

## A COGNITIVE VIEW OF SEMANTIC RELATION IN IGBO SYNTAX

### Introduction

This paper aims at a structural description of semantic relation in Igbo Syntax insofar as the linking verbs (copulas) *bu* 'is' and *di* 'be' are concerned. The data are drawn extensively from a set of normal, protocol language as found in Igbo personal names.<sup>1</sup> The description of the details of sentence structures, including the deep structures of the data, will be based on the cognitive model formerly known as stratificational grammar evolved by Lamb (1962 and 1966) and followed up by Lockwood (1972). It turns out, then, that we shall be subscribing to an important concept of cognitive system of semantic relation.<sup>2</sup>

### 2. The Data

The data for the study were accomplished purely on the basis of actual events involving actual utterances in Igbo, as seen in some personal names used among the Igbo. This is very possible because Igbo personal names are essentially a record of events of everyday normal speech of the people. Representative samples were selected from a long list which we have compiled through years of research in the field of Igbo onomastics. The procedure for data collection involved a number of analytic processes:

- (a) Random collection of names from Church registers; school registers; judicial records; private club records; demographic records; and from personal interviews which we conducted in major dialect areas in Igbo. For example, the interviewer sought to establish a general semantic conception of the verbs *bu* 'is' and *di* 'be' in various dialects of Igbo. The subjects (SS) were asked various questions, to elicit answers involving their use of the two copulas in relational clauses. The questions were structured and administered accordingly so that

the SS were given even chances with the same set of questions - though allowing room for dialectal variations - where sometimes the SS used the verbs interchangeably in their various dialectal origins.

- (b) Arbitrary selection and alphabetic listing of the names - result from (a).
- (c) Structural grouping of the result from (b) into sentence, clause, phrase, and word.
- (d) Classification of the result from (c) according to types: affirmative, negative, interrogative, etc.
- (e) Verifications by rules formulation, notably cognitive-stratificational model.

### 3. Analysis

We applied the cognitive or stratificational model. In this model, a stratificational diagramming follows a basic principle whereby the lexical items are arranged at the surface structure level. Thus, the deep structure or meaning of a given data does not have the lexical items (i.e. the participants) in a different arrangement, because they only exist at the surface level. What we did, then, was follow up a systematic analysis of the data by means of stratification. Consequently, we included a systematic examination of how constituents fill functions in syntactic units and of the relationship between functions and features, from which meaning is realized.

### 4. Findings

The results of the analyses yielded nuances which provide a great insight into certain recalcitrant facts about the syntax of Igbo, such as the copula concept of relational clauses. The data analysis, for instance, showed that there is a marked consistency of copulas *bu* 'is' and *di* 'be' in relational clauses, as to where *bu* occurs as contrasted to where *di* occurs.<sup>3</sup> Also the analysis revealed that while dialectal variations exist, they are more of phonological differences than syntactical variations.

These findings have been possible because Igbo names are maximally well formed, idiomatic expressions, and as such

they form important linguistic units ranging from sentence to clause. Ikegami (1980); Makkai (1972) and Sullivan (1980) - all rightly note that the idiom does not differ from "a chain of ordinary morphemes in its morphological and phonological relation."<sup>4</sup> These syntactic facts are absolutely true of Igbo names, as we will show with the illustrations that follow.

#### 4.1 *Syntax*

Every Igbo personal name has something that serves, conceptually, as its subject, even when there is no corresponding constituent. Moreover, the choice of name structures is usually based on intuitions about what would be useful in expressing regularities among related sentences and in analysing meaning.

Let us briefly examine these names:

- (4.1) Chibundu < Chi + *bu* ndu  
 God + is + ndu  
 'God is life' (Affirmative)
- (4.2) Chidimma < Chi + *di* + mma  
 God + be + good  
 "God is good" (Affirmative)

These constructions can be viewed as objectively sets of multiple lexical relations, which can be classified as independent sentences, the affirmative. Each sentence thus involves some process or relationship specified by the verb (italized) and one or more participants specified by the clause. Thus, each structure represents the underlying propositional content of the sentence - who or what is this or that.

Notice that (4.1) and (4.2), being expressions of the Igbo world-view, mean exactly what they say. They can be expanded without enlarging their basic structure, as we have shown by the sign, '<', to the right of each string, to refer to the elements of the structure, and (+) to mark the word-order. In a normal, neutral utterance, therefore, (4.1) and (4.2) above, are recognised as relational clauses in that the proposition in each case takes the form of a relation between two participants.

