

Semelfactivity in Igbo

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Abstract: This paper examines semelfactivity in the Igbo language. It seeks to highlight semelfactive verbs and other semelfactive sentential elements. The data for the study were obtained through introspection which were confirmed by two native speakers of Igbo and were analysed descriptively. From the study, it was discovered that the semelfactive verbs in Igbo that co-occur with bound verb complements for emphasis are *takwu* ‘whisper’, *lo* ‘swallow’, *nwu* ‘die’ and *hupe* ‘glimpse’ whereas *kọ* ‘scratch’, *tabi* ‘blink’, *ze* ‘sneeze’, *kụ* ‘knock’, *ti* ‘shout’, *wuli* ‘jump’ (*wu* ‘jump’. *-li* ‘upward’ as opposed to *wuda* ‘jump downwards’), *gba* ‘kick’, *nyu* ‘fart’ and *kwa* ‘cough’ that take inherent complement verbs. The research also revealed that *na mberede* ‘suddenly’ and *na ntabi anya* ‘in a twinkle of an eye’ are semelfactive adverbials in the Igbo language. Based on the findings, the paper concludes that in Igbo, semelfactivity entails a one-time action and a spontaneous or instantaneous action.

Keywords: semelfactivity, semelfactive verbs, adverbials, Igbo, complements

1. Introduction

Semelfactivity is a compound word derived from the Latin words *semel* ‘once’ and *faciō/facere* ‘do,’ which means ‘do-it-once’ or one-off (Bacz, 2012). Semelfactivity often occurs among verbs. Bacz (2012) observes that in the morphology of Polish verbs, the term, *czasowniki jednokrotne* is used to refer to a group of *-ną-* suffixed verbs that express the meaning of one-time occurrence. Nessel (2013) defines semelfactive verbs as verbs that indicate one quatum of the activity designated by the base verbs. A quatum here refers to one event in a series of events (Nessel, 2013). Semelfactive verbs are categorized under dynamic verbs (Katalin, 2011). Other features of semelfactivity are [-static], [-telic], and

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[+punctual] (cf. Song, 2014). Semelfactive verbs are [-static] because the actions being performed do not last for a long time. It is a spontaneous action. It is [+dynamic] in the sense that dynamic verbs describe activities or events which can begin or end. The feature of atelicity presents semelfactive verbs as “punctual actions without a result state” (Song, 2014:4). Semelfactivity comprises semelfactive verbs, semelfactive suffixes and adverbials.

In this research, bound and inherent complement Igbo verbs that are related to semelfactivity are addressed. The bound complement verb, according to Nwachukwu, (1987) is a verbal article that is dependent on a verb from which it is derived. In this case, the complement derives its meaning from the verb; and without the verb, the complement is meaningless. Inherent complement verbs, on the other hand, consist of a verb that is followed by a noun, known as inherent complement (IC). Nwachukwu (1987:22) contends that “inherent verb complement is one whose citation form is obligatorily followed by a meaning specifying noun complement”. Simply put, most Igbo verbs have accompanying nouns which add to the meaning of the verb and as such if the noun is replaced, a new meaning emerges automatically.

This study is necessitated as a result of lacking a research solely focused on semelfactivity in the Igbo language. As such, the objectives of this study are to identify semelfactive verbs and their relatedness with bound and inherent verbs in Igbo, to explore other word categories that denote a semelfactive notion in Igbo and lastly to examine how semelfactive notions in Igbo can be iterated or ‘deselmefactivised’. The data for this study were generated through introspection and were confirmed by two native speakers of the Igbo language. This confirmation has been necessary so as to enable the researchers to include grammatical semelfactive constructions that are obtainable in the Igbo language. The data have been analysed descriptively in the sense that no theory was employed in the data analysis. The tone marking convention used in this research is that of Nwachukwu (1987), which marks only the first in a series of similar tones. The convention also stipulates that if two consecutive acute marks appear, the second is a step tone.

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The presentation of semelfactive verbs in Igbo will be patterned alongside the feature of bound verb complement, and inherent complement verb.

2.1 Semelfactive verbs with bound verb complement

(1) <i>Ō</i>	<i>ta-kwu-ru</i>	<i>àtakwu</i>
3SG	bite-say-PST	BVC
‘He whispered.’		

- (2) *Ódò nwụ-rụ anwụ́*
 Odo die-PST BVC
 ‘Odo died.’
- (3) *Ádá lò-ro ákpụ ahù eló*
 Ada swallow-PST foofoo the BVC
 ‘Ada swallowed the foofoo.’
- (4) *Ó hụpe-re ya ahupé*
 3SG glimpse-PST it BVC
 ‘He/She glimpsed at it.’
- (5) *Ábuchi dàr-a áda*
 Abuchi fall-PST BVC
 ‘Abuchi fell.’

