



Context– Sensitive Rules in Urhobo Language, Delta State -Nigeria

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Abstract

Linguistic description exists at varying levels, namely: phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics, among others. Within the framework of Generative Grammar one observes that there is an interaction among these different levels of linguistic description within their lexical structure. Our aim in this paper is to demonstrate how context- sensitive rules showcase this network of interaction between syntaxes and semantics, using Urhobo people and their language as a case study. The research observed after all that a subset of context-sensitive rules in the language structure of any given people brings about an occurrence of polysemy. From this discovery and other findings, the study has proceeded to conclude that for an effective choice and proficient use of words in Urhobo language in particular and effective communication of any language as a whole, these context-sensitive rules must be observed. Urhobo is currently being taught at all levels of learning in Delta State, Nigeria. It is hoped that the significance of the current study is that it would help to give focus to the teaching and learning of Urhobo grammar within Delta State and wherever Urhobo language is also studied outside of Delta State and beyond Nigeria.

Key words: Generative Grammar, context-sensitive rules, Urhobo language, polysemy.

Introduction

Urhobo language speakers occupy the Delta Central Senatorial district of Delta State and part of Bayelsa State, Nigeria, where the speakers are the Ofonis. Urhobo refers both to the people of Urhobo tribes and in this research it is also used to mean the language of Urhobo people.

There are 23 autonomous kingdoms in Urhobo land and not less than ten different dialects which have been harnessed into one central Urhobo language. Though the language is mutually intelligible among all speakers, there are variations in lexical items and melody in their spoken forms among some of these dialects, especially among the speakers from the Southern geographical locations of Urhobo land. Although the language can be classified as one of the less commonly taught languages of the world, Urhobo language is currently a taught subject at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels in Delta State. The language so qualifies as one of the major languages in Delta State and part of Bayelsa State in Southern Nigeria.

GENERATIVE GRAMMAR

This model of grammar identifies three components in a language. These components include: the syntactic component, the semantic component and the phonological component. Within the syntactic component, we have the base sub-component and the transformational sub-component. Our focus is on the base sub-component. The following discussions are drawn from Ndimele (1999: 165-175)

THE BASE SUB-COMPONENTS

The base sub-components include: the lexicon, the lexical insertion rules, sub-categorization and phrase structure rules. There are hereby explained as follows:

a) the Lexicon

The lexicon embodies information about the language as regards the phonology, semantic properties and the syntactic features of lexical items. It is the bases on which speakers rely for appropriateness or not of expressions in the language. This is the real dictionary of a language hence it is referred to in the literature as the theoretical dictionary (Ejele, 2003:67).

b) Lexical insertion rules

These rules select appropriate lexical items from the lexicon and insert them under appropriate terminal categorical nodes (N, V, Adj,

etc) in the phrase-marker in accordance with the conditions or conventions obtainable in the language Ndimele (1999: 165). Two formats have been identified: matching format and substitution format.

The matching format places constraints on the syntactic position of words in a sentence. In the case of the substitution format, syntactically equivalent units can replace each other by reason of both linguistic units having or sharing the same grammatical features. According to Ndimele this format is not constrained enough because all syntactically equivalent units do not carry the same semantic import. Thus it is argued in the literature that the matching format is superior to the substitution format.

c) Phrase structure rules

These rules specify how native speakers of a language put together and categorize constituents in their language. It is a graphic representation of the mental computation of the native speakers' linguistic knowledge with regard to, not only how the linguistic units are categorized, but also how they are arranged to form larger constructions.

d) Sub categorization rules

Sub-categorization rules are of two types

- a) Context – free
- b) Context – sensitive

As the name implies, context-free rules can easily be predicted. The context of use does not affect the feature and status of the lexical item. For instance, from the example given in Ndimele (1999:171), a lexical item that is [+HUMAN] is also [+ANIMATE] and [+CONCRETE]. Therefore, having specified a lexical item as [+HUMAN], there will be no need to include the other features. Context-sensitive sub-categorization rules on the other hand are not so. In this case, the context imposes some constraints on the lexical item. There are two types of rules under this category: Selectional restriction and Sub-categorizational rules.

'kpè ìmìdáká' (cassava) and òsà (orange) like you do tangerine. You can also *biè útién / òsà* but you cannot *biè ìmìdáká* to peel off the skin. If you use *biè* for *ìmìdáká*, it means something else, which is, to slice it into thin chips to make *bòbòzi* (boiled cassava pellets, a traditional snack served with fresh coconuts). These lexical items are therefore in complementary distribution in that they cannot occur in identical contexts. The lexicosemantic properties of the verbs govern the kind of complements they should take and invariably affect their meaning.

(a) Strict subcategorizational rules

These rules are syntactically driven. A particular lexical item must appear in a particular environment based on the syntactic features associated with it. E.g., 'man' in a sentence must appear immediately after a determiner hence in the lexicon it is specified as [DET + _]. This is the frame within which MAN occurs. This frame is called SUBCATEGORIZATION FRAME. It is a devise for treating subcategorization requirements.

