo Dictionaries

Our focus in this section is to explore the linguistic labels that are lexicographically relevant, that is labels that can be added to verbal headwords as information categories. We examine especially what linguistic categories of the verbs could be relevant for Igbo dictionaries.

Igbo verbs have been classified using several parameters. The criteria include syntactic, morphological, semantic and tonal. Several verb types have been identified by different authors: transitive, intransitive, inherent complement verbs, stative/dynamic, ergative, auxiliary or compound verbs amongst others. Most conventional dictionaries - French, English, German, and Swahili label verbs based on the transitive/intransitive distinctions. In Igbo lexicography in general, no explicit/transparent method has been worked out for the classification of Igbo verbs. Early English-Igbo dictionaries (Thomas, 1914; Dennis, 1926; Ogbalu, 1962; Welmers & Welmers, 1968) and later works (Williamson, 1972; Nnaji, 1985) do not include linguistic category labels. The headwords are not labelled as nouns, verbs or adjectives; besides, no sub-classifications are given. Echeruo (1998) also has very scanty grammatical information. Lexical entries in his dictionary contain information about lexical categories or parts of speech-(v) for verb, (n) for noun, with no further classification.

Although Williamson (1972) has a comprehensive grammar of the language in the front matter, the author does not give any label to the headwords in general, neither are the verbs sub-categorized as transitive or intransitive. Williamson's outstanding contribution is in the inclusion and description of morphological information in the dictionary grammar and in the dictionary itself. For example, although the author does not label and

consequently classify the words as noun, verb etc., she enters and describes a great deal of word derivatives and extensional suffixes of the language.

Finally, the above overview is to induce reflection on the state of affairs with regard to linguistic categories in Igbo dictionaries. In the section below, we shall use the example of the tr./intr. distinction and the SOS verbs to discuss and illustrate the issues of relevance of verbs classes in Igbo dictionaries.

3.2 The Transitivity Label

Transitivity in Igbo is a complicated phenomenon and a very controversial issue in Igbo linguistics. The distinction is highly disputed and not generally accepted in Igbo language studies. There are two schools of thought - those who believe that transitivity is relevant in Igbo syntax (Nwachukwu, 1987) and those who do not (Emananjo, 2005). Although transitivity exists in the language it is difficult to divide verbs neatly into transitives and intransitives. This classification, if included in an Igbo dictionary, would yield a lopsided dictionary macrostructure, as many Igbo verbs are simply transitive by the nature of their structure. The presence in Igbo of inherent complement verbs (that is, verbs that obligatorily co-occur with their meaning specifying nominals) also complicates the problem of transitive/intransitive distinction. The behaviour of these verbs in selecting specific nominals has made the *intr./trans* categorization of verbs difficult, because the obligatory nominal complement of the CV root is also considered the object of the verb. Quite a good number of Igbo verbs are of this type. As a result, Nwachukwu (1987) proposed that Igbo verbs be classified as inherent and non-inherent complement verbs, while Emananjo (2005) on the other hand, asserts that Igbo verbs should not be classified based on transitivity, but on their complement types. The discussion on this issue is still alive (Uchechukwu, 2012).

Igwe (1999) initiated the transitive/intransitive classification of verbal headwords. He identifies the lexical category verb, and sub-categorizes it as transitive or intransitive. In what follows, we examine some entries from the dictionary to ascertain the relevance of this classification in an Igbo dictionary. First we take the inventory of the entries for the verbs under the letter 'b', entries for **no**, and the CV root '**-gba**'. Of the 35 entries for verbs under the letter 'b', 21 are classified as transitive and intransitive (tr./intr.) at the same time. Nine are entered exclusively as transitive, and 3 as intransitive. Of the total inventory of 12 '-'

gba' clusters, 8 are transitive and 3 are intransitive. Igwe's information category label of headwords does not indicate which sense of the word is transitive and which is intransitive. An analysis of the entries of '**bi**⁴' (p96), **gba**¹ and **nọ** is used to illustrate this lexicographic problem.

