

THE PROTOTYPICAL IGBO COPULA VERB

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Abstract

This paper is based on Uchechukwu's (2010) examination of the Igbo copula verbs. The effort here is a presentation of the features of the Igbo copula verb divested of much theoretical discussion. The approach adopted is purely descriptive. Three copula verbs of the language are identified: -bụ and -dí and -nọ. The verbs are characterized on the basis of their functioning in varieties copulative sentences. The result is that the verb-bụ, which functions in more varieties of copulative constructions than the other two, can be classified as the prototypical copula verb of the Igbo language.

1. Introduction

The word 'copula' goes back to the Latin verb *cōpulāre* which means 'to link'. It is in this sense of acting as a link that specific verbs of a language are described as 'copula verbs'. The starting points for characterizing the nature of this linking function are two comprehensive English grammar books and their explanation of the typical copula verb of the English language. The books are Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, and Svartvik, (1985) and Huddleston and Pullum (2002).

Quirk et al. (1985, p. 1171; p. 1174) identify the verb *to be* as the 'principal' copula verb of the English language. This identification is based on the syntactic and semantic features of the verb.

Syntactically, the verb *to be* is described as appearing in a clause, in which it is accompanied by a predicative complement or a predication adjunct. The predicative complement can take the form of adjectival (1) or nominal complements (2):

- | | | |
|-----|------------------------|-------------------------------|
| (1) | Adjectival complement: | The girl is <u>restless</u> . |
| (2) | Nominal complement: | William is <u>my friend</u> . |

In (1) the copula verb (*is*) is followed by an adjective complement *restless*; while in (2) it is complemented by a nominal phrase, *my friend*. The predication adjunct refers to the fact that only *to be* permits adverbials as complements. In (3) below, the complementing adverbial is a space adjunct *at the zoo*, while the complementing adverbial in (4) is a time adjunct, *at nine*.

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|-----|----------------|--------------------------------------|
| (3) | Space adjunct: | The children are <u>at the zoo</u> . |
| (4) | Time adjunct: | The party will be <u>at nine</u> . |

Semantically, *to be* is distinct from other ‘pseudo-copula’ verbs because it is the ‘most neutral in meaning’. This is clearly the case with (1) and (2) above: *to be* is insensitive to the difference in the adjectival complement *restless* as well as to the nominal complement *my friend*. Besides, it adds no additional meaning to both phrases in conformity to its neutrality in the constructions. This can be made more explicit by substituting *to be* in (1) and (2) with the pseudo-copulas *seem*, *feel* and *appear*:

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|-----|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| (5) | a. The girl <i>seems</i> restless. | b. William <i>seems</i> my friend. |
| (6) | a. The girl <i>feels</i> restless. | b* William <i>feels</i> my friend. |
| (7) | a. The girl <i>appears</i> restless. | b* William <i>appears</i> my friend. |

In the constructions (5-7) each verb adds a different meaning to the sentence in which they occur; giving rise to grammatically problematic sentences as in (6b*) and (7b*). These demonstrate semantic restriction in the usage of these pseudo copula verbs, which is not the case with *to be* in (1) and (2).

Huddleston and Pullum (2002, pp. 217-218) also portray the English *to be* as a copula verb with syntactic and semantic characteristics, but differ from Quirk et al by using the term ‘complex-intransitive’ to describe a clause in which the predicative complement is either subjective (8) or subject-oriented (9):

- | | | |
|-----|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| (8) | Ed <i>was</i> quite competent. | [Complex-intransitive: S-P-PC] |
| (9) | Ed <i>seemed</i> quite competent. | [Complex-intransitive: S-P-PC] |