In the above examples (1-5), the acts of whispering, dying, swallowing, glimpsing and falling are instantaneous and spontaneous. They are one-off and do-it-once events in the sense that it does not take time for someone to whisper to someone, death can occur at any slightest minute, one swallows at the snap of a finger and glimpsing denotes a brief look, which does not take time. More so, they are semelfactive verbs and not activity verbs because the sentences do not describe an action in a series of actions. In distinguishing between semelfactive verbs from activity verbs, Katalin (2011:122) contends: “many semelfactive verbs also allow for activity interpretation when the events they describe occur in a repetitive sequence. For instance, the verb ‘cough’ is semelfactive when it describes ‘one cough’, but an activity when it describes ‘one cough’ a sequence or series of coughs”. It is also observed from the data that these semelfactive verbs have bound verb complements (BVCs). Although these BVCs are optional, in the sentences above, they serve as emphatic elements to the verb. BVC, according to Nwachukwu (1987), is a verbal particle, which has no independent existence outside the verbal complex. It is often derived from its verb and serves as an emphatic marker, which can occur with any Igbo verb whenever emphasis is required.

2.2 Semelfactive verbs with inherent complement verb structure

Inherent complement verbs are made up of verbs that usually precede a noun which is known as inherent complement (IC). Nwachukwu (1987:22) contends that “inherent verb complement is one whose citation form is obligatorily followed by a meaning specifying noun complement”. Examples of semelfactive verbs with inherent complement verb structure include:

- (6) *Ó kọ-rọ ókọ*
 3SG scratch-PST scratch (ICV)
 ‘He/She scratched.’

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|----------------------|-----------------|--------------------|------------|
| (7) <i>Úchè</i> | <i>tá-bì-ri</i> | <i>anya.</i> | |
| Uche | eat-end-PST | eye (ICV) | |
| 'Uche blinked.' | | | |
| (8) <i>Òkéke</i> | <i>zè-re</i> | <i>úzere</i> | |
| Okeke | sneeze-PST | sneeze (ICV) | |
| 'Okeke sneezed.' | | | |
| (9) <i>Èkené</i> | <i>kù-rụ</i> | <i>áka.</i> | |
| Ekene | knock-PST | hand (ICV) | |
| 'Ekene knocked.' | | | |
| (10) <i>Újú</i> | <i>tì-ri</i> | <i>mkpu</i> | |
| Uju | shout-PST | shout (ICV) | |
| 'Uju shouted.' | | | |
| (11) <i>Há</i> | <i>wùli-ri</i> | <i>élu</i> | |
| 3PL | jump-PST | up (ICV) | |
| 'They jumped.' | | | |
| (12) <i>Ézè</i> | <i>gba-ra</i> | <i>Íjè'omaṙkwụ</i> | |
| Eze | kick-PST | Ijeoma leg (ICV) | |
| 'Eze kicked Ijeoma.' | | | |
| (13) <i>Óbìnnà</i> | <i>nyụ-rụ</i> | <i>áhụrụ</i> | |
| Obinna | fart-PST | fart | |
| 'Obinna farted.' | | | |
| (14) <i>Chínàzá</i> | <i>kwà-ra</i> | <i>úkwarà</i> | |
| Chinaza | cough-PST | cough | |
| 'Chinaza coughed.' | | | |
| (15) <i>Èméka</i> | <i>dụrụ</i> | <i>n'</i> | <i>ubú</i> |
| Emeka | shrug | at | shoulder |
| 'Emeka shrugged.' | | | |

The verbs *kọrọ*, *tabiri*, *zere*, *kurụ*, *tiri*, *wuliri*, *gbara*, *nyurụ*, *kwara* and *durụ* in examples (6-15) above are semelfactive verbs. In (6), the act of scratching one's body has an instantaneous denotation unless one wants to iterate the action by scratching repeatedly. The time it takes to scratch one's body once is spontaneous. In the same vein, the acts of blinking, sneezing, knocking, screaming, jumping, kicking, farting and coughing have semelfactive interpretation. The act of blinking in (7) was done once and not repeated. In (8) Okeke sneezed once. The act of knocking performed by Ekene in (9) was also done once and not repeated. Other from (10-15) were also done once and not repeated. Aside from the feature of do-it-once, these actions are rapidly done, sometimes consciously and in other times subconsciously. For instance, blinking and sneezing are typical examples of

subconscious events because the performer cannot control such actions and is unaware when such acts might take place. On the other hand, knocking, kicking and jumping are performed consciously whereas scratching, screaming, and coughing can occur subconsciously or consciously as the case may be.

In essence, in line with Agbo's (2010) test for semelfactivity, the constructions in (6-15) will still be grammatical when the adverbial nominal is added to them. For instance:

- (16) *Ó kò-rò ókò (ozigbo)*
 3SG scratch-PST scratch (ICV) immediately
 'He/She scratched immediately.'
- (17) *Úchè tá-bì-ri anya (ozigbo)*
 Uche eat-end-PST eye (ICV) immediately
 'Uche blinked immediately.'
- (18) *Òkéke zè-re úzere (ozigbo)*
 Okeke sneeze-PST sneeze (ICV) immediately
 'Okeke sneezed immediately.'
- (19) *Èkené kù-rù áka (ozigbo)*
 Ekene knock-PST hand (ICV) immediately
 'Ekene knocked immediately.'
- (20) *Újú tí-ri mkpu (ozigbo)*
 Uju shout-PST shout (ICV) immediately
 'Uju shouted immediately.'

From the examples above, the verbs in (16-20) passed the test of semelfactivity because they are still grammatically correct even with the addition of the adverbial noun *ozigbo*. *Ozigbo* is enclosed in parenthesis because it is an optional element in the construction. With its absence, the notion of one-off and do it once is still presented in the verbs.

More so, examples (6-15) have inherent complement verbs that occur alongside the semelfactive verbs. These inherent complement verbs (ICVs) are compulsory nominals in Igbo constructions, which complete the semantic import of the verb. The ICVs in (6-15) are *ókò*, *anya*, *uzere*, *aka*, *mkpu*, *elu*, *ukwu*, *ahuru* and *ukwara*. This implies that without these nominal elements, the desired semelfactive meaning of the verb will be lost. This is so because in the slot of the ICVs, there are other elements that can fill that position. For instance, examples (6), (7) and (9) can be rewritten as follows:

- (21) *Ó kòrò ukó*
 3SG stative scarce
 'It is scarce.'
- (22) *Úchè tabi-ri ónụ ya*
 Uche bite-PST mouth his

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- ‘Uche bite his mouth.’
- | | | |
|-------------------|--------------|---------------|
| (23) <i>Èkené</i> | <i>kù-rù</i> | <i>mkpuru</i> |
| Ekene | plant-PST | seed |
- ‘Ekene planted a seed’.

The ICVs in (6), (7) and (9) have been substituted with *ukọ*, *onu* and *mkpuru*, which give the sentences a different meaning notwithstanding that the subject and the verb of the two examples (6,7&9 and 21,22&23) are the same. Due to this change in meaning that occurs when the ICV of a verb is substituted, Nwachukwu (1987:40) opines that “the root and its nominal complement form a semantic unit, and any dictionary entry, which excludes the complement lacking meaning because complement is the meaning-specifying constituent of its verb.”

3. Semelfactive adverbials in Igbo

Adverbial means a word or group of words that say when, where, how, etc. something happens. They may consist of an adverb (e.g. quietly), a prepositional phrase (e.g. through the door), a noun phrase (e.g. last week), or an adverbial clause (e.g. before she flew to Japan) (Hewings, 2005). Aside from the adverbial noun *ozigbo* identified by Agbo (2010), other adverbials such as *na ntabi anya* ‘in a twinkle of an eye’ and *na mberede* ‘suddenly’ also denote the spontaneity of an action. Consider the following examples:

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|------------------|---------------|--------------|-----------|----------------|
| (24) <i>Ikem</i> | <i>nyù-rù</i> | <i>áhùrù</i> | <i>na</i> | <i>mberède</i> |
| Ikem | fart-PST | fart | in | sudden |
- ‘Ikem farted suddenly.’
- | | | | | |
|-------------------|--------------|------------|-----------|----------------|
| (25) <i>Àzùkà</i> | <i>mù-rù</i> | <i>nwá</i> | <i>nà</i> | <i>mberède</i> |
| Azuka | give-PST | child | in | sudden |
- ‘Azuka gave birth suddenly.’
- | | | | | |
|---------------|--------------|-----------|--------------|-------------|
| (26) <i>Ó</i> | <i>mè-re</i> | <i>nà</i> | <i>ítàbi</i> | <i>ánya</i> |
| 3SG | do-PST | in | blink | eye |
- ‘It happened in a twinkle of an eye.’
- | | | | | |
|---------------------|-------------|-----------|--------------|-------------|
| (27) <i>Chínèdú</i> | <i>dàra</i> | <i>na</i> | <i>ítàbi</i> | <i>ánya</i> |
| Chinedu | fall-PST | in | blink | ye |
- ‘Chinedu fell in a twinkle of an eye.’

