

# POSTURE ACROSS CULTURES

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## Abstract

Posture verbs describe the position of objects thus revealing the varied conceptualization of entities in space among languages. Despite these diverse conceptualizations, the verbs sit; stand and lie have been identified as key members of the posture verb class. The assumption of posture is not restricted to only humans but extends to non-human entities. Posture verbs can also be extended to conceptualize the existence and location of inanimate objects. In this study, verbs that indicate the positions of entities in space are compared in German and Igbo languages. The study specifically explores the verbs sit; stand and lie in German and Igbo along the line of the domains set forth by Newman 2002 as properties that make up the semantic frames of the basic posture verbs. Data for the study is derived from the Max Plancks questionnaire on positional verbs. The findings of the study demonstrate that basic posture verbs in German and Igbo converge on Newman's characterizations concerning the spatio-temporal domain, force dynamic domain, and active zone. In addition, the study observes that in the expression of the position of inanimate entities, German deploys relevant posture verbs whereas Igbo expresses the same with an auxiliary verb. The study is relevant to cross-linguistic research on the conceptualization of entities in space.

**KEYWORDS: POSTURE VERBS, ENTITIES, CONCEPTUALIZATIONS, IGBO, GERMAN.**

## 1. Introduction

The human sitting, standing, and lying are assumed to form the canonical states which constitute the central meanings of posture verbs. Humans employ diverse postures in the course of their daily routines. This assumption of posture is not restricted to only humans but extends to non-human entities. Posture verbs according to Newman (2002) are good candidates for basic-level categories of events. Posture verbs are sources of metaphorical extensions and they can be extended to conceptualize the existence and location of inanimate objects. Newman (2002) opines that the sitting, standing, and lying postures play important roles in our ordinary daily routines. We also engage in different activities while assuming these postures, for instance, one can read and eat while standing, sitting, or lying notwithstanding that there are typical postures for specific activities. Newman in discussing the central meanings of the basic posture verbs considers the spatio-temporal domain, the force dynamics domain, the active zone associated with each predicate, and the sociocultural domains as properties that make up the semantic frame of the verb: sit, stand, and lie.

Posture verbs in German and Igbo have been explored in independent studies (Fagan (1991), Gamerschlag, Pertersen and Strobel (2013) Okoye (2020)) to mention but a few. These independent studies notwithstanding, the obvious fact remains that cross-linguistic similarities and differences exist in the meaning of words. Furthermore, the differences rather than similarities in meaning and conceptualization usually pose challenges for second language learners and to gain mastery of the second language, the language learner must differentiate between words in the first language and the second language.

In this study, verbs that indicate the positions of entities in space are compared in German and Igbo languages. The study specifically explores the verbs sit; stand and lie in German and Igbo based on Newman's (2002) characterization of basic posture verbs to ascertain their applicability in the two languages.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: section 2 reviews some comparative works on posture verbs in other languages while section 3 provides the methodology adopted in the study. In section 4, we compare German posture verbs with those of Igbo. Section 5 forms the conclusion of the study. The next section goes into the review of some works on posture verbs.

## 2. Literature Review

Studies have been carried out on aspects of posture verbs at specific levels and on a comparative basis. Efforts, however, will be made to examine studies that relate to the central discussion on the comparison of posture verbs in Igbo and German. One of the relevant studies is Fagan (1991) who studies the semantics of the German positional predicates *liegen/legen*, *sitzen/setzen*, and *stehen/Stellen* to explicate the basic rules that govern their use to express the meanings 'be' and 'put'. The effort by Fagan is geared towards providing the learners of German as a second language a guide that will help them not just gain an understanding of the social characteristics of the verbs but also enable the learners to use them correctly in producing authentic German sentences. Fagan set forth the following generalizations as a reliable guide to the use of *liegen*, *sitzen*, and *stehen* to express the meaning 'be' and *legen*, *setzen*, and *stellen* to express 'put' in German. The guides according to Fagan are as follows

- 1a. A rigid object with one side or surface that is perceived as the top appears with *stehen* or *stellen* when facing up but when not facing up, *liegen* or *legen* is used.
- b. An object that does not have one side or a surface perceived as up appears with the verbs *liegen* or *legen* but if the same object is positioned in a way that the vertical dimension is greater than the horizontal dimension then *stehen* or *stellen* is used.
- c. An object that is located or placed in some elevated position or permanently attached to something appears with the verb *sitzen* or *setzen*.

Fagan not only delineates the boundary of usage for the German positional verbs but provides elucidation on the active and dynamic uses of German posture verbs.