What is common to (8) and (9) is the fact that the verbs *seem* and *to be* function as ‘complex-intransitive’ verbs; that is, subject-oriented and without an object. However, *to be* in (8) has the syntactic quality of being a verbal predicator, carrying only the tense inflection (*was*: third person singular, present indicative). This is in line with the authors’ explanation that *to be* has ‘little semantic content’ and primarily links the subject, in this case *Ed*, with the predicate complement *quite competent*. But the authors also acknowledge that this does not apply in all cases. Sentence (9), for example, is similar to the example *the girl seems restless* (5a), because even though *seem* also belongs to the ‘complex-intransitive’ verbs just like the verb *to be*, it does add a meaning to the sentence. This meaning is made apparent when the sentence is paraphrased as follows: Ed *seemed* quite competent} Ed ‘*appears to be*’ quite

competent. This only confirms the additional semantic content of *seem*: that *seem* and *to be* do not stand in strict paradigmatic relationship as such. Thus, the verb, *seem* unlike *to be* does expresses semantic predication and is not a mere syntactic linker of subject and complement.

In summary, both English grammar books attribute two main characteristics to copula verbs. These are syntactic and semantic in nature. A general agreement seems to exist in the supposition that a copula verb functions as a syntactic link between a subject and its predicate complement. Discrepancies, however, are noticeable with regard to the semantic qualities as explained by the authors. The expression ‘neutral in meaning’ (Quirk et al.) does not fully agree with Huddleston & Pullum’s ‘little semantic content, though not in all cases’. The insight from the English copula verb *to be* and especially its syntactic and semantic properties forms the basis for investigating the copula verbs in Igbo.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 examines treatment of Igbo copula verbs in the literature and selected grammar books and dictionaries. Section 3 examines occurrence of the three verbs in copula constructions. Section 4 is on the prototype theory and the prototypical Igbo copula verb, while section 5 forms the summary and conclusion.

2. Igbo Copula Verbs

Within the last three decades of the last century some verbs of the Igbo language were classified as the copula verbs mainly on the basis of a comparison with the English *to be*. The works involved here can broadly be divided into two broad groups of the grammar books and the dictionaries.

2.1 Igbo Copula Verbs in Grammar Books

To this group belong scholarly essays and grammar books. The main works in this area are: Winston (1973), Welmers (1973), Emenanjo (1978) and Nwachukwu (1983; 1984).

Winston (1973, pp. 151-152) for example, only sub-classified Igbo verbs into six groups without providing any sentence to justify this grouping. Under the sub-class of copula verbs, the author cites the verbs *wụ* or *-bụ* and *-dị* as the copula verbs of Igbo that translate the English *to be*. While *-bụ* translates *to be* ‘of identity’; *-dị* translates *to be* ‘of quality or property’. Nevertheless, *-dị*, *-nọ* and *-bí* are still found in the author’s sub-class of locational verbs.

Welmers (1973) in analyzing stative constructions in Igbo mentions three monosyllabic verbs, /í'bù/, /í'dí/ and /í'nò/. The author explains that the verb *-bù* is used in identification sentences in the sense of 'being identical with' (1):

- (10) *ó bù ónyé ñkúzí.*
 He/she be person teacher
 'He is a teacher.'

The verb *-dí* carries out two functions. First, *-dí* translates the sense of 'being describable in terms of' and occurs only with descriptive nouns. Secondly, *-dí* expresses location for inanimate nouns or all non-human animates (11):

- (11) *ó dí n' ébé áhù.*
 It be PREP place there
 'It is there.' ['It is at that place.']

The third verb, *ínò* expresses location for animates including humans. The noun or phrase indicating the place is introduced by the preposition *nà* 'in, at, on':

- (12) *ó nò ná Kánù*
 He/She be PREP Kano
 'He/She is at Kano.'

Emenanjo (1978, p. 141) classifies the Igbo verbs into active and stative verbs. While the active verbs are generally used for expressing action or activity, the stative verbs express qualities, states as well as existential notions of being. Moreover, stative verbs are used for expressing 'adjectival' notions. Emenanjo's characterisation of stative verbs as expressing qualities, states, existential notions of being as well as 'adjectival' notions agrees with the functions of the verbs *-bù*, *-dí* and *-nò* as explained by Welmers (1973).