## 4.2 Relational Clauses

Relational clauses in Igbo can be distinguished by certain internal features apart from word-order, notably the functional value of the verbs and the grammatical class of predicate attributes. Those clauses whose verbs provide marked forms of relation or link between the subject and the predicate are here referred to as relational clauses. Normally a relational clause in Igbo is characterised by the presence of the linking verb (copula) *bu* (is) whose predicate attribute must be a noun, or by copula *di* (be), with a noun as the predicate attribute.

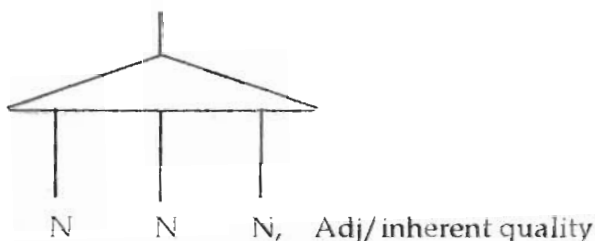


Fig. 1: A cognitive model of relational clause.

A basic structure for a relational clause can be posited:

$$S \longrightarrow N + V + N, \text{ Adj/N}$$

meaning that a relational clause consists of a noun (N), followed by a verb (V), and a noun or an adjective, as illustrated in Figure 1. In (4.1) and (4.2) the copulas *bu* (is) and *di* (be) respectively, perform special functions characteristic of each. Therefore, two distinctive types of relational clauses can be recognised: (i) **Equational Clause** and (ii) **Stative Clause**. We take these up one after the other in what follows.

## 4.3 Equational Clause

An equational clause in Igbo is characterized by obligatory *bu*. Functionally, this verb has an inherent quality of state. It marks a relationship between two entities, as in (1.1), including (4.3.1) and (4.3.2).

- (4.3.1) Nwabueze < Nwa + *bu* + *eze*  
 Child + be + king  
 'The child is a kingly gift'

(4.3.2) Madubuike < Madu + bu + ike  
 man + be + power  
 'Man is a source of power'

In those examples, the copula *bu* (is) equates the subject to the predicate attribute of each construction.

Although those participants *Chi* (God) and *Ndu* (life) (4.3.1); *Nwa* 'child' and *eze* 'king' (4.3.2); and *mmadu* 'man' and *ike* 'power' (4.3.3) belong to the same order of abstraction, they differ in generality, which is an important characteristic of equational clauses in most SVO languages such as Igbo. Halliday (1970:154) rightly suggests, though for English, that the distinctive feature of equational clauses is the predicate attribute noun.

A structure for equational clause in Igbo can now be derived:

$$S \longrightarrow N + V + N,$$

to mean that an equational clause in Igbo consists of a noun (N), a verb (V), (obligatory) and a noun (N), as seen in Figure 2.

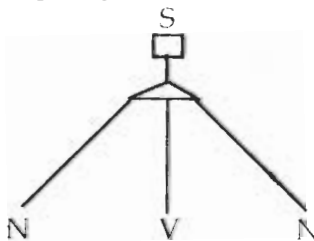


Figure 2: A cognitive model of equational clause.

The surface structure of (1.1) is expanded in Fig. 3, showing the deep structure.

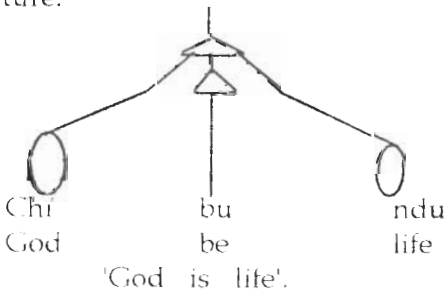


Figure 3: Cognitive/Deep Structure

### Reversibility

If the copula *bu* in (4.1.1) is omitted, the result would be a phrase structure,

(4.3.3) Chindu < Chi + ndu  
 God + life  
 'God of life'

showing that a zero (Ø) copula is not recognized in equational clauses in Igbo. In other words, (4.3.3) may not be considered as a clause, with the omission of the copula. Perhaps, this may differ from what happens elsewhere. Sebeok (1943:320) suggests specific conditions for the omission of copula in Hungarian, noting at least, twelve exceptions to the rule. Also Sableski (1965:439) notes the absence of copula in Bengali clauses, but observes some variations especially in the use of certain copulas in certain syntactic conditions to elicit affirmative or negative equational clauses. This strikes one as similar to Igbo, only in that respect.

In Igbo, there may be no exception to the rule of obligatoriness in equational clauses. Rather than omission of copula, a reversal of word-order can be accommodated. For example, (4.1.1) may become

(4.3.4) Ndubuchi < Ndu + *bu* + chi  
 Life + is + God  
 'Life is God within the soul'.

