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## **A case for prepositions in Igbo**

<http://www.phil.muni.cz/linguistica/art/mmadike/mma-001.pdf>

previously unpublished

## A CASE FOR PREPOSITIONS IN IGBO<sup>1</sup>[\*]

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*Abstract:* It is widely believed that the Igbo language has only one lexical preposition, *na* (in, on, at, etc.). This view holds that the language makes use of extensional suffixes, complex verbs and the serial- verb construction to express prepositional notions. On the contrary, this study seeks to establish that in addition to *na*, Igbo makes use of other lexical prepositions like *tupu* (before), *màkà* (for), *bànyere* (about, against) and *gbasara* (about), in addition to the other means of expressing prepositional notions. Like *na*, these prepositions function as head, govern and case-mark their complements, can be fronted with their complements as wh-phrase and can function as sentence fragments with their complements. The paper adopts the principles and parameters framework to realize its objective. By means of a set of syntactic constituency tests, the findings show that these prepositions exhibit the same pattern of distribution and are therefore members of the same syntactic category.

*Keywords:* extensional suffixes, complex verbs, sentence fragments, particles, associative and applicative.

### 1. Introduction

There is a continuous debate on whether there are other lexical prepositions in Igbo, apart from *na*. In the popularly cited literature on Igbo grammar, there is a widely held view of what Oji (1987: 64) refers to as the ‘oneness’ of the ‘imperial preposition’ in Igbo. In agreement with Oji, Nwachukwu (1987: 5) asserts that only the “ubiquitous *na*, is mentioned in the existing grammars.” This view holds that *na* (in, on, at, etc.) is the only preposition in the language. Ward (1936:198) claims that *na* is the commonest preposition and that *bànyere* (about) and *màkà* (for) are the equivalents. Green & Igwe (1963), Igwe & Green (1964), Carrell, (1970), Emenanjo (1978, 2010), Ezikeojiaku (1989), Ume, Ugoji & Dike (1989), among others, claim that *na* is the only member of the category, preposition in Igbo. The language however adopts other means to express prepositional meanings. This kind of assumption is not restricted to Igbo. According to Lefebvre (1990: 45) “... in the literature on West African languages, it has generally been assumed that these languages lack the category P.” On the contrary, her study of this category in Fon shows that the language “is not different from English, French or other languages which have a syntactic category P.”

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<sup>1</sup> I am highly indebted to the anonymous reviewer for his insightful comments which have helped to improve this work.

[\*] Previously unpublished. Peer-reviewed before publication. [Editor’s note]

At this juncture, let us define the term preposition. According to Luraghi and Parodi (2008: 149), “prepositions are particles that must necessarily take a noun or pronoun as their complement and indicate the noun’s grammatical relation or semantic role....” As for particles, they are usually regarded as “words that are short, sometimes though not always \*clitic, and generally not falling easily under any of the traditional \*parts of speech” (Matthews 2007: 289). Examples of prepositions in English include *in, on, at, over, below, towards* and *about*. In addition to the category preposition, the Igbo language adopts other means of expressing prepositional ideas, the perceived relations expressed by a preposition between its NP complement and some other elements in the sentence.

### 1.1 Other forms for expressing prepositional ideas

Emenanjo (1978, 2010) rightly observes that the language utilizes other means such as the use of extensional suffixes, complex verbs, and the serial verb construction (SVC) to express prepositional notions. He claims that “all serious study of Igbo grammar recognize one preposition...The commonly acknowledged Igbo preposition is *na*” (Emenanjo 2010: 10).

It is really the case that Igbo makes use of extensional suffixes, complex verbs and verb serialization as a means of supplementing the number of prepositions in the language. As regards the use of extensional suffixes, the following examples *-kọ* (associative) and *-rV* (applicative) are illustrative. The *-rV* is a CV constituent of the form /r-/ followed by a vowel which harmonizes with the final vowel of the host.

- (1) a. Ha bikò ọ̀nū.  
       3<sub>PL</sub> live-with together  
       ‘They live in one place/together.’  
 b. Jọ̀n gà-èdere m̄ akwà.  
       Jọ̀n Fut-press-Appl 1<sub>SG</sub> cloth  
       ‘Jọ̀n will iron the clothes for me.’

