

CONSTRUAL-BASED CLASSIFICATION OF IGBO VERBS

Chinedu Uchechukwu
 Department of Linguistics
 Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

Martha Chidimma Egenti
 Department of Linguistics
 Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

Abstract

*Experiential verbs are generally verbs that are used to code or give expression to our inner psychic processes or emotions. The Igbo verbs of this group were first noted by Uwalaka (1988) who also drew attention to a form of alternation in their construction which she called ‘subject-object-switching’ (SOS). While agreeing with Uwalaka’s identification, this paper further builds upon and delineates Uchechukwu (2007) by explicitly advocating the Cognitive Grammar concept of **construal** as a tool for identifying and exploring the Igbo experiential verbs. In other words, there is a particular perspective that is peculiar to Igbo experiential verbs, a predominantly patient-oriented perspective. The paper concludes by advocating for the recognition of this perspective as an instrument for the study of aspects of the semantics of Igbo verbs in general.*

1. Introduction

Uwalaka (1988) was the first to note the peculiar feature of some of the experiential verbs in Igbo involving a change in how the event expressed through them is construed. The best illustration of the phenomenon has always been the construction with the verb *íkwa ùkwàrà* ‘to cough’ as in the sentence below:

- | | | |
|-----|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| (1) | a. <i>Úchè nà - ákwà ùkwàrà</i> | b. <i>ùkwàrà nà - ákwà Úchè</i> |
| | Uche AUX - verb cough | cough AUX - verb Uche |
| | Subj.-Experiencer Obj.-Stimulus | Subj.-Stimulus Obj.-Experiencer |
| | [lit. Uche is coughing cough] | [lit. Cough is coughing Uche] |
| | ‘Uche is coughing.’ | ‘Uche has a cough.’ |

In sentence (1a) ‘Uche is coughing’, while in (1b) it is as though ‘cough is coughing Uche’. According to Uwalaka, the subject in sentence (1a) has been switched over to the patient-experiencer in sentence (1b), while the object in (1a) now becomes the agent in (1b); hence the name *subject-object-switching* verbs or ‘SOS verb’ for short. As she drew attention to this

phenomenon, Uwalaka also noted that “it does not appear to have caught the attention of linguists” (Uwalaka, 1988, p. 43) by which she naturally meant ‘Igbo linguists’. As far as we know, not much has been done on the phenomenon, in spite of Uwalaka’s statement on its neglect by Igbo language scholars. Uchechukwu (2007) applied the Cognitive Grammar tool of *construal* to the phenomenon and through that came to the conclusion that the SOS constructions involve two perspectives, the agent-oriented perspective and the patient-oriented perspective. Later on, Uchechukwu (2011) extended the applicability of these two perspectives to Igbo lexicography with the argument that ‘construal phenomenon’ should facilitate the development of a definite kind of citation that should function as the headwords in Igbo dictionaries.

The effort in this paper can be interpreted as a further advocacy of the approach. The next section gives an overview of the Igbo experiential verbs, while section 3 is on the Cognitive Grammar concept of construal and the agent and patient oriented perspective connected with it. Section 4 involves an examination of the experiential verbs from the Cognitive Grammar angle. Section 5 concludes the work.

2. Igbo Experiential Verbs

Uwalaka explains experiential verbs as those verbs that refer to an entity’s perception, cognition, sensation and reaction (Uwalaka, 1988, p. 149). Each one of these classes shall be very briefly touched upon in this section with a focus on a summary of Uwalaka’s characterization of them.

