

INFLECTION IN NGWA OF IGBO

Christopher Joseph¹

josephchristopherchinedu@gmail.com

General of Studies

National Institute for Nigerian Languages

Famous Oghoghophia IMU²

famous.imu.pg79123@unn.edu.ng

Department of Linguistics

National Institute for Nigerian Languages

Abstract: This study investigates inflection in the Ngwa dialect of Igbo. It will investigate how inflection that predominantly falls on verbs in the dialect express different grammatical categories of tense, person, number and gender. As a tonal dialect, the study will also examine morphophonemic inflection in Ngwa dialect. A descriptive approach is adopted. The data used were obtained from primary sources via interviews with natives of Ngwa, while some of the data were obtained from secondary sources such as textbooks and journal articles. The study adopts the theory of Paradigm Function Morphology (PFM). The findings of this study reveal that inflections in Ngwa dialect are mostly and commonly marked on verbs. It also reveals that this inflection on verbs are affixes which can be prefixes or suffixes, so that such verbs can fit in with the syntactic structures in order to express different meaning in the Ngwa dialect. The study also reveals that inflections of verbs in the Ngwa dialect finds expression morpho-phonemically, that is, change in forms are dependent on change in sound or tone. The study concludes that inflection in the dialect enables morphing of verbs and forming new meanings through prefix, suffix, and tonal variations which allow speakers to convey a wide range of grammatical information in a compact and efficient manner. Also, the limited coverage of inflection in Ngwa dialect the study recommends more research works be carried out in the verbs of the dialect and how the inflected forms express new meanings, which will enhance the growth and development of the dialect.

Keywords: Dialect, Inflection, Morphology, Morpho-phonemic, Syntax, Semantics.

1.1 Background to the study

Imu & Cookey 2022 opines that morphology incorporates different ways of creating nominal and compound verbs through inflection and derivation. Inflection is a common feature of many human languages. It is the process of changing the form of a word to indicate grammatical function. This can be done by adding prefixes or suffixes to the word, or by changing the internal structure of the word. This study investigates inflection in Ngwa Igbo. The distinct inflectional processes of prefix, suffix and morphophonemic in Ngwa dialect is mainly with verbs. The Igbo term for affix is *mgbakwunye*. It works with the verb root to modify the meaning of the verb root. It could be prefix,

suffix or interfix. The Igbo term for prefix is *nganiihu*, suffix is *nsonaazu*, while interfix is *nnoneetiti*, one or more verbs could be prefixed, suffixed or interfixed to form other form or variant of the root word.

The investigation into the phenomenon of word formation in human language is an interesting aspect of linguistic inquiry (see Imu, 2021, & Imu, 2023). It not only reveals the important processes of word formation but also the universals in human language. Morphology being the core of understanding word formation is a crucial level of language investigation with two aspects: inflectional and derivational morphology. Inflection is the word-formation mechanism to express different grammatical categories such as tense, mood, voice, aspect, person, gender, number and case. Inflectional morphology is often realized by the concatenation of bound morphemes (prefixes and suffixes) to a root form or stem, but non-concatenative processes such as ablaut and infixation are found in many languages as well, but the concern in the study is inflection in Ngwa dialect, with focus on verbs. Verb inflections serve to expand meanings and enrich the information conveyed within a sentence, providing important details about an action, its participants, and the context in which it takes place. This system of inflected verbs in Ngwa dialect of Igbo language makes it possible to express complex ideas more efficiently and accurately, facilitating effective communication between speakers.

It's important to note that different languages and dialects may have different aspects of inflection expressing different grammatical features. However, understanding how it operates is essential for meaningful communication which allows speakers to understand sentence structure, and agreement, to convey a wide range of grammatical information in a compact and efficient manner.

2. Literature review

2.1 Conceptual definitions of terms

For practical purposes, we need clear and straightforward definitions of the key concept in this study, inflection.

Inflection is a one of the main types of morphological operations by which an affix is added to a word, the inflectional affix adds a particular grammatical function to a word without changing the category of that word, or even leading to a different word. The inflected forms become variants of one and the same word (Haspelmath & Sims 2010).

According to Ballard (2013), in linguistic morphology, inflection (or inflexion) is a process of word formation in which a word is modified to express different grammatical categories such as tense, case, voice, aspect, person, number, gender, mood, animacy, and definiteness. In other words, inflection refers to a process of word formation in which items are added to the base form of a word to express grammatical meanings.

Schwarzwald (2013) defined inflection as a change of form a lexical unit undergoes to make various grammatical distinctions. It is different from derivation in that it does not create new lexical entries, it is predictable, and the number of inflectional devices is limited. For example, the words walk-walks-walked-(be) walking are inflected forms of the verb walk.

2.3. Theoretical studies

There are theories of inflection in linguistics seek to explain how inflectional processes work and how they are organized within a language. These theories have evolved over time and vary in their approaches and perspectives.

Word-and-Paradigm (WP) Theory: This theory was first created by linguist, Charles Hockett (1954) and further expanded on by James Blevins (2016). The theory focuses on the whole of a word rather than morphemes. The theory suggests that inflectional forms are organized in paradigms, and inflectional rules operate on a word's base form to generate other related forms. The theory emphasizes the importance of morphological relations between words within paradigms not as cells. It identifies the internal structure of words and the ways this structure facilitates an external organization into patterns of relatedness. The word and paradigm theory identifies ways appropriate for specifying and quantifying word-internal and word-external organization. Furthermore, inflections are stem modifications which serves as exponents of morphological feature sets.

Transformational Rules Generative Grammar: This theory was propounded by Noam Chomsky (1957). It incorporates transformational rules, which are rules that convert a sentence's deep structure into its corresponding surface structure. These rules allow for movements, deletions and other syntactic transformations that account for the variations in word order and sentence structures we observe in different languages. Essentially, this theory assigns deep structure and surface structure to show the relationship of such sentence or word. It considers grammar to be a system of rules that generate exactly those combinations of words that form grammatical sentence in a given language and involved the use of defined operations called *transformations* to produce new sentences from existing ones. While the focus of this theory is on sentence construction and the changes it undergoes, this study is concerned with verb root.

2.4 Theoretical framework

This study adopts the theory of Paradigm Function Morphology (PFM) which was propounded by Stump (2001) and applied to the study of inflection in English. The theory is built on the premise that inflection is a function from the cells in a lexeme's paradigm (lexeme/property set pairings). This morphological theory accounts for the inflection of words for a grammatical purpose. The theory strongly holds that different forms of the same root are central to the inflectional system of any language (Stump, 2012). The theory is realizational because it presumes that the inflectional patterns of are realized at the grammatical level of any language. In the Ngwa dialect, the implication of this theory would be that inflection of verbs is basically inferential because word forms are derived from roots using the morpho-syntactic patterns of a particular language, that is the lexeme or property set pairings.

It is important to note that these forms that result from inflecting root words, in this case, verbs are guided by the rules of the dialect. These grammatical rules enable the realization of an inflected word in the content paradigm. In other words, a set of forms that are inflected must necessarily share the same root. The theory of PFM is suitable for this study because it accounts for the morphological changes that occur in words and the relevance of such changes in the syntactic structure of Ngwa dialect.

2.5 Empirical studies

Empirical studies on languages around the world have shown that the degree and types of verb inflection vary widely. Some languages have highly inflectional verb systems with extensive conjugations, while others may have more analytic structures where inflection is less prevalent, and tense and aspect are expressed through separate auxiliary verbs. The focus of this study is on verbs, and their inflected forms or categories in Ngwa dialect.

Imu & Ejobee (2021) examines aspect of inflectional morphology in Urhobo. The study adopts descriptive approach. The work reveals that verbs are inflected in so many ways in the Urhobo language. The study also reveals that prefix and suffix morpheme are affixed to the verb stem to convey the exact information contained in the gloss. It also shows that there is no clear distinction between the simple present tense and simple past tense in the language.

Aronoff & Fudeman (2011) inflectional morphology deals with the forms of the lexeme that are determined by syntactic environment, that is, inflectional forms yield to grammatical processes of forming past tense, plural, present progressive, leaving the word class and the core lexical meaning of the roots they are attached to unchanged. This is the case in Ngwa dialect as verb root provide the foundation for inflected forms such as the verb *bia-* which means come, has inflected form in the past tense category *biara* which means went, and this does not change the root word *bia* but is suffixed with *ra* at the end. In this process, verbs are marked for certain grammatical features by adding a morpheme to the end of a word (in this case this morpheme is known as a suffix).

Kramersch (2010) language is the principal means whereby we conduct our social lives. When it is used in contexts of communication, it is bound up with culture in multiple and complex ways. The words people utter refer to common experience. They express facts, ideas or events that are communicable because they refer to a stock of knowledge about the world that other people share. Words when rightly used reflect speakers' attitudes and beliefs, and their point of view. This study constitutes a relatively new area of research because it establishes that understanding inflection in any language or dialect makes it possible to express cultural identity, also because of this knowledge, speakers gain full and automatic command of the inflectional machinery of their dialect.

Nwachukwu (1995) asserts that most languages of Africa and certainly those of Nigeria belong to the register type of tone languages. His submission quite captures the element of tone and its influence on the meaning of words in Ngwa dialect of Igbo. Tonal variation also determines meanings in the dialect. Where attention is not given to tone, ambiguity may set in and meaning may be lost in the process of communication.

It has been established that Igbo language is tonal, without exception to the different dialects which includes Ngwa dialect. Scholars do not agree on the number of tones in Igbo language, for instance, Igwe (1975) and Emenajo (2015) identify two basic tones in the Igbo language, the high tone and the low tone, while Ogbonnaya (1975) and Mbah & Mbah (2010) identify the third aspect of tone in Igbo, Ogbonnaya refers to it as a mid tone, and the Mbahs refer to it as the down-step tone.

Although these studies above are consistent with when discussing tones in Igbo language, none of the study has examined tone from the Ngwa dialect. While this study looks at the tonal implication

in inflection, it also states that inflection change signals the grammatical function of verbs in Ngwa dialect. In other words, inflectional morphemes are used to create a variant form of a word in order to signal grammatical information without changing the meanings of words. In Ngwa dialect, the focus is on verbs, and it can be prefixed or suffixed to express a different category or grammatical meaning of the same word, that is the same verb.

2.6 Summary of literature review

Inflection is the systematic relation between words' morpho-syntactic content and their morphological form; as such, the phenomenon of inflection raises fundamental questions about the nature of morphology and about its interfaces. While other theories were discussed, Paradigm Function Morphology theory is adopted as it suitably explains how inflectional processes work and how they are organized within a language, and empirical review of studies on inflection and the relevance of tone in Ngwa dialect.

3. Inflection in Ngwa dialect

The Ngwa people are found in Abia state, south eastern Nigeria. They are the largest and most populous ethnic group in Abia state, and the Ngwa dialect of Igbo is spoken in a number of local governments and communities in the state, they include: Isiala Ngwa, Obingwa, Ukwa, Ukwunagbo, Osisioma, Aba North and South.

Ngwa dialect is a tonal. This means that the pitch of a syllable can change the meaning of a word. It also means that same sequence of consonants or vowels can have different meanings depending on how it is pronounced. For example; *isi* can mean head or the number six, therefore the tonal differences produces different meaning.

Tonal inflection refers to the rising and falling tones of a language. Inflectional values in Ngwa dialect of the Igbo language fall mostly on the verbs (Nweya, 2013). Verb in Igbo language is known as *Ngwaa*. The Igbo verb is the only grammatical category that accepts affixes both derivational and inflectional (Emenanjo, 1978, Nwachukwu, 1984, & Mbah, 1999 & 2011).

The analysis that will be presented after in this study portray that verbs are inflected in Ngwa dialect through affixation in order to form different grammatical categories and functions. This morphological process can be seen in verbs like *bia, ga, de, ke*, among others. The affixation takes the form of prefixes and suffixes. Prefixes are affixes which are attached before the base or root word, and suffix is after the base or root of a verb or word in order to modify, extend, and change the meanings or functions of the verbs or words to which they are attached. They are universal phenomena in human languages. According to (Agbedo, 2015), affixation is morphological processes that involves the attachment of a prefix or suffix, which is often a bound morpheme at the beginning or end of a root or stem either to inflects or derive another word. Both the prefix and suffix cannot exist independently in the syntactic structures; they are bound to base or roots.

3.1 Verb

In the verb- *ga-* which means to go, when inflected can take different forms showing gender, number etc.

Ga+ra(went) when the suffix -ra is added, it forms the past tense.

A+ga (going) when the prefix a- is added, it forms the future tense.

To further analyze this inflection in Ngwa dialect, the study will identify different verbs and how the inflected forms express different grammatical categories such as tense, person, number, gender, and morpho-phonemic.

1 Tense

The following verbs are used as examples; *bia, me, de, ri, kpe*, to show present and past tense.

bja(come) – *biara*- (came)

me (do)- *meela* (done/did)

de (write)- *dere*- (wrote)

ri (eat)-*riela*- (eaten/ate)

kpe (pray)- *kpela*- (prayed)

In the above, there are suffixes to the root or base, hence, leading to inflected forms and change in meaning as well.

2 Person

The verb *Bu* – to be

To indicate person, the inflected forms will be;

A bu m / M bu – I am

Ibu – You are

Obu – He/She/It is

Anyibu – We are

Unubu – You (all) are

3 Number

In Ngwa dialect, the verb that express numbers can refer to the counting numbers, because they show quantity, and on the other hand it can be used to tell the order of things and their rank. This is best expressed in sentences.

The infinitive verb I + action verb- *i+nwe* –to have

Enwere m akpaato- I have three bags

Okekenaasusasuse

Okeke speaks five languages

Nwanne m nwoke were ofunwanwoke

My brother has one son

Nke a buiheomumunkeabu m

This is my second lesson

I guroakwukwonkeato?

Did you read the third book?

The analysis above shows how number is conjugated with verbs to express meaning and forms.

4 Gender

In Ngwa dialect just like in the Igbo language, when verbs are inflected, the gender is not distinct, this means that there are no masculine or feminine verbs, however, context of usage can allow for such distinction of gender.

Bu/Wu - (to be)

Obu – can mean He/She/It is. It is only in context that the distinction can be made.

However, to make a distinction about gender, the context will determine that, such as ;

Nwanne m nwoke nwere ofun wanwanyi -my brother has one daughter

In the sentence above, *nwoke* is a male, while *nwanyi* is a female, they are not verbs, but *nwere* which is the present simple tense of *nwe-* have.

This implies that female-specific and male-specific reference in Ngwa dialect just like in the language is achieved through compounding.

3.2 Morphophonemic inflection

Morphophonemic inflection is a type of inflection that involves changes in the phonemic form of a morpheme in order to mark grammatical function. It involves an investigation of the phonological variations within morphemes, usually marking different grammatical functions, for example, the vowel changes in some words or the consonant alternations. In this context, the focus is on tonal change in words that consequently yield different meaning.

According to Mbah & Mbah (2015) tone can be said to be the pivot around which Igbo language rotates. Meaning in Igbo language depends on the one used. For instance, the Igbo word “*akwa*” can be interpreted in various ways by the readers if not tone-marked. Tone marking system is a system of using pitch levels to indicate semantic differences. Tone is widely reported as a prosodic feature of the Igbo language that contrasts meaning among words and sentential constructions.

We examine the following words that tones govern their meanings;

Òmà - Does he know?

Òmá - He knows

Ómá - Well

Ómá - Beautiful/nice

In the last two, they share same tone, but the context of usage will make the distinction.

Ìmé - Pregnancy

Ímé - Inside

Ímè - to do

Ímù - to give birth to

Ímù - to sharpen

Ímú - to learn

Ìmù - (anya) to be awake

Ìtì - a dullard

Ítì - to beat

Ìtì - to put on

Ítì - to play

´Akwa´ (cry),

`akwa` (bed),

´akwa` (cloth),

´akwa´ (egg)

´Oke´ (male),

´oke` (share),

´oke` (boundary),

´oke´ (rat)

´Isi´ (head),

´isi` (blindness),

´isi` (smell),

‘isi (to cook)
‘Igbo` (prevent),
‘igbo´ (hard drug),
‘Igbo` (a tribe/ language in Nigeria)
‘Ube` (arrow),
‘ube´ (pear),
‘ube´ (dialectal meaning excellent)
‘Ihe` (light),
‘ihe´ (something)
‘Mma´ (knife),
‘mma (beauty)

These are words do not change in forms essentially but have multiple meanings, depending on the tonal variation. If the tonal variations are not given attention to, it creates ambiguity in a dialect or language.

3.2 Summary of findings

The findings of this study reveal that inflections in Ngwa dialect are mostly and commonly marked on verbs. It also reveals that these inflections on verbs are affixes which can be prefixes or suffixes. While the suffixes in the dialect are usually verbs that can be put at the end of the verb, prefixes are added to the beginning of the verb roots so that such verbs can fit in with the syntactic structures in order to express different meaning in the Ngwa dialect. The findings of the study also show that inflection of verbs for the formation of various forms of a verb in the Ngwa dialect is morphophonemic, that is, tone is a constituent commander and determiner of word categories, in effect, change in forms are dependent on change in sound or tone.

3.3 Conclusion

The morphological process of inflection in Ngwa dialect enables morphing verbs to create different meanings which allow speakers to convey a wide range of grammatical information in a compact and efficient manner. While inflection mainly falls on verbs in Ngwa dialect, tonal variations are also central to inflection in the dialect. The study recommends more research works to be carried out on inflection in dialect because of limited study, this will enhance the growth and development of the dialect.

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