The surface structure of (4.3.4) is the same as (4.1.1) although they differ in semantic terms. In (4.1.1) the Subject or Executor is used as demonstrated in Fig. 3. The deep structure may not be the same topic. In (4.3.4), however, it functions as Rheme and vice versa, i.e. it expresses the largest amount of extra meaning - in addition to what already has been communicated.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps, such a view could be true of other languages whose equational clauses can be reversed. For example, the English clause,

(4.3.5) Maxwell is the leader

may not mean exactly the same as

(4.3.6) The leader is Maxwell

It can be inferred that the relation between the participants in

(4.1.1), (4.3.4), (4.3.5) and (4.3.6) is one of identification, not inclusion. Further details of the deep structure concept, however, should be left to a semological view, which is beautifully treated by Copeland and Davis (1980). Here, however, it is important to stress that, semologically, Igbo personal names express something about entities in the real world or in imagination, as is clear in the semantics of the data which are used here for illustration. We give, for example, the cognitive view of (4.3.1) and (4.3.2) in Figure 4(a) and (b).

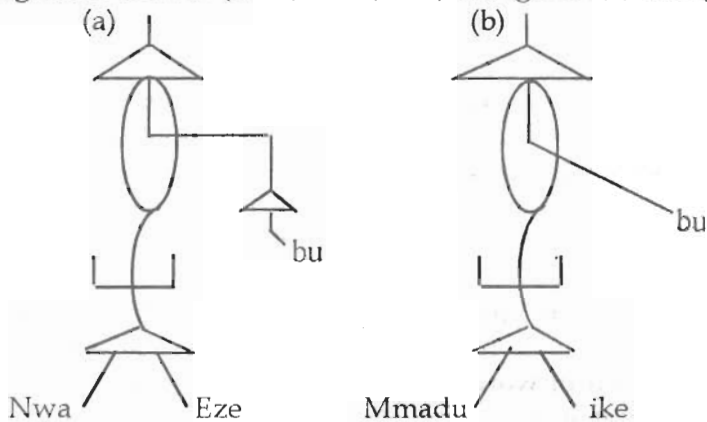


Figure 4

Other examples of affirmatives are

(4.3.7) Ndubuisi < Ndu + bu + isi  
 Life + is + head

i.e. 'Life is first'

or 'Life comes first' (Affirmative)

(4.3.8) Nwabuonyinye < Nwa + bu + Onyinye  
 child + is + gift  
 "A child is a gift"

(4.3.9) Igwebuike < Igwe + bu + ike  
 Majority + is + strength/power  
 'Majority is strength'

Equational clauses are also found in question statements and affirmative negative statements, as in these names:

(4.3.10) Onyebuchi < Onye + *bu* + chi  
 Who + is + God  
 'No one is God'

(4.3.11) Maduabuchi < Madu + a + *bu* + chi  
 Human + not + is + God  
 'Man is not God' (Affirmative negative)

As can be seen, (4.3.10) and (4.3.11) have the same functional structure as in Fig. 3. However, they are distinguished only in the sense that (4.3.10) is a question, with the question word, *onye* (who), which is a pronoun (prn.), while (4.3.11) is negative statement with the negative marker (Neg. M) *a*. Notice especially that (4.3.10) and (4.3.11) have obligatory *bu*, and that the predicate attribute in each case is a noun. To show the deep structures, (4.3.10) and (4.3.11) are encoded into diagrams, as in Figure 5(a) and (b):

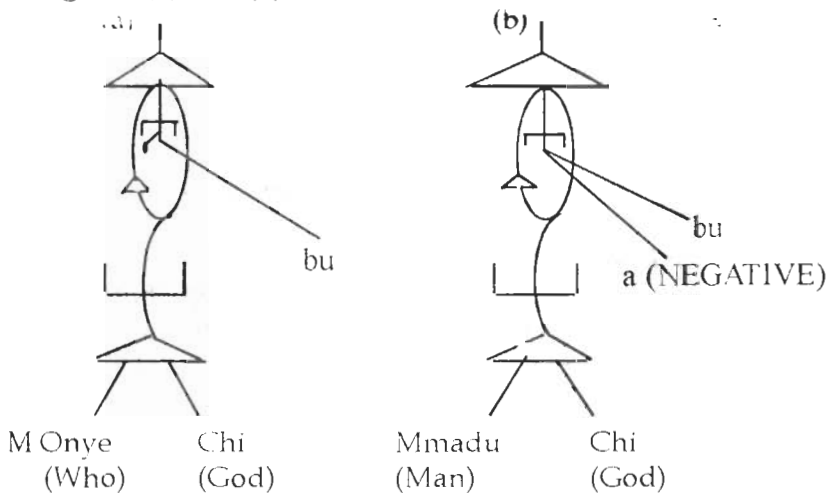


Figure 5.

