

THE CLASS OF DITRANSITIVE VERBS IN IGBO

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to classify the Igbo verbs based on the phenomenon of ditransitivity. More specifically, it aims at characterizing the ditransitive verbs of the language through the use of the concept of 'event schema'. Ditransitivity, a type of transitivity, is a term which describes a verb or clause that takes two objects. These objects refer to the 'recipient' and 'theme'. Cross-linguistically, the prototypical ditransitive verb is 'give'. However, this prototypical ditransitive verb has several sub-classes that reflect various semantic subtleties e.g. donate. Looking at the Igbo verbs, this classification is not as straightforward as can be observed for the English verb mostly due to some morphosyntactic characteristics of the Igbo verb, especially in the preponderance of V+NP verbal complex structure, whereby the NP complement to the verb sometimes obligatorily also function as the object of the verb. Consequently, the paper argues that the notion of ditransitivity can be observed as a scalar feature ranging from the prototypical ditransitive (-nyé 'give') to the inherent complement verbs (ICVs) with the abstract form at the middle.

1.0 Introduction

The issue of 'transitivity' in Igbo has been a subject of debate since Nwachukwu (1983). Emenanjo (1984) argues against the notion of 'transitivity' in Igbo stating that it is not necessary because Igbo verbs require some type of obligatory complement in both the underlying and surface structures. He agrees with Awobuluyi (1972) who claims that transitivity is irrelevant in Yoruba syntax and extends the phenomenon to be similar in Igbo since both languages are members of the same language family. Emenanjo opts for 'complementation' while Nwachukwu (1983, 1984, and 1987) regards transitivity important in Igbo verbal studies. This paper is not aimed at joining issues with the two authors, but it should be noted that the term 'object' can be found in Nwachukwu's and Emenanjo's discussions of General complements (GC). This paper is therefore focused on a type of transitivity (ditransitivity) in Igbo using the concept of event schemas. It argues that the issue of ditransitivity is clearly not a case of binary opposition partly due to the peculiar feature of the Igbo verb that is amply illustrated by the class of verbs known as the 'Inherent complement verbs' (ICVs).

The rest of the paper goes into this issue as follows. Section 2 is on the concept of ‘event schemas’. The notion of ditransitive verbs shall be explained in section 3. Section 4 uses the equivalent of the prototypical ditransitive verb in Igbo -*nyé* ‘give’ to examine the ditransitivity situation in Igbo. Section 5 summarizes and concludes the paper.

2.0 Event Schemas

This section gives an overview of the concept of *Event Schema* stating its origin, types and the particular type that applies to *GIVE* verbs.

The notion of schemas was first introduced by Bartlett (1932) in cognitive psychology. However Fillmore (1977a, 1977b) introduced this concept to linguistic studies by adopting the notion of ‘frames’ which he likened to Bartlett’s ‘schemata’ in his ‘frame semantics’. Fillmore (1977a cited in Goldberg 1995) states that “meanings are relativized to scenes or frames”. This implies that contrary to the belief that meaning has no internal structure, it is typically defined in relation to a particular scene or frame. Following Fillmore, Evans and Green (2006, p. 222) propose that

“a frame is a schematization of experience (a knowledge structure),
which is represented at the conceptual level and held in long term memory.
This frame relates the elements and entities associated with a particular
culturally embedded scene from human experience”.

This means that in order to understand the meaning of words and grammatical constructions, one must access the frame with which these words and constructions are associated. Evans and Green (2006) cite a Fillmorian example with related words like ‘buy’, ‘sell’, ‘pay’, ‘spend’, ‘cost’, etc., and explain that in order to understand these words, we need access to a COMMERCIAL EVENT frame which provides ‘the background and motivation for the categories which these words represent.

Levin (2008) also uses the term ‘event schema’ to refer to a meaning that corresponds to a possible event type. According to (Dirven & Verspoor, 2004), an event frame or schema,

also called a conceptual schema of an event, combines a type of action or state with its most salient participants, which may have different ‘roles’ in the action or state (Dirven & Verspoor, 2004, p 78). Goldberg (1995: p. 27) sees Fillmore’s frames in the same way as Lakoff’s (1987) idealized cognitive models (ICMs).