The verb **bi**⁴ is identified as v.t./intr. The entry has several unrelated meanings - **ibi aka** 'to raise arm', **ibido** "to learn", **ibichi uzo** "to block or close way", **ibighe uzo** "to open way", **ibido** "to start or begin". These are different lexemes which need to be treated as separate headwords but are subsumed under the nest for **bi**⁴ without each lexeme being identified either as transitive or intransitive.

The same can be confirmed for the labels for **gba**¹. In the dictionary **gba**¹ is labelled as v. tr./intr. The following verb lexemes are identified and described within the the dictionary article headed by **gba**¹. They are **igba aka** 'to hit hard', **igba aku** "to shoot an arrow", **igba ajuju** "to ask questions", **igba asu** "to spit", **igba miri** "to spray water on", **igba isimvukwum** "to shrug shoulders", **igba egbe** "to shoot a gun", and others. These verbs are separate lexemes. Again we see that the different verbs are not identified as transitive/intransitive. This method does not allow the user to appreciate the transitivity status of any of the verbs. Moreover, what is actually identified and marked as transitive/intransitive is the verb root **gba**. The CV- roots **gba**¹ to **gba**¹² in this dictionary are all marked transitive and/or transitive, but the different verb lexemes are not marked. Other clusters marked include **kpa**, **tu** and **kpo**. The dictionary is filled with such unclear syntactic status of the verbs and this is the major deficiency in the dictionary.

Similarly, entries for **nọ** as v.t./intr are misleading because the verb is one of the three copular verbs of the language (Uchechukwu, 2011). The lexemes are **inọ ala** "to sit down", **inọ ndo** "to be near", **inọ ndu** "to be/stay alive" **inọ nso** "to be near" etc. These entries are separate lexemes and should be given different headword status with their individual grammatical labels. In the extract below (Igwe, 1999, p. 515-516), we give the entries for this verb from the dictionary:

- (5) **nọ** v. t./intr. (a) be, be at, (of animates, persons);
 (b) sit (down); stay; (c) be alive exist
 (d) be present (at)
ịnọ ala to sit; to sit down
ịnọ ndụ to be living or alive
ịnọ ndụ to be, sit or stay near
ịnọ nso to be near or close

It is not clear from this style of entry which headword is transitive and which is not, and so should be avoided in Igbo dictionary compilation. The large number of transitive/intransitive marking on verbs is confusing.

The transitive/intransitive distinction of verbs is made more complicated in Igwe's dictionary by the wrong treatment of the inherent complement verbs (ICV). These verbs co-exist with their meaning specifying nominals. The verb does not exist without its complement. Nwachukwu (1987, p. 40) describes this class of verbs thus:

The citation form of the verb consists of a CV-root followed by a free noun (or in very few cases, a prepositional phrase). The root and its nominal complement form a semantic unit and any dictionary which excludes the complement lacks meaning, the complement is the meaning specifying constituent of the verb.

We find in Igwe's dictionary that a good number of these verbs are entered without their nominal complements. Oweleke (2007, 2008) has described some of the lexicographic problems created by such entries.

The verb+NP/PP structural feature of ICVs in the language blurs the phenomenon of transitivity. This results in most inherent complement verbs being incorrectly marked and treated as transitive, which creates the wrong impression that the nominal complements of the verbs, are the true objects. The nominals are not objects; they are complements of the CV-roots and form a semantic unit with the verb root, but they can also function in specific usages as the only object of the verb. All the verbs entered in the clusters of **-gba**³, **-gba**⁴, **-gba**⁵, **-gba**⁶ are treated as transitive. This is because the author analyses **gba** in isolation as a verb and the verb complement as the direct object. However, this is far from the true situation. In **gba**³ for example, he has the following entries: **igba oso** "run", **igba mgba**

"wrestle/struggle", **igba egwu** "dance", **igba oro** "play hide and seek", and **igba gburugburu** "run round and round". The complements *oso*, *mgba*, *egwu*, *oro*, and *gburugburu* are not objects but the complements of the verb root **gba**.

