Tense as an Element of INFL Phrase in Igbo

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Abstract

This paper examines tense as an element of inflection phrase (INFL phrase) in Igbo, its inflectional patterns, tonal behaviour, where and how it is marked. The work adopts a GB approach in the analysis of the data. The work identifies different tense markers in Igbo. Suffixation is strongly attested in Igbo verb form, which indicates tense than prefixation. The past tense marker is a bound morpheme which is overtly morphologically marked on the verb stem. The present tense is covertly marked. The copula verbs – ‘dị’ and ‘nọ; can take the – rv suffix to indicates the past tense. The verb ‘ma’, which looks like the copula verbs, can indicate either present or past time meaning depending on the context in which it is used. The Igbo verb structure does not change in relation to different verb forms, which indicate tense. The work also reveals that no single verb form in Igbo indicates future tense. The rule of vowel harmony is strictly observed. Tone plays significant role in Igbo tense. No verb form indicating tense in Igbo carries inflectional marker, which expresses subject-verb agreement as it is in English.

1. Introduction

The category INFL was introduced by Chomsky (1981) in his Government and Binding framework. It comprises agreement (in person and number, and gender for some languages), of the verb in terms of tense. Haegeman (1991) attests that INFL is a node, which is taken to dominate all the verbal inflection, i.e. including person, number properties. She further says that INFL dominates not only the tense features of the verb but also its agreement properties (AGR). Therefore, INFL dominates tense, aspect, mood, modality, number, person and negation. It requires a VP complement. This work examines tense as an element of INFL phrase in Igbo.

A phrase is a group of words, which are joined together following the rules of the grammar of the language. According to Radford (1981), a phrase is a set of elements which forms a constituent without placing any barrier on the number of elements. It is a functional phrase, which consists of inflection. Inflection is that change made in the word internal structure which elicits variation in meanings and grammatical function without causing a change in the word class. This process is achieved through affixes particularly prefixes and suffixes e.g.:

1. a. a + gụ - agụ (read) (participle)
   b. si + ri - sirī (cooked) (past tense)
c. bu + ru - (being fat) (stative verb)
d. e + gbu – e + la – gbela (has killed) perfective aspect

From the foregoing, the underlined morphemes represent different affixes to indicate tense and aspects, which are haboured under the INFL. In some languages, the verbal patterns differ not only in inflectional features but also in the types of information conveyed on the verb phrase or verb form. Every language has a normal way of making inflections.

2. Theoretical Background

In the generative grammar of Chomsky (1957), inflection phrase (IP) was then discussed as the auxiliary (AUX). In the Government and Binding framework, AUX, as an immediate daughter of the sentence has lost the favour of the analysts as an obligatory category of the sentence. Supporting the view, Yusuf (1997) attests that the term ‘AUX’ has gone into disuse and the term ‘INFL’ (inflection) has come to replace it. More appropriately AUX is harboured within INFL, that is, it is now under INFL. INFL is said to be much more accommodating node than AUX. The maximal projection IP consists of | and a specifier. | in turn comprises of | and a complement. The S node is now replaced by inflectional projections as shown thus:

Fig 1:

The figure above shows that the sentence is a projection of IP. INFL can account for all sentences with or without overt auxiliaries whereas AUX cannot. Chomsky (1981) claims that INFL is an obligatory category of the sentence, it is however, not obvious that the node dominated by INFL are realized as the same in all languages. Supporting the view, Ndimele (1992) observes that there are certain parameterized differences regarding the content of INFL across languages. Following Chomsky (1981) and Ndimele (1992), Yusuf (1997:42) claims that such verbs as ‘have’ and ‘may’ do not look like inflections although the affixes do.
However, there is possibility that they are inflectional in many languages. 

In Chomsky (1986), he replaced INFL by the single – letter symbol (\). Radford (2004) suggests that the general idea behind this label is that finite auxiliaries are inflected forms. He illustrates his contention using the sentence:

2. He doesn’t know.

The auxiliary ‘doesn’t’ carries the third person singular present tense ‘– s’. The infinitival ‘to’ serves much the same function in English as inflection in languages such as Italian, which have overtly inflected infinitive (e.g. Italian ‘canta-re’ (to sing). He also asserts that under INFL analysis, an auxiliary such as “should” is a finite INFL, whereas the particle “to” is an infinitival INFL, examples:

3(a) It is necessary that Joseph should show interest.

(b) James believes that Jane is very intelligent.

(c) James considers Jane to be very intelligent.