Nwachukwu (1983, p. 18-42) clearly mentions the verbs *-wù* /-*bù*, *-dí* and *-nò* as the copulas in the Igbo language that translate the English *to be*. He also gives the definition of

¹ Realized in standard Igbo as *í'bù*, *í'dí*, and *ínò* and their corresponding citation forms are *-bù*, *-dí* and *-nò* respectively

the term as “a type of relator or relational verb providing a link between the subject of a sentence and its complement”. The author’s examples are reproduced below:

- (13) ó bú /wú Okeké.
It be Okeke
‘It is Okeke’.
- (14) Ógù nò n’ ùlò.
Ogu be PREP house
‘Ogu is at home’.
- (15) Égo dī n’ akpa m.
Money be PREP pocket mine
‘There is some money in my pocket’.

Although Nwachukwu (1984) does not explain the function of -wú /-bú in the above examples, its function is clearly identificational, while -nò (14) depicts location of animate subjects, and -dī in (15) the location of inanimate subjects. Finally, the author also explains the copula -bú as occurring in present stative constructions (Nwachukwu, 1984, pp. 81-101)

The table below is a summary of the comments or conclusions of the examined authors on each of the Igbo verbs that function as the copulas of the language.

Author	Conclusions on the Igbo copula verbs
(1) Welmers, Wm. E. (1973)	-bú : identification -dī: description; location (inanimates) -nò: location (animates)
(2) Winston, F.D.D (1973: 151-152)	-wú /-bú: } copula verbs - dī: } -wú /- bú : identification -dī: quality/property -nò: location (animate) -dī: location (inanimate) -dī: existential verb
(3) Nwachukwu (1983: 18-42; 1984: 84-101)	-wú /-bú: } -dī } copula verbs -nò } -dī: location (inanimate) -nò: location (animate)

Table 1: Summary of the Conclusions on the Igbo Copula Verbs

Finally, the review of the literature on the Igbo copula verbs reveals that unlike the analysis of the English copula, *to be*, the identified Igbo copulas were not examined for their syntactic and semantic characteristics; probably because the verbs were only sub-issues and not the focus of the authors. Although the sentences from the few works (cited above) are too few for a thorough analysis of the syntactic and semantic qualities of verbs *-bū*, *-dí* and *-nọ*, they nevertheless form a good starting point for going into the subject. Another good starting point is the information on these verbs in the extant Igbo dictionaries. This is the subject of the next section.

2.2 Igbo Copula Verbs in Dictionaries

According to Atkins and Rundell (2008, pp. 44-45), dictionaries describe the vocabulary of a language because it tells its readers the ways in which that word typically contributes to the meaning of an utterance, the ways in which it combines with other words and the types of text that it occurs in. In line with this explanation, the dictionary entries for the verbs *-bū*, *-dí* and *-nọ* should provide objective evidence of how they combine with other words. The dictionaries examined in the light of this conclusion are Williamson's (1972) *Igbo English Dictionary*, Echeruo's (1998) *Igbo-English Dictionary*, Igwe's (1999) *Igbo-English Dictionary* and Emenakọ's (2005) *Nkọwaokwu Igbo n'okwu bekee* [Igbo-English Dictionary].

The verb *-bū* is realised in Williamson's (1972) *Igbo English Dictionary* as the English verb, *be*. In its function, *-bū* is explained as used in identifying two noun phrases with each other as in (16) below:

- (16) A *bū* *m* *onye* *isī*.
 PREF be me person head.
 'I am the leader.'

Echeruo (1998) simply cites *bū* [*-bū*] as a verb with a high tone and gives the dialectal variant *wū* [*wū*]. No sentence examples are provided. Igwe (1999) categorizes the verb cited as both transitive and intransitive, in addition to indicating that it also carries out the function of

identifying; however, the dialectal variation (*wū* 1²) is given the unexplained category of ‘substantive’ as well as ‘copulative’. But it is not clear what the author means by ‘substantive’ and ‘copulative’, because the term is neither explained in the dictionary grammar nor is the dictionary helpful with the categorisation of the verb as both transitive and intransitive. In addition, (*wū*1) is also given the meaning ‘to be equivalent to’. (2005) only cites the verb *-bū* with the indication (sing. & plur). Similar to Echeruo (1998) above, no sentence examples are given.

