SYMMETRIC PREDICATES IN IGBO: A SEMANTIC ANALYSIS[1]

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Language is highly productive yet economical to the extent that it avoids absolute synonyms. When anything like absolute synonymy is sensed in a language, such as in symmetric predicates in Igbo, it provokes thought and begs some explanation. This study seeks a semantic explanation of symmetric predicates in Igbo in the face of apparent helplessness of word order analysis. Data collection was basically through observation and informal interview. Theta theory provided the basis for the argument structure analysis used in this study to show that the inherent complement verb relates to one and the only argument in a symmetric predicate and assigns it an Experiencer role. This argument may be found in the subject position or, in the complement position when the inherent complement of the verb is fronted. The study also shows that, an alternative interpretation can emerge if the verb assigns a theme role to the argument in the subject position in which case asymmetric relation will result. The study wraps up with a suggestion for more research on the syntactic processes of inherent complement movement in symmetric predicates in Igbo. Data for the study are taken from the Standard Igbo (SI) basically, but a few came from Obimo dialect spoken in Nsukka local Government area of Enugu state. In the tone marking convention adopted, high tone is unmarked while low and downstep are represented with[̀] and [̄] respectively.

Une langue est en général hautement productive tout en étant économique au point qu'elle évite des synonymes absolus. Lorsque quelque chose comme un synonyme absolu est pressenti dans une langue, comme c'est le cas dans les prédicats symétriques en Igbo, cela donne matière à réflexion et qui requiert une explication. Dans la présente étude, il est question de chercher une explication sémantique des prédicats symétriques en igbo face au désagrément apparent de l'analyse de l'ordre des mots. Les données proviennent de l'observation et des interviews informelles. La théorie de Theta a fourni la base pour l'analyse de la structure de l'argument utilisé dans cette étude pour montrer que le complément du verbe inhérent est affilié à un et unique argument dans un prédicat symétrique et il lui assigne le rôle d'Expérimentateur. Cet argument peut être trouvé dans la position du sujet ou dans la position du complément lorsque le complément inhérent du verbe est en position antérieure. L'étude montre également qu'une interprétation alternative peut émerger si le verbe assigne un rôle de thème à l'argument dans la position du sujet ;un tel cas débouche en une relation asymétrique L'étude termine par une suggestion pour une recherche plus approfondie sur les processus syntactiques du mouvement du complément inhérent. Dans les prédicats symétriques en igbo. Les données pour cette étude ont été prises à partir de l' igbo standard (IS) en grande partie, mais aussi certaines viennent de l'obimo, un dialecte parlé dans la région de la province de Nsukka dans l'Etat d'Enugu. Pour ce qui est de la convention adoptée du marquage du ton, le ton haut n'est pas marqué tandis que le ton bas et la faille tonale sont représentées par h[̀] et [̄] respectivement.

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0. INTRODUCTION

Word meanings in language are atoms that are intricately interconnected in a web–like fashion, in which some concepts define relationships between other concepts. Concepts have been differentiated into two fundamental types: the ones that necessarily involve a relationship with other concepts; and the ones that just seem to be independent units. The independent ones can be connected to each other through a relationship concept, but they themselves do not connect other concepts.

Word definition imposes different types of relationships among concepts. Entailment relation between concepts, for instance, defines a transfer of properties between concepts such that, if, for instance, Obi is a bachelor, and a bachelor is a man, Obi is a man. In other words, the word is, by definition, transfers properties between concepts, while Obi, bachelor and man are independent units which cannot connect other concepts.

Some relations among words are said to have mathematical properties because they enable us to reason about numbers, and so reflect our inherent mathematical understanding. The mathematical property inherent in relations involving transfer of properties such as depicted by 'is' is referred to as Transitivity (different from syntactic transitivity). Another word that denotes transitive relations is the preposition in: if the book is in the bag, and the bag is in the room, the book is in the room. Others include: above, equals, less than, greater than, etc.