As regards the use of complex verbs, let us consider the verbs *rībà* (rī+bà) ‘crawl-enter’ and *gafè* (ga+fè) ‘go-pass/cross.’

- (2) a. Agwọ̀ gà-àrībà ebe à.  
       Snake Fut-crawl-enter place this  
       ‘A snake will crawl in here.’  
 b. Mmiri Imò gafèrè Aba.  
       Water Imò go pass-pst Aba  
       ‘The Imò River passed through Aba.’

With reference to the examples in (2), Emenanjo (2012: 7) rightly points out that “semantically, complex verb stems can have figurative or idiomatic meanings like those found in English phrasal verbs.” The examples above are in line with what Mbah (2012) analyses as category incorporation whereby the second verb reanalyzes as a prepositional marker.

The use of serial verbs involves a string of verb phrases which occur consecutively without any intervening conjunction or subordinator. Emenanjo (2012: 8) states that “concomitant

with the expression of prepositional ideas, the SVC is used specifically for expressing...” such roles as Instrument (3a) and Dative (3b), among others.

- (3) a. Àda jì ọ̀gù àbọ ubì.  
 Àda hold hoe weed farm  
 ‘Àda is weeding the farm with a hoe.’  
 b. Bonà nàtàrà egō nye hā.  
 Bonà receive-pst money give them  
 ‘Bonà collected some money and gave to them.’

The use of serial verbs in expressing prepositional notions is not peculiar to Igbo. There is evidence that in Kwa languages, serial verbs are known to have reanalyzed as prepositions (Haspelmath 1999).

### 1.2 The non-prepositional functions of *na*

It is necessary at this juncture to clarify the issue as regards the non-prepositional functions ascribed to *na*. It is a misnomer to state that the preposition *na* performs other functions in the language. The fact is that the form *na* is homonymous. According to Bussmann (1996: 210) “homonymous expressions are phonologically ... and orthographically ... identical but have different meanings and often distinct etymological origin ...” Thus, the form *na* can be realized as a preposition (4a-b), auxiliary verb (4c) and conjunction (4d-e) when used as such. Now consider the following examples.

- (4) a. Azù dì nà ñkàtà.  
 Fish be in basket  
 ‘There is fish in the basket.’  
 b. Azù dì n’efere.  
 Fish be in plate  
 ‘There is fish in the plate.’  
 c. Jọn nà-àga ahjā.  
 Jọn Aux-go market  
 ‘Jọn is going to the market.’  
 d. Ji nà edè bù nri.  
 Yam and cocoyam be food  
 ‘Yam and cocoyam are food items.’  
 e. Ha mà nà nri à dì ọkụ.  
 3<sub>PL</sub> know that food this be hot  
 ‘They know that the food is hot.’

In (4a), the preposition *na* is written in full when the complement begins with a consonant, otherwise its vowel segment is elided when the complement begins with a vowel (4b).

Interestingly however, an anonymous reviewer has drawn our attention to a recent article by Batibo & Rombi (2016). The authors identify the Bantu word *na* (which is similar to the Igbo form *na*) as having been inherited from Pronto-Bantu. It is claimed that this form *na*

functions primarily as a marker of coordination or association of syntactic units. They argue that in the course of time, some Bantu “languages have extended its use through the process of grammaticalization to assume other functions” (Batibo & Rombi 2016: 73).

As in Igbo, a Kwa language, distinct from Bantu, a geographically distant language, the form *na* in some Bantu languages performs such similar functions as a marker of coordination, temporal aspectual marker and preposition (Batibo & Rombi 2016). This formal and functional resemblance between *na* in Igbo (cf the Igbo examples (4d–e, 4c and 4a–b) respectively) and *na* in Bantu needs further investigation to ascertain whether they have a common historical origin.

### 1.3 The apparent resemblance between *bànyere*, *gbasara* and *bànyèrè*, *gbàsàrà*

It is equally pertinent to address the issue whether *tupu*, *màkà*, *bànyere* and its correlate, *gbasara* have other functions apart from being prepositions. As prepositions, they do not perform other functions. However, *bànyere* and *gbasara* appear to resemble the verbs *bànye* (*bà+nye*) ‘enter-away from the speaker/into’ and *gbasa* (*gba+sa*) ‘shoot/run-spread.’ The examples below are illustrative.