The distinctions in the function of the copulas *bu* (is) and *di* (be), as found in equational clauses, make it possible to classify such clauses as affirmative, negative and interrogative. Consider the names in Table 1.

Against each name, the sign, '<', is used to indicate the



normal sentence structure from which the name is derived.

Affirmative	Negative	Interrogative
(4.3.12) Azubuike < Azu <i>bu</i> ike 'A solid background is a refuge'	(4.3.17) Onuabuchi < Onu <i>abu</i> chi People's opinion is not God's	(4.3.21) Onyebueze < Onye <i>bu</i> eze 'Who is king?'
(4.3.13) Chibueze < Chi <i>bu</i> eze 'God is king'/ 'God is king'	(4.3.18) Ochiabuuto < Ochi a <i>bu</i> uto 'A smile does not necessarily mean friendliness'	(4.3.22) Onyebuanyi < Onye <i>bu</i> anyi 'Who is a friend?'
(4.3.14) Eziokwubundu (Eziokwu <i>bu</i> ndu) 'Truth is Life'	(4.3.19) Onwuabuanyi Onwu a <i>bu</i> anyi 'Death is not a friend'	(4.3.23) Onyebuoke < Onye <i>bu</i> eke 'Who is God?'
(4.3.15) Nnabuike Nna <i>bu</i> ike 'Father is a source power'	(4.3.20) Chiabunjo Chi a <i>bu</i> njo God is not evil/bad'	(4.3.24) Onyebuisi Onye <i>bu</i> isi 'Who is supreme?'
(4.3.16) Nwabungozi Nwa <i>bu</i> ngozi 'The child is a blessing'		

**Table 1: Classification of Equational Clauses in Igbo**

### 5. Stative Clauses: *Copula Di*.

A stative clause in Igbo is characterized by obligatory copula *di* 'be' and by its predicate attribute which must be an adjective. Further examples are represented in these names:

- (5.1) Amudiegwu < Amu + *di* + egwu  
Title + be + wonderful  
'A title is honourable'
- (5.2) Chukwudiomimi < Chukwu + *di* + omimi  
God + be + deep  
'God is incomprehensible'.

The grammatical function of obligatory *di* 'be' is to state a qualification, hence the predicate attribute for stative clause must be an inherent quality. In (5.3) above, the predicate attribute is *mmu* 'good' in (5.1), it is *egwu* 'honourable' and in

(5.2), it is *onimi* 'incomprehensible', for instance.

A structure can be assigned:

$S \longrightarrow N + V + Adj.$ ,

This is further illustrated in Figure 6.

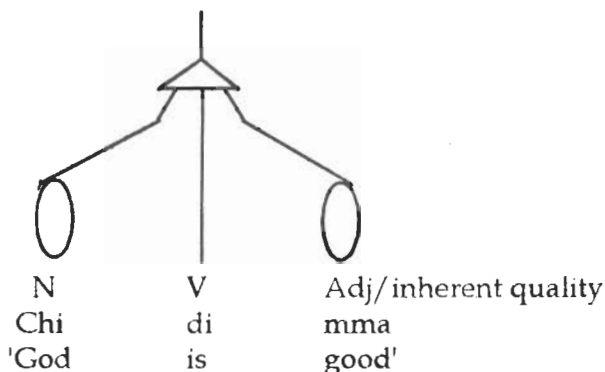


Figure 6.

meaning that a stative clause consists of a noun (N), followed by a verb (V), and an inherent quality (Adj.). But we must further stress that the verb which characterizes such a clause is the copula, *di* (be).

Like equational clauses, stative clauses can be identified also in affirmative question, with question word, *Onye* (who) and in negative structure, with negative marker, *a*. Consider these names:

(5.3) Onyedimma < Onye + *di* + mma  
           Who + be + good  
           'Who is good?' (Affirmative-  
                                           Interrogative)

(5.4) Onyediiche < Onye + *di* + iche  
           Who + be + different  
           'Who is different?' (Negative  
                                           Declarative)

(5.5) Onwuadimma < Onwu + *a* + *di* + mma  
           Death + not + be + good  
           'Death is not good'

- (5.6) Chiadinjo < Chi + a + di + njo  
 God + not + be + bad  
 'God is never bad'

The basic structure of these sentences is the same as shown in Fig. 5, although different deep structures can be derived, as we have seen in question and negative equational clauses, (a) and (b) in Fig. 5. It is very important to notice that in all those illustrations the concept of obligatory copula is strongly stressed.

