

# Chapter Eighteen

## THE REFLEXIVE-RECIPROCAL POLYSEMY IN IGBO

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### Abstract

According to Heine (2000) the reflexive/reciprocal polysemy is not fully treated in the grammar books of many African languages. As the Igbo language does not belong to one of those examined by the author, it is worthwhile to find out whether Heine's conclusion also applies to Igbo. The paper endeavours to examine how such a reflexive/reciprocal polysemy is reflected in the Igbo language. The conclusion is that the polysemy is often misunderstood, leading to wrong conclusions on the nature of the reflexive in Igbo. Furthermore, an identification of the polysemy factor should contribute to a better analysis of the structure in the Igbo language.

### Introduction

The nominal *ònwé* is translated as 'self' (Igwe 1999: 609) and used in the regular formation of the reflexive construction in Igbo. It is a *dependent unit* that needs to combine with other units to form a relatively autonomous structure (Taylor 2002: 226). It is specifiable only through an associative construction with another nominal and does not occur as an independent morpheme in the language. It also has a cognitive basis that motivates its use to form a schematic abstract possessive construction which lies in its use to form the reflexive in the language.

Abstract possession serves the cognitive function of using one entity to locate another (Langacker 1991: 171; van Hoek 1997: 53). For example, in the expression 'the mother's chair' one uses the conception of 'the mother' for locating a particular instance of the nominal type 'chair', which is the instance, associated with 'the mother'. Igbo construes the same possessive relation through a simple juxtaposition of the nominals, coupled with an associative tonal relationship, but without an additional morphological marking:

(1) *óché òmē*

chair mother = '(the) mother's chair'

The tonal relationship is expressed here through a downstep on *òmē*, which otherwise should have been realized as *ómé*.

A comparison of the English and Igbo possessive constructions in (1) above reveals that in English the possessor is used as the reference point to locate the possessed (Langacker 1991: 171), while in Igbo it is the possessed that is used to locate the possessor.

Similarly, in the formation of constructions involving the nominal *ònwé*, it is *ònwé*, the possessed entity, that serves as the reference point for locating the particular instance of the possessor, the pronouns, with which it forms the reflexive constructions in the language:

(2) <b>Singular</b>	<b>Plural</b>
<i>ònwé m̄</i> 'myself'	<i>ònwé ānyí</i> 'yourselves'
<i>ònwé ǵl̄</i> 'yourself'	<i>ònwé unù</i> 'yourselves'
<i>ònwé yā</i> 'herself/himself'	<i>ònwé hā</i> 'themselves'

These forms shall be used to examine the polysemy issues pointed out at the beginning of the paper. The rest of the paper goes into these issues as follows. Section 2 looks at the possible derivational path of the Igbo reflexive and compares it with the formation of reflexives in other African languages. Section 3 is on the polysemy issue, while section 4 forms the summary and conclusion.

### The Derivational Path of the Igbo Reflexive and Related Forms

The derivational path of the Igbo reflexive seems to differ from that of other African languages that have been investigated so far.

The first point of difference is in the nature of the particular structures used to form the reflexive construction. In his examination of the reflexives in a number of African languages, including Igbo, Awoyale (1986) confirms the use of the structure [*body* + pronoun] to form the reflexives in Yoruba, Urhobo, Epira and Bassa-Nge, while Igbo uses the structure [*ònwé* + pronoun]. Awoyale concludes that it is the pronouns which combine with *body* in these languages that bear the reflexive sense of the construction, as they account for the anaphoric pronominalization. Igbo, on the other hand, differs from them, for it is the whole structure [*ònwé* + Pronoun] that forms the reflexive structure. Hence, although the pronoun can be described as marking the agreement with the antecedent, it is both the pronoun and the nominal *ònwé* that form the anaphor to the antecedent. Thus *ònwé* is to be seen as an abstract 'self' that through the possessive construction is construed as a reflection of the possessor.