- (5) a. Obi *bànyèrè* *ugboàla* Onitsha.  
Obi enter-into-pst vehicle Onitsha  
‘Obi entered the Onitsha bound vehicle.’
- b. Okwu ahù *gbàsàrà* gị.  
Talk that shoot-spread-*Appl* 2<sub>SG</sub>  
‘That discussion concerns you.’

From the examples in (5) we find that *bànyèrè* and *gbàsàrà* are verbs, with their -rVpst (5a) and -rV<sub>Appl</sub> (5b) suffixes. They can be contrasted with those in (6) where *bànyere* and *gbasara* function as preposition.

- (6) a. O kwùrù *ihe* *bànyere* *hā*.  
3<sub>SG</sub> say-pst thing about 3<sub>PL</sub>  
‘He said something about them.’
- b. Ha *nàtàrà* *ozi* *gbasara* *onye* ahù.  
3<sub>PL</sub> receive-pst message about person that  
‘They received a message about that person.’

It is necessary to note that in (5) the verbs have a sequence of low tones, while in (6) the prepositions bear a sequence of low-high-high (6a) and high-high-high (6b) tones.

### 1.4 The issue of *na* as the only preposition

The view that *na* is the only preposition in Igbo has however not remained unchallenged. Oji (1987) rejects the claim that *na* is the only preposition in the language. Those who share this view include Uwalaka (1991, 1996), Mmadike (1998), Uba-Mgbemena (2006) and

Mbah (2006, 2010). Oji has a list of thirteen items which he classified as prepositions. According to Oji, items in the list “are, beyond all doubt prepositions in the Igbo language, when used as such” (Oji 1987: 66). Uwalaka’s (1991) position is that there are very few prepositions in Igbo, with *na* as the best known and investigated preposition in the language. Mbah (2010: 26) argues for the use of “category incorporation as a device for generating prepositional notions, which supplement the apparently few lexical prepositions in the language.”

The present study claims that in addition to *na*, the other prepositions in Igbo are *tupu* (before), *màkà* (for), *bànyere* (about, against) and *gbasara* (about).

### 1.5 Theoretical framework

To undertake this study, our analysis will be based on the principles & parameters framework (Chomsky 1981a, 1981b). We adopt the use of syntactic constituency tests like preposition stranding, pied-piping, wh-movement and sentence fragment tests. These tests provide a principled way of accounting for the distribution of items that belong to the same syntactic category.

The present study is significant in many ways. It shows that in addition to the lexical preposition *nà*, the language adopts other means of expressing prepositional ideas. The study has also clarified the view that *na* can function as auxiliary verb and conjunction. In addition, the study has clarified the issue with regard to the assumption that the prepositions *bànyere* and *gbasara* are equally verbs. What is peculiar to our study is that it provides an insight into the establishment of the category status of these items as prepositions in the language. From the available literature on the subject this is the only study that has adopted the use of constituency tests to show that *nà*, *tupu*, *màkà*, *bànyere* and *gbasara* are Igbo prepositions. The tests undoubtedly confirm that these are indeed prepositions in the language.

### 1.6 Organization of the study

This study is in three parts, with section 1 as the introduction. Section 2 describes the constituency tests, while section 3 forms the summary and conclusion. The Green & Igwe (1963) tone-marking convention is adopted. High tone [´] is left unmarked, while low [ˋ] and step [ˊˋ] tones are marked as indicated.

- (b) Nri ahù àgbaala ụkà *tupu* okụ ànyūō.  
 Food that .go-perf sour before light quench  
 ‘The food had gone sour before the light went off.’

## 2. Data presentation and analysis

Now, let us consider the following sentences where we draw examples for our analysis.

- (7) a. Òbi dówèrè efere ahù *nà* ñkàtà.  
 Obi keep-pst plate that in basket  
 ‘Obi kept the plate in the basket.’



