

The Syntactic Restrictions of Copula Constructions in the Igbo Language

By

Ezema, Chinenye A.
Humanities Unit
School of General Studies
University of Nigeria, Nsukka

Abstract

The aim of this study is to determine the syntactic restrictions of copula construction in the Igbo language. However, its specific objective is to determine the syntactic restrictions that underlie copula constructions in the Igbo language. This study adopts the descriptive analytical method of data analysis. The data were generated through intuitive reasoning, the researcher being a native speaker of the language. Three genuine copula verbs were identified in this study. They are 'bụ/wụ', 'nọ' and 'dị'. These copula verbs translate the English verb 'be'. The copula verb 'bụ' functions to identify an entity; 'nọ' depicts location of animate subjects with human attribute while 'dị' identifies the qualities of arguments and or location of inanimate subjects and animate subject without human attributes. There are syntactic restrictions that underlie copula constructions in the Igbo language and Igbo copula verbs can be realised or constructed in various environment.

Key Words: Copula, Igbo Language, Copula Construction, Syntactic Restrictions

Introduction

One of the grammatical categories that appears to be language universal is the verb. It is so central in the Igbo language that some scholars have called it a verb centred language. Nwachukwu, 1985, Mbah, 1999, 2011 and 2018 supported the above view. It is so called because while it is possible to form other grammatical categories from the verb, the reverse is not the case. Because of the central role the verb plays in the language, there is no grammatical category that has generated scholarly interest as the verb. Very many studies have been done on the Igbo verb. For further instances and studies, see Green & Igwe, 1963, Nwachukwu, 1983, Mbah 1999, 2018, Uchechukwu, 2015, Ogwudile 2017, Ndiribe.

Green and Igwe (1963) did an early in-depth study that was however descriptive and taxonomic. The work defines the verb, the negative and declarative forms, the auxiliary verb forms, the affixes and the nomino-verbal forms. It further discusses the clausal patterns of Igbo. Okonkwo (1974) also did another work on the Igbo verb. It focuses on the definition of the concept of verb, its parts, the associated tenses and the major construction types involving the verb. It also discusses complements formed from the verb, the cognate objects and verbs of incomplete predication.

Further to this work is Nwachukwu (1983), a collection of papers on the verb. The study discusses the concept of verb, its classification, its derivational morphology, its inflectional patterns and non-finite forms. It goes further to analyse transitivity in relation to the Igbo verb. It investigates the status of the auxiliaries, motion verbs and selectional

restrictions. Mbah (1999) also discusses the verb, its formal property, its complements and projections. He uses modular syntactic paradigm to analyse the verb.

Another study was carried out by Uchechukwu (2011, 2015) who also analysed the verb from the descriptive and cognitive points of view respectively. Ogwudile (2017) is a detailed analysis of the Igbo dynamic verb using analogical mapping as a framework. There are other articles, theses and dissertations, which have discussed the Igbo verb. However, none of them has focused on the copula verb from the point of view of logical semantics.

The word *copula* is a word derived from the Latin word *cōpula, which* means ‘link’ or ‘tie’ two different things. A copula verb is a verb or verb-like word. ‘Copula’ in linguistics is generally used as a word used to link the subject of a sentence with the predicate. The predicate could be a subject complement.

The copula verb is also called the copulative verb. This is often considered a part of the predicate; then, the remaining is called the predicative expression. A copula is a kind of verb in grammar, which connects the subject in a sentence to a modifier or complement and functions as a linking verb. In some other languages, the copula verbs according to Wikipedia may show more resemblances to pronouns, as in Classical Chinese and Guarani, or may take the form of suffixes attached to a noun, as in Beja, Ket, and Inuit languages.

Copula constructions can assume the position of the predicative expression and the subjects are reversed in some

languages. In theoretical analysis, the subject in such sentences is usually divided into a subject noun phrase and a predicate verb phrase. Copula verbs do not function as action words and thus do not have adverbs as modifiers.

Another issue of great concern is the verb agreement. This is when both the subject and the predicative expression are noun phrases. For example, in the English language, the copula normally agrees with the preceding phrase even when it is not logically the subject. The copula may be used to express identity when predicates are formed. The noun phrase, that is, subject and its complement, have the same referent or expression of an identical concept. They also may be used to express their membership of a class or a subset relationship. Equally, they may be used to express or show some properties, relations or positions, permanent or temporary.