In the entries for *-dī*, all the dictionaries seem to agree on its translating the English *to be*, but with differing supplementary meanings. Williamson (1972) gives it the meaning of *be* in the sense of ‘to be in a state of’ as well as ‘have a certain quality’, while Echeruo (1998) gives it the two meanings of ‘exist’ and ‘continue to exist’. Igwe (1999), on the other hand, identifies two forms: *dī* 1 as a verb and *dī* 2 as a particle. The relevant entry for this examination is the former: the verb *dī* 1. The entry for the verb *-dī* 1 has seven sub-senses. In the first sub-sense, *-dī* (i), the verb is cited as an intransitive verb. Though it translates English *be*, *-dī* (i) translates English *be* in the sense of ‘location’ ‘be in’; ‘be on’; ‘be at’:

- (17) *idī n’ qrū.*
 be PREP work
 ‘To be at work.’

The rest of Igwe’s sub-senses are summarized as follows. (a) ‘belong’, ‘be part of’, ‘be included in’, (b) ‘to exist’ and ‘to be alive’, (c) ‘hold or contain something’, (d) ‘possessing a quality or state’ and occurs with adjectives or abstract nouns as subject and locative phrase complements (which could be expressed or unexpressed), (e) ‘cause’; ‘bring about’, and (f) ‘be dependent on’; ‘be responsible (for)’. Finally, Emenakọ (2005) simply cites *-dī* as the verb *to be*. No examples or explanations are given.

The verb *-nò* can also be confirmed in the dictionaries. In Williamson (1972) it is equivalent to the English *be* in the sense of ‘be in a place’ for animates as well as ‘stay’, ‘dwell’, ‘be at home’ and ‘sit’. There are no examples. In Echeruo’s (1998), the verb *-nò* is entered as *nöö*. The author simply cites its English equivalent as *be*. Igwe (1999) marks the

² Similar to Echeruo (1998), its dialectal variation is also given as (*wū* 1)

verb as a ‘transitive’ and ‘intransitive’ and with the following four sub-senses (a) ‘be’, ‘be at’ of animates and persons; (b) ‘sit down or stay’ as in

(10) *inò àlà*

‘to sit, to sit down.’

Sub-sense (c) ‘be alive, or ‘be living’, ‘exist’, and sub-sense (d) ‘be present’. However, no sentence examples are given for any of them. Finally, Emenakò’s (2005) simply categorizes the verb as an infinitive intransitive verb. Unlike the entries in Williamson (1972) and Igwe (1999), the verb *-nò* is explained by Emenakò as being used exclusively for human beings and not for animate creatures as a whole. It also denotes ‘to stay’, ‘to be alive’, ‘to be present’, and as an infinitive it connotes ‘to occur’ and ‘to be extant’. No examples are provided to augment these meanings.

In conclusion, all four dictionaries are unanimous in their interpretations of the three verbs *-bú*, *-dí* and *-nò* as translating English *be*. Nevertheless, differing perspectives are evident in their explanations on the additional functions of all three verbs as summarized in the table below:

Verb	Williamson (1972)	Echeruo (1998)	Igwe (1999)	Emenako (2005)
<i>-bú</i>	identifies two nouns with each other	high tone verb; variety –<i>wú</i>	- trans./intr. - identifying - be equivalent to	singular/plural
<i>-dí</i>	- be in a state of - have a certain quality	- exist - continue to exist	- trans./intr. - be in a location - belong, be part of - exist, be alive - hold or contain something - possessing a quality or state - occurs with abstract nouns/locative phrase complements - cause, bring about - dependent on, responsible for	to be
<i>-nò</i>	- be in a place (for animates) - stay, dwell - be at home - sit	be	- trans./intr. - be, be at (of animates) - sit down or stay - be alive, be living, exist - be present	- infinitive intransitive verb - used exclusively for human beings - stay, be alive - be present - to occur/be extant

