



A Study of Igbo Gender-Based Irreversible Binomials

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Abstract

A number of studies have tried to show that the fixed linear order in irreversible binomials does not come about randomly. The choice of which word comes first and which second is claimed to be determined by phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic (extra-linguistic) constraints. This study examines three Igbo gender-based irreversible binomials in which the male term usually has precedence over the female. It adopts the use of the semantic, pragmatic, morphological and syntactic constraints in determining the choice of precedence order. The study reveals that these constraints are consistent with the precedence order in the set of data used. It asserts that this preferred precedence order can be used to gain an insight into the culture of the people. It however suggests that an extensive study of irreversible binomials in Igbo be carried out to determine the universality of these constraints

Key words: binomials, constraints, culture, gender, irreversible, pragmatic, precedence.

1. Introduction

The term binomial is an adaptation from mathematics to characterise a pair of expression that occurs in a specific order. Malkiel (1959:113) defines a binomial as "the sequence of two words pertaining to the same form class, placed on an identical level of syntactic hierarchy, and ordinarily connected by some kind of lexical link." Examples of binomial expressions in English include *loud and clear, length and breadth, here and now, life and death, take it or leave it and sooner or later*. Examples in Igbo include *egbe nà ùgò, ọnwụ nà ndụ, elū nà àlà* and *ọhịa nà ụzọ*, which are glossed respectively as *kite and eagle, death and life, up and down* and *bush and road*. This language is spoken in the five south east states of Nigeria (Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo) as well as in parts of Delta and Rivers states.

In binomials the collocating elements usually occur in a fixed order and under no circumstance should the order be reversed. It is in this sense that they are referred to as irreversible binomials. Thus in English, it would be odd to say *clear and loud, later or sooner* etc. Since binomials "are characterised by an invariable form and often non-compositional semantics, it can be assumed that they are stored as units in the mental lexicon, similar to words..." (Lohmann, 2012:30). As part of the lexicon therefore, languages contain a set of uniquely structured lexicalised units known as irreversible binomials. According to Lohmann (2012:27), irreversible binomials represent "frequent, conventionalised and idiomatic instances, it can be assumed that they are stored as units in the mental lexicon.... Speakers thus 'reach for them' during production...."

A number of studies have tried to show that the fixed linear order which characterises irreversible binomials does not come about randomly. The choice of which word in the collocation comes first and which second is claimed to be determined by a set of constraints. These include phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic constraints (cf Fenk-Oczlon, 1989; Benor and Levy, 2006; Lohmann, 2012; Saeed, 2010).

Maduka-Durunze (1992) worked on Igbo irreversible binomials. According to him, "in any gender-based antonymous binomials, the one with the male element precedes. This definitely has to do with

the superior status normally accorded to the male in Igbo and other societies" (Maduka-Durunze, 1992:55). This study however sets to contribute to the issue by examining exclusively, a set of three gender-based irreversible binomials in which the male term is the first element in the first two examples. In the third, a female term is the first element. The binomials are *di nà nwunyè* (husband and wife), *oke nà nne* (male and female) and *nne nà nnà* (mother and father), as in tables I-III respectively. To do this, the study relies on the semantic, pragmatic, morphological and syntactic constraints in order to find out the extent these constraints will be able to determine precedence order in these binomials.

There are four sections in this study. Section 1 is the introduction, while section 2 is the tabular representation of data. The analysis of data is in section 3, while section 4 forms the summary and conclusion. The tone marking convention adopted here is that of Green and Igwe (1963) whereby only low [`] and step [˘] tones are indicated, while high tone [ˊ] is left unmarked.

2. Table of binomials

In the tables that follow, each of the constituent elements is entered in the column which tallies with its position in the binomial. Every entry is associated with its denotative meaning and form class. Beneath this, each entry is further specified with the various senses with which it is associated. Finally, the numbered entries exemplify the range over which entry is distributed.