In the English language, the copula verb is “to be”. While the term copula is generally used to refer to such principal forms, it may also be used to refer to some other verbs with similar functions, like ‘become’, ‘get’, ‘feel’ and ‘seem’ in English. These may also be called “semi-copulas” or “pseudo-copulas”.

In the English language, the copula verb ‘be’ has eight suppletives. The suppletives are be, am, been, is, are, being, was, were. A copula construction particularly in the English language is the type of construction, which is formed using the copula verb. However, in Igbo the ‘be’ verb in English may be translated by other verbs other than the general copula verbs in the language.

In grammar, predicate refers to the part of the sentence, which excludes the subject noun phrase. It is a word or combination of words, which includes the verb, objects, or phrases governed by the verb that makes up one of the two main parts of a sentence. Predication is attributing claims to the subject. Equally, it is a branch of logical semantics, which uses symbols to explore relationships between and within propositions. The predicator usually governs the predicate. The copula verb is not regarded as a predicator in a sentence.

Researches on stative verbs in Igbo have been conducted by many scholars. As observed in a study done by Nwaozuzu (1981) that in most Indo-European languages especially English, stative verbs are not normally used in the progressive aspects. She also observes that they (that is, stative verbs) occur in the simple tense. Equally, she says that in the Igbo language, certain verbs are considered as stative verbs especially when their rV suffix is used to express the present tense.

Mbah (2008) in the same vein conducts a study on two forms of existential in the Igbo language. The study also looks at how the semantic relations of location and integral predication are encoded by ‘nwere’ and ‘dị’; how the semantic relations that are potentially ambiguous are disambiguated by associating each with either of the two types of predications in the Igbo language.

In a further study, Mbagwu (2013) conducts a study where he identifies two groups of Igbo verb - locatum and location verbs, with the objective of determining their features morphologically. Mbagwu finds out that the verbs are morphologically distinguished by locative affixes. In another

study Uchechukwu (2015) examines and presents features of the Igbo copula verb. However, he analyses the verbs on the basis of their functions in varieties of copulative sentences.

None of the above-named scholars has investigated the syntactic restrictions in the Igbo language. This gap has made the present researcher investigate the syntactic restrictions of copula construction in the Igbo language.

Statement of the Problem

Many languages have one main copula verb while others have more than one. In sentence, the general use of copula is to link the subject of a clause to the predicate. Most times, the copula verb is considered to be part of the predicate while the remainder is called a predicative expression.

The syntactic restrictions of copula construction in the Igbo language have not been given serious attention by researchers and linguists. The problem of this study, therefore, is to determine the syntactic restrictions of copula construction in the Igbo language.

Objective of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to examine the syntactic restrictions of copula constructions in the Igbo language. However, the specific objective of the study was to:

determine the syntactic restrictions that underlie copula constructions in the Igbo language.

Research Question

To actualise the objectives of this study, the following research question was formulated to guide the research:

What are syntactic restrictions that underlie copula constructions in Igbo?

Methodology

In this section, the research methodology is discussed bearing the following in mind: research design, area of study, research instrument, sources of data collection and method of data analysis.

The research design adopted for this study is a descriptive analytical design. According to Nworgu (2015), a descriptive design aims at collecting data on a subject and describing it in a systematic manner, the characteristic features or facts about the subject. In this type of design, facts about any given phenomena are ascertained.

The content area of study is interface of syntax and semantics in copula construction with major emphasis on the syntactic restrictions of copula construction in the Igbo language.

The instruments used in this research are intuition, books, printed journals, e-journal and published books. These are materials that have relevant information for this study.

This research adopts primary (introspection) and secondary source methods. The data were collected through intuitive reasoning, the researcher being a native speaker of the language. As a native speaker of Igbo, principles which

native speakers intuitively employ in speech are adopted. The secondary data form the main data for the study. These secondary data were gotten from texts, printed journals, research works like dissertation and thesis. The data were collected from personal libraries, public libraries and the internet. Moreover, information was collected from printed documents and electronically stored materials. Materials from these sources were read and interpreted so as to determine the availability of the appropriate data (information) required for this study. The data collected were analysed using qualitative analysis. Deductions were made descriptively.

Data Presentation and Analysis

This section discusses the syntactic restrictions of copula constructions in the Igbo language.

