Reflections on "Democratic Choice" in the History of Linguistics in Nigeria

Chinedu Uchechukwu*

Abstract

Last year the speakers of the different Nigerian languages had every justification to join in the celebration of ten years of democracy in the country, for democracy has created the enabling environment for them to exercise their freedom of choice in their use of their language without feeling intimidated. Although linguistics in Nigeria has been a strong aid in this development, it however does not seem to present a similar picture of democratization in its own history. This paper uses some issues in the history of linguistics in Nigeria to argue that the term "democratic choice" has not really been realized in linguistic theory in the country. The conclusion is that different linguistic theories should be allowed to offer what they can to the development and uplift of Nigerian languages.

Introduction

It is a fact of history that the foundations for research in Nigerian languages were laid by European scholars. Another common fact of history is that the beginning of Nigerian linguistics is connected with the training of Nigerian linguists by the same European scholars. It should consequently not be out of the ordinary that a discussion of many an issue in the history of Nigerian linguistics often begins with the mention of an European input. The European input in the present paper is from Kay Williamson, who has been described as the "mother of Nigerian linguistics" (Emenanjọ & Ndimele 1995:

1). One major issue in Kay Williamson's professional decisions and comments that has been made public shall serve as a springboard for going into the problem of choice in the history of linguistics in Nigeria.

Kay (as she was popularly called) has been noted to be the first to apply the transformational generative grammar to an African language (Emenanjọ & Ndimele, 1995, p. 2). This was later followed by other works by different scholars both European and African. In an interview with Emenanjọ and Ndimele, she was quoted as explaining that because syntactic theory was changing very fast she could not keep pace with the changes outside the United States of America. As a result she abandoned syntax and went for phonology and historical linguistics (Emenanjọ & Ndimele, 1995, p. 4). The implications of this decision by the 'mother of Nigerian linguistics' needs to be properly examined and related to the history of the linguistics of a Nigerian language like Igbo. By so doing it should become apparent that if Williamson's advice had been heeded, may be the history of the linguistics of the Igbo language might have taken a different turn by now, such that both linguists and students of the language should by now have more possible research areas to choose from in terms of linguistic theories and areas of research.

The rest of the paper goes into this issue as follows. Section 2 looks at the problems connected with choosing a particular linguistic theory within the Nigerian context, while section 3 focuses on how students are taught introductory courses to syntax. Section 4 forms the summary and conclusion.

The Choice of Linguistic Theories
While it is indeed the case, that more has been written in the area of syntax than on any other aspect of the Igbo language (Emenanjọ, 1991), the works within this area of syntax have

been restricted to the same generative framework over the decades. The consequence is that a discussion of syntactic theory in Igbo linguistics (and may be within the wider context of linguistics in Nigeria) virtually always amounts to a discussion of syntax within the generative framework. In spite of this preponderance of the generative theory of syntax in Nigeria, there emerge now and then some reactions that indicate either a shift away from the theory or simply a form of call for reorientation.

Emenanjọ's (1978) is an example of a shift away from one theory to a form of theoretical eclecticism with a descriptive orientation. The author knows full well the generative tradition, but does not rigidly restrict himself to it. Instead, he makes it clear in his grammar book that the analyses he adopts are not consistently or rigidly based on any of the current theories of grammar. Instead, one would find scattered in his work "the language, conventions and standard procedures of structuralism, of Chomsky, and of Chafe" (Emenanjọ, 1978, p. xx). This eclectic approach can still be confirmed in later works by the same author (Emenanjọ, 2005). The author has also spoken (p.c.) of the tendency amongst young linguists to use little language data in the effort to be as formalistic as possible in their theory. Similar comments have also been attributed to Kay Williamson by Emenanjọ & Ndimele (1995, p. 3).

The second kind of reaction is more of a call for reorientation. This reaction is connected with the fact that most Nigerian linguists were trained either within the generative framework or its off-shoot (like Case grammar e.g. Ụwalaka, 1988). While the generative framework itself has undergone, and still continues to undergo, a number of changes over the years, some Nigerian linguists are not conversant with some of these changes because of its rapidity; even students use the same reason to turn away from

linguistic theory (syntax). As has already been pointed out, this was also exactly the reason why Williamson left linguistic theory (syntax) for phonology and historical linguistics. It is in line with this reality that Ndimele (2003, p. 3) draws attention to the need for Nigerian linguists to be constantly retrained so as to keep pace with the changing face of linguistic theory. It is also possible that Ndimele means with 'linguistic theory' the 'generative tradition' that is predominant in Nigeria. The author's remark might be connected with the fact that some Nigerian linguists might not be informed of the recent developments within the theory and as such need to undergo some retraining so as not to continue to pass on out-dated information to their students, or even constitute a hindrance to the academic progress of the students. This retraining could also involve an expansion that goes beyond just one theoretical framework. For example, the *grammaticalization framework* and the reactions to it both within Nigeria and outside is very illustrative of this need for expansion of one's horizon.