Table I. Di nà Nwunyè

Di	Nwunyè
<i>di (n): husband</i>	nwunyè (n): wife; female
<p><i>di: term for distinction; expert or master; one acknowledged as accomplished in a trade or craft</i></p> <p>(1) <i>di àkù < di + àkù- master + wealth: one acknowledged for expertise in creating or accumulating wealth.</i></p> <p>(2) <i>di àlà < di + àlà- master + ground: freeborn person; adult male (female) indigene with full legal rights (i.e. neither slave nor indentured servant, nor belonging to any cult-caste).</i></p>	

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| <p>(3) di egbè < di + egbè- expert + gun: <i>sharp shooter, marks man.</i></p> <p>(4) di jī < di + ji- expert + yam: <i>expert or prosperous yam farmer.</i></p> <p>(5) dikē < di + ike- master + strength: <i>strong, courageous, and valiant.</i></p> <p>(6) di m̄gbā < di + m̄gba- master + wrestling: <i>expert wrestler.</i></p> <p>(7) di m̄gba < di + m̄gba- master + wrestling: <i>convulsion.</i></p> <p>(8) di m̄kpà < di + m̄kpà- expert + kidnapping: <i>person in the prime of manhood; strong, great, or valiant person.</i></p> <p>(9) di ñkà < di + ñkà- master + skill: <i>expert craftsman, skilled person or artist.</i></p> <p>(10) di nrī < di + nri- master + food: <i>person who is fond of food; great eater; gourmet.</i></p> <p>(12) di òchì < di + òchi- master + tapper: <i>wine tapper.</i></p> <p>(13) di ògù < di + ògù- master + fight: <i>warrior.</i></p> <p>(14) di òkà < di + òkà- master + craftman: <i>smith, sculptor, carver.</i></p> | |
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<p>(15) di okwū < di + okwu- master + speech: <i>orator</i>.</p> <p>(16) di ọrū < di + ọrụ- master + work: <i>enthusiast for work</i>.</p> <p>(17) di ụrā < di + ụra- master + sleep: <i>great sleeper, sleepyhead</i>.</p>	
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Table II. Oke nà Nne

Oke	Nne
<p>Oke (n): <i>male person, animal, things; maleness</i></p> <p>oke : <i>adult, old, aged, big, great, strong, powerful, forceful; of animal or thing, valiant; manly, masculine in character; intense, intensive, sustained, excessive (of quality, quantity, degree, value, duration, length, height, width, distance, event, etc.).</i></p> <p>(1) oke àhụ < oke + àhụ- intensive + body: <i>serious misfortune</i>.</p> <p>(2) oke akā < oke + aka- great + length: <i>great, much distance or length</i>.</p> <p>(3) oke akwā < oke + akwa- great + cry: <i>much crying, great cry</i>.</p> <p>(4) oke àmàmihe < oke + àmàmihe- great + wisdom: <i>great</i></p>	<p>nne (n): <i>mother</i></p> <p>nne: <i>female of animal or thing</i></p>

wisdom or knowledge.

- (5) oke àzùzù < oke + àzùzù- excessive + catarrh: *flu, infectious kind of catarrh.*
- (6) oke ifufe/ìkùkù < oke + ifufe- excessive + breeze/wind: *hurricane, high wind or whirl wind.*
- (7) oke iwē < oke + iwe- great + anger: *great anger, much anger.*
- (8) ke m̀gbè < oke m̀gbè < oke + m̀gbè- great + time: *since, a long time ago.*
- (9) oke mmā < oke + mmā- great + beauty: *exceedingly beautiful or handsome.*
- (10) oke m̀mād̀ù < oke + mmad̀ù- great + person: *old, aged person; great, powerful person.*
- (11) oke njō < oke + njō- excessive + ugliness: *exceedingly ugly or bad.*
- (12) oke nnwā < oke + nnwa- great + child: *great child, precious child.*
- (13) oke nwàanỳì < oke + nwàanỳì- great + woman: *great, forceful or powerful woman.*