Ameka and Levinson (2007) posit that in English, information on relative location is entirely packaged on the prepositional phrase with a void verb 'be' fulfilling the need for a predicate" Thus according to Ameka and Levinson, English uses the locative *be* in the bag/phone

is on the table, the picture is on the wall where languages, for instance, German would express locations as shown below:

2a. Das Buch liegt auf dem Tisch  
The book is on the table

b. Die Tasse steht auf dem Tisch  
The cup is on the table

c. Das Bild hängt an der Wand  
The picture is on the wall

d. Der Schlüssel steckt in dem Schloss  
The key is in the lock

Ameka & Levinson 2007:851)

The distinction encoded in German concerning the figure concerns whether the object is flat or has a base whereas the distinction regarding the ground is captured concerning whether it is a container or a vertical surface amongst others.

Ameka and Levinson (2007) agree with Fagan 1991 on the distinctions encoded by German verbs of positions.

Gamerschlag, Petersen, and Strobel (2013) apply a frame-based approach to three basic German posture verbs *sitzen*, *stehen*, and *liegen*. The authors set forth the properties relevant to the choice of a specific posture verb in German as follows: the way the localized object is kept in position (support from below in the case of *sitzen* 'sit', and support from above in the case of *hängen* 'hang'), the state or matter of the supporting medium (*schwimmen auf* 'be afloat on' versus *liegen auf* 'lie on'), the orientation of the most prominent object axis, for instance, *die Leiter liegt* 'the ladder is lying. The authors drawing from the decompositional analysis of Kaufman (1995) demonstrate that the choice of any of the posture verbs depends on the body part which is supported to keep the located object in its position, the orientation of the object axis in addition to the canonical vertical particular to objects which exhibit a canonical orientation. The approach adopted by the authors allows for various degrees of clarity achieved by utilizing the increment in nodes referring to complex concepts.

The description of Igbo posture verbs by Okoye (2020) submits that some Igbo verbs denoting postures apply to both animate and inanimate entities while some of the verbs used to denote the posture of animates reveal figurative usage when applied to inanimate entities. Furthermore, Okoye (2020) notes that in the Igbo conceptualization of posture, attention is paid to the entities in space and not the ground hence the same entity assuming different postures on the same ground would result in the use of different posture verbs. The study posits multiple verbs for different varieties of the Igbo posture verb 'lie' and reveals meaning extension in cases where the verbs convey existential rather than posture sense. The study asserts that posture verbs in Igbo provide a rich basis for describing entities in space in addition to reflecting diverse conceptualizations of postural senses.

De Knob (2016) offers a systematic description of the semantic uses of German placement verbs, bearing in mind that both posture and placement verbs conceptualize schemas that are used in specific constructions. Berthele 2012 in De Knob (2016) notes that German

placement verbs are linked to posture verbs. However, Berthele attempts a parallel description of the verbs and posits that three semantic uses namely postural, locative, and metaphorical uses have been distinguished for German posture verbs.

From a comparative point of view, Adeyeye and Abiodun (2019) examine the verbo-nominal structures in German and Yoruba languages using Blechtrömme's Gunter grass and Fagunwa's Igbo *Olodumare* as sources of data. The authors adopt Lado's Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis to provide the areas of similarities and differences between the two languages. On the strength of the contextual usages exhibited by the corpus, the authors submit concerning similarity that German and Yoruba complex verbs comprise two or more constituents, with the majority of the complex verbs exhibiting two constituents and the minority manifesting more than two constituents. They also aver that nominal and prepositional constituents are added to simple verbs to form complex verbs in both languages. Concerning differences, Adeyeye and Abiodun claim that whereas German complex verbs are products of derivational word processes, Yoruba complex verbs are compositional constituents. The authors conclude that the similarities and differences identified in the two languages validate the theory of language universals while asserting the pedagogical relevance of the study. Adeyeye and Abiodun's study becomes relevant to the present study in the light of its comparative basis especially as it involves German and Yoruba, a sister language to Igbo.

Having examined independent and comparative studies carried out on both German and Igbo posture and related verbs, it appears that a comparative study of posture verbs in the two languages is yet to be carried out. This is the lacuna that the present study intends to fill. The next section shall go into the methodology adopted in the study.

