

THE DIFFERENT “IS” REALIZATIONS IN IGBO

Praise Adimchinobi Modekwe & Sunday Ifeanyi Okoli

Department of Linguistics
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
praise1612modekwe@gmail.com & sundayifeanyiokoli@gmail.com

Abstract

There have been several studies and investigations to the verbs of Igbo language by several scholars. Some of these studies have been on the different verb types in Igbo and their functions. The Igbo copula verbs have also received much study by Igbo researchers. However, to the best of the knowledge of the researchers, there has been no detailed study on the various ways the copula, “is” can be used in Igbo. This study investigates the different ways the verb, “is” can be translated in the Igbo language. It adopts the elicitation method for data collection and a descriptive linguistic approach for data analysis. The results show that the verb “is” can be translated with different words based on the context and word association. Also, in situations where “is” is used as an auxiliary verb or a progressive tense, it is usually accompanied by an open vowel suffix. The researchers therefore, recommend that further research be conducted on the verb “is” in Igbo.

Keywords: ‘is’ realizations, verbs, Igbo, copula, linguistic

1. Introduction

Language is a dynamic system that reflects the unique cultural and cognitive patterns of its speakers. Among the fascinating aspects of linguistic diversity is how different languages express fundamental concepts such as existence, identity, and states of being. The English copula verb "is" represents one of such universal concept that manifests differently across world languages, revealing intricate patterns of meaning construction and grammatical organization.

The Igbo language, spoken by millions in southeastern Nigeria and diaspora communities worldwide, presents a particularly rich case study for understanding copular verb systems. Unlike English, which primarily uses a single form "is" to express various states and relationships, Igbo demonstrates a sophisticated tripartite system that distinguishes between identity (bụ), properties and inanimate location (dị), and animate location (nọ). This semantic precision reflects the language's nuanced approach to categorizing existence and relationship types.

While considerable scholarly attention has been devoted to Igbo verb classification and copular systems by researchers, this study focuses on systematically investigating the different ways the English verb "is" can be expressed in Igbo. Through careful analysis of contextual usage and semantic associations, the research aims to describe the full range of "is" realizations, from the primary copular verbs (bụ, dị, nọ) to auxiliary constructions and other grammatical expressions that convey similar meanings. Using descriptive method, the data is analyzed.

2. The Concept of Verbs

A verb is generally a word which can be used to show a state or an activity. It can also be seen as a word which denotes a state, an occurrence, an existence or an action. Nwanjoku et al (2022) citing Mecalfe and Astle (2003) state that "verbs are words that indicate an action, a doing of something. Nwanjoku et al (2022) note that the verb is perhaps the most important part of the predicate in every language.

Verbs can be grouped into lexical and auxiliary verb. They can also be grouped as stative and dynamic verbs. The stative verbs are used to show the state of things/being. They do not indicate any physical activity. They are usually associated with mental state, emotion and sense. They are not used typically for progressive or continuous tenses. Dynamic verbs on the other hand, are verbs that indicate actions.

The Igbo verb uses different forms of the same verbs to express state and activity while in English different verbs are used.

2.1 Features of Igbo Verb

The Igbo verbs have some characteristics. Some of the features cut across different languages while some of them are unique to the Igbo language.

Mbah (2015) in analysing the classification of Igbo verbs notes that the most popular classification of Igbo verbs is traced to Nwachukwu, Emenanjo, Ubahakwe, Uwalaka and Uchechukwu. He states that the ideology of the

Igbo verbs could be divided into two major issues: the constituent of the Igbo verb and the classes of the Igbo verb.

2.1.1 Structural Classification of Igbo Verbs

Uchechukwu (2011) talks about the semantics and structure of Igbo verbs. He asserts that structurally, the Igbo verbs can be grouped into simple verbs, complex verbs and verbal complex. He notes that the simple verbs have a consonant-vowel (CV) structure. He also notes that some simple verbs can change in tone when the infinitive is added while verbs in their low tone retain their tones even after the addition of the infinitive. He identifies a complex verb as any verb that goes beyond the CV structure of the single verbs. These verbs are formed by combining two simple verb roots or combining a verb root with a suffix. Verbal complex on the other hand, are verbs formed by combining a verb with a noun or prepositional phrase.