- (14) oke nwokē < oke + nwokē- great + man: *great, forceful or powerful man.*
- (15) oke obioma < oke + obioma- great + kindness: *great, much kindness or benevolence.*
- (16) oke ōchīchō < oke + ōchīchō- great + searching: *excessive desire; greed.*
- (17) oke ōhīā < oke + ōhīā- great + bush: *jungle, thick forest.*
- (18) okokpòrò < oke okpòrò < oke + òkpòro- male + unmarried: *bachelor, unmarried adult male.*
- (19) oke onū < oke onū- great + price: *high priced, dear, expensive.*
- (20) oke on̄ù < oke + on̄ù- great + joy: *great joy, gladness or rejoicing.*
- (21) oke orìà < oke + orìà- great + sickness: *great or severe illness.*
- (22) oke osisi < oke + osisi- great + tree: *big, great tree; male tree.*
- (23) oke oyī < oke + oyī - great + cold: *high fever, often accompanied with rigour.*
- (24) oke unwū < oke + unwū- great + famine: *great or severe*

<p><i>famine</i></p> <p>(25) oke ùtùtù < oke + ùtùtù- great + morning: <i>early morning, dawn.</i></p>	
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Table III. Nne nà Nnà

Nne	Nnà
<p>Nne (n): mother, female person or animal.</p> <p>nne : female person.</p>	<p>Nnà (n): father</p>

3. Analysis

As is evident from the data, the male terms *di* (husband) and *oke* (male) precede their associating female terms *nwunyè* (wife) and *nne* (mother) in tables I and II respectively. Only in table III does the female term *nne* precede the male term *nnà*. Semantically, the male terms are used to express a wide range of qualities. *Di* (table I), in addition to its denotative or core meaning, husband, is associated with such meanings as *distinction, expert* or *master, one accomplished in a trade or craft*. Also *oke* (table II) has the denotative meaning, male, and equally such nuances of meaning as *adult, old, aged, big, great, strong, powerful* and *forceful*. In view of this, the male terms are said to be semantically unmarked, while the female terms, with their restricted meanings, are said to be semantically marked (Crystal, 2007 edn.:283).

From the pragmatic (extra-linguistic) perspective, we examine the first two terms in tables I and II, *di* and *oke* respectively. This is done in the light of Lohmann's assertion that "If one of the constituents' referents is ranked higher in extra linguistic hierarchy, it precedes the other one. This variable refers to a male-first-bias, as well as other hierarchies, e.g., men and women..." (Lohmann, 2012:28). Given that the male terms are semantically unmarked, they subsequently assume a higher position in the extra-linguistic hierarchy.

In the context of Igbo culture, the male person is more important to the culture than the female. It is the male that inherits property as well as ensure the continuity of his lineage. The lack of a male child is one of the compelling reasons for taking a second wife, even in contemporary Igbo society.

Romaine (1994:103) describes this 'male-first-syndrome' as the "received wisdom handed down culturally, which suggest women are derivative of men, such as the Biblical account of God's creation of the two sexes, in which Adam is made first and Eve is formed later by God's taking of a rib from Adam." This symbolically represents an order in English in which, for instance men are mentioned first: *man and woman, husband and wife, boys and girls*, with *ladies and gentlemen* as the exception.

With regard to the morpho-syntactic constraint, consider the wide range of contexts over which the male terms *dí* and *oke* are distributed. In table I, *dí* occurs in 17 contexts, and in table II *oke* occurs in 25 contexts. It thus follows that the male terms "range widely in productivity, both in the sense of the number of lexical items that they have been used to produce and in the sense of the possibility of being used in producing new words" (Napoli, 1996:184).