The Grammaticalization Choice
Traditionally, grammaticalization process has been identified as involving an "increase of the range of a morpheme advancing from a lexical to a grammatical or from a less grammatical to a more grammatical status" (Kurylowicz, 1965, p. 69). In addition, it also leads to a loss "in autonomy by [the morpheme] becoming more subject to constraints of the linguistic system" (Lehmann, 2004, p. 155). (More to an overview of the framework, see: Heine, Claudi & Hünnemeyer, 1991; Lehmann, 1995, 2004)

One good example of a language structure that has been examined within the framework and also cross-linguistically confirmed to involve such a development from a lexical to a grammatical status is the verb 'go'. It has been

found to develop into a FUTURE marker or future auxiliary verb in various languages, including English. Below are the English examples that are often used to illustrate this point:

(1)   a.   Uche goes to school every Monday.
        b.   Uche is going to go to school on Monday.
        c.   Uche is going to read that book.

In sentence (1)a the verb *go* is a full verb, a motion or change of location verb. The verb occurs twice in sentence (1)b; one could easily interprete the first occurrence as a verb of motion. For such an interpretation however, the subject, Uche, must be seen as already moving in order to start going to school. This odd interpretation is connected with the fact that the first occurence is no longer a simple motion verb. Instead, it connotes FUTURE, and also gives the sentence the sense of 'Uche shall go to school on Monday'. A similar sense can also be confirmed for sentence (1)c, where the subject, Uche, is not necessacirily involved in a physical motion of going to the location of the book he is to read; instead, the verb *go* has here exclusively a FUTURE meaning: Uche has not yet read the book, but he shall surely read it. A simlar variation in the meaning of the Igbo verb -*gá* 'go' can be confirmed in the literature. The table below gives an overview of some of the statements on this verb, to be followed by a discussion of its variation in meaning.

Author	Term Used	Identified structures and their equivalents
Nwachukwu (1982, p. 25)	(1) Auxiliary (2) Modal Verb	-*gá* 'will' -*gá* 'has to; must'
Emenanjọ (1978, pp. 127-128) Emenanjọ (1985, pp. 126-127)	Future Auxiliary-marker	-*gá* as an auxiliary it can be complemented by the simple infinitive or particle, or the obligative participle'
Echeruo (1998, p. 53)	Auxiliary Verb	-*gá* '*aux*. used as an auxiliary verb to indicate future action'
Igwe (1987, p. 123)	Modal Verb	-*gá* 'to go, must have to'
Igwe (1999, pp. 179-180)	Modal Verb	-*gá*^{1} 'go, go to, move' -*gá*^{2} 'auxiliary verb – will, shall'
Nwigwe (2003, p. 131)	Modal Verb	- *gá* 'will, must' "a homophone of another verb *gá* which means 'go' "
Emenakọ (2005, p. 64)	Auxiliary Verb	-*gá*^{1} *aux*. vb. (preceding or prefixed to the active verb) portraying futurity, .i.e future tense: will, shall' -*gá*^{2} 'go (syn. -*jé*)

Table 1. The Descriptions of the Verb -*gá*

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The description of the morpheme *-gá* in the above table can be brought under three headings: (1) a main verb: -*gá* 'go '; (2) future auxiliary marker: -*gá* 'shall '; and (3) modal auxiliary -*gá* 'has to; must'. The sentences below are used to illustrate this variation in the meaning.

(2) a. *Èméká gà - rà Àbá.*
    Emeka go - rV-Past Aba
    'Emeka went to Aba.'

  b. *Èméká nà -   àgá Àbá.*
    Emeka AUX (PROGR) -go-PART Aba
    'Emeka is going to Aba.'

While in sentence (2)a the verb of motion is in the past form, it is modified by the progressive auxiliary in sentence (2)b and consequently realized as the participle *àgá*. Note the difference in examples (3)a and (3)b below where the verb -*gá* functions as an auxiliary:

(3) a *Èméká gà - èrí   ákpụ̄.*

    Emeka AUX (FUT) - eat-PART casava

    'Emeka shall eat casava.'

  b. *Èméká gà - àgá Ābá.*
    Emeka AUX (FUT) -go-PART Aba
    'Emeka shall go to Aba.'