There is another mathematical property that relations can have because of their meaning. This property is called symmetry. When relations have symmetric property, "the statement "X RELATION Y" entails the reverse, "Y RELATION X" (Harley 2006:203). The preposition, beside; the verbs, marry, meet, play (with), all denote symmetric relations. If the cup is beside the book, the book is beside the cup; if Ada marries Eze, Eze marries Ada; if Ifeoma meets Deborah, Deborah meets Ifeoma; etc.

Cross linguistic evidence reveals that symmetric relations are a property of African languages. Meeussen(1975:4) cited in Heine and Nurse(2008:22) calls this phenomenon Anastasis and defines it as the swapping of subject and complement participants within the clause, for example, it is possible to express 'Worms enter the corpse' by saying 'The corpse enters the worms'. Nwachukwu (1987) and Uwalaka (1988) describe this phenomenon in Igbo as Subject-Object-Switching (SOS) and argue that they feature experiential verbs.

In this study, we shall reanalyze these structures that denote symmetric relations in the Igbo language to show that no objects are involved in these structures since their subjects are not agents. We shall demonstrate that word order analysis is incapacitated in accounting for structure denoting such relations and invoke semantic roles to show that though swapping of grammatical functions in such constructions produces two grammatically well-formed sentences, the semantic roles are intact and not reversed as suggested in exchange of the subject and complement. There is also a call for a review of pronominalization as a test for grammatical objects. In the data presentation, [́] is high tone, [̀] is low tone, and downstep is unmarked.

1. SYMMETRIC PREDICATES IN IGBO

In traditional grammar, predicate refers to that part of the sentence that is not the subject. Hence in sentence analysis, once the subject is isolated the rest is the predicate. Predicate therefore, corresponds to the Verb Phrase (VP) or predicate phrase headed by the verb in current linguistic analysis.

The Igbo predicate phrase is headed by a verb which is not usually defined in isolation. Explaining this situation, Uwalaka (1983:77) observes "it is self-evident that when asked for any concept that could be expressed by a verb in other languages, the native Ìgbò speaker almost invariably furnishes a verbal element with its accompanying nominal element. This is because many Ìgbò verbals select specific nominals. In other words, Igbo verbals are relational concepts; they connect nominal elements covertly or overtly. When certain verbals connect independent concepts in Igbo, it is possible to swap the positions of the independent concepts in a manner that displays symmetry. The data below illustrate:

(1) a. b.

i. **Obì nà-àtụ egwù** **Egwù nà-àtụ Obì** 'Obi is afraid'
Obi PROG-PREF:fear fear Fear PROG-PREF:fear Obi

ii **Àmaka nà-ème iherē** **Iherē nà-ème Àmaka** 'Amaka is shy'
Amaka PROG-PREF:do shyness Shyness PROG-PREF:do Amaka

iii. **Ezè nà-àkwa ụkwarà** **Ụkwarà nà-àkwa Ezè** 'Eze is coughing'
Eze PROG-PREF:cough cough Cough PROG-PREF:cough Eze

iv. **Odò nà-echè uchè** **Uchè nà-echè Odò** 'Odo is thinking'
Odo PROG-PREF:think thought Thought PROG-PREF:think Odo

v. **Ngọzị nà-erùè ụrụa** **Ụrụa nà-erùè Ngọzi** 'Ngozi is dozing' (OI)
Ngozi PROG-PREF:doze sleep Sleep PROG-PREF:doze Ngozi

vi. **Àda nà-àgba arā** **Ara nà-àgba Adā** 'Ada is running mad'
Ada PROG-PREF:run madness Madness PROG-PREF:run Ada

vii **Òkeēkē nà-èto afọ̄** **Afó nà-èto Okeēkē**
Okeke PROG-PREF:grow belly. Belly PROG-PREF:grow Okeke.
'Okeke has distended stomach'

viii. **Ùju nà-èghe ugherē.** **Ugherē nà-èghe Uju** 'Uju is yawning'
Uju PROG-PREF:yawn yawn. Yawn PROG-PREF:yawn Uju