Table 2: Summary of the Dictionary Entries for *-bú*, *-dí* and *-nò*

Finally, it can be observed that none of the lexicographic works categorically explains the nature of all three verbs or refer to them as ‘copula verbs’. Neither did they venture into their syntactic and semantic features. The shortcomings in the lexicographic works can be

seen in the sense of what Atkins and Rundell term the limitations of subjective evidence (2008: 445). Therefore, corporal evidence is required to arrive at a broader characterization of these Igbo copula verbs. This necessitated the initial use of the corpus software Ellogon the electronic text of the Igbo novel *Ádí ìgbò nà òménàlà há* (2004) in Uchechukwu (2010). The results were later reconfirmed in the present study through the use of another corpus software, AntConc, but with the aim of establishing which one of the three could be described as the prototypical Igbo copula verbs. The corpus results, adapted from Uchechukwu (2010), are given below.

3. The Concordance Results for -bù, -dí and -nò

For the discussion of the copulative functions of the three verbs that could be established in the concordance results, the following concepts shall be used: copulative sentences of characterization (or simply *characterization sentences*), copulative sentences of identification (or simply *identification sentences*) and specificationally identifying (i.e. *specificational sentences*). According to Fernández (1999), the *copulative sentence of characterization* are sentences where the copula verb occurs with all those expressions that attribute to the subject any kind of characteristic or quality that allows for its individuation in discourse. On the other hand, the *copulative sentences of identification* are those sentences where the copula occurs with distinct categories of constituents that can be associated with identification. Finally, the *specificational sentences* are structured in such a way that the referent is in the post-copula position and the entity to which the description is extended is in the pre-copula position; that is why this type is called *inverted identifying*. The three verbs -bù, -dí and -nò shall be presented in the light of these clarifications.

The corpus results of the copulative functions of -bù, -dí and -nò show that the verb -bù occurs in copulative sentences of *characterisation* and *identification* with sub-groups, while -dí occurs in sentences of identification alone, and -nò in mainly *specificational sentences*. The examples below illustrate these differences.

(19) a. Charaterization

Gínì **bù** ójĩ?
 What be kolanut?
 ‘What is kolanut?’

b. Identificational (Descriptive Identifying)

N'ébé ùfódú ojí **bù** íhé m̀bú nwókē ná-ágá òkwú nwáànyí ...
 PREP place some kolanut be thing first man AUX go word woman...
 'In some places, kolanut is the first thing that a man courting a woman...'

c. Identificational (Inferential)

... ndí à é dèrè **bù** ndí é nwèrè íké ídē.
 ...these one written be things one has power to write.
 '...those (things) written are those that one was able to write'.

d. Identificational (Definitional)

... ójī **bù** m̀kpúrụ péré m̀pé...
 ...kolanut be seedling small small...
 '...kolanut is a small fruit...'

e. Specificational (Anticipatory)

... ó **bù** ónyé Árō nǒ n'ògbákò áhù gà-àgò yā.
 ...it be person Aro sit PREP gathering DET AUX- consecrate it.
 '...it is the Aro person in that gathering that shall consecrate it.'

f. Simple Specificational

Íhé ányí nà-àrịó **bù** ógólógó ñdù...
 Thing we AUX ask for be long life...
 'What we ask for is long life...'

The verb *-dí* occurs in only one type of copulative construction which could either be characterising or descriptive in nature as exemplified in (12a and b) respectively:

(20) **a. Characterization**

... Ójī bù íhé ndí òkènyè, b́rúkwá íhé **dī** nsó nà....
 ...kolanut be thing PL elders is also thing be sacred and...
 '...kolanut is something for the elders and is also something sacred...'

b. Description

... ébé **dī** íchè íchè n'àlá Ìgbò...
 ... place be different different PREP-land Igbo...
 Lit: [... places are different in Igboland...]
 '...different places in Igboland...'

The third verb, *-nò* occurs in only one kind of copulative sentence: *specificational* (21)

Specificational

Ìkè à gòsìrì nà òjònkíjò **nò** òdì kà ụkà òdápùtá.

One DET show that Ojonkijo be be like church sudden/unexpected.

‘This shows that Ojonkijo is like an unexpected Church Service’.

This comparison of the copulative functions of *-bú*, *-dị* and *-nò* show clearly that *-bú* carries out predominantly more copulative functions than *-dị* and *-nò*.