This structural analysis is further supported by the extensive classification work that has emerged from various scholars. The traditional criteria for classifying Igbo verbs have been generally tonal, syntactic, semantic and morphological (Ndimele, 2003), in addition to lexical, stative non-stative, transitive, intransitive, causative and complementation criteria (Onumajuru, 2005, and Nwachukwu, 1983). These classifications have led to the emergence of various terms including complement verbs, inherent complement verbs, prepositional verbs, ergative complement verbs, bound complement verbs, copula verbs, dynamic verbs, action verbs, stative verbs, serial verbs, psychological and emotional verbs, verbs of meteorological condition and process verbs (Mbah, 2015).

2.1.2 Agglutinative Nature of Igbo Verbs

Nwanjoku et al (2022) identify a peculiarity of the Igbo verb which is its agglutinative nature. These can be seen in the example below:

- a. Oku repiacharaụloya (Fire burnt down his house completely) Repiachara – verbal group ire : burnt (the main verb) pia ; down (adverb in suffixal position) cha : completely (adverb of manner) Rra: past tense marker (rv)
- b. Nkita tacharaanụahụ (A dog ate up the whole meat) Ta: eat (the main verb root) Cha: up (completely) ra : past tense marker (rv)
- c. Idèbupucharaàkwàhù (Flood carried away the bridge completely) Bupuchara- the verbal group ibu : carry (the main verb) pu : away (adverb in suffixal position) cha : completely (the suffixal adverb of manner) ra : the past tense marker (rv)

The example above shows that each morpheme in the Igbo verb has a single meaning and retains its original form.

2.1.3 Inherent Complement Verbs

They also opine that the Igbo verbs can take inherent complements. These complements look like the direct objects of these verbs. Some of these verbs include Ile anya (to look) and ibeakwa (to cry). Emenanjo (1975) notes that the ICV happens to be the most peculiar feature of the Igbo verb.

The concept of inherent complement verbs has been a subject of considerable debate in Igbo linguistics. Uwalaka (1988) questioned whether it is the verb, i.e. the single verb root [e.g. -gba], or the verb with its complement [i.e. -gbaegbè] that constitutes the Igbo verb. This question arose from Emenanjo's (1975) contention that the Igbo verb obligatorily co-exists with a noun – the complement, and that in the underlying structure, the verb and its noun complement are so mutually obligatory and inseparable that they always function as a semantic unit – the verbal complex. However, some scholars have felt otherwise. Uwalaka (1988), Uchechukwu (2010), Iloene (2010) and Mbah (2011) are of the view that the complement of the verb is separable from the verb, while Uwalaka (1988) opines that some verbs need not have a complement in their argument structure to form a grammatical string.

2.1.4 Specialized Classes of Igbo Verbs

2.1.4.1 Process verbs

The classification of Igbo verbs has revealed several specialized categories, one of which is the process verbs. Process verbs in Igbo were first identified in Uwalaka (1988), who treated them under the term 'verbs of occurrence', which she claims came from Bamgbose (1974). The verb of occurrence refers to verbs which depict events and happenings not directly attributable to some action. Uwalaka's list of Igbo process verbs include verbs such as -ba 'burst', -bhja 'crush', -ta 'dry', -kpọ 'dry', -cha 'ripe', -gbawa 'crack', -gbanwe 'change', -gbọ 'boil', -ghaaghgha 'grow up', -nwụ 'die', -re 'decay', -wa 'break', -gbu 'have a cut accidentally', and -kpọ 'hit part of the leg against an object' (Uwalaka, 1988).