The second point of difference between Igbo and other languages investigated by Heine (2000) is in Heine's generalization of the derivational path of the reflexive markers in African languages. In his examination of different African languages, the author observes that ordinary nominals that mean 'body', 'head', 'owner' or 'comrade' are normally used to express additional grammatical functions like reflexives, reciprocals, emphatic, middle, and passive. He also draws up the following grammaticalization paths for the different lexical items that have grammaticalized as/developed into reflexives in the different languages he examined:

- (a) ‘body’, ‘head’ >EMPH > REFL > RECI > MIDD >PASS<sup>1</sup>
  - (b) ‘owner’ > EMPH
  - (c) ‘comrade’, ‘relative’ > RECI
- (Heine 2000: 10).

From the semantics of its reflexive structure, Igbo seems to fall within Heine’s group (b) with the meaning ‘owner’. It shall be seen in the next section that although the Igbo *ònwé* belongs to Heine’s Group (b), it however differs from this group.

### The Polysemy Issue

Heine explains the polysemy issue to mean where two or more of the meanings identified by him (emphatic, reflexive, reciprocal, middle, and passive) are expressed by one and the same form in a given language (Heine 2000: 4). We shall first look at a prototypical reflexive event before examining the polysemy issues that can arise in the use of a reflexive structure in Igbo.

Lichtenberk sees a prototypical reflexive situation as one in which “a participant acts on himself or herself, rather than on any other” (Lichtenberk 1999: 313). This is an idealized cognitive model which can be pictured in the form of a cyclic event in the figure below:



*Fig. 1. A Prototypical Reflexive Event*

In a reflexive construction the reflexive marker and its antecedent are clause mates; the reflexive marker functions as a direct object, while the antecedent functions as the subject of the same sentence. Semantically the reflexive marker encodes a patient, while its antecedent encodes an agent.

A reflexive situation is realized in Igbo through nominal reflexive markers and the inherently reflexive predicates (verbs) like *-sá àh* ‘take a bath (literal: wash body)’ that involve the subject carrying out the action on himself; but the concentration in this paper is on the [*ònwé* + pronoun] structure already presented in example (2) above. In the sentences below the choice of the verb *-mér ² àh* ‘wound’ is deliberate. The verb *-mér ² àh* literally means ‘injure body’. It is an *inherent complement verb*, with *-mér ²* as the verbal part and *àh ²* as its complement. They together form the *inherent complement verb* that means ‘injure’ in English. Its use in the sentences below is to demonstrate that the nominal part of the verbal complex, *àh* ‘body’, plays no role in the formation of reflexives in Igbo, unlike in those other languages discussed by Awoyale (1986). Also the choice of pronouns as antecedents to

<sup>1</sup> EMPH (emphatic), REFL (reflexive), RECI (reciprocal), MIDD (middle), PASS (passive)

the reflexives is meant to highlight the contrast with their use in the reflexive constructions. To make this explicit, I shall put all occurrences of the reflexive structure in square brackets:

- (3) ▪<sub>1</sub> mètùrù [ònwé m̄]<sub>1</sub> ahú  
I wound -rV-PAST self my body  
'I injured myself'
- (4) Ànyí<sub>1</sub> mètùrù [ònwé anȳ]<sub>1</sub> ahú  
we wound -rV-PAST self our body  
(a) 'We injured ourselves'  
(b) 'We injured one another.'
- (5) Í<sub>1</sub> mètùrù [ònwé ḡ]<sub>1</sub> ahú  
you SG. wound -rV-PAST self your body  
'You injured yourself'
- (6) Únù<sub>1</sub> mètùrù [ònwé únù]<sub>1</sub> ahú  
you PL. wound -rV-PAST self your body  
(a) 'You injured yourselves'  
(b) 'You injured one another'
- (7) ▪'<sub>1</sub> mètùrù [onwé yá]<sub>1</sub> ahú  
3Sg. wound -rV-PAST self he body  
'He injured himself'
- (8) Há<sub>1</sub> mètùrù [onwé há]<sub>1</sub> ahú  
they wound -rV-PAST self they body  
(a) 'They injured themselves'  
(b) 'They injured one another'

The construal of the reflexive situation in the singular sentences (3), (5) and (7), correspond with the prototypical reflexive situation in *Fig. 1* above. The initial pronouns, as the antecedents in the three sentences build the dominions for locating their anaphors. The construal is different with regard to the plural sentences (4), (6), and (8). Outside any definite context the plural sentences could refer to either a reflexive or a reciprocal situation, as can be seen from their English (a) and (b) translations. This is because of the reflexive/reciprocal polysemy in Igbo.