Similarly, within the clusters **gba**⁴, **gba**⁵ and **gba**⁶ are the following: **igba avu** - "to exude pus", **igba ufufu** "to foam", **igba obara** – "to bleed", **igba miri** "to exude water", **igba akwukwuna** "to practise prostitution" **igba mbọ**, to endeavour, **igba aja** - "to divine", **igba azi** – "to take a meal", **igba mkpe** – to mourn, **igba uka** – to sour etc. The relationship between these CV-roots and their complements is not a transitive relation. The CV-roots and the nominals form a semantic unit. Without these complements the verbs do not exist. In **igba mbọ** and **igba ọsọ**, for example, the CV-root **gba** + **ọsọ** and **gba** + **mbọ** mean "run", and "endeavour" respectively. Transitive verbs take two arguments and also impose certain semantic roles on the nouns such that the subject/object relationship is that of agent/patient or experiencer/theme. Some of the verbs above can take two arguments while others can take one; that is, they can be transitive or/and intransitive. The adoption of this method by other Igbo dictionary writers like Eke (2001) and Emenakao (2005) has already been discussed in the introductory section of the paper above.

Considering the problems discussed here, it is clear that the transitive/intransitive distinction is not a suitable label for marking verbs in Igbo dictionaries. Besides, the inherent and non-inherent features of the Igbo verb blurs transitivity in the language

3.3 S.O.S. Verbs

The choice of the SOS verb in this section is to illustrate how an explicit grammatical behaviour of a linguistic unit justifies its lexicographic relevance as a headword. The discussion here is based on Uchechukwu (2007, 2011). The structures identified by Uwalaka as SOS verbs are formed through the [verb + NP/PP] structure that has been described as Igbo *verbal complex* (Emenanjo 1975) or *inherent complement verb* (Nwachukwu 1987) and comparable to the German *Funktionsverbgefüge* (Uchechukwu, 2006). The best illustrative example of the SOS phenomenon is the sentence pair formed with the verbal complex **-kwà úkwàrà** '(to) cough' [formed through a combination of the verb root **-kwà** 'push' with the noun **úkwàrà** 'cough', which is its *inherent complement*]:

- | | |
|---|---|
| (6)a. Úchè nà - ákwà úkwàrà
Uche AUX - verb cough
Subj.-Experiencer Obj.-Stimulus
[lit. Uche is coughing cough]
'Uche is coughing.' | b. úkwàrà nà - ákwà Úchè
cough AUX - verb Uche
Subj.-Stimulus Obj. Experiencer
[lit. Cough is coughing Uche]
'Uche has a cough.' |
|---|---|

In (6a) *Uche* is the subject-experiencer, while *cough* is the object-stimulus. But in (6b) *Uche* becomes the object-experiencer and *cough* becomes the subject-stimulus. It is this syntactic change of place between the subject and the object that led to the description of such constructions as subject-object-switching (SOS), and to the verbs that can be used for it as subject-object-switching verbs.

On the basis of the *Cognitive Grammar* approach, Uchechukwu (2007) identifies two aspects of the SOS verb which he calls the Agent-Oriented and the Patient Oriented perspectives. For example, in the above sentences, sentence (a) has the Agent-Oriented perspective because the subject is carrying out the action as an agent. In sentence (b) he is the one suffering the action and therefore the patient. Sentences like (b) patient-oriented.

Uchechukwu (2007) argues that such verbs are highly entrenched in the Igbo language, and sees the discussion of the verb by Uwalaka (1985), Nwachukwu (1987) and many others, as a confirmation of its widespread usage among native speakers. Such verbs are therefore highly entrenched in Igbo, but without any form of linguistic label to distinguish them. Hence, without such an explicit indication of its peculiar nature in dictionaries, such verbs would constitute as much a problem for the average user of the dictionary as does the present transitivity/intransitivity label.

4. Summary and Conclusion

The paper examined an aspect of information categories in Igbo dictionaries. First of all, a shift in target audience could be identified, especially in Igwe (1999), from an exclusively European audience to an exclusively internal, Nigerian audience. A similar shift away from using the linguistic category labels of European languages for Igbo headwords did not take place. Hence, the shift in Igwe's dictionary was found incomplete. Finally, through an

examination of the phenomenon of transitivity and the SOS verbs, the inadequacy of the transitivity categorisation could be confirmed. Hence, the need to avoid this category in Igbo dictionaries.

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