### **3. Methodology**

The data for the present study were derived from the Max Planck's questionnaire on positional verbs. The questionnaire contains a total of sixty objects in different locative scenes. Two native speakers of Igbo were used to provide the Igbo interpretations of the scenes while two speakers of German as a second language provided the German data with regard to the scenes depicted in the questionnaire. The study however presents only the data conveying the basic postural senses (sit, stand, and lie) in the two languages under comparison. Igbo is a tone language and all tone-bearing units in the data are toned marked using Green and Igwe's (1964) tone marking convention where the low tone is indicated with a grave accent [·], step tone is marked with a macron [-], the gliding tone is marked with a modifier letter up arrowhead [ ^] while, the high tone is left unmarked. In section 4 following, the forms showing the basic posture forms in Igbo and German are shown

### **4. Posture Verbs in German and Igbo**

The assumption of Newman concerning the basic postures (sit, stand, and lie) is that their semantic frame is characterized by four properties namely; the spatio-temporal domain, force dynamics, active zone, and the socio-cultural domain. These domains according to Newman contribute to the central meanings of the basic posture verbs.

The comparison of German and Igbo verbs denoting posture shall be based on these properties set forth by Newman (2002). Though Newman was not rigid about the properties, efforts shall be

made to examine posture verbs in the two languages along the lines of the spatio-temporal domain, force dynamics, active zone, and sociocultural domain.

We present the basic posture verbs in German and Igbo both in isolation and in sentential construct and then proceed to compare them based on the above-mentioned properties.

Both Igbo and German have verbs that convey information concerning the position of entities in space. The verbs are presented in 3 below:

German	Igbo	Gloss
3a stehen	kwùru	'stand'
b. sitzen	nò dọ	'sit'
c. liegen	dinà	'lie'

The meaning of German and Igbo verbs described as posture verbs in example 3a-g include those verbs whose meanings encode the static position of animate entities (humans and animals) or the static position of inanimate entities in space. The forms in 3a-c refer to body postures and give information regarding the orientation of the entity. Subsection 4.1 below explores Igbo nòdọ and German sitzen which translate to English sit.

#### 4.1. Sitzen & Nò dọ 'Sit'

The posture verb denoting sit in English is rendered nòdọ in Igbo and sitzen in German. These verbs apart from contextual usages can be used in isolation with the postural meaning still intact. Based on Newman's characterization concerning the spatio-temporal domain which is the overall spatial configuration that presents itself and is maintained through time, nòdọ and sitzen are typical of a compact position. This means that in the two languages, the spatiotemporal domains correspond.

The German Posture verb sitzen 'sit' basically refers to the posture of an individual resting on the buttocks. In sentential constructs, German uses a preposition to show the location of the entity as shown in the following German and Igbo expressions.

4a Hans sitzt auf dem stuhl  
 Hans sits PREP the chair  
 Hans is sitting on the chair

b. Ada nò n' oche  
 Ada sits PREP chair  
 Ada is sitting on the chair

Like the German sitzen 'sit', Igbo nò 'sit' specifies the location of the sitting entity using a locative prepositional phrase in this case n' oche 'on the chair' as revealed in 4b.

The force dynamics which are how the entities exercise force or are subjected to force appear similar in the two languages. Both entities in 4a and b (Hans and Ada) enter into the sitting posture through a brief movement of lowering oneself into a chair. The maintenance of these states for longer periods is also captured within force dynamics and in this regard, one discovers that the sitting position in German and Igbo languages requires a certain level of control.

Based on the active zone which is the salient point directly involved in the interaction of entities or the maintenance of states, both German and Igbo have the buttocks as active zones. Socio culturally, sitting, is a relatively comfortable position as opposed to standing which is considered less comfortable.

In representing the postural sense of sitting, one discovers that where the Igbo language conveys the notion of sitting in one way, German conveys the same notion in different ways. For instance, the German expressions *Ich sitze hier*, *Ich Sitze*, and *Ich sitze gerade* all translate to English I am sitting whereas in Igbo the same notion is conveyed with the expression *A nọ m ala*.

#### 4.2. Stehen & Kwùru ‘Stand’

The basic posture stand is rendered *stehen* in German and *kwùru* in Igbo. Concerning the spatio-temporal domain, both *kwùru* and *stehen* are associated with a vertically elongated position. This is opposed to a compact position associated with the sitting posture. In maintaining this elongated vertical position, the active zones are the legs and torso which assume a vertical shape. This active zone applies in the conceptualization of the posture denoting stand in both German and Igbo languages. Standing allows a greater exercise of vision over a greater distance as opposed to sitting and lying. Consider the following:

5a. Hans steht auf dem boden  
Hans stands PREP the ground  
Hans is standing on the ground

b. Ada kwu n’ ala  
Ada stands PREP ground  
Ada is standing on the ground

The examples in 5a and b suggest that the entities assume a vertically elongated position. Based on force dynamics, the posture is entered into through a brief movement that involves rising from a chair, bed, or any other entity. It essentially requires more control to maintain a standing posture both for animate and inanimate entities.

