Igbo Preposition: A Syntactic Approach

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Abstract

The form 'preposition' is a closed class in the sense that it does not accommodate new forms. Most of the Igbo grammar writers hurriedly jumped to conclusion that the Igbo language has only one preposition which is 'na'. This research work attempts to join some linguists to investigate this wide spread notion. Other lexical items that function as preposition in Igbo would be tested and analyzed syntactically using transformational generative grammar analysis. Data for the research piece were gathered through theoretical studies, simple observations, generation of data and verbal discussions with some grammarians and linguists. The findings are that apart from 'na' other lexical items like gbàsárá, bànyéré , maka, beelusọ can also function as preposition in the language. This study would be of a great benefit to Igbo scholars, grammarians and linguists.

Introduction

Word classes that have many members are known as open class, while those that can hardly welcome new words are referred to as closed class. Preposition is one of the word classes in the Igbo language. Words that perform this grammatical function are very few in the language. Apart from 'na', there are other lexical items that are classified under preposition.

Preposition is one of the functional categories that is addressed as a closed class because coinage can hardly take place. This notion cuts across all languages of the world. Hence, Igbo preposition is not left out. If prepositions in the English language that has more than twenty lexical items is considered closed, what can then be said about Igbo preposition which most Igbo grammar writers assume to have only one lexical representation. For this Green and Igwe (1963:45) note "Only one preposition has been found in Igbo, 'na' – in, on, at, etc. only the context gives it a specific meaning." Even Emenanjo (1978:83) joins to echo that there is only one preposition in the Igbo language. Added to that, SPILC (1985:18) records, "Only one preposition was identified and that is 'na' e.g. *Okoro nq na mmiri.*"

'Na' is considered to be the only preposition in the Igbo language, maybe because it is easily identified. But with careful and meticulous analysis, one would discover other prepositions in the language. On this note, Mbah (1999:172) emphatically says, "The scholars have not however agreed on the number of prepositions and their types in the language (Igbo)."

This wide spread notion that 'na' is the only preposition in the language is disputed in the subsequent pages of this research piece. The work is segmented into sections. The first section discusses the concept of preposition. The second segment talks about the criteria for determining preposition, preposition in Igbo and their types will be discussed in section three, then the findings and conclusion.

Concept of Preposition

Several authors have written on the concept of this topic 'preposition'. McArthur (1996:719) posits, "Preposition is one of the traditional parts of speech into which words are classified. It is a closed class, in that few new prepositions ever enter a language." According to Carnie (2007), "Parts of speech that allow new members are said to be open class. Those that don't (or where coinages are very rare) are closed class."

Preposition can be said to be one of the word classes existing in most languages. It is a form that gives information about the position of the nominal in a construction. It is the form that comes before a nominal. According to Pei and Gaynor (1980:174), "Preposition in general is a word or particle placed before a substantive to show the sytntactical or grammatical relation of the latter in the sentence."

In his own contribution, Yule (1996:88) has it that Prepositions are words used with nouns in phrases providing information about time (at five, in the morning) place (on the table, near the window) and other connections (with a knife, without a thought) involving actions and things.

In affirmation, Mbah (1999:171) attests that preposition refers to the lexical item placed before its complement to show its locative relation, in contradistinction to verbs, between the complement and some other word in a sentence.

In the same vein, Ndimele (2003:107) notes,

> The name 'preposition' suggests 'preceding position'. A preposition   is a word which typically occurs before a noun, a phrase containing noun, or a pronoun, which links the noun, a phrase containing noun, or pronoun to the rest of the sentence. The term itself reflects the grammatical position of a preposition-'positioned before'. The linguistic units which accompany the preposition are known as the complements.

Also Allen (2004:996) postulates, "Preposition in some languages is a word functioning to indicate the relation of a substantive (the object of the preposition) to another substantive, a verb or an adjective: or of the eight traditional parts of speech."