There is a structural symmetric relation between each data in (1a) above and the (b) counterpart; the nominal elements at the subject and complement slots exchange positions. In other words, the subject and complement positions are swapped suggesting that (a) entails (b) or that **Obì** RELATION **Egwù** (for instance) entails the reverse, **Egwù** RELATION **Obì** What makes the data interesting is that the connection between the verbs and the nominal elements at both ends is bidirectional and can be represented as:

(2) SUBJECT ←→ COMPLEMENT
↑
VERB

In inflectional languages where case endings are used to indicate relationships, word order does not matter as far as connections among sentence parts are concerned. For instance, consider the Latin expressions below:

(3) **Marcus ferit Corneliam** (subject-verb-object)
Marcus Corneliam ferit (subject–object-verb) 'Marcus hits Cornelia'

The pair of sentences above has affixes attached to the constituents. These affixes indicate the direction of the relationship among sentence parts, and thus remove the possibility of a bidirectional connection and relationship.

The situation is different for the Igbo data in (1) above; there are no affixes on nouns. This suggests a bidirectional connection of sentence constituents, yet the semantic relationship is not bidirectional. It does seem, therefore, that word order analysis fails to account for this non-bidirectionality of the semantic relation between the subjects and complements in symmetric arrangement. This is because word order transfers the functions of the subjects in (1a) to the complements in (1b) in what can be termed function reversal. We shall therefore turn to semantic structure to account for the function reversal in symmetric structures in the Igbo language.

2. IGBO SYMMETRIC PREDICATES AND SEMANTIC STRUCTURE

The meanings of relational concepts like verbs specify the number of other concepts they relate to. The specification for the number of concepts that a verb connects gives rise to the differences between intransitive, transitive and ditransitive verbs (Harley 2006). Thus, when the meaning of a verb requires that it connects to only one concept, the verb is said to be intransitive. Transitive verbs, on their part, connect two concepts, while ditransitive verbs connect three concepts. The data in (1) above, each has a verb that connects two concepts; the subject and the complement, suggesting that the verbs are transitive.

Relational concepts also indicate the direction of relationships among concepts by specifying who does what to whom. Let us take a look at the English sentences below:

(4) (i) Mary scolded John.
(ii) John scolded Mary

The two sentences above do not mean the same thing. The verb scold specifies two concepts that it relates to; the one who does the scolding; and the one who receives the scolding. It also specifies the roles of the two concepts, i.e. which of the two concepts does the scolding and which receives the scolding. The concepts that are connected by a particular relation are called arguments of the relation. In other words, Mary and John, connected by the relation scold in (4) above are arguments of the relation scold. Thus, intransitive verbs take one argument, transitive verbs two, and ditransitive verbs three. The structure that the verb imposes on the concepts it relates to (i.e. the specification of the roles and how they connect) is called the verb's argument structure.

Information regarding argument structure, specified by relational concepts provides the necessary resources to account for symmetric structures and their inherent function reversal phenomenon. This is because grammatical functions may reverse but grammatical roles do not reverse for a particular relationship. This is the reason the two sentences in (4) above encode different relationships but those in (5) below refer to the same relationship.

(5) (i) Mary scolded John.

(ii) John was scolded by Mary.

The two sentences above mean the same despite the function exchange between the subject and complement.