Uwalaka tries to distinguish between the Igbo reflexive and the reciprocal pronouns by positing that "there are both singular and plural paradigmatic sets of reflexive pronouns in the language, but only a plural set of reciprocal pronouns" (Uwalaka 1988: 87). This is in contrast to Awolyale's statement that reflexivization in the Kwa group of languages "does not recognize the formal distinction between absolute reflexives and reciprocals" (Awolyale 1986: 5). Uwalaka's argument could hold, if we have a group of morphologically marked reflexives

that are distinct from the reciprocals; but the facts of the Igbo language seem to agree more with Awoyale's conclusion that reflexives and reciprocals are not formally distinguished in the language. Nevertheless, the statements from the two authors do in fact buttress Heine's conclusion that we are dealing with polysemous items whose derivational path was presented above and is repeated below:

- (a) 'body', 'head' >EMPH > REFL > RECI > MIDD >PASS
  - (b) 'owner' > EMPH
  - (c) 'comrade', 'relative' > RECI
- (Heine 2000: 10).

Group (a) is the most polysemous, while groups (b) and (c) are at the same level. With regard to especially group (b) to which Igbo belongs, Heine makes the following generalization: "If polysemy involves the meaning "owner" then the only other meaning is EMPH" (Heine 2000: 10). As Igbo's *ɔnwé* involves the reflexive and the reciprocal, Heine's generalization needs to be modified as follows: 'owner' >REFL >RECI. This modification is actually in line with the author's *caveat* that more languages can reveal further facts that can be used to modify his generalization. The present observation on the derivational path of the Igbo reflexive can therefore be taken as a contribution to such a modification.

Finally, a statement similar to Uwalaka's has also been made in connection with the difficulties that Igbo learners of English encounter in their acquisition of the English reflexive pronouns. For example, in his examination of such difficulties, Oluikpe (1978) concludes that

Because Igbo does not have the equivalent of reciprocal pronouns, students express the reciprocal pronoun with the reflexive. Consequently, we encounter errors such as these:

- \*Ada and Eze love themselves.
- \*We must know ourselves before we marry.
- \*When the two friends met, they kissed themselves.

(Oluikpe 1978: 81)

Oluikpe's conclusion above, is based on the non availability of explicit morphological differentiation between the reflexives and the reciprocals in Igbo. In addition, the author came to this conclusion when the polysemy factor in the semantics of reflexives had not yet become an issue. The reflexive/reciprocal polysemy in the Igbo language is actually the source of the error, and not simply a lack of the appropriate morphological category. Otherwise, one would also have to conclude that the additional emphatic and reciprocal uses of the same reflexive form in the different African languages investigated by Heine are all an indication of a lack of the reciprocal and the emphatic forms in those languages. In which case the extensions of the reflexive meaning along the already discussed derivational path of group (a), for example, ['body', 'head' >EMPH > REFL > RECI > MIDD >PASS] would have to be dismissed as erroneous. In the same vein the derivational path identified for Igbo,

as ['self' REFL > RECI] would also have to be dismissed. But Heine's cross-linguistic investigation indicates that we are dealing here with a polysemous lexical item. The conclusion therefore is that a prototypical reflexive event in Igbo can best be encoded in simple singular sentences, while the polysemy problem arises in plural sentences.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

The reflexive construction in Igbo is made up of the nominal *ònwé* and a personal pronoun, both of which give rise to the structure: [*ònwé* + pronoun]. This paper has tried to elaborate on the derivational path of the Igbo reflexive construction by showing how it differs from the reflexive structure in other African languages. Finally, the insight from the investigation is that the Igbo reflexive construction is also used to form a reciprocal construction because the language does not morphologically differentiate between the two.

### **References**

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*... appropriate register,  
proper mastery of the generic  
structure of the relevant area and evidence  
of considerable proficiency in the tactic and  
logico-semantic relations of the grammar  
of the clause are essential  
ingredients for making  
meaningful choices.*