The above declaration indicates that the preposition does not stand in isolation in the deep structure; it must go with a noun or nominal complement in any given construction.

Wiktionary remarks,

> Preposition a closed class of non-inflecting words typically employed to connect a noun or a pronoun, in an adjectival or adverbial sense, with some other word, a particle used with a noun or pronoun to make a phrase limiting some

other word, so called because it is usually placed before the word with which it is phrased (http://en.wiktionary.org./wiki/preposition

Criteria for Determining Preposition

There are some suggested yardsticks for measuring preposition. Before any lexical item is considered to be an Igbo preposition it must conform with the below mentioned rules:

Firstly, a preposition must occur before a noun. As the name implies, pre-position means before the position of NP. There should be no intervening element between the preposition and its complement (See Mbah 1999:171; Ndimele 2003:107).

Secondly, prepositions assign oblique case to their NPs. Case assignment has to do with the structural position that NPs take, for instance, *'He bought a car me.' This is ungrammatical because 'me' lacks case since there is no preposition to assign the case in the sentence. Any element that can license a case to the NP is now the preposition. Radford (1981:313) says, "… any adequate grammar in English must contain a set of case-making rules which assign to NPs some case appropriate to their sentence position." Hence, NP is assigned the case-feature [+objective] if it is governed by a preposition.

The third criterion for assessing a preposition is that a preposition governs and C-commands its NP object. A preposition or verb governs any constituent which it C-commands. C-command means Constituent Commands. To explain C-command: Radford (1981:313) states, "X C-commands Y iff (=if and only if) the first branching node dominating X dominates Y, and X does not dominate Y, nor Y, X."

Prepositions in Igbo

Some lexical items have been identified as preposition in the Igbo language. According to Nwachukwu (1987:5), "There are two types of preposition in Igbo, 'na' and 'maka', although only one of them, the 'ubiquitous' *na* is mentioned in the existing grammars. It is not easy to pin *na* down to any one meaning because it derives its meaning from the specific verb with which it is co-occurring. *Maka* on the other hand means 'for/on behalf of' which occur in mutually exclusive context". Apart from *na,* maka is also among the prepositions in the Igbo language. For instance,

1a. Q na-ekwu *maka* gị.

Q   na   e   kwu maka gi
3rd ps sgl aux pref   vrt   prep 2nd ps sgl
He/she is talking about you (sgl)

b.   Ifeọma bịara maka ule

Ifeọma bịa ra   maka   ule
Noun   vrt -rv2 prep   noun
Ifeoma came for exam.

Mbah (1999173) identifies *belus*ọ as an Igbo preposition. For example

2a. Onyeisi kpọrọ onye ọbụla beluso ya

Onyeisi kpọ rọ   onye ọbụla beluso ya
Noun   vrt -rv2   quantifier   prep   3rd ps sgl
The Head called everybody except you

b.   Eze ma esi nri niile beluso ji
Eze   ma   e   si   nri   niile   beluso   ji
Noun   aux pref vrt noun quantifier prep   noun
Eze can cook all kinds of food except yam

Another preposition seen in the language is *gbàsárá*/*bànyéré* as in

3a.   Ha na-ekwu okwu gb*àsárá* gi
Ha   na- e   kwu   okwu gb*àsárá* gi
Noun aux pref vrt noun prep   2nd ps sgl
They   are talking about you

b.   Ụmụakwụkwọ na-ajụjụ ajụjụ b*ànyéré* ule
Ụmụakwụkwọ na- a   jụ ajụjụ b*ànyéré* ule
Noun   aux pref vrt compl prep   noun

The students are asking question about the exam

Apart from *na* other lexical items identified as Igbo prepositions are *maka,
belusq,* gb*àsárá* and b*ànyéré*. The lexical items have to be tested using the
above mentioned criteria for determining preposition.

The first criterion says a preposition must occur before a noun. The above
prepositions can precede nouns in constructions, as in the above instances. In
the examples 1-3 it is very clear that the prepositions *maka, beluso,* gb*àsárá*

and bạnyẹ́rẹ́ preceded the NP complements *gị, ya, ji , gị ule* respectively without intervening words.

The second criterion is that prepositions assign oblique case to their NPs. It was the prepositions that assign cases to the NPs that follow them. Without the prepositions in the above sentences the sentences will either be vague, ambiguous or ungrammatical. For instance, when prepositions are removed, the structures will be
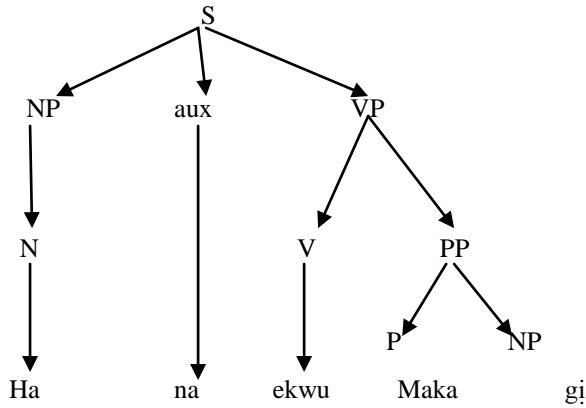
4a.   *O na-ekwu gị

  b.   Ifeọma bịara ule

  c.   *Onyeisi kpọrọ onye ọbụla ya

  d.   *Eze ma esi nri niile ji

  e.   *Ha na-ekwu gị

  f.   Ụmụakwụkwọ na-ajụ ajụjụ ule

In number 4a, the construction is ungrammatical because it lacks a preposition that will assign oblique case to it. Example 4b is vague due to the absence of preposition; examples 4c, 4d and 4e are completely ungrammatical while example 4f is ambiguous because it is prone to different interpretations. It can mean that the students are asking examination questions, or that they are asking after the examination.

The third yardstick for measuring a preposition is that a preposition governs and C-commands its NP object.
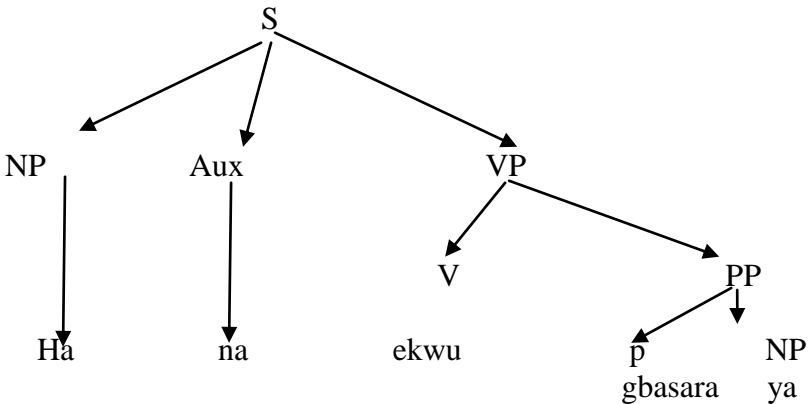
Diagram illustration

Ha na-ekwu maka gị

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                        S
           ┌────────────┼──────────────┐
          NP           aux            VP
           │            │         ┌────┴────┐
           N            │         V         PP
           │            │         │      ┌──┴──┐
           │            │         │      P     NP
           │            │         │      │      │
          Ha           na        ekwu  Maka    gị
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[P maka]   governs   [NP   gị)

Here, the first branching node dominating the preposition *maka* is the PP-node, and this dominates the NP *gị*. So *maka* C-commands *gị*.

Ha na-ekwu gb*àsárá* ya

Ha na-ekwu gb*àsárá* ya

```
                        S
          ┌─────────────┼──────────────────┐
         NP            Aux                 VP
          │             │            ┌──────┴──────┐
          │             │            V             PP
          │             │            │          ┌──┴──┐
         Ha            na           ekwu        p     NP
                                            gbasara   ya
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The same illustration is applied to the other examples of preposition.

-rv Preposition

This is the type of hidden preposition that leans on the verb. Mbah (1999:173) tags it 'bound preposition.' These forms according to him include preposition which cannot stand independently as a lexical item. They include some of the affixes that Emenanjo captions 'extensional suffixes.' The extensional suffix expressing prepositional notion relevant to this study is –rv prepositional suffix. SPILC (1985:18) records that, "The idea of preposition can be expressed by means of an –rv prepositional which some writers call benefactive." The –rv is a leaning preposition since it cannot exist independently, hence they semantically express prepositional notion. This can be seen in constructions like:

> 5a.   O deere m ihe
> O   de   re   re   m   ihe
> 3rd ps sgl   vrt   -rv Prep   -rv2   1st ps sgl   noun
> She wrote something for me/ on behalf of me

> b.   Ada kwụụrụ Obi ụgwọ
> Ada   kwụ   rụ   rụ   Obi   ụgwọ
> Noun   vrt   -rvPrep   -rv2   noun   noun
> Ada paid for Obi/ on behalf of Obi

The grammatical functions of the –rv2 and –rv Prep are quite different. The former is a past tense marker in the Igbo language, while the later has a prepositional notion. Without the second –rv in the examples 5a and b, the above examples have entirely different semantic output. Thus,

> 6a.   O dere m ihe
> O   de   re   m   ihe
> 3rd ps sgl   vrt   -rv2   1st ps sgl   noun
> She wrote something on me

> b.   Ada kwụrụ Obi ụgwọ
> Ada   kwụ   rụ   Obi   ụgwọ
> Noun   vrt   -rv2   noun   IVC (IVC means Inherent
>   Verb Complement)
> Ada paid Obi

The examples 5a and b have additional –rv because the first –rv has prepositional notion while the second one is the past tense marker. But the

second 'r' is deleted due to the phonological process to conform to the standard Igbo. For this Mbah (1999:173) notes, "A phonological process, syncope, elides the medial -r- such that the output is emerging standard Igbo. For instance,

7a	O reere m azụ atọ					
	O	re (r)e	re	m	azụ	atọ
	3rd ps sgl	vrt -rv Prep	-rv2	IO	D O	num
	She sold three fish for me					

b.	O rere m azụ atọ				
	O	re re	m	azụ	atọ
	3rd ps sgl	vrt -rv2	I O	D O	num
	She sold me three fish/ She sold me for three fish				

The example 7a has both past tense marker and prepositional notion, but the example 7b above has only past tense marker. The difference in their grammatical construction results in difference in their meaning.

For the –rv preposition type, Nwachukwu (1987:9) states that there must be an applicative NP
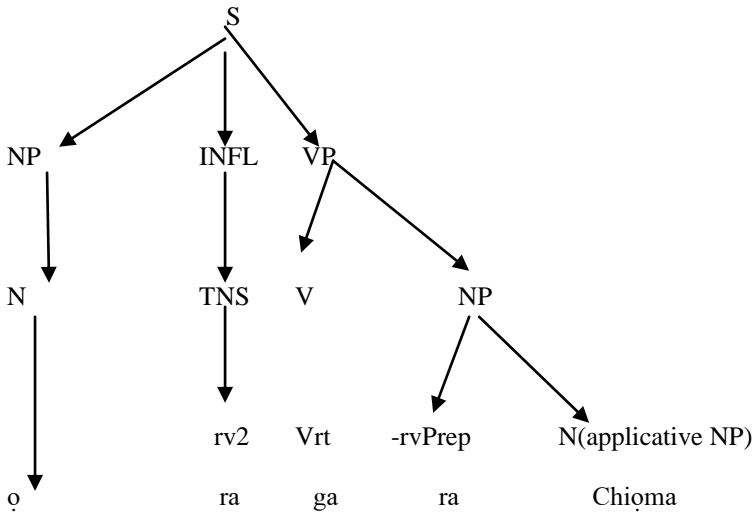
If there is an applicative NP (the subject/entity on whose behalf, interest, advantage or disadvantage the action expressed by the verb is carried out) in addition to other internal objects, then the applicative NP which is always introduced by the –rv suffix dis- places these other objects to second or third position respectively, this is so because the applicative suffix is a bound form that is prepositional in function and has to govern its object.

Therefore, the above assertion is correct about the claim that –rv preposition is prepositional in function because of the criteria for determining preposition says that the preposition governs its object.