The relational elements in data (1) (the predicates) impose some particular kinds of roles or semantic properties on the independent elements that they connect (i.e. subjects and complements). Deciding what roles the verb imposes on the subject and the complement will depend on the nature of the verbs. This requires that the verbs be properly characterized with regard to their event and argument structure. Semantically, Igbo verbs are categorized as either dynamic or stative (Nwachukwu 1983a). While dynamic verbs express actions or events involving an entity, stative verbs express states of affairs. Dynamic verbs are further classified into action and event verbs. "Whereas action verbs are used to express the conscious activity of a participant in a sentence, the event verbs may not necessarily express any activity" (Anyanwu 2007). Against this backdrop, the verbs in the data cannot be said to be stative verbs, so they are dynamic. As dynamic verbs, we can also see that they do not express any conscious activity of any participant. This means that the subject in each sentence cannot be regarded as an agent, neither does the complement in each sentence have any action performed on it, hence it is not a patient. The verbs are therefore event verbs. By the type of complements they take, the event verbs instantiated in symmetric structures under discussion belong to the class of inherent complement verbs (Nwachukwu 1987). By their nature, they must take a nominal complement to be meaningful. Even their citation form includes the inherent complements. Given that their subjects are not agents or their complements patients, the event verbs are intransitive (cf. Nwachukwu 1983b). Uwalaka (1983:9) makes a distinction between an inseparable dummy element (i.e. inherent complement) that collocates with the verb to complete its meaning, and the direct object complement of a transitive verb, using the pronominalization test. While the dummy element cannot be replaced by a pronoun the direct object can. Thus, the replacement of direct objects in examples 6(ia and iia) with pronouns in their (ib and iib) counterparts, in the sentences below, is illustrative of pronominalization.

(6) i.a. **Àda gbùrù Agụ̀** 'Ada killed a Lion'
Ada kill-rVPST lion

i.b. **Àda gbùrù ya** 'Ada killed it'
Ada kill-rVPST 3SG

ii.a. **Àmaka nà-àsa efere**, 'Amaka is washing (a) plate'
Amaka PROG-PREF:wash plate

ii.b. **Àmaka nà-àsa yā** 'Amaka is washing it'
Amaka PROG-PREF:wash 3SG.

iii.a. **Ezè nà-èsi nrī**. 'Eze is cooking food'
Eze PROG-PREF:cook food

iii.b. **Ezè nà-èsi yā** 'Eze is cooking it'
Eze PROG-PREF:cook 3SG.

In the examples above the verb has the same meaning whether the object is a lexical noun or a pronoun.

Applying the pronominalization test to our target data results in (7) below:

(7) * **Obì nà-àtụ yā Ya nà-àtụ Obì**
Obi PROG-PREF:? 3SG. 3SG PROG-PREF: ? Obi.

* **Àmaka nà-ème yā Ya nà-ème Àmaka**
Amaka PROG-PREF:do 3SG. 3SG PROG = PREF:do Amaka.

* **Ezè nà-àkwa yā Ya nà-àkwa Ezè**
Eze PROG-PREF:cry/sow 3SG. 3SG PROG-PREF:cry/sow Eze.

***Odò nà-éche ya Ya nà-echè Odò**
Odo PROG- PREF: think 3SG. 3SG PROG-PREF:think Odo

* **Ngọzị nà-erùe yā Ya nà-erùè Ngọzị** (OI)
Ngozi PROG-PREF:? 3SG 3SG PROG-PREF:? Ngozi

From the examples in (7), it can be seen that the absence of the nominal element produces meanings that are either indeterminate (?) or different from the intended meaning. The verbs are therefore event verbs and the sentences intransitive since the associated nominal elements cannot be replaced with a pronoun to produce the same meaning. They can also be made to impose the responsibility for the events on some elements by introducing another nominal as illustrated in (8) below:

(8) i. **Agwọ nà-àtụ Obì egwù** 'snakes scare Obi/Obi is afraid of snakes'
Snake(s) PROG-PREF:fear Obi fear

ii. **Osè nà-àkwa Ezè ụkwarà** 'Pepper makes Eze cough'
Pepper PROG-PREF:cough Eze cough

iii. **Akwā à nà-ème Àmaka iherē** 'this cloth makes Amaka shy'
Cloth this PROG-PREF:do Amaka shyness

iv. **Ùle à nà-echè Odò uchè** 'this exam makes Odo worry'
Exam this PROG-PREF:think Odo thought

v. **Ọgwụ ahụ nà-erùè Ngọzị ụrụa** (OI) 'that drug makes Ngozi sleep'
Medicine that PROG-PREF:doze Ngozi sleep