Finally, the concordance results present data evidence that *-bú* has predominantly more copulative functions than *-dị* and *-nò*. The corpus results are summarized in the figures below and further discussed in the following section below.

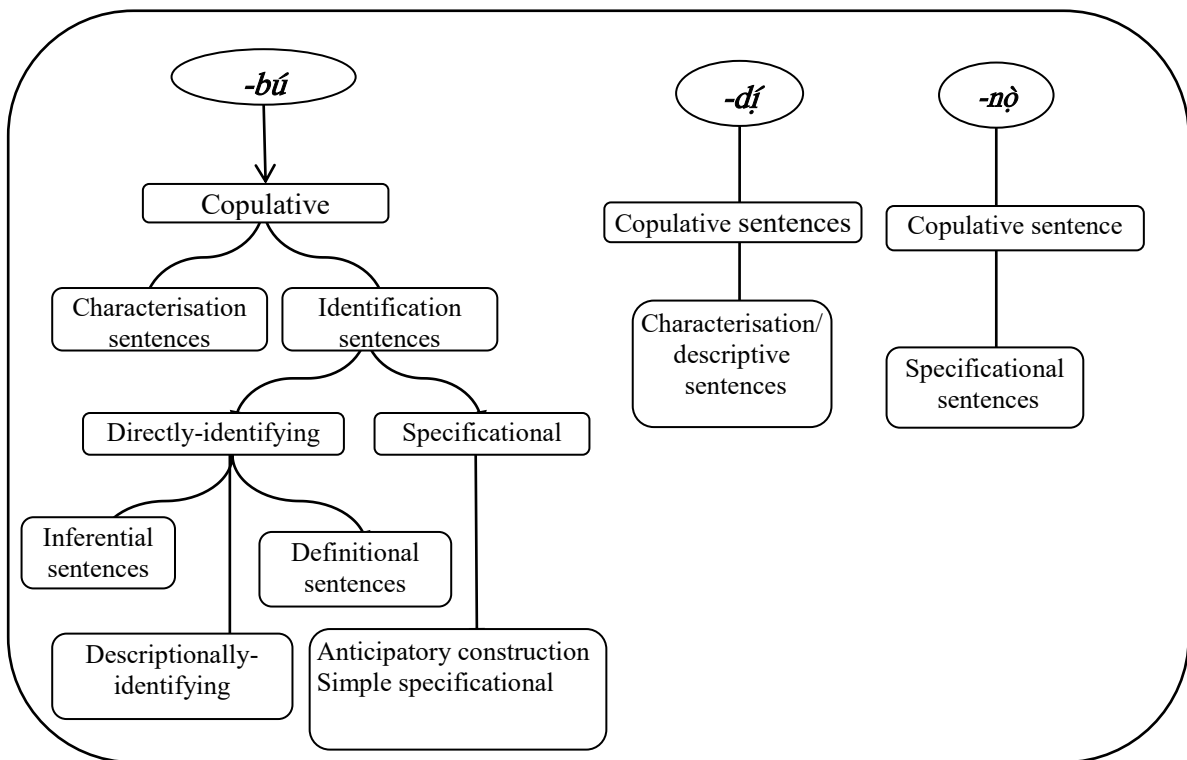


Figure 1: Concordance Results *-bú*, *-dị* and *-nò*

As observed in section 2 above, Quirk et al (1985) refer to the English verb *to be* as the ‘principal’ and ‘most central’ copula. These expressions ‘principal’, ‘most central’ point to the effort to delineate the characteristics of the typical copula in the English language. However, this can also be seen as a form of prototype categorisation approach based on the

qualities or features a verb should possess as the ‘principal’ or ‘most central’ copula. This method is used to compare the findings of the corpus results for the Igbo verbs through the application of prototype theory and its specific interpretation within linguistics.

4. Prototype Theory

This section first gives a summary overview of the prototype theory in general before going into its specific application within the field of linguistics. Thereafter, it is used to characterise establish and characterise the prototypical copula verb of the Igbo language.