Evidently, event schemas have long been a subject of much research. However, Dirven and Verspoor (2004) have gone further in outlining and describing the different types of event schemas. He states that events schemas can be indicated by the most prototypical verbs that are used to ask questions about the events taking place (2004, p.78). He lists the different event schema types as follows:

- | | |
|---------------------------|---|
| 1) “Being” schema: | Who or what is some entity (like)? |
| 2) “Happening” schema: | What is happening? |
| 3) “Doing” schema: | What is something doing? What does he or she do? |
| 4) “Experiencing” schema: | What does someone feel, see, etc? |
| 5) “Having” schema: | What does an entity have? |
| 6) “Moving” scheme: | Where is an entity moving? Where does an entity move? |
| 7) “Transferring” schema: | To whom is an entity transferred? |
- (Dirven & Verspoor, 2004, 79)

We shall focus on the ‘transferring’ schema since it applies to the verb GIVE which is cross-linguistically the prototypical ditransitive verb. The ‘transferring’ schema implies two states. There is the initial state where one participant has something and passes it on to another participant; the second state is after the action has taken place and the second participant is in possession of the item that was passed on. Dirven and Verspoor (2004) illustrate these processes as follows:

- (1) a. Janice gave Lynn a birthday cake.
 b. Janice gave a birthday cake to Lynn.
 c. Janice gave the door a coat of paint.
 d. *Janice gave a coat of paint to the door.

In both (1a) and (1b), there is a reflection of the ‘transferring’ schema. However, there is a subtle difference in the meaning of both sentences. In (1a) there is a successful transfer and Lynn becomes the new possessor, but in (1b), no such meaning is implied. Hence, Lynn is the ‘recipient’ in (1a) while she is the ‘goal’ in (1b). (1c) reflects a case of abstract possession while (1d) is ungrammatical because the impression created by the sentence is that of ‘temporality’ whereas the paint permanently becomes a part of the door. In subsequent sections, we shall hinge our discussion of ditransitive verbs on the concept of event schemas; in addition, the terms ‘frame’ and ‘schema’ shall be used interchangeably.

3.0 Ditransitive Verbs

In linguistics, transitivity is a property of verbs that relates to whether a verb can take a direct objects and how many such objects it can take. Ditransitive verbs are a small set of transitive verbs which can take two objects. Givón (2001), using the term ‘bitransitive’ (his own term for ditransitive) verb, defines it as one that codes events in which a deliberate agent (the subject) causes the movement of the patient (direct object) to or from some location (indirect object). He lists examples of such verbs to include ‘put’, ‘send’ and take’. Haspelmath (2005b) defines it as “verbs with two arguments in addition to the subject: a ‘recipient’ or ‘addressee’ argument, and a ‘theme’ argument. His typical ditransitive verbs are: ‘give’, ‘sell’, ‘bring’, ‘tell’. The verb ‘give’ is the most common example of this set of verbs and is used below to show the difference between a transitive clause and ditransitive one.

- (2) a. I ate the apple.
 b. Ada gave Obi an apple.

Example (2a) is a transitive construction because the verb ‘eat’ requires only one object ‘the patient’. However, (2b) is a ditransitive construction because the verb ‘give’ requires two objects: the patient or theme, ‘apple’ and the recipient, ‘Obi’. As earlier stated, verbs are associated with rich frame semantic meanings. It is generally agreed that ‘give’ is the most prototypical ditransitive verb. Langacker (1991) argues that language is structured around

‘conceptual archetypes’ which he defines as “certain recurrent and sharply differentiated aspects of our experience which we use to structure our conceptions.” These archetypes are usually the prototypical values of basic linguistic constructions, since language is a means by which our experience is described. The archetypes are also extended in various ways because of our propensity for interpreting the new or less familiar with what is already a limited inventory of conventional units to the unending, ever-varying parade of situations requiring linguistic expression (Langacker 1991: 294-295 cited in Goldberg 1995). Goldberg (1995) observes that the most central meanings of verbs as well as constructions are usually the prototypical type, from which other senses are derived.

Generally, the following can be confirmed in the literature about the GIVE verb that has been classified as the prototypical ditransitive verb. Kittila (2006), for example, states that if a language has only one such verb, it is always GIVE and that if it only has a few, the class nearly always includes GIVE. He also observes that this class of verbs has prototype patterns with GIVE as its central member. Newman (1996) notes that “the act of giving” can be considered as a basic type of act of considerable functional importance. Borg and Comrie (1984) examine three participant verbs in Maltese and observe that the indirect object of ‘give’ has the highest amount of direct-object properties. Hence, ‘give’ in Maltese is the ‘most ditransitive’ verb by Kittila’s definition.

Kittila (2006) also suggests that GIVE has no semantics of its own but merely lexicalizes the basic three participant events, understood as a relation that involves an agent, a theme and a recipient. Naess (2007) confirms this view by stating that the semantics of GIVE suggest “a transfer event with an actively instigating agent, a transferred patient and an animate recipient.” He also observes that the unusual behavior of GIVE verb in many languages simply stems from its high degree of ditransitivity.

