

Morpho-tonological Classification of Igbo Verbs¹

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Abstract

Igbo verbs have been classified along morphological and tonal lines (cf. Emenanjo, 1978; Ogwueleka, 1987; Nwachukwu, 1995; Uchechukwu, 2011). On a morphological basis, simple, complex, compound and inherent complement verbs have been identified. Three tonal classes of verbs – high, high-low and low – are also identified. This paper discusses a morpho-tonological classification of Igbo verbs. From the investigation so far, the paper tries to show that there is an interaction between tone and the morphological classes of Igbo verbs. This interaction is perceived through the realization of tone since every vowel, and consequently every syllable, bears a tone. For example, for simple verbs, the tone borne by the vowel could be either high or low; for complex verbs, if the free verb bears a high tone, the affix bears a low tone. Consequently, if the free verb bears a low tone, the affix bears a high tone. For compound verbs, if the first verb bears a high tone, the second verb bears a low tone and vice versa. For inherent complement verbs, the tone borne by the vowel could be either high or low. This paper concludes that Igbo verbs take either a high or a low tone. The paper reaffirms the need to continue with the already established tone classes of Igbo verbs.

Keywords: *Igbo verbs, morphological classes, tone groups, tone-morpheme interaction*

Introduction

This paper is a review of the morpho-tonological classification of Igbo verbs. Igbo belongs to the West Benue-Congo sub-family of the proto Benue-Congo language family. The Igbo people occupy what is politically known as the southeastern part of Nigeria. The Igbo language is spoken in the core Igbo states – Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo – as well as in some parts of Bayelsa, Delta and Rivers States all in the southern region of Nigeria.

A close examination of the existing literature on the classes of Igbo verbs reaffirms the general trend in Igbo phonology that the already established high-low tone in Igbo should be maintained. The effort is for one to

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compare all the classifications and highlight their peculiarities. Concerning the tone marking convention, all tones are marked.

The paper is organized as follows: Section two gives a brief discussion on different morphological classifications of Igbo verbs; section three provides the tonal classifications of Igbo verbs; section four is devoted to the interaction of tone and the morphological classes of Igbo verbs while section five presents some concluding remarks.

Morphological Classifications of Igbo Verbs

The investigated morphological classifications are based on Ogwueleka's (1987) and Uchechukwu's (2011) studies. They are presented below.

Ogwueleka's Classification of Igbo Verbs

Ogwueleka (1987) identifies three broad classes of Igbo verbs, defined in terms of their morphological structure. They include: Simple, complex and compound verbs. The three classes are discussed below.

A Simple Verb

This is a verb that contains only one verb root. Ogwueleka (1987) observes that a simple verb form contains its citation form and nothing else.

Simple verbs do not have affixes, as shown below:

Table 1: The Structure of Simple Igbo Verbs

	Infinitive	Citation form	Imperative
a.	ìzḅ̄ to buy	zḅ̄	zḅ̀
b.	ìgā̄ to go	gā́	gā̀
c.	ísī̄ to cook	sí́	sìé́
d.	írī̄ to eat	rí́	rié́
e.	ìdà̀ to fall	dà̀	dā̀

Compound Verbs

A compound verb contains two free verbs. Ogwueleka maintains that a compound verb form is one whose constituents are at least two free verb forms (see Table 2).

Table 2: The Structure of Compound Igbo Verbs

	Infinitive	Citation form	Imperative
a.	ír[dà to climb down	r[+dà = r[dà	r[dà
b.	írìgò to climb up	rì+gò = rìgò	rìgò
c.	íbubà to carry into	bú+bà = búbà	búbà
d.	ìgbabà to run into	gbá+bà = gbábà	gbábà
e.	ìgabà to keep going	gá+bà = gábà	gábà

Complex Verbs

A complex verb has one free verb and an affix. Ogwueleka (1987) claims that a complex verb form is a verb form whose constituents are at least a verb root and a bound affix, as indicated in the following table:

Table 3: The Structure of Complex Igbo Verbs

	Infinitive	Citation form	Imperative
a.	ìpxtà to come out	pxtà	pxtá
b.	ìpātā to bring/carry	pātá	pātá
c.	ìbūtē to bring/carry	būtē	būtē
d.	ìlotè to remember	lotè	loté

The free verbs in the above table are: px̀, pá, bú and lò, while the affixes are: tà, tá, té and tè.