The second criterion is that the preposition assigns oblique case to its NP. This manifests in the examples below:

8a	Ọ gaara Chiọma ahịa (He went to the market for Chioma)

b.	Ọ	ga	ra	ra	Chiọma	ahịa
	3rd ps sgl	vrt	-rvPrep	-rv2	appl.NP	Obj

This can be illustrated in tree diagram of TGG

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                              S
                 /            |          \
               NP           INFL         VP
               |             |          /   \
               N            TNS        V     NP
               |             |         |    /   \
               |            rv2       Vrt  -rvPrep   N(applicative NP)
               ọ            ra        ga    ra         Chiọma
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Here the applicative NP is *Chiọma who* is the benefactor of the action displaced the direct object due to the presence of the –rv prep. At the same time the –rv prep governs its object which is *ahịa* and assigns oblique case to it. The sentence will be ungrammatical without the –rv prep. Thus,

   9 *Ọ gara nna ya ahịa

Still under types of preposition, Mbah (1999:174) mentioned another type of preposition he calls 'Category Incorporated Preposition.' By this, he refers to those lexical categories which bind into a compound in the process of which one of the elements loses its categorial status by reanalysing its meaning. Quoting Oji (1987), Mbah notes,

> A word does not effectively become a part of speech until it is used with other words…. A word can assume the character of another part according to its function in different context, and so, for the moment be classified as that other part…thus, every part of speech can temporarily change to other   of the remaining seven.

From the above declaration, it is no longer surprising that a complex verb can have a prepositional notation. That is, a verb compound can be a verb and a preposition (V+V=V+Prep). For instance,

> 10. Ha nyefere ya ọchịchị
>   Ha   nye   fe   re   ya   ọchịchị
>   3[rd] ps pl vrt   prep   -rv2   3[rd] ps sgl noun
>   *They   give   over   past tns   him   leadership
>   They handed him over leadership

> b. Anyị kwụfere Toonna ụgwọ
>   Anyị   kwụ   fe   re   Toonna   ụgwọ
>   1[st] ps pl vrt   prep   -rv2   noun   noun
>   *We   pay   over   past tns   Toonna   debt
>   We over paid Toonna

In some compound verbs, there is prepositional notion as in examples 10a and b. The verb roots are 'nye' and 'kwu' respectively, while the prepositional notion is the extensional suffix 'fe'. For this, Allen (2004:996) has it that, "A preposition is so closely connected with a verb as to have all the force of a compound. Also, http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/preposition remarks, "Prepositions are a heterogeneous class of words, with fuzzy boundaries that tend to overlap with other categories (like verbs, nouns and adjectives)."

McArthur (1996:721) contends that there are words that have some of the characteristics of prepositions but also strong affinities with other word classes.

Findings and Conclusion

The paper has gone a long way to join some linguists to prove that using the laid down syntactic criteria that there are other lexical items that belong to the word class of preposition. Such lexical items are: *maka,* gbàsárá bànyéré, and *beluso.* Depending on their grammatical function and contextual usage they can function as preposition. Apart from these lexical prepositions, there are other prepositional types such as –rv prep and the category incorporated preposition. Conclusively, it is therefore, an understatement to say that 'na' is the only preposition found in the Igbo language.

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