Levin (2008) calls verbs such as ‘give’, ‘send’ and ‘throw’ which can be used to describe events of transfer ‘dative verbs.’ She gives the following examples of give-type verbs in English: (a) ‘give’ - type verbs: give, hand, lend, loan, rent, sell,...., and (b) “verbs of future having”: allocate, allow, bequeath, forward, grand, offer, promise. The author also explains that this class of verbs have ‘give’ as its central member which lexicalizes the event of ‘transfer of

possession', whereas other verbs like 'rent' and 'lend' specify facets of the event in relation to 'duration'. However, Levin (2008) notes that the prototypical ditransitive verb is associated with the meaning of *Caused Possession* which is schematized as: 'x cause y to have z'. An example of a construction with this schema is

(3) Obi gave Ada an apple.

However, the same verb 'give' can be associated with another schema, the 'caused motion schema' that has the following structure 'x cause z to be at y'. The schema is illustrated in example (4) below:

(4) Obi gave an apple to Ada.

The alternation between both meanings and syntactic realizations is known as 'the dative alternation' which is a feature of dative verbs like 'give', 'send' and 'throw'.

We have looked at ditransitive verbs and observed the features associated with them. The verb 'give' is widely accepted to be the most prototypical of this class of verbs. "Give" lexicalizes an event of transfer and is associated with the schema- 'cause y to have z'. We shall use it as a cover term for ditransitive verbs in the treatment of Igbo ditransitive verbs in the next section since 'give' is the most typical and representative of ditransitive verbs.

4.0 The verb '-nyé'

Uchechukwu (2008) builds on Newman (1996) to assert that the Igbo verb *-nyé* is like the 'give' verb in any other language which typically involves an act "whereby a person (the giver) passes with the hands control over an object (things) to another person (the recipient)". He goes further to present the Igbo 'give' configuration into two parts: the literal meaning and its figurative extensions. The distinction between the literal meaning and the figurative meanings can be related to the concept of 'prototypes' and 'extensions' in cognitive linguistics, whereby the literal meaning is the central or basic sense while the figurative meanings are extensions of

the central meaning. However, for the purpose of this study we shall not only focus on the meanings or senses of ‘give’ in Igbo but place emphasis on its morphology. By doing so, we shall observe three groups: the literal, the metaphorical and the inherent complement verbs. The discussions here shall therefore be based on Uchechukwu (2008).

4.1 *The Literal GIVE*

Uchechukwu (2008) observes that the literal meaning of *-nyé* involves the three components of a typical GIVE scenario: a ‘giver’, ‘a thing’ and ‘a recipient’ as shown below:

- (5) *Uchè nyè-rè Àda àkpà m.*
 Uche give- rV (PAST) Ada bag I
 ‘Uche gave Ada my bag.’

- (6) *Obi nyè-rè Àda egō.*
 Obi give-rV (PAST) Ada money
 ‘Obi gave Ada money.’

In the above examples the transferred object is concrete (*àkpà* and *egō* respectively). This is also the same as the prototypical meaning of ‘give’ which has to do with the transfer of a concrete object.

4.2 *The Metaphorical GIVE*

In the metaphorical usage *-nyé*, the notion of transfer is still present. However, the sense in which ‘transfer’ is realized is different from the basic sense of physical transfer of a concrete object”. Here, the way the concept of ‘transfer’ is expressed is abstract. This is shown with the Igbo example (16):

- (7) *Obi nyè-rè Àda ọnū.*
 Obi give rV (PAST) Ada mouth

‘Obi insulted Ada very well.’

In (7) above, *on̄* is an abstract object that is transferred from ‘Obi’ to ‘Ada’ but could be described as ‘mouthful of insults’.

4.3 The Inherent Complement GIVE

An inherent complement verb (ICV) is one whose citation form is obligatorily followed by a meaning specifying noun complement, examples include *-tụ anya* ‘expect’, *-si ike* ‘be difficult’ (c.f. Nwachukwu 1987). Uchechukwu (2008) describes the ICV as the combination of a verb root with a noun or prepositional phrase to form the equivalent of a simple verb in an average European language. He illustrates this statement with the verbs *-gbá ósó* ‘run’, *-gbá égwu* ‘dance’ and *-kpá nkata* ‘converse’. He also observes that in the use of *-nyé* to form such verbs, some figurative senses of the GIVE scenario become apparent. He illustrates this by drawing attention to ICVs that involve the combination of the verb with nouns like *urù* ‘profit, gain’, *ùgwù* ‘respect/honour’, and *ara* ‘madness’ to form the following ICVs: *-nyé urù* ‘yield profit/be profitable’, *-nyé ùgwù* ‘respect of honour someone’, and *-nyé ara* ‘cause madness’.