Though a responsibility of some sort has been assigned to the subjects in (8) above, we can say that the subjects are still not agents because they did not do anything, stricto senso, neither did the complements have anything done to them. This is in consideration of the fact that an agent is an active performer of an action. Rather than express activity, the event relations, instead, express a feeling or attitude on the part of the complements

(Obi, Eze, etc) with respect to the subjects (**agwọ, osè,** etc). Thus, instead of Agent-Patient arguments, the relations in (8) can appropriately be said to have Experiencer-Theme arguments; the argument doing the feeling (Obi, Eze, etc), being the experiencer, and the one that is the source of the feeling (**agwọ, osè,** etc), the theme. The basic sentences of (8) can, therefore, be represented as in (9) below:

(9) i.**Obì nà-àtụ egwù (màkà) agwọ** 'Obi is afraid of snakes'
Obi PROG-PREF:fear fear (because of) snake(s)

ii **Àmaka nà-ème iherē (màkà) akwà**.'Amaka is shy because of the cloth'
Amaka PROG-PREF:do shyness (because of) cloth

iii. **Ezè nà-àkwa ụkwarà (màkà) osè** 'Eze is coughing because of pepper'
Eze PROG-PREF:cough cough (because of) pepper

iv. **Odò nà-echè uchè (màkà) ùle à**, 'Odo is thinking about this exam'
Odo PROG-PREF:think thought (because of) exam this

v. **Ngọzị nà-erùè ụrụa (màkà) ọgwụ ahụ** 'Ngozi is dozing because of that drug'
Ngozi PROG-PREF:doze sleep (because of) medicine that.

Interestingly, (8) and (9) have turned out symmetric, equivalent to (1a and b), and the choice of each side of the symmetric structures depends on which argument of the verb is focused or emphasized, experiencer or theme. The structure in (8) is achieved by fronting or topicalizing the theme argument. When the theme argument is focused by topicalization, the experiencer argument appears between the verb and the inherent complement. In this position, the experiencer argument can be pronominalized such that the replacement of the highlighted nominals in (10a) with a pronoun produces the well formed sentences in (10b).

(10) a.

(i) **Agwọ nà-àtụ Obì egwù**
Snake(s) PROG-PREF:fear Obi fear

(ii) **Osè nà-àkwa Ezè ụkwarà**
Pepper PROG-Perf:cough Eze cough.

(iii) **Akwā à nà-ème Àmaka iherē**
Cloth this PROG- PREF:do Amaka shyness.

(iv) **Ùle à nà-echè Odò uchè**
Exam this PROG- PREF:think Odo thought.

Ùle à nà-éche yā uchè
Exam this PROG- PREF:think 3SG thought.

(v) **Ọgwụ ahụ nà-erùè Ngọzị ụrụa** (OI)
Medicine that PROG-PREF:doze Ngozi sleep.

Ọgwụ ahụ nà- erùè yā ụrụa
Medicine that PROG-PREF:doze 3SG sleep.

(10) b.

Agwọ nà-àtụ yā egwù
Snake(s) PROG-PREF:fear 3SG fear

Osè nà-àkwa yā ụkwarà
Pepper PROG- PREF:cough 3SG cough.

Akwā à nà-ème yā iherē
Cloth this PROG-PREF:do 3SG shyness.