In (3a and b), the sentences contain tense and finite verbs whereas (3c) contains an infinitive, which does not have tense. The IP without tense will appear as infinitive, which is not case assigner while the sentence with tense contains an inflected verb. Consider the following examples:

4(a) Joseph rejects the work

(b) Joseph rejected the work.

(c) Joseph will reject the work.

(d) I did not expect Joseph to reject the work.

The above (4a - c) sentences are presented thus:

4. IP

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{Spec} \\
\text{N} \\
\text{V'} \\
\text{Joseph -s reject the work -ed will}
\end{array}
\]
INFL dominates not only the tense feature of the verb but also its agreement (AGR) properties. That is [+ tense] and [+ AGR]. Infinitives lack tense marking and agreement. This is [- Tense] and [- AGR] as in (4d) above, represented thus:

6. I did not expect (Joseph to reject the work)

Radford (2004) claims that finite auxiliaries have two distinct forms – a present form and a corresponding past tense form as follows: is/was, are/were, do/did etc. The following pairs show that the common property shared by all the finite auxiliaries is that they mark present and past.

It is worth to note that INFL inflects on the verbal elements in some languages. In Igbo, the role of verb is very significant in achieving tense which is harboured under INFL phrase. The verb is the only lexical category that can be inflected. Green and Igwe (1963) affirm that the verbals are distinguished from all other parts of speech by the fact that they are the category in which an inflectional affix is found. This is shown by Ndimele (1999) thus:

7. Af + V ——> V + Af

Examples:

8(a) Uche zara ụlọ (Uche swept the house)
   (b) Uche azaala ụlọ (Uche has swept the house)
   (c) Azala ụlọ (Don’t sweep the house)

All these underlined morphemes are bound inflectional affixes attached to the CV – stem in accordance with the principles of vowel harmony. They cannot occur alone in the sentence except when attached to the CV – stem.
3. Tense Markers in Igbo

Tense refers to a specific time of an action or event. Tense in English is realized inflectionally as in Igbo. Tense inflection affects the verbals of both English and Igbo languages. Lyons (1968) asserts that tense has to do with time relations in so far as these are expressed by systematic grammatical contrast. Napoli (1996) contents that tense is the only way information about frame of an action or event is realized inflectionally. Tense indicates whether an action happens now, happened before or will happen in the future. That is why Katamba (1983) adopts a three-point reference in relation to a particular moment. That moment is typically the moment of speaking or writing e.g. it indicates whether the event happened prior to the moment of speaking (past tense) is contemporaneous with the time of speaking (present tense) or subsequent to it (tense future). He notes that in the morphology of many languages, these three tense distinctions are obtained, though lacking in some others where two basic distinctions may be drawn between the past and non-past standing for both present and future.

In English, the tense used in the sentence must agree with the time of an action. Tense in Igbo accepts inflections as in English. It is worthy to note that prefixes and suffixes constitute inflectional markers for tense and aspect in Igbo. The markers are bound morphemes. The prefixes occur before the CV – stem, while the suffixes occur after the CV – stem. The prefix never occurs as a sole indicate for tense or aspect in Igbo, rather it is affixed when necessary; and different suffixes attached to indicate different meanings in the language.

Okonkwo (1974:29) holds that the verb stem is the basic unit for building up tenses in Igbo. Some linguists claim that Igbo has three tenses – the present tense, the future tense and the past tense. For the fact that the verb stem is the basic unit for building up tenses in Igbo, no single verb in the language can be inflected to indicate an action that will take place in the future. The future time meaning in Igbo is expressed not by the verb form but by an element such as the auxiliary verb ‘ga’. Nwachukwu (1983) states that the future time in Igbo is not expressed by means of inflectional suffix but with the auxiliary ‘ga-’. Examples:

9(a) Obi ga-egbu ewu.
(b) Eze ga-eri ji ahụ.

In the above examples, it is observed that the auxiliary ‘ga’ requires a participle as a complement. It is also joined to its complement with a hyphen to mark future time. Green and Igwe (1963) have identified the –rv (time) suffix as the past tense marker. Nwachukwu (1983) recognizes the –rv (time) as the only tense marker in Igbo which marks past tense.
Some linguists agree that apart from the above notions, Igbo verbs can be inflected for various other time expressions and notions. Ogbalu (1972,), Okoroaffia (1974) and Okonkwo (1974) see various expressions involving affixes as all tense. Green (1964) claim that in some dialects like Onitsha, the counterpart of –rv (time) suffix is optional. This view suggests that in Igbo language generally, some affixes are optional. Winston (1973) claims that what are obtainable in Igbo morphology are not tenses but rather aspects and mood. Tense in Igbo can be present or past.