- (8) a. *Obòdò nyè-rè ha ugwu*
Town give-rV (PAST) they respect/honour
‘The town honoured them’
- b. *Ire nri na-e- nyé urù.*
to sell food Aux-PTCP- give profit
‘Food Selling is profitable.’ (c.f. Uchechukwu 2008).
- c. *Obi nyèrè Ada nsi.*
Obi give-rV(PAST) Ada poison
‘Obi poisoned Ada.’

From the above examples the notion of ditransitivity or ‘transfer’ in its literal sense becomes blurred. This stems from the nature of the ICVs. The complements of the verb *-nyé* in (8a) to (8c) cannot be described as true objects; hence, the sentences can also not be called true

ditransitive constructions. This feature of the description of the Igbo verb as ‘idiomatic’ (Emenanjo, 1984 p.28). This phenomenon differs from the example of *-nyé* in sections 4.1 and 4.2 above where the verb has two object (be it concrete or abstract). The figure below summarises the morphology of *-nyé*:

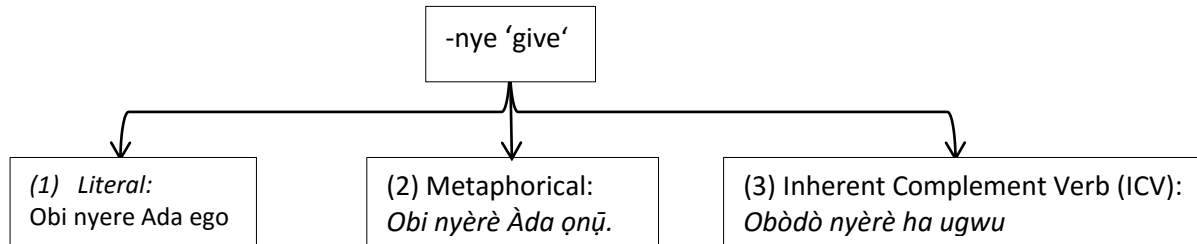


Figure 1: Structures Formed with the Verb *-nyé*

Finally, the discussion of the verb *-nyé* in the sections above point to the fact that ditransitivity is not as straightforward in the Igbo language as it has been established in the literature for the English language. Hence, an analysis of ditransitivity in Igbo can best be treated on a scale with *-nyé* as an example. The implications of such analysis would see the literal sense of *-nyé* as the most basic and ditransitive, hence placing it at one end of the scale (+ditransitive), followed by the Figurative Sense at the centre of the scale, with the ICV appears at the other end of the scale. The ICV is on the opposite end because it has lost all its ditransitive features and can no longer be called a “ditransitive verb.” This is shown in fig.2 below which could be seen as a general scale of ditransitivity in Igbo but is illustrative of the ditransitivity of the verb generally *-nyé* as has been discussed so far in the sections above.

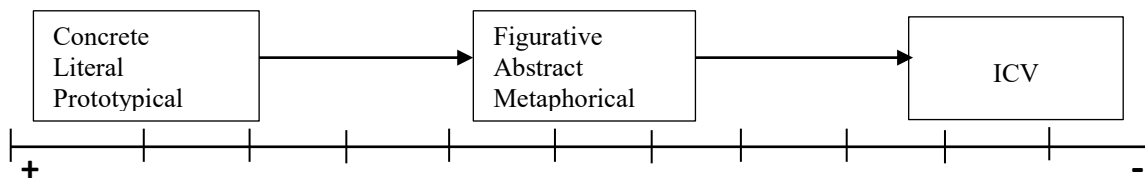


Figure 2. The Scale of Ditransitivity in Igbo

5.0 Summary and Conclusion

The notion of ditransitivity indicates that the verb has two objects: the direct object and the indirect object. Such a verb prototypically also lexicalizes the event of transfer. However the notion of ditransitivity is challenged when morpho-semantic qualities of the prototypical ditransitive verb in Igbo *-nyé* is examined. As an ICV, it loses all its ditransitive features and can no longer function as a ditransitive verb.

Borg and Comrie (1984) show that 'give' is not an unusual ditransitive verb but that ditransitivity itself is unusual. They also observe that many languages have no ditransitive verbs in the strict sense. König and Heine (2010) describe !Xun as a language without ditransitive verbs. Naess (2007) observes that the unusual behavior of the GIVE verb in many languages simply stems from its high degree of ditransitivity. This seems to be the case in Igbo. However, this phenomenon may be partly due to the morphosyntactic nature of the verb in the language. Hence, ditransitivity is seen as a scalar feature with varying degrees. The most ditransitive is usually the basic sense of *nyè* which lexicalizes an event of physical transfer while the sense of abstract transfer is associated with the metaphorical extensions of the meaning of 'give'. However, the ICVs cannot be said to be ditransitive since there is no sense of transfer in this class of verbs. Hence, the ICVs are at the other end of the continuum in absolute contrast to the literal *-nyé* on the other end.

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