However, Mbah (2015) challenges this classification, arguing that all Igbo verbs are process verbs with incidental complements. He contends that the absence of a complement is filled by the bound cognate noun which also depicts action in process, concluding that these verbs should be reclassified as ergative verbs. According to Mbah (2015), a verb is a process verb when it sets an action in motion for the realization of an intended goal, and the bound cognate noun indicates the path of the verbal process.

2.1.4.2 Posture verbs

Another specialized category that has gained attention in recent scholarship is posture verbs. Okoye (2020) explores verbs that indicate the positions of entities in space in the Igbo language, identifying members such as *kwurū* 'stand', *nọdu* 'sit', *dina* 'lie', *sekpū* 'kneel', *makpū* 'lie on the belly', *tukwū* 'squat', *hukpū* 'bend', and *dọbe* 'lean' as constituting Igbo verbs denoting posture.

The study reveals that Igbo posture verbs demonstrate both literal and extended meanings. While some verbs apply exclusively to humans (such as *sekpū* 'kneel', *tukwū* 'squat', and *hukpū* 'bend'), others are shared between human and animal entities (such as *kwurū* 'stand', *nọdu* 'sit', and *makpū* 'lie on the belly'). Additionally, there are specific posture verbs for inanimate entities, including *togbo* 'lie', *kọ* 'hang', *chisa* 'lie', *kpodo* 'turn upside down/invert (typical of elongated entities)', and *kpudo* 'turn upside down/invert (typical of curved entities)' (Okoye, 2020).

An interesting finding from Okoye's (2020) study is the existence of multiple verbs for different varieties of the Igbo posture verb 'lie', which make reference to animate/inanimate contrast in addition to considering the quantity of the entity in space. The study also reveals that meaning extension applies to Igbo posture verbs, with extensions observed in cases where the verbs convey existential rather than posture sense.

2.2 The concept of Igbo copula verbs

Uchekukwu (2015) citing Nwachukwu (1983, 18-42) defines copula verb as "a type of relator or relational verb providing a link between the subject of a sentence and its complement"

Uchekukwu (2010) identifies the three copula verbs in Igbo *bū*, *dị* and *nọ*. She identifies *bū* as the prototypical copula verb of the Igbo language. She also notes that *bū* is the verb to be that deals with the identity.

Example: *ọ bū ọnyéjókúzí.* He/she be person teacher 'He is a teacher'

Dị on the other hand, indicates property and quality. It is also used to show the location of inanimate nouns.

Example: *ọ dị n' ébé áhụ.* It be PREP place there 'It is there.' ['It is at that place.']

Nọ is used to express the location of animate objects including humans.

Example: *ọ nọ ná Káno* He/She be PREP Kano 'He/She is at Kano.'

The copula system in Igbo demonstrates a sophisticated semantic distinction that reflects the language's conceptualization of existence, identity, and location. This tripartite system (*bū* for identity, *dị* for properties and inanimate location, and *nọ* for animate location) represents a unique feature of Igbo grammar that distinguishes it from many other languages.

3. Data Presentation and Analysis

This study focuses on the different ways the copula "is" is realized in Igbo and the different ways it can be said. In Igbo language, there are different ways the word, "is" can be produced. The *bū*, *dị* and *nọ* are the main realizations of is. There are also other ways to which the verb, is can be realized in Igbo.

Examples:

1. Is translated as *bū*

- 1a *Obi bū nwoke*
 Obi be boy
 'Obi is a boy'.
 1b. *Ada bū nwaanyị*
 Ada be female
 'Ada is a girl.'
 1c. *Ada bū onye ọrụ ugbo*
 Ada be person work farm
 'Ada is a farmer.'
 1d *Ada bū onye Awka*
 Ada be person Awka
 'Ada is a native of Awka.'

In the examples above, it can be noted that the word, is can be translated as 'bū' in situations that show the subject's state. When it is used to describe the subject's occupation or nativity, there is an addition of the noun, *onye*. More so, the tone of *onye* changes from a low high tone to a high high tone.