2.2 Uchechukwu's Classification of Igbo Verbs

Uchechukwu (2011) gives four different classes of Igbo verbs based on their morphological structure. They include simple, complex, compound and inherent complement verbs. The simple, complex and compound verbs are similar to those discussed above. Therefore, emphasis is laid on Uchechukwu's inherent complement verbs.

Inherent Complement Verbs

An inherent complement verb, noted Uchechukwu (2008:394), "involves 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. This is also

obtainable in Igbo, an African language. For example: *-gbá ọsọ* ‘run,’ *-gbá égwú* ‘dance,’ *-kpá nkàtá* ‘converse,’ and so on.”

Verbs with ‘prepositional meanings’ in a verb₂ position of a compound verb structure

4. Verb ₂	Verb ₁ (-gbá ‘run’)+Verb ₂	Prepositional Meanings of Verb ₂
a. -bà ‘enter’	-gbábà ‘run into’	into
b. -dà ‘fall’	-gbádà ‘run down(wards)’	down(wards)
c. -fè ‘go by/ over/across’	-gbáfè ‘run over/across’	over; across
d. -gá ‘go’	-gbágá ‘run to (a location)’	to(wards)
e. -rú ‘reach’	-gbárú ‘run up to’	up to
f. -sò ‘follow’	-gbásò ‘run after’	after
g. -fù /-pù ‘exit’	-gbáfù ‘run out’	out

(Adapted from Uchechukwu, 2008:398)

Ogwueleka’s classification of Igbo verbs involves three morphological classes of the verbs, while Uchechukwu’s classification has four.

Classification of Igbo Verbs Based on Tone

Two major studies on the tonal classification of Igbo verbs will be reviewed here. They are Emenanjo (1978) and Nwachukwu (1995).

Emenanjo’s Classification of Igbo Verb Stems

Emenanjo (1978) classifies Igbo verb stems into two classes, namely simple and complex. His classification is based on the number of syllables contained in the verbs as well as on their inherent tone patterns. Details of his classification are as follows:

The Simple Verb Stem

The simple verb, according to Emenanjo (1978:135), is “one which has only one element in its form.” On tonal classification of the simple verbs, Emenanjo has two classes, namely the Simple High Tone Verb (HTV) and the Simple Low Tone Verb (LTV). He noted that the verb stem is consistently low for LTV and consistently high or downstep for HTV in most (if not all) verbal derivatives.

Table 4: Examples of Simple High Tone Verbs

	Infinitive	Citation Form	Imperative
a.	ìgā̄ go	gā́	gā́
b.	ìsī̄ cook	sī́	sī́
c.	ìmā̄ to know	mā́	mā́
d.	ìkx̄ to plant	kx́	kx́

Table 5: Examples of Simple Low Tone Verbs

	Infinitive	Citation Form	Imperative
a.	íma to stab	mà	máá
b.	íbè to cut	bè	bèé'
c.	ífè to cross over	fè	fèé'
d.	ípù to go out	pù	pùó

The Complex Verb Stem

A complex verb has more than one element in its basic form. Emenanjo (1978) describes those complex verbs which have two or three elements in their basic form. Concerning the tonal features of complex verbs, Emenanjo notes that "complex verbs can be divided into 12 tone classes 1-12, and 4 groups A-D, with regard to their tonal behaviour in verbal derivatives and in verb forms."