Here the verb -*gá* functions as an auxiliary verb, like *nà* in (2)b above. In example (3) the verb is categorized as an auxiliary as a result of its effect on the following verb which

is similar to the effect of the auxiliary verb *nà* in (2)b above. The modified verbs in (3) are realized as the participles *èrí* and *àgá* for (3)a and (3)b respectively. Although the auxiliary is followed in these sentences by the participle of the modified verbs, it can also be followed by their infinitives in some dialects of Umuahia without much change or loss in meaning:

(4)   a.   *Èméká gà   - i̩bī̩á   ǹgá ānyī̩.*
                Emeka AUX-FUT - to come place we

                'Emeka shall come to our place.'

    b.   *Èméká gà   - i̩gā Ábá.*
                Emeka   AUX-FUT - to go Aba
                'Emeka shall go to Aba.'

There are however other occasions where an emphasis or change in the tone of voice could be used to give the verb *-gá* in the above sentences a modal meaning of compulsion, i.e. 'must'. It suffices here to cite the examples from Emenanjọ (1985) and Igwe (1973) as glossed by the authors in examples (5) and (6) below:

(5)   a.   *Ékhè gà - èrí   yā.*
                Ekhe ANT eat-PART it
                'Eke will eat it.'

    b.   *Ékhè gà - írī   yā.*
                Eke ANT - to eat it
                'Eke must eat it.'
                (Emenajo 1985: 127)

(6)   a   *ọ́   gà - èmé   yā.*
            He AUX do-PART it
            'He will probably do it.'

      b.   *ọ́   gà - ímē   yā.*
            He AUX to do   it
            'He will probably do it.'
            (Igwe 1973: 496)

Emenanjọ explains ANT as an anticipative aspect that could have the meaning of FUTURE as in (5)a, while (5)b has a nuance of certainty. Both Emenanjọ's (1985: 127) interpretation of (5)b as having the nuance of 'certainty', and Igwe's gloss of 'probably' in example (6), are aspects of epistemic modality that has led to the verb also being identified as a modal verb.

From the above presentation one could envision the following possible path for the development of the verb *-gá*: (a) full verb *-gá* 'go' →(b) future auxiliary marker *-gá* 'shall; will' → (c) modal auxiliary *-gá* 'must; might'. In the 'new' function as an auxilliary (whether as a future auxiliary or as a modal auxiliary) the verb *-gá* follows Lehmann's (2004, p. 155) summary of the effect of the grammaticalization process on a morpheme: it loses in autonomy and can no longer function as a full verb; it becomes subject to the constraints of auxiliaries in the language, which involves the co-occurrence with participles or (in some cases) with infinitives. Emenanjọ, who did not work with the grammaticalization framework, also comes to a similar conclusion with regard to the same language structure. The author concludes that the Igbo future auxiliary must have developed from a 'go' verb rather than a 'come' verb (Emenanjọ, 1985, p. 206). The development could have been

from a motion to a future auxiliary marker in the sense of 'go to do something', which could probably explain why the modified participles of the verbs can also be replaced with their infinitives in some dialects. Compared with the findings in typological studies, the Igbo -*gá* follows the typological pattern of the development of future-auxiliary verbs from 'go' motion verbs (Bybee, Pagliuca & Perkins, 1991).

Such suspicions on the possible lexical origin of some grammatical items have always been expressed in the study of many an African language by some native speakers. With regard to the Igbo language for example, Emenanjọ (1978; 1979) admits a possible verbal origin of some Igbo suffixes, the same way that Bamgbose (1972) and Emenanjọ (1985) speak of a full verbal origin of some elements that have been referred to as *verbids* in the literature. What seems to have been missing for a further systematic investigation of the possible development of the identified language structures is a theoretical framework like grammaticalization to bring all these pieces of information together. But grammaticalization had not yet become a major issue in the investigation of the Igbo language (and many other African languages) by their native speaker linguists. It is therefore not surprising that while Ndimele (2003a) celebrates the fact that Kay Williamson's festschrift, *Four Decades in the Study of Language and Linguistics in Nigeria*, contains essays exclusively by Nigerians, none of the essays was on any aspect of grammaticalization in any Nigerian language. Similarly, the festschrift for the two foremost Igbo linguists, Emenanjọ and Nwachukwu, in Ndimele (2003a) and Ndimele (2005) respectively, do not contain any essay on the phenomenon of grammaticalization in Igbo or any other Nigerian language. This could be as a result of the historical coincidence that the generative framework which had always

ruled the waves within the Nigerian context, did not set out to investigate such phenomena.

It should however be noted that at the international level the generativists were not initially favourably disposed towards the grammaticalization framework. In fact, the greatest attack and opposition to the grammaticalization approach came from a generativist, Newmeyer, who polemically proclaims that "there is no such thing as grammaticalization" (Newmeyer, 1998, p. 226). Is it then not somewhat embarrassing when the same generative approach turns around some years later to speak of grammaticalization as one of the phenomena to be described within the generative approach? This turn around could also be seen as a form of progress, for the one time opponent has finally come to the realization of the fact that he has only been attacking a strawman.