2.1 Verbs of Perception

Verbs of perception are verbs which are used to express those events that involve the senses. Here the person/experiencer NP is consciously aware and open to the external world. The verbs in this group involve basic expressions of the visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory and gustatory sensory modalities (Helle, 2006). One of the characteristics of perception verbs is the presence of the experiencer and the entity being perceived. Hence, a prototypical verb of perception as Usoniene (1999) and (Uwalaka, 1988) explain, consists of at least two participants: the

perceiver (experiencer) and the perceived (stimulus) which should be present for a meaningful complete sentence. The verbs under this sub-group, the verbs of perception, relate to the five senses. They are as follows:

- (2)
- | | |
|-----------------|---------------------|
| <i>ìhū</i> | 'to see' |
| <i>ínū</i> | 'to hear' |
| <i>ínū ísì</i> | 'to perceive smell' |
| <i>ínū ùtọ́</i> | 'to perceive taste' |
| <i>ímēsā</i> | 'to touch/feel' |

Some of the characteristics of these verbs, according to Uwalaka (1988, pp. 150-154), are summarized below:

1. both the experiential NP and the patient NP should be present for a semantically and syntactically complete sentence.
2. the instrument arousing a perception is also present in certain constructions as the body part instrument NP.
3. With the exception of the verb *ímēsā* 'to touch', which takes the patient as a subject and the experiencer as the object, other verbs of perception subjectivize the experiential NP associated with them while the associated NP takes the object position.
4. Verbs of perception have semantically-related action verbs counterpart. Both are presented in the table below.

Verbs of Perception (With an Experiencer as Subject)		Action Verb Counterpart (With an agent as Subject)	
<i>ìhū</i>	'to see'	<i>ìlē (anya)</i>	'to look'
<i>ínū</i>	'to hear'	<i>ìgè n̄tì</i>	'to listen'
<i>ínū ísì</i>	'to smell'	<i>ìsì n̄'ímí</i>	'to smell'
<i>ínū ùtọ́</i>	'to taste'	<i>ìgwū ọ̀nū/ìdē ọ̀nū</i>	'to taste'

Table 1: Verbs of Perception and their Action Counterpart

2.2 Verbs of Cognition

This class of verbs describes the mental processes of the Subject NP (experiencer). Garcia-Miguel and Comesana (2003, p. 3) explain that the mental processes involve a “potential senser or cognizer (subject of knowing or believing) and an object of knowledge or belief of this mental processes”. Uwalaka (1988, p. 155) is of the opinion that verbs of cognition involve ‘knowing’, ‘understanding’, ‘memory’, ‘remembering’, ‘forgetting’ and ‘recognition’. Some of the Igbo verbs of cognition are as follows:

- | | | |
|-----|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| (3) | <i>ítūkwàsà óbì</i> ‘to trust’ | <i>írò</i> ‘to think’ |
| | <i>ígbà ñchèzō</i> ‘to be forgotten’ | <i>íghōtā</i> ‘to understand’ |
| | <i>ígbāgwòjù ányá</i> ‘to confuse’ | <i>íhụwà ámā</i> ‘to take note of’ |
| | <i>íchè échìchè</i> ‘to think’ | <i>íkọta</i> ‘to recognize’ |
| | <i>íchètà</i> ‘to remember’ | |

The following are some of the characteristics of Igbo verbs of cognition as identified by Uwakala (1988, pp. 155-157):

1. With the exception of few verbs like *íchè échìchè* – ‘to think’ which can occur in a sentence with only the experiencer NP and their cognate NP, the other verbs of cognition occur with both the experiencer NP and the patient NP.
2. With regard to the choice of subject, at the surface level, the verb of cognition generally chooses the associated experiencer NP as subject. However, some other verbs like *ígbà ñchèzō* ‘to be forgotten’ take the patient as subject, with the experiencer as object.
3. The verbs of cognition do not occur with any form of instrument NP.

2.3 Verbs of Sensation

These verbs are associated with physiological experiences or sensations that an animate entity can undergo. Igbo verbs of sensation include the following:

- | | | |
|-----|--|---------------------------------------|
| (4) | <i>ágúū ígū</i> ‘to be hungry’ | <i>óyí ítū</i> ‘to feel cold’ |
| | <i>íké ígwū</i> ‘to be tired’ | <i>áfọ ịrū</i> ‘to have stomach-ache’ |
| | <i>ńsí/ńmámārī ịkpà</i> ‘be pressed by faeces/urine’ | <i>ńtì ịtà</i> ‘to have ear-ache’ |
| | <i>àhú ókū ịrī</i> ‘to have fever’ | <i>ítā áhúhú</i> ‘to suffer’ |

Characteristics of Verbs of Sensation identified by Uwalaka (1988, pp. 158-161) include the following:

1. Verbs of sensation generally occur in sentences with their cognate NP (including all nominal parts of a complex verb) in subject position. In other words, the cognate NP is invariably selected as subject in sentences. However, whether the cognate NP occurs as Subject or Object, the semantic relationship between it and the verbal component of the verb remains the same. On the contrary, there are other verbs like *ítā áhúhú* 'to suffer' which take the experiencer as subject.
2. Some verbs of sensation which make assertions about an experiencer NP only are one place predicates.
3. They occur with body-part cognate NPs.
4. Verbs of sensation do not optimally take their associated experiencer NP and their cognate NP as subjects.

2.4 Verbs of Reaction

This refers to an entity's response to stimuli, which could be verbal, emotional, psychological and/or psychophysical.

2.4.1. Emotional-Response Verbs

Emotional-response verb expresses an action or a state of an emotional or psychological nature. With an emotional response verb, generally someone feels something. The Verbs of this group are as follows:

- | | | |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------|---|
| (5) <i>Óbì ídī útó</i> 'to be happy' | <i>ímāshī</i> 'to be pleased' | <i>ítū n'ányá</i> 'to be surprised' |
| <i>Óbì íjō n̄jọ</i> 'to be unhappy' | <i>íhū n'ányá</i> 'to love' | <i>ígbāgwòjù ányá</i> 'to be confused at something' |
| <i>Óbì ígbāfù</i> 'to have a shock' | <i>íwē íwé</i> 'to be angry' | <i>ígbā ghārì</i> 'to be confused at something' |
| <i>íkpā óchì</i> 'to be pleasing' | <i>íwé j̄jì</i> 'to be angry' | <i>íchē úchē</i> 'to be made anxious' |
| <i>íchō</i> 'to desire' | <i>íwūtē</i> 'to be upset' | |

Uwalaka's characterization of these verb (1988, pp. 165-169) is as follows:

1. All verbs of reaction are necessarily associated with a source of causation
2. The emotional-response verbs fall under three sub-sets:
 - a) There is obligatory presence of the causative NP and the experiencer NP. While the former takes the subject position, the latter takes the object for the sentence to be meaningful and complete e.g. of such verbs are *iwute* and *itụ n'anya*.
 - b) The 2nd subset of emotional response verbs optionally takes the causative NP as subject when it is overtly specified otherwise they generally select as subject their cognate NP. Also, they do not only obligatorily require the experiencer NP in surface structure, but some of them are sensitive to SOS switching in that they only allow their subject and object to be switched when they do not co-occur with the causative NP e.g., *gbafuru'* and *iwe iwe*.
 - c) Lastly, this 3rd group co-occurs with the experiencer NP and the patient NP while the causative associated with it remains covert which implies that the causative NP is never given overt specification in simple sentence e.g., *hụ* and *másí*.
3. Some emotional response verbs have two possibilities of subject-choice e.g. *iwe iwe* (a). They can either take the experiencer NP as subject or their nominal component as object or (b). They select as subject their cognate NP while the experiencer NP is the object.
4. Those groups of emotional-response verbs which never co-occur with the causative in surface structure with regard to subject-choice fall under two sub-groups viz:
 - a) The experiencer NP occurs as subject, while the patient NP occur as object e.g. *hụ*.
 - b) Few of the verbs take the patient NP as subject while the experiencer NP as object e.g. *imashi*

2.4.2 Stimulus Response Verbs

Stimulus response verbs involve momentary and involuntary actions. Igbo stimulus response verbs include the following:

object of conceptualization. One of such impositions of structure is Cognitive Grammar's concept of 'viewpoint/vantage point' which is explained by Langacker as the spot at which the viewer is situated and from which a scene is viewed (Langacker, 1987, pp. 122-126; 2000, chap. 7). This is best understood with reference to Langacker's canonical event model below.

The model represents the normal observation of a prototypical action. There is an external vantage point with an outside viewer 'V'; and the viewer observes the energetic interaction between an agent 'AG' and a patient 'PAT', which takes place within a setting and also constitutes a single event.

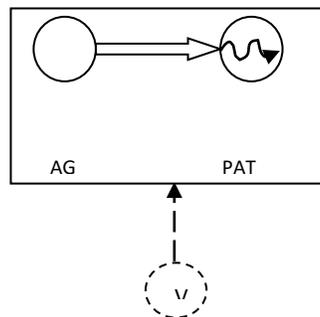


Figure 1. Canonical Event Model (Langacker, 1991, p. 285)

Langacker also explains that the prototypical values of basic grammatical constructs are characterized with reference to such a canonical event model (Langacker, 1991, p. 298) which forms part of the conceptual archetypes in our everyday experience (Langacker, 2006). But with regard to an SOS sentence pair, the alternation does not involve an external viewer similar to the canonical event model. Instead, it involves the conceptualization of the SOS event as a whole, with an alternation in the prominence given to the two sides of a canonical event. Looking at the canonical event model for example, one could picture the construal of an event in terms of the prominence given to the AGENT side of the model, or to the PATIENT side. Hence, for the SOS verb, when a sentence is oriented towards the agent in its construal more prominence is given to the qualities of the agent; on the other hand, more prominence is given to the patient side if the construal of the sentence is oriented towards the patient. That is why the construal of an event with prominence given to the AG side has been designated the *Agent-Oriented* construal, and that of an event with prominence given to the PAT side is then called

the *Patient-Oriented* construal (Uchechukwu, 2007). The *Agent-Oriented* construal involves an agent that executes/initiates an action/stimulus or sensation which could either reach out in a ‘force dynamic’ (Talmy, 2000, p. 409-470) or ‘action chain’ (Langacker, 1991, p. 283) manner and affect or land on another entity. Let us repeat here the sentence pair cited at the beginning of the paper, as they best illustrate these two orientations:

- | | | | | |
|-----|----|---------------------------------|----|---------------------------------|
| (7) | a. | <i>Úchè nà - ákwà úkwàrà</i> | b. | <i>úkwàrà nà - ákwà Úchè</i> |
| | | Uche AUX - verb cough | | cough AUX - verb Uche |
| | | Subj.-Experiencer Obj.-Stimulus | | Subj.-Stimulus Obj.-Experiencer |
| | | [lit. Uche is coughing cough] | | [lit. Cough is coughing Uche] |
| | | ‘Uche is coughing.’ | | ‘Uche has a cough.’ |

In the first sentence *Uche* is carrying out an action; he is coughing, while in the second sentence it is literally as if “cough is coughing Uche”. This means that in the second sentence Uche is the patient suffering the effect of something happening to him. In both sentences *Uche* is the experiencer, but he is more of an agent in (7a) and a patient in (7b). Hence, sentence (7b) is the opposite of (7a) as the action/stimulus/sensation is construed as landing on/happening to/affecting the patient, but without the patient being able to make any contribution to the effect on him/her. The patient forms the ‘energy sink’ or ‘tail’ of an action chain (Langacker, 1991, p. 292).

Finally, in the next section we shall give illustrative sentences from the different classes of experiential verbs discussed in this paper.

4. The Experiential Verbs and the Two Construals

In this section at least one verb from each of the categories of experiential verbs shall be used to form patient-oriented sentences. We shall see that the patient-oriented angle is a valid perspective for Igbo experiential verbs; it is also a perspective that need not be overlooked as Uwalaka pointed out some decades ago.