Following pronominalization test, (10b) where the highlighted nominals in (10a) are successfully replaced with pronouns, can we call the highlighted nominals direct objects? In other words, can we say that **kwa yā ụkwarà** for instance, has **osè** as the agent and **Ezè** as the patient? Since, as pointed out earlier, an agent is an active performer of an action, and a patient is a direct recipient, we would deny the sentences as transitive and observe that the scope of pronominalization test in the determination of direct objects needs a review. In other words, **agwọ, osè,** etc actually did not perform any action. Granted that they may have some inherent characteristics that can cause some reactions, they did not do anything, in the strict sense, neither did the complements have anything done to them. The relations instead express a feeling or attitude on the part of the supposed direct objects (Obi, Eze, etc) with respect to the other arguments (**agwọ, osè,** etc).

This brings us once again to the Experiencer-Theme relation we established earlier between the subjects and complements of event inherent complement verbs in symmetric predicates in Igbo. From the foregoing, it is obvious that though the verbs in (1) have complements, the complements are not objects. Second, the complements do not seem to have any semantic roles, being themselves part of the verbs that assign the semantic roles. If there is any merit in these points, the symmetric structures in (1) have just the experiencer role assigned to the only argument by the verb in each sentence. The symmetric relation between (1a and b) is a product of topicalization alternation between the experiencer argument(1a) and the inherent complement (1b), Thus, with only grammatical function reversal, the argument in each symmetric structure maintains the same relationship and so has the same semantic property as can be illustrated in the argument structure representation below:

(11) **Tụ egwù < Obi >** 'Obi is afraid'

Experiencer

This can be contrasted with typical transitive structures where any swapping of subject and object produces completely different meanings as a result of a change in grammatical role. Example (12) below illustrates.

(12) i. **Ezè gbùrù Agụ̄**
Eze$_{AG}$ kill:PST Lion$_{PAT}$

ii. **Agụ̄ gbùrù Ezè**
Lion$_{AG}$ kill: PST Eze$_{PAT}$

The experiencer, logically, requires a target or source of experience. This means that the argument structure represented in (11) above implicates a theme, the target of the experience, which native speakers provide in appropriate contexts. In other words, the expression, **Obì nà-àtụ egwù** makes a demand on the hearer who imagines that something is responsible for the experience. It is this understanding that rules out an alternative interpretation where Obi is the target of experience as in:

(13) **Tụ egwù < Obi >** 'Obi has fear inspiring potential'

Theme

With the structures in (11) and (13), it is apparent that a sentence such as **Obì nà-àtụ egwù**, for instance, is subject to two interpretations: Obi is afraid (11) and Obi has fear inspiring potential (13). The first interpretation is as a result of the lexical property of the noun 'Obi': the semantic property [+Animate] confers experiencer argument to topicalized nouns in symmetric predicates since only animate things have senses. Word order alone is not sufficient to produce these appropriate interpretations in symmetric structures.

CONCLUSION

We have attempted a semantic explanation of symmetric predicates in Igbo seeing that the surface form cannot adequately explain this relation. Argument structure analysis shows that the inherent complement verb relates to one and the only argument in a symmetric predicate and assigns it an Experiencer role. This argument may be found in the subject position or, in the complement position when the inherent complement of the verb is fronted. The study also shows that, an alternative interpretation can emerge if the verb assigns a theme role to the argument in the subject position in which case asymmetric relation will result.

Symmetric predicate is another type of expression used to achieve focus in the Igbo language. There is, therefore, the need for the analysis of the syntactic processes involved in the movement of the Inherent Complement (IC) in symmetric predicates. Only then can we account for the theme implicated where experiencer role is assigned, and the experiencer implicated where a theme role is assigned (i.e. in the alternative interpretation). It will also be clear what role the supposed missing theme argument plays in the inherent complement (IC) movement operation.

ABBREVIATIONS

AG	Agent	PST	Past Tense
IC	Inherent Complement	PROG	Progressive
OI	Obimo dialect of Igbo	PREF	Prefix
PAT	Patient	3SG	Third Person Singular Pronoun

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