- b. Ubò kpàrà egō yā *nā* Mgbidi.  
Ubo gather-pst money 3SG at Mgbidi  
'Ubo made his money at Mgbidi.'
- (8) a. Polo jùrù dọkìtá *bànyere* āhū ikē nnē yā.  
Polo ask-pst doctor about body strength mother 3sg  
'Polo inquired from the doctor about his mother's health.'
- b. Ezè ètiela ̄wū *bànyere* ohi jī.  
King enact-perf law against theft yam  
'The king has enacted a law against the stealing of yams.'
- (9) a. Gọmēnti nyèrè ntùzi akā *gbàsara* mgbòchi ọrĩa ebolà.  
Government give-pst pointing hand about prevention sickness ebola  
'The government issued guidelines about the prevention of ebola.'
- b. Ha amāghī ihe *gbàsara* ọrĩa ìbà.  
3PL know-NEG thing about sickness malaria  
'They don't know anything about malaria fever.'
- (10) a. Kristì nwùrù *màkà* òjọ ānyī.  
Christ die-pst for sin 3PL  
'Christ died for our sins.'
- b. Ọgwū à bù *màkà* àhụ mgbū gī.  
Drug this be for body pain 2SG  
'This drug is for your sickness.'
- (11) a. Ọ bàtara *tupu* ozi yā erute ānyī akā.  
1SG return-pst before message 3SG reach 3PL hand  
'He returned before his message got to us.'

In examples (7–11) above, the italicized prepositions function as the head of their respective complements with which they form a maximal projection (PP). They also govern and case-mark their complement. In line with the principles and parameters framework (Chomsky 1981a & b), the constituency tests will be used to determine the appropriate syntactic category of these prepositions.

### 2.1 Preposition stranding

In preposition stranding, the preposition is left behind after its complement has been moved out of the phrasal projection. According to Uwalaka (1991), Igbo does not permit preposition stranding. To illustrate this, let us consider the following examples.

- (12) a. \* Nkàtá ì kà Obi dówèrè efere ahù *nà* tì  
Basket that Obi keep-pst plate that in
- b. \* Àhụ ikē nnē yā ì kà Polo jùrù dọkìtá *bànyere* t ì  
Body strength mother 3SG that Polo ask-pst doctor about
- c. \* Mgbòchi ọrĩa ebolà ì kà gọmēnti nyèrè ntùzi akā *gbàsara* t  
Prevention sickness ebola that government give-pst pointing hand about

- d. \*Àhụ mgbū gī<sub>i</sub> kà ọgwū à bù màkà t<sub>i</sub> ;  
Body pain 2<sub>SG</sub> that drug this be for
- e. \* Ozi yā erute ānyī aka<sub>i</sub> kà ọ bàtàrà tupu t<sub>i</sub> ;  
Message 3<sub>SG</sub> reach 3<sub>PL</sub> hand that 1<sub>SG</sub> return-pst before

As the examples in (12) show, the complement of the preposition is moved to sentence initial position, followed by the complementizer, *kà* (that). A co-indexed trace of the moved constituent is left behind at the extraction site. The strings in (12) are ungrammatical as a result of the ECP (empty category principle) violation. The trace is not properly governed because the preposition in Igbo is not a proper governor (Lasnik & Saito 1984). In Igbo, only the verb can head-govern its trace, but the preposition can govern and case-mark its complement only when such a complement is lexically realized.

When without its complement as in (12), the preposition is said to be stranded. In such a situation, the preposition constitutes a barrier, thus preventing both antecedent-government and head-government of its trace (Uwalaka 1991). However, the ungrammaticality of the strings in (12) can be rescued by the pied-piping strategy.

## 2.2 Pied-piping

Pied-piping is the converse of preposition stranding. By the pied-piping strategy, both the preposition and its complement are extracted and moved to sentence initial position. The following examples are illustrative.

- (13) a. *Nà ñkàtà<sub>i</sub> kà Obi d̀wèrè efere ahù t<sub>i</sub>.*  
In basket that Obi keep-pst plate that  
'It was in the basket that Obi kept the plate.'
- b. *Bànyere āhū ikē nnē yā<sub>i</sub> kà Polo j̀r̀r̀ d̀k̀t̀à t<sub>i</sub>.*  
About body strength mother 3<sub>SG</sub> that Polo ask-pst doctor  
'It was about his mother's health that Polo asked the doctor.'
- c. *Gbasara mgbòchi ọrīā ebolà<sub>i</sub> kà g̀ọ̀m̀è̀nt̀ì nyèrè nt̀uzi akā t<sub>i</sub>.*  
About prevention sickness ebola that government give-pst pointing hand  
'It was about the prevention of ebola disease that the government gave directives.'
- d. *Màkà àhụ mgbū gī<sub>i</sub> kà ọgwū à bù t<sub>i</sub>.*  
For body pain 2<sub>SG</sub> that drug this be  
'This drug is for your sickness.'
- e. *Tupu ozi yā erute ānyī aka<sub>i</sub> kà ọ bàtàrà t<sub>i</sub>.*  
Before message 3<sub>SG</sub> reach 3<sub>PL</sub> hand that 1<sub>SG</sub> return-pst  
'It was before his message got to us that he returned.'