Syntactic Restrictions of Copula Constructions in the Igbo Language

Environment of Occurrence of ‘bụ’

Uchechukwu (2011) identified different environments where Igbo copula verbs can occur or be realised. Below are the areas where Igbo copula verb can be realised according to Uchechukwu. In copulative sentences, she identifies that ‘bụ’ can occur in characterisation and identification sentences. Typical of characterization sentences is the attribution to the sentence of any kind of characteristic or quality. She cites this example:

O bū ojị ogbi

It is kolanut not eaten

It is a non-edible kolanut

The above example is formed through associative construction, in the sense that two nouns ‘oji’ and ‘ogbi’ are put together to form a genitive phrase with one serving as the head.

In identification sentences, there are two main types of copulative sentence: direct-identifying and specificational sentence. The sub-types of direct-identifying sentence are descriptively-identifying sentences, inferential sentences and definitional sentences. A sentence is adjudged descriptively-identifying when the pre-verbal items contain the subjects, which are described in the post-verbal expressions just like in (2) where the pre-copula noun ‘oji’ is identified in the restrictive post-copula clause “ihe mbụ nwoke na-aga okwu nwaanyi”

N’ebe ụfọdụ oji bụ ihe mbụ nwoke na-aga okwu nwaanyi ...

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 ...

The verb ‘bụ’ does not add any meaning of its own to the sentence, but simply links the pre-verbal expressions with their corresponding post-verbal identifying phrases.

Inferential sentences are those sentences where it is possible for the pre-copula expressions to infer an implication in the post-copula phrases as in:

... ndị a e dere bụ ndị e nwere ike ide

... these one written be things one has power to
write

... those (things) written are those that one was able to write

From the above example, one can discern from ‘... ndị a e dere’ that they are the ‘results’ of those one was able to write.

In definitional sentences, words in the subject pre-copula positions are defined in the post-copula phrase as “mmanụ ndị Igbo ji eri okwu”.

Qjị bụ mmanụ ndị Igbo ji eri okwu

Kolanut be oil people Igbo hold eaten word

Kolanut is the oil with which words are eaten

One of categories of specificational sentences, as observed by Uchekukwu is anticipatory constructions. In anticipatory constructions, the pronoun ‘Q’ anticipates the post-copula nominal as in:

Q bụ mbe kacha mara ihe ...

It be tortoise be greatest know something ...

It is the wisest tortoise ...

Environment of Occurrence of ‘dị’

In copulative sentences, ‘dị’ occurs in characterisation sentences such as in (6) where it functions as a linker of the subject ‘ojị’ with its corresponding ‘attribute of state’.

... Ojị bụ ihe ndị okenye, burukwa ihe dị nsọ na ...

... Kolanut be thing PL elders, is also thing be sacred and ...

... Kolanut is something for the elders and is also something scared ...

As identified by Uchechukwu (2011), ‘dị’ can be realised in non-copulative sentences such as in verb of predication and existential verbs. When realised as verb of predication, it denotes location of time, figurative, inanimate and animate as illustrated in examples 7a, 7b, 7c and 7d respectively.

7a. Ihe adighị ka ọ dị na mbụ
Things is-NEG like it be in first
Things are not as they used to be

7b. Ewu dị ndụ mana mpi ya kpọrọ nkụ
Goat be life but horn it dry-post dry
The goat is alive but its horn is dry

7c. Osikapa dị n’ ụlọ
Rice be PREP house
Rice is in the house

7d. E nwere okenye dị n’ama ha
Pro have elder be PREP compound them
There is an elder that lives in their compound

In (7d), ‘dị’ can be replaced with ‘bi’.

Where the verb ‘dị’ is function as an existential verb, it is preceded by ‘ọ’ and ‘ọ dị’ can be substituted with ‘e nwere’ as shown in 8a and 8b.

8a. ‘Ọ dị ihe ha na-eme na-adighị mma
It be thing they Aux-do Aux-be-neg good
There is something they do that is not good

8b. E nwere ihe ha na-eme na-adighị mma

Pro have thing they Aux-do Aux-be-neg good
There is something they do that is not good

Environment of Occurrence of ‘nọ’

In copulative constructions, ‘nọ’ appears in sentences of specification, where it is often followed by ‘dị ka’ as seen in example 9a.