On the other hand, the notion of reversibility cannot be applied to stative clauses in Igbo. If, for example, (5.3) and (5.4) are reversed, the results would be unacceptable utterances in Igbo, as follows:

- (5.7) \*Mmadionye  
 (5.8) \*Egwudiamu  
 (5.9) \*Omimidichukwu

The unacceptability of these constructions arises from the fact that the transformed structures feature a form of "baby-talk" in which the copula is used for the wrong entity or in the wrong sense.<sup>6</sup> In Table 2 below, we give a classification of stative clauses as represented by some personal names.

Affirmative	Affirmative Declarative	Interrogative
(5.10) Chidiebere < Chi <i>di</i> ebere 'God is merciful'	(5.14) Chidiogo < Chi <i>di</i> ogo 'God is sympathetic'	(5.18) Onyediocha < Onye <i>di</i> ocha 'Who is sinless?'
(5.11) Chidiike < Chi <i>di</i> ike 'God is powerful'	(5.15) Nwadiuru < Nwa <i>di</i> uru 'A child is useful/ profitable'	(5.19) Onyedinso < Onye <i>di</i> nso 'Who is holy?'
(5.12) Nwanyidiuko < Nwanyi <i>di</i> uko 'Woman is scarce'	(5.16) Onwudiwe < Onwu <i>di</i> iwe 'Death is painful'	(5.20) Onyediuto < Onye <i>di</i> mma 'Who is good?'
(5.13) Nwadimkpa < Nwa <i>di</i> mkpa 'Child is needful'	(5.17) Chukwudinsu < Chukwu <i>di</i> nso 'God is holy'	(5.21) Onyediukwu < Onye <i>di</i> ukwu 'Who is great?'

## CONCLUSION

In the preceding analyses, no exceptions have been noted for obligatory copula in relational clauses in Igbo. It is perhaps on such a basis that Igbo may differ somewhat from some other languages which may or may not express copula at all in equational clauses, e.g., Hungarian and Bengali.

There is no question, though, that 'copula' is a universal concept in languages. As far as equational clauses are concerned, Ferguson (1971:277) rightly suggests two main types of languages. Type A, he says, has copula, with a few exceptions, and that type B languages have no copula. Given such a classification, and based on the evidence of Igbo, as seen here, it would seem clear enough that Igbo would belong in Ferguson's Type A languages, in spite of certain peculiarities which Igbo may have in relational clauses. So far as we have seen in this essay, some peculiar differences between the two types of Igbo relational clauses include the fact that unlike equational clauses, stative clauses cannot be reversed. The reason for that has been seen as due largely to the marked function of copula *di*: it can only state a condition of, but not identify a predicate attribute. Thus a "reversion" in a stative clause would result into unacceptable utterance in Igbo, (5.5) through (5.7), for instance. What perhaps remains to be emphasized, then, is that the structural concept of relational clauses in Igbo arises from word-order in which the copulative verbs *bu* 'is' and *di* 'be' are obligatory. Also the personal names used here for analysis at least justify the fact that they provide clear representations of Igbo syntax. Finally, the stratificational diagram in Figures (1) through (6) obviously have served to demonstrate (however elementary) that cognitive theory is right about the structure of languages, as a stratified network of relations.

## FOOTNOTES

1 The field work from which this paper is drawn has been supported by the University of Nigeria Senate Research Grant Committee, Research Grant No. 90/13 of 1991.

2. See Lamb, S. (1966).

3. The data used here are consistently standard Igbo. A few variations of such names, however, can be found in various dialect clusters: Onicha, Owere, Abiriba, Oba, Owerenta, etc. While dialect variations exist, they are more of phonological differences than syntactic variations. Therefore, the data here are appreciably representative of Igbo syntax.

4. See Lyons (1977b); Lepschy (1970); and Lyons (1968). Bloomfield (1933:170) has rightly noted that a linguistic structure which is "not included in any larger form" be recognized as a sentence, which is the approach we have adopted here.

5. Researchers of Igbo language have not paid enough attention (if at all) to the implications of grammatical structuring of Igbo personal names. Most of the work so far in Igbo names tend to concentrate on social significance as seen in the practices of the giving of personal names or on semantic interpretations of such names (cf. Wieschoff 1941).

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