The prototype theory has its origin within the field of psychology in the works of Rosch (1973; 1975a; 1975b; 1978) and later on in Rosch, Mervis, Gray, Johnson & Boyes-Braem (1976) in a series of research projects into how human beings and other organisms deal cognitively with their perceptions of the world outside. Their conclusion is that “One of the most basic functions of all organisms is the cutting up of the environment into classifications by which non-identical stimuli can be treated as equivalent” (Rosch et al, 1976, p. 383).

Rosch eventually laid aside the above interpretations by explaining that prototype effects when defined operationally by experiment, refer to judgments of a degree of prototypicality (Lakoff, 1987, p. 40-43). This can only be the case because the prototypicality of a category is the effects or results of the categorisation process itself. Thus, the human being can only categorise on the basis of what he can perceive and that which is more easily perceived will be of greater significance to the categorisation process (Johnson 2003, p. 12). Rosch also states that to speak of a prototype at all is simply a convenient grammatical fiction and that this remains an unspecified formula until it is made concrete by inclusion in some specific theory of representation (Rosch 1978, p. 40). Hence, the thoughts of Aitchison (2003, p. 69) that the disparate nature of prototypes makes it wiser to speak of prototype effects, rather than straight prototypes.

Lehrer (1990, p. 368) drew attention to the dependence of categorisations based on field of study when she states that the concerns of psychologists involving concepts and categories are not necessarily the same as those of linguists. This paves a middle-way approach to Rosch et al.’s findings to the effect that the interpretation of their experimental research would differ from field to field.

4.1 Prototype Theory in Linguistics

From the linguistic point of view, Cruse (1990, pp. 382-402) explains that prototype theory can be used for categorisation from two different perspectives. The first is to establish the prototypical members of a category or what Taylor (2003, p. 64) refers to as 'prototype-as-exemplar view'. In this approach, the relationship between a category and its members determines the extent of the prototypicality. The second, the prototypical feature or characteristic approach, involves describing a category or concept in terms of its features or characteristics. Taylor (2003, p. 64), calls this the 'prototype-as-subcategory' approach while Geeraerts (2006: 28) chooses the term referential hypothesis.

According to Cruse (1990, p. 383), the latter perspective of the prototype characteristics approach is often adopted by linguists because the attributes of a category can readily be viewed as semantic features of the category that serve as a conventional label for the category. Within this approach there may be no actual member of the category that manifests all the prototypical features of the category (Cruse 1990, p. 382; Taylor 2003). This is the method adopted here for the analysis of the prototypical copula verb of the Igbo language.

4.2 The Prototypical Igbo Copula Verb

Prototype theory was applied to determine the prototypical copula verb in Igbo. With regard to the verb *-dí*, the corpus results show the ambiguity of this verb. The copulative sentences show that *-dí* occurs only in sentences of *characterisation*, while *nò* is solely in copulative sentences of *specification*. The Igbo verb, *-bú* can be said to possess predominantly more characteristics of a copula verb due to its prototypical copula usage in copulative sentences. Hence, while *-dí* and *-nò* are less representative of the copula category due to their occurrence in predominantly non-copulative sentences the verb *-bú* stands out as the 'principal' and 'most central' copula verb in the Igbo language.

5. Summary and Conclusion

This work has strove to identify the prototypical copula verb in Igbo. It examined extant literature and referred to dictionaries on the language to confirm that the verbs in the course of the examination. Furthermore, a corpus software to extract the verbs whose qualities as copula verbs could then be examined on the basis of the facts of the language. The

concordance results indicate a variation in the copulative functions of the three verbs *-bụ́*, *-dí* and *-nọ́*, with *-bụ́* displaying the highest occurrence in copulative sentences in comparison with *-dí* and *-nọ́*. The theoretical framework of prototype theory was used to characterise *-bụ́* as the prototypical copula verb of the language.

Finally, it has also become obvious in the course of this work that there are several aspects of the Igbo copula verbs that still need to be addressed, for example, the feature of $\pm$ animacy involving the verbs *dí* and *-nọ́*. This of course, is for another occasion.

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