

Lexical syntax and the listing problem in Ìgbo

Úzò Ìhìònú (New York) and Victor Manfredi (Boston University)

Abstract

Ìgbo dictionaries face a *listing problem*: how to classify (sort and retrieve) predicate-type expressions which share the same initial CV root but differ in other nonroot elements. Such other elements, much discussed in structuralist and generative literature, include compounded CV roots both bound and free (Ward 1936, Welmers 1970, Émènanjò 1975, Lord 1975) as well as free nominals often called “inherent complements” (Émènanjò 1984, Nwáchukwu 1985, 1987). The listing problem consists in the fact that some strings which share an initial CV morpheme are perceived to belong to a single lemma (lexical entry), while others with the same initial CV are semantically distant enough from each other to qualify as distinct lemmas, but the choice is intuitive and inexplicit. Nwáchukwu (1987, 44-48) cites nine clusters of predicate expressions, each of which shares an initial CV: *-gbá* (23 listemes), *-tí* (13), *-kpá* (9), *-má* (7), *-tá* (4), *-kpó*, *-tí* and *-mù* (3 each), and more examples appear in Williamson (1972) and Ígwè (1985). Impressively, Úchèchúkwu finds the root *-má* in 16 listemes (his “verbal complexes”), all sharing the abstract denotation ‘flat’ but clustered in four conceptual domains: human body-parts, wielded instruments, cultural objects and natural shapes (2005, 81). Unfortunately the same approach does not achieve equally elegant results in the *-gbá* cluster (Úchèchúkwu 2004). More remarkably, Ánòká (1972) finds that at least 15 distinct CV roots substitute for *-zú* ‘buy’ in the context of distinct commodities, so that the abstract meaning of ‘purchase’ defines a cluster of listemes that share no single morpheme whatsoever, with the choice of CV root being determined purely by selectional (classifier-like) properties of the direct object. From all this evidence, it’s clear that the lexical predicate of Ìgbo can’t be identified with the CV root, despite the label of “verb” given by Africanists to any CV roots because some or many such roots translate as lexical verbs in European languages. Instead, it seems that a free CV root in Ìgbo is potentially no more than an adverbial modifier of a listed predicate, to be represented as an adjunct not as the head (cf. Williams 2003). This paper adds another argument for the same conclusion, based on a different kind of cluster, in which the lexical head is the nominal complement itself:

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| (1) | <p><i>ósò</i> cluster:
[-CV-CV <i>ósò</i>]
‘escape on the run’
cf. <i>ósò</i> ‘flight, race’</p> | <p><i>-kú-fù ósò</i>
<i>-kírí-fù ósò</i>
<i>-tí-fù ósò</i>
<i>-kú-nye ósò</i>
<i>-vó-rò ósò</i>
[...]</p> | <p>e.g. <i>Ézè bú-ru águ kú-fù ósò.</i>
E. see-AFF leopard CV-CV flight.GEN
‘Ézè saw a leopard and took to his heels’</p> |
|-----|--|---|---|

Accepting *ósò* as the lexical head of all these strings based on their quasi-identical interpretation, the parser somehow needs to skip over the initial -CV-CV for listing purposes, treating it instead as an adverbial modifier. This result, if correct, is beyond the reach of either morpheme-based or word-based storage. Instead, discontinuous constituency demands *lexical syntax* (Hale & Keyser 1993, cf. Hale & al. 1995, Hale 2000). Specifically, all the items in (1) instantiate the phrasal parse in (2), where the positions labeled V, DP and P are empty variables. The unergative, dynamically locative semantics common to all the expressions in (1) is not separately stated for each one, but falls out in a general way from the identical branching lexical-syntactic structure which they all share.



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