2. Is translated as *dị*

- 2a. *Ada dị ọcha*
 Ada be fair/white
 'Ada is fair'.
 2b *Chioma dị ime*
 Chioma be pregnant
 'Chioma is pregnant.'

- 2c. Q dị n' elu akwụkwọ
 3PS be in up book
 'It is on top of the book.'
- 2d. Azụ dị n' ofe
 Fish be in soup
 'Fish is in the soup.'

In the example above, di is used to show the verb is, when a statement of fact is made. It is also used to show the location of an inanimate object as we can see in example 2c and 2d.

3. *Is translated as nọ*

- 3a. Emeka nọ n' ahịa
 Emeka be in market
 'Emeka is in the market.'
- 3b. Chioma nọ n' Enugu
 Chioma be in Enugu
 'Chioma is in Enugu.'
- 3c. Ebuka nọ nso
 Ebuka be close
 'Ebuka is nearby.'

In the examples above, is can be translated as no when it is used to indicate the position of animate subject.

Other realizations of the is verb include:

4. Ada ma-ra mma
 Ada know-PST beauty.
 'Ada is beautiful.'
5. Ada ma-ra akwụkwọ
 Ada know-PST book
 'Ada is intelligent.'
6. Ada ma-ra ihe
 Ada know-PST something
 'Ada is wise.'
7. Ada to-ro ogologo
 Ada tall-PST tall.
 'Ada is tall.'
8. Obi sụrụmkpụmkpụ
 Obi is short
 'Obi is short.'
9. Obi bu- ru ibu
 Obi carry-PST fat
 'Obi is fat.'
10. Ngozi ta-ra ahụ
 Ngozi chew-PST body
 'Ngozi is slim.'
11. Ada agba-la akwụkwọ
 Ada OVS run-ASPbook
 'Ada is married.'
12. Ada gbara afọ iri abụọ
 Ada run-PST years ten two
 'Ada is 20 years old.'
13. Ada na-agba mbọ
 Ada PROG-run hardwork
 'Ada is hardworking.'
14. Ada na-akwa akwa
 Ada PROG-cloth cloth
 'Ada is a tailor.'
15. Ada na-a-tụ egwu
 Ada PROG-OVS-throw fear
 'Ada is afraid/fearful.'

Is serving as an auxiliary verb

In Igbo language, *na* is used to depict *is* as an auxiliary verb. It normally goes with an open vowel suffix, the main verb and the object.

Examples:

16. Ada *na-a-sụ* *akwa*
 Ada AUX-OVS wash cloth
 ‘Ada is washing clothes.’
17. Ada *na-e-de* *ihe*
 Ada AUX-OVS write something
 ‘Ada is writing something.’
18. Ada *na-a-sa* *efere*
 Ada AUX-OVS wash plate
 ‘Ada is washing plates.’
19. Ada *na-e-be* *akwa*
 Ada AUX-OVS cry cry
20. Ada *na-e-si* *nri*
 Ada AUX-OVS cook food
 ‘Ada is cooking food.’
21. Ada *na-e-chu* *mmiri*
 Ada AUX-OVS fetch water
 ‘Ada is fetching water.’
22. Obi *na-a-nya* *ụgbọala*
 Obi AUX-OVS drive car
 ‘Obi is driving a car.’
23. Ada *na-a-rahụ* *ura*
 Ada AUX-OVS sleep sleep
 ‘Ada is sleeping.’
24. Ada *na-a-gba* *ọsọ*
 Ada AUX-OVS run run
 ‘Ada is running.’
25. Ada *na-e-kwu* *okwu*
 Ada AUX-OVS speak word
 ‘Ada is talking.’
26. Ada *na-a-kụ* *aka*
 Ada AUX-OVS clap hand
 ‘Ada is clapping.’
27. Ada *na-e-kwe* *ukwe*
 Ada AUX-OVS sing song
 ‘Ada is singing.’