Table 6: Tone Classes/Groups of Igbo Complex Verbs

a.	Group A	1. HH	búlí' carry up
b.		2. HHH	búlíté carry towards
c.	Group B	3. LH	welí' take up
d.		4. LHH	welíté take towards
e.	Group C	5. HL	búbà carry into
f.		6. LL	wèbà take in
g.		7. HLH	búbátá carry inside
h.		8. LLH	wèbátá take inside
i.	Group D	9. HHL	ríchápù eat up
j.		10. HLL	mébèpù finish doing
k.		11. LHL	bètópù cut off
l.		12. LLL	wèbèpù take up

(Culled from Emenanjo, 1978:148–149)

Tone groups A–D are capable of accounting for the various tone changes possible in the Igbo verbal system as in the Igbo sound system.

Nwachukwu's Classification of Igbo Verbs in Terms of Tone

Nwachukwu (1995) provides three tone classes of Igbo verbs using the citation form. The first class of verbs is the High, which includes stably high-tone verbs. The second class of verbs is the High-Low and this is the

class of verbs which has the tonal features of high tone verbs in the infinitive form, but behave elsewhere like low tone verbs. The third class of verbs is the Low, which involves stably low-tone verbs.

Table 7: The Three Tone Classes

	TCL	Imperative	Past	Perfective	Gen.
		Subjunctive			
1a.	rí	rié eat!	rìri	èriéla	rié
b.	gbú	gbúo kill!	gbùru	ègbúola	gbúo
c.	gbá	gbáa run!	gbàra	àgbáala	gbáa
2a.	gá	gáa go!	gàra	àgáala	gáa
b.	dé	dée write!	dère	èdéele	dée
c.	mé	mée do!	mère	éméeela	mée
3a.	dà	dáa fall!	dàra	ádaála	dáa
b.	tò	tóo praise!	tòro	étóola	tóo
c.	chè	chèé think!	chère	échéeela	chèé

(Data from Nwachukwu, 1995:16)

Nwachukwu goes on to assert that verbs of TCL1 kind maintain a consistent high tone on their root, that verbs of TCL2 kind have a low-tone root in the imperative and past forms only and that such verbs revert to a high-tone root in the perfective and general subjunctive forms. On the other hand, verbs of TCL3 kind have a consistent low-tone root in all the forms. The obvious conclusion is that the group of dialects investigated by Nwachukwu has two distinct high and low tone verb classes 1 and 3, with a second class which falls together with TCL1 in the perfective and general subjunctive forms and with TCL3 in the imperative and past forms. This is why this second class of tonally unstable verbs is sandwiched between TCL1 and TCL3.

Table 8: Comparison of Emenanjo's and Nwachukwu's Classifications of Igbo Verbs

Emenanjo's Classification	Nwachukwu's Classification
Fourteen tone classes of verbs.	Three tone classes of verbs.
Division of tone groups into simple verb tone groups and complex verb tone groups.	Concentration is on simple verbs.

The Interaction between Tone and the Morphological Classes of Igbo Verbs

Table 9: Simple Verbs

		Imperative	Past	Perfective	Gen. Subjunctive
a.	zǎ buy	zuò	zurù	àzuòlá	zuò
b.	gá go	gaa	gara	àgaaá	gaa
c.	si cook	sié	siri	èsíelá	sié
d.	ri eat	rié	riri	èriela	rié
e.	dà fall	daa	dara	àdaaá	daa
f.	zà sweep	zaa	zara	àzaaá	zaa
g.	tǎ be older than	tòó	tòrò	àtòòlá	tòó