The sentences in (13) are grammatical because there is no violation of the ECP. The traces in (13a, b & c) are antecedent-governed by their co-indexed antecedents, while those in (13d & e) are head-governed by the verbs *bù* and *bàtàrà* respectively.

### 2.3 Wh-question

In the examples that follow, the prepositional phrase is questioned. The questioned constituent, in italics, is wh-moved to sentence initial position.

- (14) a. *N'èbeē*<sub>i</sub> kà Obi dòwèrè efere ahụ t<sub>i</sub> ?  
At where that Obi keep-pst plate that  
'Where did Obi keep the plate?'
- b. *Bànyere ginī*<sub>i</sub> kà Polo jùrù dọkịtà t<sub>i</sub> ?  
About what that Polo ask-pst doctor  
'What did Polo ask the doctor?'
- c. *Gbasara ginī*<sub>i</sub> kà gọmēntì nyèrè ntùzi akā t<sub>i</sub> ?  
About what that government give-pst pointing hand  
'About what did the government give directives?'
- d. *Màkà ginī*<sub>i</sub> kà ọgwū à bù t<sub>i</sub> ?  
For what that drug this be  
'What is this drug for?'
- e. *Kèdu ọgè*<sub>i</sub> ọ bàtara t<sub>i</sub> ?  
What time 3<sub>SG</sub> reach-pst  
'When did he return?'

Again in (14), as in (13), there is no ECP violation because the traces are properly governed.

### 2.4 Sentence fragment

In a discourse context, the response to the interrogative in (14) can be a sentence fragment, as in (15) or a sentence, as in (13). A sentence fragment is however not a complete sentence since it does not constitute a clause, like the examples in (13). Here below, the preposition and its complement are used as response.

- (15) a. *Nà ñkàtà.*  
In basket  
'In the basket.'
- b. *Bànyere āhū ikē nnē yā.*  
About body strength mother 3<sub>SG</sub>  
'About his mother's health.'
- c. *Gbasara mgbòchi ọrịā ebolà.*  
About prevention sickness ebola  
'About the prevention of ebola disease.'
- d. *Màkà ahụ mgbū gī.*  
For body pain 2<sub>SG</sub>  
'For your sickness.'
- e. *Tupu ozi yā erute ānyī ākā.*  
Before message 3<sub>SG</sub> reach 3<sub>PL</sub> hand  
'Before his message got to us.'

### 3. Summary and conclusion

The long-standing view in the popularly cited literature on Igbo grammar is the recognition of *na* as the only preposition in the language. Those who share this view include Ward (1936), Carrell (1970), Emenanjo (1978, 2010) and Ezikeojiaku (1989). Oji (1987) refers to this view as the ‘oneness’ of the ‘imperial preposition.’ Oji (1987) and others like Nwachukwu (1987), Uwalaka (1991, 1996), Mmadike (1998), Uba- Mgbemena (2006) and Mbah (2006, 2010) are of the view that Igbo makes use of prepositions, as expressed in this study.

The present study makes its contribution to the ongoing debate on whether *na* is the only preposition in the language. The study has shown that apart from the prepositions identified in this study, Igbo adopts other strategies to express prepositional ideas. It has also thrown some light on the homonymous nature of the form *na*, each of which has its specified function. It has equally drawn attention to the apparent similarity between the functions of the form *na* in Igbo and *na* in some Bantu languages. Again the study has clarified the issue with regard to whether *bànyere* and *gbasara* are verbs. Unlike the other studies, it has used a set of syntactic constituency tests to show that in addition to *na* (in, on, at &c), *tupu* (before) *màkà* (for) *bànyere* (about, against) and *gbasara* (about) exhibit the same properties as heads of their respective phrases, case-mark their complements, can be fronted with their complements as wh-phrase and can also be used as sentence fragments. Based on these shared properties, the study therefore concludes that they are undoubtedly prepositions in the language.

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