9a. O gosiri na omenala nọ dị ka mba ọ bụla si dobe ya
It shows that tradition be be like folk every follow keeps it
It shows that tradition is the way the folk keep it

Uchechukwu further contends that ‘dị’ can be removed in the above construction without any change in the meaning of the construction as can be seen below:

9b. O gosiri na omenala nọ ka mba ọ bụla si dobe ya
It shows that tradition be be like folk every follow keeps it
It shows that tradition is as way the folk keep it

Summary/Conclusion

The summary of the study is based on the findings of this study. It was found out that syntactic restrictions underlie copula constructions in the Igbo language. Igbo copula verbs were shown as they can be realised or constructed in various environment as analysed by Uchechukwu (2011). ‘Bụ’ can be realised in characterisation sentences with attribution to sentence of any kind of characteristic or quality as in example 1; identification sentences as in example 2 and specification and inferential sentences as in example 3.

‘Dị’ can be realised as an attribute of state as in example 6. It can be realised also as verb of predication when it denotes location of time, figurative, inanimate and animates as shown in examples 7a, 7b, 7c and 7d. Equally, ‘dị’ can be substituted with ‘e nwere’ as was shown in examples 8a and 8b. Moreover, ‘nọ’ can be realised in sentence specification when it is followed by ‘dị ka’ as shown in the example 9a. In line with the findings above, it is pertinent to say that the objectives of this work have been achieved. The study shows that the Igbo copula verbs were shown in various syntactic restriction and constructions with ‘bụ’, ‘nọ’ and ‘dị’.

Recommendation

The study recommends that further studies on the syntactic restrictions of copula construction in dialects in the Igbo language be carried out to know variants of ‘bụ’, ‘dị’ and ‘nọ’. However, an in-depth investigation can be carried out on the present topic using another theoretical framework. Furthermore, studies can still be done on other languages to find out if copula verbs motions can be find out in them.

References

- Emenanjo, E. N. (1978). *Elements of modern Igbo grammar*. Ibadan: Oxford University Press.
- [Green, M. M. & Igwe, G. E. \(1963\). *A descriptive grammar of Igbo*. London: Oxford University Press.](#)
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inverse_copular_constructions (02/11/2022)
- Mbagwu, D. U. (2013). Locatum and location verbs in Igbo: A morpho-syntactic analysis. Ph.D Thesis, University of Nigeria, Nsukka.
- Mbah, B. M. (1999). *Studies in syntax: Igbo phrase structure*.

- Nsukka: Prize Publishers.
- Mbah, B. M. (2008). Dị and nwere: Towards a semantic study of integral and locational predication in Igbo. In O.-M. Ndimele, I.I. L. Udoh & O. Anyanwu (Eds.). *Critical issues in the study of linguistics, languages and literature in Nigeria. A festschrift for Conrad Max Benedict Brann. Series No. 7. 2008 (pp465-472)*. Port Harcourt: M&J Grand Orbit Communications Ltd & Emhai Press.
- Mbah, B. M. (2011). *GB syntax*. Enugu: Association of Nigerian Authors, Cross River State Chapter.
- Mbah, B. M. (2018). *Generalised Igbo Syntax*. Awka: Amaka Dreams Ltd.
- Mikkelsen, L. (2008). http://linguistics.berkelry.edu/-mikkelsen/papers/mikkelsen_copular_clause_clause_web.pdf
- Ndiribe, (2018). A minimalist analysis of the syntax of complementation in Igbo. Ph. D Thesis. University of Nigeria, Nsukka.
- Nwachukwu, P. A. (1983): Towards a classification of Igbo verbs. In P. A. Nwachukwu (Ed.). *Readings on the Igbo verb*. 17-43 Onitsha: Africana-FEP Publishers.
- Nwachukwu, P. A. (1984). Stative verbs in Igbo syntax. *Journal of West African languages*, XIV (2), 81-101.
- Nwachukwu, P. A. (1995). *Tone in Igbo syntax*. Nsukka: Igbo Language Association.
- Nwaozuzu, G. I. (1981). Stative verbs in Igbo. B.A. project, University of Nigeria, Nsukka.
- Nworgu, B. G. (2015). *Educational research: Basic issues and methodology*. Ibadan: Wisdom Publishers Ltd.
- Ogwudile, C. E. C. (2017). The cognitive semantic analysis of Igbo verb “GBA”. Ph.D Thesis. Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.

Okonkwo, M. N. (1974). *A complete Igbo course*. Ibadan: Macmillan.

Uchechukwu, P. A. (2011). A corpus-based analysis of Igbo and Spanish copula verbs. Retrieved from <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/280004843> on 01/12/2018

Uchechukwu, P. A. (2015). The prototypical Igbo copula verb. *Journal of Igbo language and linguistics*. Vol. 1, 53-73.