See also the following examples which show how the meaning intended determines the sisters a lexical item requires or permits:

4. (a) A meeting place
- (b) The meeting place

5 (a) suggests one out of several meeting places, and 5 (b) suggests that there is no other meeting place. The intended meaning determines which of the articles will be chosen.

Much of this structure is found in collocations. According to Firth (1951) in Palmer (1981:75-76), you know a word by the company it keeps. Invariably the company a word keeps determines the meaning of a word. Thus in English when you say

5. Jane is going out with Henry

And

6. The farmers were red with rage

The underlined words suggest that Jane is in an amorous relationship with Henry, and the farmers were very angry. The company the head word keeps define, give a frame, a portrait, to the meanings of these words. There are instances of such restrictions in Urhobo.

7. ògò ré ùdi nà óhe énu ré úrhé nà
bottle of drink the is on top of tree the

- [N DET] [N DET] [_+DET]
 ‘The bottle of drink is on top of the tree’
8. Èvùn ‘inside’ èvùn ùwèwìn nà
 PP PP [N DET] [_+DET]
- As in
 ùkùjèlè èvùn (rẹ) ùwèwìn nà
 NP PP (PP) NP DET [_NP]
 spoon inside of house the
 ‘There is spoon inside the house’

In the foregoing examples, we observe that nouns in the language take determiners compulsorily within the frame of an NP. Furthermore, preposition has to compulsorily occur with an NP in the language. Other examples are

9. Òb(ẹ) ‘at’ òbẹ ùwènvwì
 PP NP
- As in
 ẹsè Ẹ òb(ẹ) ùwènvwì
 NP ASP PP NP [_NP]
 ‘Ese is at home’

10. rẹ ‘of’ rẹ ághwá
 PP NP
- As in
 11. àfiótò èrànvwè rẹ ághwá
 NP NP PP NP [_NP]
 Rabbit animal of bush
 ‘The rabbit is a wild animal’

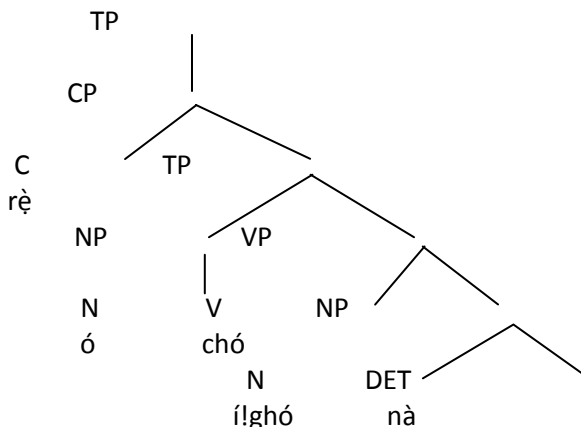
Another grammatical unit which also shows the operation of strict subcategorization rules in Urhobo is the relative pronoun, rẹ ‘that’. This is shown in the examples below:

- rẹ ‘that’ rẹ rẹ ó chó í!ghó nà
- As in
12. Úfuómá mrẹ ómọ nà rẹ ó chó í!ghó nà [_S_Ṛ]
 NP VP NP DET S_Ṛ

Ufuoma see child that 3sg steal money the
 Ufuoma saw the child that stole the money

The diagram below shows the distribution of lexical items with respect to the relative pronoun *rẹ̀*, where the relative pronoun acts as the complementizer

13.



From the foregoing sentences one observes that the relative pronoun compulsorily takes an $S_{\bar{2}}$, an embedded clause hence TP.

Note that the tone the relative pronoun bears is low compared with that of the preposition already treated in sentences 10 and 11 above (*rẹ̀*). This is because in Urhobo tones play lexical and grammatical functions as they determine the differences in meaning and function of lexical items. See also Aziza (2007: 281).

Conclusion

Our present consideration highlights some important aspects of Urhobo as it engages context-sensitive rules. Selectional restrictions in the language engender the occurrence of polysemy. From the examples treated, one observes that the several meanings of words within the polysemous lexemes belong to a common core and the various meanings are related. (cf Ndimele, 2001:167). Though related, the words select against occurring in the same environment. That is, they are restricted, sensitive to the kind of environment they can occur so as not to convey a wrong meaning as we have already noted

above. In the case of strict subcategorizational rules in the language, we observe that in order to bring about well-formedness in the language, certain lexical items obligatorily co occur within certain frame. Thus whereas selectional restriction in the language is semantically driven, strict subcategorization is syntactically driven. Since Urhobo language is being taught at all levels now especially in Delta State, Nigeria, it is imperative for learners of Urhobo language to know these rules so as to be able to construct grammatically acceptable sentences in the language and to organize the lexical items they have learned in such a way as to communicate their thoughts effectively.

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