Table 10: Compound Verbs

		Imperative	Past	Perfective	Gen. Subjunctive
a.	r[dà climb down	r[dà	r[dara	àr[daaá	r[dà
b.	búbà carry into	búbà	bubara	èbubaáá	búbà
c.	gbábà run into	gbábà	gbabara	àgbabaáá	gbábà
d.	gáfè pass over	gáfè	gafere	àgafeela	gáfè
e.	gabá keep going	gabá	gabara	àgabala	gabá
f.	rìgò climb up	rìgò	rìgorò	èrìgòóá	rìgò
g.	p[wá break by squeezing	p[wá	p[wara	áp[waáá	p[wá
h.	tìwá break by hitting	tìwá	tìwara	ètìwaáá	tìwá
i.	sonyé join	sonyé	sonyere	èsonyéela	sonyé

Table 11: Complex Verbs

		Imperative	Past	Perfective	Gen. Subjunctive
a.	p̀x̀tá come out	p̀x̀tá	p̀x̀tára	ápx̀táá	p̀x̀tá
b.	p̀atá bring/carry	p̀atá	p̀atára	ápátáá	p̀atá
c.	loté remember	loté	lotèrè	élotelá	loté
d.	mékpa maltreat	mékpa	mékpara	émékpaáá	mékpa
e.	rínwò not eat	rínwò	rínworò	érínwoóá	rínwò

Table 12: Inherent Complement Verbs

		Imperative	Past	Perfective	Gen. Subjunctive
a.	gbá q̀sq̄ run	gbáá q̀sq̄	gbará q̀sq̄	agbaáá q̀sq̄	gbáá q̀sq̄
b.	gbá m̀gbā wrestle	gbáá m̀gbā	gbará m̀gbā	agbaáá m̀gbā	gbáá m̀gbā
c.	gbá as[r̄l̄] gossip	gbáá as[r̄l̄]	gbará as[r̄l̄]	agbaáá as[r̄l̄]	gbáá as[r̄l̄]
d.	gbá égbè shoot	gbáá égbè	gbará égbè	agbaáá égbè	gbáá égbè
e.	gbá q̀kx̄ burn	gbáá q̀kx̄	gbará q̀kx̄	agbaáá q̀kx̄	gbáá q̀kx̄
f.	tx̄ ányā expect	tx̄ò ányā	tx̄rù ányā	atx̄òlá ányā	tx̄ò ányā
g.	tx̄ ókwuté throw a stone	tx̄ò ókwuté	tx̄rù ókwuté	atx̄òlá ókwuté	tx̄ò ókwuté
h.	tx̄ n̄tx̄ tell a lie	tx̄ò n̄tx̄	tx̄rù n̄tx̄	atx̄òlá n̄tx̄	tx̄ò n̄tx̄
i.	sí n̄rī cook food	síè n̄rī	sírī n̄rī	esíelá n̄rī	síè n̄rī
j.	si íkè be difficult	síè íkè	sírī íkè	esíelá íkè	síè íkè

Observations

For the simple verbs, it is observed that apart from their past forms, the high-tone verbs are stably high while the low-tone verbs are consistently low. For the compound verbs, it is observed that the high-tone verbs maintain the high tone in all four cases while the low-tone verbs maintain their tone, apart from data 11e-h at the 'Perfective' form. For the complex verbs, the high-tone verbs maintain the high tone in all four cases, while the low-tone verbs maintain their tone. As for the inherent complement verbs, there is tonal fluctuation among the verbs.

Summary of Findings and Conclusion

This paper has made an effort to reaffirm the morphological and tone classes of Igbo verbs. In doing so, the paper has endeavoured to:

- (1) bring the different/disparate works together in one place.
- (2) make transparent the features already identified by the different authors.
- (3) identify the possible morpho-tonological pattern of the identified classes.

Thus, for the simple verbs, the tone borne by the vowel could be either high or low; for the compound verbs, if the first verb bears a high tone, the second verb bears a low tone and vice versa. For the complex verbs, if the free verb bears a high tone, the affix bears a low tone. Consequently, if the free verb bears a low tone, the affix bears a high tone. As for the inherent complement verbs, the tone borne by the vowel could be either high or a low. Overall, most of the verb roots would end up being regarded as either high-tone or low-tone roots.

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