Coming to the entry in table III, *nne* nà *nnà* (mother and father), the female term *nne*, which occurs as the second element in table II, precedes the male term *nnà*. This precedence relation in table III will be accounted for from the pragmatic point of view, as reflected in the Igbo world view. For instance, "child bearing and rearing in traditional Igbo family values are of the first rate importance among the roles associated with women" (Mere, 1972:93). This can be considered alongside the proverb *Nne ewū nā-àta àgbàrà, nnwa yā àna éle yā ānyā n'ònyū* (When the mother goat is cropping, the kid watches her mouth). Furthermore, the proverb *Ízù ka mma nà nne jí* (Privacy is better shared with siblings from the same mother) confers primacy to *nne* over *nnà* in the polygamous Igbo society where uterine siblings are more closely related among the children from the same father. Thus, there is a tendency towards a mother-child than father-child pattern of relationship. This stems from the fact that only the woman knows the real father of her child.

It is also the case that every Igbo person is regarded as *nwadiàlà* (associate member of one's maternal home) by members of the mother's lineage (*ikwunnē*). This informs why "when one is a victim of oppression, the victim may flee to the home of the *ikwunnē* as a sacred asylum" (Ejiofor, 1982:60).

A classic example of a sacred asylum is drawn from Okonkwo, in Achebe's *Things fall apart*, who fled from his home, Umuofia, for his *ikwunnē*, when he inadvertently caused the death of his kinsman. Nevertheless, it was regarded as a crime against *àlà*, the earth goddess. For that, Okonkwo was under obligation to seek refuge in his mother's home for seven years. This explains why the Igbo give names like *Nnekà* (Mother is supreme) even in patriarchal Igbo society. It used to be the case that when a woman died, her corpse was taken to her maiden home and buried there. According to Uhendu, Okonkwo's uncle, "A man belongs to his fatherland when things are good and life is sweet. But when there is sorrow and bitterness, he finds refuge in motherland. Your mother is there to protect you. She is buried there. And that is why we say that mother is supreme" (Achebe, 1958:122).

In the section that follows, there will be a brief discussion on how language interacts with culture. It will enable us see how the binomials in this study can be said to provide a window into the minds of the Igbo in their conception of gender superiority.

4. Interaction between language and culture

The term culture is an abstract concept which is difficult to define. However, we adopt Geertz's (1973) definition of culture as "... historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitude toward life " (cited in Lenkeit, 2001:30). Language provides the means of communicating the cultural values of a people. By means of language, every culture expresses its culture-specific meanings and values. Thus, culture is dependent on language as a vehicle for transmitting the components of culture.

One of such components of culture is that represented by the gender-based irreversible binomials, which constitute part of the lexicon. According to Lobner (2002:161), the lexicon "represents a unique way of talking about the world and corresponds to a particular way of thinking." This means that the lexicon can be construed as a reflection of the way of life of its users.

The Igbo lexicon contains a set of gender-based irreversible binomials, the subject matter of this study. These binomials are characterised by the fact that they are lexicalised units uniquely structured in such a way that the preferred linear order is the one in which the male term precedes the female. Again the male terms are unmarked. These features reside in the lexicon and thus are entrenched in the minds of the users of the language. To the language users, the features associated with the male terms correlate with the primacy of the male gender over the female. Thus, it is in this that language interacts with culture.

5. Summary and conclusion

The study has examined a set of three Igbo gender-based irreversible binomials which constitute part of the lexicon of the language. Some of the constraints used in determining precedence order in a number of languages were incorporated in our data analysis. These constraints were able to make the right predictions in our data as they did in other languages where they have been used. The male terms in tables I and II precede the female. These male terms are unmarked and express such attributes as excellence, aggressiveness, valour, greatness etc. These qualities reflect the stereotype attitude shaped and sustained by the patriarchal Igbo society via its linguistic repertoire. The male terms are found to be productive, occurring in a wide range of contexts. Only in the third example, table III, did the female term precede the male and has primacy over it. The explanation for this was based on the primary role of mothers as child bearers and rearers.

Having examined a set of Igbo gender-based irreversible binomials which constitute part of the Igbo lexicon, the findings lend support to the claim that language provides an insight into the culture of the people who use it. This study suggests that other aspects of the Igbo lexicon should be investigated further to corroborate or refute the claim. It also suggests that other sets of irreversible binomials be examined in the light of the various constraints which determine precedence order so as to verify their wide applicability.

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