In example (24) and (25), the introduction of the adverbial with the prepositional phrase structure, *na mberede* ‘suddenly’ has an instantaneous notion. The same feature is applicable to (26) and (27). In (24), the semelfactive notion occurs when Ikem suddenly farted. In (25), without anyone’s anticipation, Azuka’s delivery of a baby is also spontaneous. In (26) and (27), what happened and the Chinedu’s fall is also semelfactive. The examples above show that semelfactive notions not only occur in Igbo verbs but

adverbials can also be used to introduce semelfactive notions in constructions. Since semelfactivity involves one-off events, the adverbials *na mberede* and *na ntabi anya* possess the characteristic of suddenness which semelfactivity is known for.

4. ‘Desemelfactivising’ Igbo verbs

‘Desemelfactivising’ is a term we coined to denote the act of cancelling the semelfactive notion in Igbo verbs. Another term which can be used to replace ‘desemelfactivising’ is iterating, which according to Bussmann (1996), describes durative events that occur repeatedly or regularly. In Igbo, the adverb, *ugboro ugboro* ‘repeatedly’ is used to describe actions that are done more than once. In other words, unlike semelfactivity that denotes one-time action, ‘desemelfactivised’ constructions denote more than one-time action. For example:

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|------|-------------------------------|----------------|--------------|---------------|---------------|
| (28) | <i>Ó</i> | <i>kò-rò</i> | <i>ókò</i> | <i>ùgboró</i> | <i>ùgboro</i> |
| | 3SG | scratch-PST | scratch | repeat | repeat |
| | ‘He scratched repeatedly.’ | | | | |
| (29) | <i>Ifeanyi</i> | <i>tabi-ri</i> | <i>anya</i> | <i>ùgboró</i> | <i>ùgboro</i> |
| | Ifeanyi | blink-PST | eye | repeat | repeat |
| | ‘Ifeanyi blinked repeatedly.’ | | | | |
| (30) | <i>Chínàzá</i> | <i>zè-re</i> | <i>úzere</i> | <i>ùgboró</i> | <i>ùgboro</i> |
| | Chinaza | sneeze-PST | sneeze | repeat | repeat |
| | ‘Chinaza sneezed repeatedly.’ | | | | |
| (31) | <i>Ekene</i> | <i>kụ-rụ</i> | <i>aka</i> | <i>ugboro</i> | <i>ugboro</i> |
| | Ekene | clap-PST | hand | repeat | repeat |
| | ‘Ekene clapped repeatedly.’ | | | | |

From the above examples (28-31), the acts of scratching, blinking, sneezing, clapping were ‘desemelfactivised’ and iterated in the sense that they were not done once but more than once. The presence of *ugboro ugboro* in the above examples serves to desemelfactivise the constructions in (28-31). This concurs with findings of Bacz (2012: 109) that semelfactive notions can be ‘desemelfactivised’ by adding some constituents in the semelfactive construction such as the removal of *n* in Polish semelfactive verbs such as *kichnąć* ‘sneeze once’ and *kichać* ‘sneeze’, *klęknąć* ‘kneel down’ (single occurrence) and *klękać* ‘kneel down many times’ to ‘desemelfactivise’ the verbs. On the other hand, our data in Igbo shows the addition of a free morpheme as a way of ‘desemelfactivising’.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined semelfactivity in the Igbo language. In the examination of semelfactivity in Igbo, some semelfactive verbs in Igbo and the structure of their

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complements as well as semelfactive adverbials were identified in the language. The study also looked at how semelfactivity in Igbo can be ‘desemelfactivised’ to indicate reoccurrence or repetitiveness. From the study, it was discovered that the semelfactive verbs: *takwu* ‘whisper’, *nwu* ‘die’, *lo* ‘swallow’ and *hupe* ‘glimpse’ co-occur with their bound complements *atakwu*, *anwu*, *elo*, and *ahupe* for emphasis. On the other hand, it was discovered that *kọ* ‘scratch’, *tabi* ‘blink’, *ze* ‘sneeze’, *ku* ‘knock’, *ti* ‘shout’, *wuli* ‘jump’, *gba* ‘kick’, *nyu* ‘fart’ and *kwa* ‘cough’ take inherent complement verbs. The research also revealed that *na mberede* ‘suddenly’ and *na ntabi anya* are semelfactive adverbials with prepositional phrase structure in the Igbo language. Lastly, the adverb *ugboro ugboro* ‘repeatedly’ iterates the one-time feature of semelfactivity. This addition of free morphemes *ugboro ugboro* is not obtainable in Polish where ‘desemelfactivity’ is obtained from a bound morphemic process. From these findings, this research concludes that in Igbo, semelfactivity entails a one-time action and a spontaneous or instantaneous action.

Abbreviations

3SG	Third Person Singular	PL	Plural
BVC	Bound Verb Complement	PST	Past Tense
ICV	Inherent Complement Verbs		

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