#### 4.3. Liegen & Dinà ‘Lie’

The verbs *dinà* and *liegen* represent lie in the two languages. Spatio-temporally, *dinà* and *liegen* have to do with horizontal elongated position. German has *liegt* as an alternate verb that also connotes lie. Examples 6a and b show the posture verbs denoting lie in the two languages.

6a. Das kind liegt auf der couch  
The baby lies PREP the couch  
The baby is lying on the couch

b. Nwa dina n’ akwa.  
Baby lie PREP bed  
Baby is lying on the bed.

Socio-culturally, the posture verbs denoting lie are the least compatible with physical actions associated with rest, sleep, sickness, and death. Examples 4- 6 reveal that in both German and Igbo, the basic posture verbs specify the location of entities using a preposition thus revealing that in both languages, the function of the preposition as a locative applies. Liegt and dina 'lie' have the sides and possibly the buttocks as active zones. Lying as a state is entered into through a brief movement of lowering oneself into a bed. For the spatiotemporal domain, a horizontal elongation is maintained through time and this applies to both German and Igbo languages.

The German posture verbs *stellen*, *setzen*, and *legen* are used to denote 'to put in standing, sitting, and lying positions. In Igbo, the verbs, *kwụba*, *nọba*, and *nibe* suffice as verbs used to denote the same positions. This means that causative actions are expressed differently from non-causative in the two languages. The examples in 7 are illustrative

7a Die Mutter legt das Kind ins Bett.

Det Mother lie Det child Prep Bed  
The mother lays the child in bed.

b. Das Kind liegt auf dem Bett

Det Child lie PREP Det bed  
The child is lying on the bed.

8a Nne nibe-re nwa n'akwa

Mother lie-RV child PREP bed  
Mother lay the child in bed

b. Nwa dina n'akwa

child lies PREP bed  
The child is lying on the bed

The forms *legt* and *nibe* in 7a and 8a are causative forms of the posture verb denoting lie in English. These differ from the non-causative counterpart (*liegt* and *dina*). Thus, the two languages can be said to have different forms for expressing causation and non-causation.

#### 4.4. Posture Verbs and inanimate entities

Apart from showing the location of entities in space, posture verbs are used as auxiliary verbs in some languages. This suggests their tendency towards grammaticalization, a subject that is beyond the scope of the present study. In Igbo, the auxiliary verb *di* 'be' is used to indicate the general location of an entity in space whereas, in German, one of the basic posture verbs is used to show location. Consider examples in 9 through 11

9a. Die flasche steht auf dem felsen

Det bottle stands PREP DET rock  
The bottle is on the rock

b. Karama di n'elu nkume

bottle be PREP top rock  
The bottle is on the rock

10a. Der teller steht auf dem tisch  
Det plate stand PREP Det table  
The plate is on the table

b. Efere di n' elu tebulu  
Plate be PREP top table  
The plate is on the table

11a. Der ball liegt auf dem boden  
Det ball lie PREP det floor  
The ball is on the floor

b. Boolu di n'ala  
Ball be PREP ground  
The ball is on the floor

c. Die Balle liegen auf dem Boden  
Det ball lie PREP Det floor  
The balls are on the floor

In example 9a, the posture verb *steht* reveals the position of the entity *flasche* 'bottle' on the *felsen* 'rock' whereas the auxiliary verb *di* is used to reveal the position of *Karama* 'bottle' on the *nkume* 'rock'. Notice that entities in the German examples 9 through 11 are inanimate thus bringing to bear that the basic posture verbs conceptualize the position of both animate and inanimate entities in space. This also applies to Igbo (cf Okoye 2020). The observation by Leisi (1961) in Fagan (1991:137) who notes that the objects of *legen*, *setzen*, and *stellen* must be solid and cannot be in liquid, powder, or granular form is also confirmed by the German examples in 9 through 11.

## 5. Summary and Conclusion

In this study, posture verbs in German and Igbo languages have been explored along the line of properties set forth by Newman (2002) as those that form the semantic frame for posture verbs. Based on these properties, this study discovers that in German and Igbo languages, the spatiotemporal domain, the active zones, the force dynamics, and the sociocultural domains converge thus substantiating Newman's characterization. Concerning the use of posture verbs as a copula, this study shows that where German uses posture verbs to reveal the position of inanimate entities, Igbo deploys the use of the copular verb *di* 'be'. Although the use of the Igbo posture verb *nọ* 'sit' has been observed (Uchechukwu 2010), other posture verbs are yet to be fully explored in this regard. This study, therefore, calls for inquiry into this area. It has also been observed that in German, ideas can be expressed using different sentential constructs. These sentential constructs seem to answer more specifically to WH Questions such as what and where. Further probe into posture verbs in interrogative constructions in both languages is recommended.



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