

Verbal Classifier Features of the Igbo Verb Root

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This paper examines the verbal classifier features of the Igbo verb root in a multiword structure involving the combination of a verb root with a nominal or prepositional phrase (schematized as Verb+NP/PP). The structure is predominant in the Igbo language and functions as the equivalent of a single lexical item in an average European language. Some examples include *-má ụŕá* 'slap' and *-tụ́ ime* 'impregnate' for the Verb+NP structure, and *tụ́ n'ányá* 'surprise' for the Verb+PP structure. Both have been compared with the English phrasal verb (Nwachukwu 1987) and the German Funktionsverbgefüge (Uchechukwu 2006), and have also been described in almost similar terms as have been used for describing the English and German structures (e.g. *light verb*). However, the Igbo structures differ from these other structures in not having simple verb equivalents, contrary to the English and German languages whose complex structures also have simple verbs as functional equivalents, for example, *bring about* => *cause*, and *Beobachtungen anstellen* => *beobachten*. This lack of simple but functionally equivalent verb forms for the Igbo V+NP/PP structure, and the unlimited possibility of combining the small set of Igbo verb roots with various nominal and prepositional phrases to form new V+NN/PP structures, have given rise to the traditional view that the verbal components of such structures are empty/practically meaningless (Nwachukwu 1987; Emenanjo 1984). However, a cognitive linguistics approach to the structure has argued for an image schema motivation of their verbal components, with each of the above named verb roots being given the following schematic meanings: *-má* 'manipulate flat-shaped object', *-tụ́* (1) 'throw (with movement away from speaker and in an upward arched direction)', (2) 'land on/descend towards' (Uchechukwu 2005; 2006; 2011). This paper goes further into the issue by examining the relationship between the Igbo verb root and the other components of the structure from the perspective of a 'verbal classifier' system. Seen from this angle, some of the classificatory features identified in the literature for classifier languages (Allan 1977, 2001; Barron 1982) can be confirmed for the Igbo verb root. Also, an application of Allan's (1977) methods of (1) foreign observer's intuition, (2) native speaker intuition, and (3) the introduction of new items to the native speaker, whereby the same features identified by a foreign observer and a native speaker are used at the introduction of new items to the Igbo native speaker, further buttresses the verbal classifier features of the Igbo verb root. In conclusion, Langacker's view on the effect of a classifier in any noun classifier system also applies here. A classifier in any such system imposes a construal, and each classifier imposes a different construal on the same noun (Langacker 2008: 341); so also does each Igbo verb root impose a construal, and each verb root imposes a different construal on the same NP or PP component.

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