3.1 Present Tense

The present tense refers to the present time. It expresses current activity or event as opposed to the past taking the moment of speaking as reference point. The copula verbs are used to express the present tense and the stative verb. The copula verbs are ị, nọ, bụ/wụ and bi. These verbs are formed with the CV – stem. They occur in a simple structure without any inflectional prefix or suffix and still denote present time meaning. The tone patterns of these verbs are consistently low, example:

10(a) Unu ị ndụ.
   2pl pres alive
   They are alive.
(b) Ọ nọ n’ụlọ.
   3sg press in the house
   He is in the house
(c) Anyị bụ ụmụakwụkwọ
   1pl pres students
   We are students

Example (10a) is represented thus:

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IP
  Np
    N
      Pro
      Tense
      V
      NP
    Pres
    W

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From the above examples, nominals follow the copula verbs in (11a and c). In (10b) the copula verb takes a locative prepositional phrase.

The present time meaning can also be illustrated as follows:

11 (a) Anyị bi n’Onịcha ugbu a.
    1pl pres in Onitsha now
    We are live in Onitsha now.

(b) Ha nọ n’ulọ ugbu a.
    3pl pres in the house now.
    They are in the house now.

Example (11a) is represented thus:

3.2 The Past Tense

The present tense denotes a complete action whose influence has ceased to be felt in the present. The Igbo language uses-rv inflectional suffix to express definite past time meaning with the structure such as [CV + rv] examples:

12(a) Ada zụrụ anụ.
    Ada buy past meat.
    Ada bought meat.

(b) Ego zara ụlọ.
    Ego sweep past the house
Ego swept the house
(c) Uche jere ụka.
3pl go past the church.
They went to the church.
Example (12a) is represented thus:

The above tree diagram in (12a) which represents the sentences discussed above, INFL, is specified for the past tense and dominates the –rv suffix. VP is constituent separate from the past tense. Hence, we expect that the VP may move independently of the tense endings. Being an affix, the marker indicating the past tense cannot be left unattached; it must be attached to the verb. The –rv past tense marker is lowered onto the verb. Yusuf (1997:40-42) points out that any time we have inflection, it lands on some verbal elements in a process called Affix-hopping. This ensures that the affixal INFL is not orphaned or stranded. The suffixes are attached to the CV – stem in accordance with the principle of vowel harmony. We assume that the suffixes attached to verbs are elements of INFL and they are obligatory.

The idea of “obligatoriness” or “obligation” was clarified by Nwachukwu (1983) when he asserts that the obligatory markers must be present in the verb before it can express the appropriate time meaning. In (11a, b and c) above, the verbs assign case to the subjects (NPs) “Obi”, “Ada”, “Uche” and “anụ”, “ụlọ” and “uka” in the predicate positions. The mapping of the –rv unto the verb changes the high tone of “zụ” and “ta” to low tone while “za” retains its low tone. The tone of the verb that indicates past time meaning is consistently on low tone. That is, the tense
being past is the condition on the tone being low. Mbah (1999) represents it thus:

If < tense, past > = > tone, low >, then tense – tone.

It is observed that the –rv inflectional suffix is a tense marker and its place of occurrence is not restricted to the dynamic/activity verbs but extends to the stative verbs, which express present time meaning, for example:

13(a) Ọ mara mma
   She is beautiful
(b) Ego buru ibu.
   Ego is fat.
(c) Ike nwere ego

From the foregoing, it can be said that the verb plays significant roles in indicating tenses in Igbo.

4. Summary and Conclusion
The result of the analysis shows that suffixation is strongly attested in Igbo verb, which indicates tense than prefixation. The past tense marker is overtly morphologically marked on the verb. The marker is a bound morpheme with inherently low tone. The present tense is marked covertly. The Igbo verb structure does not change in relation to different verb forms which indicate tense. The copula verbs – “di” and “nọ” can take the –rv suffix to indicate past tense. The verb “ma”, which looks like a copula verb can be used to indicate present or past tense depending on the context in which it is used. It is observed that no single verb form in Igbo indicates future tense. The verb stem is the basic unit for building up tenses in Igbo as Okonkwo (1974) rightly points out.

Tone plays significant role in Igbo tense verb form, and also the rule of vowel harmony is strictly observed. No verb form expressing tense in Igbo carries inflectional marker, which expresses subject – verb agreement as it is in English.

References