4. Summary and Conclusion

This study has illuminated the intricate ways in which Igbo realizes the concept expressed by English "is," revealing a system that is both systematic and semantic. The findings underscore the importance of detailed language-specific research in advancing our understanding of human language diversity and the cognitive patterns that shape grammatical systems. This investigation into the different realizations of "is" in Igbo has revealed the remarkable complexity and semantic precision of the language's copular system. The study demonstrates that the English copula "is" cannot be translated uniformly into Igbo but requires careful consideration of context, semantic relationships, and grammatical functions.

The primary findings confirm that Igbo employs a sophisticated tripartite copular system where ‘*bụ*’ serves as the prototypical identity copula, ‘*dị*’ expresses properties and inanimate location, and ‘*nọ*’ indicates animate location. Beyond these core realizations, the research has identified additional expressions of "is" through auxiliary constructions using "na" with open vowel suffixes, as well as through lexical verbs such as "mara" (know) in constructions expressing states like beauty, intelligence, and wisdom.

These findings have significant implications for several areas of linguistic inquiry. For comparative linguistics, the study contributes to our understanding of how different languages categorize and express fundamental concepts of existence and predication. The Igbo system's semantic distinctions between animate and inanimate entities, as well as between identity and property attribution, offer insights into universal versus language-specific patterns in copular verb systems. From a pedagogical perspective, this research provides essential guidance for Igbo language instruction and English-Igbo translation. Understanding the contextual factors that determine copula selection can improve both teaching methodologies and translation accuracy.

However, this study also reveals the need for further research. The complexity of "is" realizations in Igbo suggests that additional corpus-based investigations could uncover more subtle patterns and contextual variations. Future research might explore dialectal variations in copular usage, diachronic changes in the system, or comparative studies with related West African languages.

References

- Emenanjo, E.N. (1975). Aspects of the Igbo verb. In F.C. Ogbalu & E.N. Emenanjo (Eds.), *Igbo language and culture* (pp. 160-173). Ibadan: Oxford University Press.
- Iloene, M.I. (2010). Igbo Morphology. In Yusuf, O. (ed.) *Basic linguistics for Nigerian languages*. (pp. 188-201). Aba: National Institute for Nigerian Languages.
- Mbah, B.M. (2011). Extension or convergence. In C. Uchechukwu (Ed.), *Extensional suffixes and clitics in Igbo. Igbo languages studies series*, 4, 63-88.
- Mbah, B.M. (2015). On the Igbo process verbs. *Igbo Language Studies*, 1, 131-138.
- Ndimele, O.M. (2003). *Morphology and syntax*. Port Harcourt: Emhai Press and Publication Company.
- Nwachukwu, P.A. (1983). *Readings on the Igbo Verb*. Onitsha: Africana-FEP.
- Nwanjoku et al (2022). The Igbo verbs in foreign language and translation. *Sprin Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*, pg 75-81.
- Okoye, A.N. (2020). Posture verbs in Igbo. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 10(8), 843-848.
- Onumajuru, E.M. (2005). Towards a classification of Igbo verbs: The problem of stative verbs in Olu. In O.M. Ndimele (Ed.), *Trends in the study of languages and linguistics in Nigeria: A festschrift for Professor P.A. Nwachukwu* (pp. 557-574). Port Harcourt: Grand orbit and Emhai Press.
- Uchechukwu, C. (2010). *Cognitive Linguistics and the Igbo verb*. Onitsha: Edumail Press.
- Uchechukwu, Chinedu (2011). *Igbo Verb and Cognitive Linguistics*. Edumail Publications limited, 31 Onira Street Onitsha.
- Uchechukwu P. A (2015). The prototypical Igbo Copula Verbs. *Igbo Language Study Series* 6, (pages 49-64).
- Uwalaka, M.A.N (1988). *The Igbo verb. A semantico-syntactic analysis*. Wien: Afro-Pub.