Let us start with the verb of perception *ímētū* which literally means ‘to touch’. The literal concrete meaning can be gleaned from the construction *ímētū áká* ‘to touch hand’. Below is its patient-oriented construal:

Here one can note the patient-oriented construal whereby strength is finishing upon Emeka. It is like saying that “Strength is running out on Emeka”, or rather “Strength ran out on Emeka at night”. This is the most natural means of expressing tiredness in Igbo.

The last two verbs are the emotional-response verb and the stimulus-response verb. The emotional response verb is *ígbā ghárí* ‘to be confused at something’ which again can be fully spelt out as *íhé ígbā òmádù ghárí* ‘something to confuse someone’.

- (11) Ókwú yā gbà-rà Àdá ghárí.
 words his hit-rV(Past) Ada confusion
 ‘His words confused Ada.’

The patient orientation in the sentence is obvious. One cannot however turn around the construction to give it the sense of ‘someone confused somebody’ as we can do with the English verb *to confuse*.

A similar patient-oriented construal can also be seen in the last category, the stimulus response verb, exemplified with the verb that Uwalaka gives as *úrá òtūtū* and translates as ‘to be sleepy’. The structure given here by Uwalaka is actually a nominalized form, ‘sleepiness’. And going by the general maxim in Igbo language studies that the language is verb centered and the source for word formation processes, one would have to ask here “from which verb did Uwalaka form this nominal structure?” It is from the structure *úrá ítū* which could be given the initial literal meaning of “sleep to throw”, but can be more adequately spelt out as follows *úrá ítū òmádù* meaning ‘sleep to throw someone’, whereby the ‘someone’ must be mentioned in the sentence:

- (12) Úrá tū-rù Èméká n’ ábálì.
 sleep throw-rV(Past) Emeka PREP night
 ‘Emeka felt sleep at night.’

Finally, from the above examples in this section, it is obvious that the patient orientation of the Igbo verb cuts across all the different categories of experiential verbs identified by Uwalaka.

5. Summary and Conclusion

Uwalaka (1988) has drawn attention to the SOS phenomenon and also to the fact that Igbo linguists have neglected or overlooked the phenomenon. This paper has tried through oversimplification to draw attention to this phenomenon as a living and real attribute of the Igbo language. It was also shown through the use of the Cognitive Grammar concept of *construal* how the SOS verbs/constructions actually code two different construals: an agent-oriented construal and a patient-oriented construal. By further focusing on the patient-oriented construal within the different categories of the experiential verbs, the effort was made to highlight the fact that this particular construal is 'real'. It is an integral aspect of the Igbo language and need not be submerged under a syntactic orientation that is dominated by the citation forms and construal operations taken over from the English language.

REFERENCES

Agbo M. (2009). Subject-Object switching in Igbo verbs: A revisit. *Iranian Journal of Language Studies*, 3(2) , 2009-224.

Garcia-Miguel, M. J.& Comesana, S. (2003). Verbs of cognition in Spanish: constructional schemas and reference points. Retrieved from www.webs.uvigo.es/adesse/textos/lcc2003%20_text%20final.pdf. on 22/11/12

Langacker, R.W. (1987). *Foundation of cognitive grammar I*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Langacker, R.W. (1991). *Foundation of cognitive grammar II*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Uchechukwu, C. (2007). Subject-Object Switching and the Igbo Lexicon. *Annual Review of Cognitive Linguistics*, 5, 55-76. [<https://benjamins.com/#catalog/journals/arcl.5.04uch/details>]

Uchechukwu, C. (2011). *The Citation Form in Igbo Lexicography: Insights from the SOS Verbs*. N. Ozo-Mekuri, (Ed.), *Festschrift for Ohiri Aniche*. Port Harcourt: Orbit Communications Ltd.

Usoniene. A. (1999). Perception verbs revisited. Lund University, Dept. of Linguistics Working Papers 47, 211-225. Retrieved from www.academia.edu/1989998/perception_verbs_revisited On 22/11/12

Uwalaka M. A.A.N. (1988). *The Igbo verb: A semantico-syntactic analysis*. Afro-Pub.