If we move away from the international scene and return to Nigeria, we should see that the grammaticalization approach is not only not well known to the point of being offered as a course of study in Nigerian linguistics departments, it is in fact also to be expected that a supervisor of a BA or MA project within the grammaticalization framework would be rare to find. To further compound matters, one is also often confronted with old, young, and even upcoming linguists who oppose the grammaticalization framework without realizing that their theoretical compatriots elsewhere have finally recognized the relevance of the framework. This attitude cannot arise from a well informed insight; instead, it seems to indicate an attitude of 'simply oppose what you do not understand'. It need not be emphasized that such an attitude does not create a healthy atmosphere for intellectual exchange or progress. The introductory courses to syntax in Nigerian universities seem to follow a similar pattern.

Introduction to Syntax

It is normal to find the title "Introduction to Syntax" as a course in any department of linguistics in a Nigerian university. A closer look at the course outline and recommended textbook(s) often reveals such a course to be exclusively an introduction to syntactic analysis within the generative framework, with an overview of Chomsky's theory of syntax. It is also normal to find books with such titles as *Introduction to Generative Syntax* as one of the recommended texts. The students are from the very beginning restricted to this one approach to syntax. They often complete their training in linguistics without the realization that there are other approaches to the same linguistic phenomenon. There is no question of freedom of linguistic choice between competing theoretical frameworks because the students simply have no choice.

Let us look at an example that seems to point in the right direction. Van Valin is internationally noted for his *Advances in Role and Reference Grammar* (van Valin, 1993). In his book *An Introduction to Syntax* (van Valin, 2003) however, the author adopts the approach of first giving the student/learner a simple, theory neutral introduction to the basic concepts in syntax such as grammatical relations, dependency relations, constituent structures, grammar and lexicon. Thereafter, he gives a brief but simplified introduction to the different theories of syntax in the sixth chapter of the book. The chapter outline from the table of contents is shown below:

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6   Theories of Syntax
6.0 Introduction
6.1 Relational Grammar
6.2 Lexical-Functional Grammar
6.3 Government-Binding Theory
6.4 Role and Reference Grammar
6.5 Summary
6.6 Other syntactic theories
6.7 Conclusion
Notes and suggested readings
Exercises
              (van Valin, 2003, p. viii)

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The author finds it reasonable to introduce the students to other theories of syntax that are different from his *Role and Reference Grammar* approach. Students would surely gain from such a theoretical open-mindedness that exposes them to alternative approaches to the same linguistic phenomenon. The present state of introducing and teaching syntax in Nigeria does not seem to provide the Nigerian student with such a possibility. He cannot easily make a choice with regard to linguistic theories.

        Finally, the root cause of this present state of affairs is not to be blamed on any person. It is simply a historical factor that the early Nigerian linguists were trained when the Generative Tradition and its off-shoots (like Case Grammar) was all the rage. It is also a historical factor that those early linguists could only give (and continue to give) what they had and continue to have. It however becomes a serious problem when these very products of a historical coincidence simply decide not to allow any other alternative approach within their sphere of influence. With such an attitude they present a picture of dictatorial, non-democratic, theoretical soldiers, the

types that Africa is gradually getting rid of from its political terrain. Should such theoretical tyrants take it upon themselves to barricade every new theory simply because it is or might sound different from what they have been trained to do? Nigeria's ten years of democracy calls for a reflection from us linguists, for it is not only the military or politicians that are capable of tyranny.

Summary and Conclusion

The paper has tried to use the words of Kay Williamson to draw attention to the need for us linguists in Nigeria to have a large heart when it comes to theoretical differences. This does not necessarily mean ending up with a state of 'anything goes'. Instead, the present ten years of democracy in Nigeria should make us reflect on the need to extend the freedom of choice to include 'the freedom of theoretical choices'. Such a goal should make us focus on training students of linguistics in such a manner that they should be placed in a position to make informed decisions with regard to choosing any theory they feel drawn to. In other words, democracy is not for the political arena alone, neither is it restricted to helping different ethnic groups promote the use of their language. The freedom of choice associated with democracy should extend to the profession of linguistics itself. It is in the light of this that Ndimele's (2003a, p. 3) statement on the need for Nigerian linguists to be constantly retrained needs to be re-examined from a different angle. The retraining should not just be restricted to a retraining within the same theoretical framework; instead, there should be more effort by many of us to widen our horizon and train ourselves in other theoretical frameworks as well. Such a retraining would definitely mean more work, but it should help us provide our students with alternative approaches to choose from. Let us not inflict our lack of intellectual mobility on our students.

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Dr. Chinedu Uchechukwu is of the Department of Linguistics, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka