

THE DERIVATION OF IGBO VERB BASES

Wm. E. Welmers
 Department of Linguistics
 University of California, Los Angeles

0. The form of Igbo used in this study may be called "Compromise Igbo". In general, though naturally with some areal and individual differences, it reflects "Central" Igbo as spoken by those whose home dialects do not have aspirated consonants or nasalization. As such, it is an extremely widespread medium of inter-dialectal communication, and is the basis for written Igbo. Except for the added indication of tone here, the transcription is closely similar to the usual Igbo orthography. /' indicates a non-low tone; /` indicates low tone; /' indicates a "down-step" with the following syllable.

1.0. Inflectional affixes in the Igbo verbal system include a relatively few prefixes, suffixes, and morphemes of tone replacement. These affixes occur with a verb base, which may consist of one to three, or occasionally four or five, syllables. Representative inflectional affixes are illustrated in the following sub-sections.

1.1. Infinitive prefix; the allomorphs /i'-/ and /i'-/ are conditioned by a pervasive pattern of vowel harmony:

i'zú	'to buy'
i'sí	'to cook'
i'mécf	'to close'

1.2. Verbal noun prefix; the allomorphs /a-/ and /e-/ are conditioned by vowel harmony; the tone of the prefix is conditioned by the tone of the verb base. The verbal noun is used in incomplete and future constructions; these are incomplete utterances, omitting an obligatory object:

ǫ̀ nà àzú	'he is buying'
ǫ̀ nà èsí	'he is cooking'
ǫ̀ gà èmécí	'he will close'

1.3. Vowel suffix used in several constructions; the choice of the vowel is conditioned by the preceding vowel. With some monosyllabic bases and certain types of bi- and polysyllabic bases, this suffix has a zero allomorph; with some monosyllabic bases, an allomorph consisting of /r/ plus the last vowel of the base occurs. The tone of the suffix is non-low:

kà ànyí zúá	'let's buy'
kà ànyí síé	'let's cook'
kà ànyí méció	'let's close'

1.4. Completive suffix /-lá/, occurring only after the vowel suffix just described:

ǫ̀ 'zúá-lá	'he has bought'
ó 'síé-lá	'he has cooked'
ó 'mécíé-lá	'he has closed'

1.5. Prefixed downstep, occurring in the completive construction as illustrated in the preceding section.

1.6. Low tone replacing stem tone, in the stative con-

struction. The stem itself may have low tone, in which case the low tone replacive has a zero effect. The stative is used only with a relatively few monosyllabic bases, which in general do not occur in the factative construction described below:

f'bu	'be identified as':	ó bu ákwà	'it is cloth'
f'dí	'be located at':	ó dí n'ébé à	'it is here'
fji	'have available':	ó ji àkpà	'he has a bag'

1.7. Low tone replacing stem tone, plus a suffix consisting of /r/ plus the preceding vowel, with low tone, marking the factative construction. The factative, roughly, refers to the past for verbs indicating action, but to the present for verbs describing a situation:

ó zùrù	'he bought'
ó siri	'he cooked'
ó məciri	'he closed'
ó ɽwèrè	'he has'

2.0. Two and only two morphemes may occur in a verb form after the vowel suffix or the completive suffix (1.3, 4). The status of these appears to be different from that of the inflectional affixes described above, and yet they do not appear to belong to the verb base.

2.1. The first of these morphemes is /-kwá/, indicating an action in addition to an action previously mentioned. Although this morpheme may occur freely with probably any verb, it differs from the verbal inflectional affixes in that it may

also occur, usually in apocopated sentences, after nominals, with the meaning 'also'.

2.2. The second of these morphemes consists of /r/ plus the preceding vowel, with non-low tone. It indicates that the action is applied to or performed for an indirect object, which is normally animate. This morpheme differs from the inflectional affixes described above in that its occurrence is restricted to verbs indicating action, and it requires the use of an indirect object. This morpheme is not the same as the factative suffix (1.6); it may occur with the factative suffix, with certain morphophonemic alternations. The additive /-kwá/ and the applicative /-rV/ may both be used in one form, in that order. These two morphemes are here illustrated with the completive construction:

ǫ́ 'zǫ́álákwá ákwà	'he has also bought cloth'
ǫ́ 'zǫ́álára 'm ákwà	'he has bought cloth for me'
ǫ́ 'zǫ́álákwára 'm ákwà	'he has also bought cloth for me'

2.3. These two morphemes may also occur at the end of forms which have no suffix, including the infinitive. The fact that they occur after certain inflectional suffixes, however, suggests that they do not belong to the verb base; if they were interpreted as part of the verb base, it would be necessary to describe some inflectional affixes as appearing between component parts of the base. To these two morphemes, the label "verbal extensions", borrowed from Bantu grammarians, may conveniently be

applied. To be sure, in Bantu, unlike Igbo, verbal extensions do constitute part of the verb base. A striking similarity, on the other hand, is found in the usage and even the form of the Igbo and Bantu applicative extensions.

3.0. A verb base may now be defined, for Igbo, as that part of the infinitive which follows the infinitive prefix, excluding the additive and applicative extensions. Such verb bases may consist of one or more syllables. In bases of more than one syllable, the first is itself a verb root, which with very few exceptions occurs independently as a monosyllabic verb base. The few exceptions display no system; they appear to be merely a few sporadic cases of bound roots, appearing only in combination with other morphemes to form bases. It is the syllable or syllables after the first in a verb base which concern us.

Ida C. Ward's An Introduction to the Ibo Language was published in 1936. Miss Ward's field of specialization was phonetics. However, as she herself explicitly states, the study of tone inevitably led her farther into the field of grammar than she had anticipated. In her discussion of two-syllable verb bases (she cites a few three-syllable bases, but makes no statements about them), she distinguishes between what she calls "compound verbs" and "verbs with meaning suffixes". A "compound verb" is a base consisting of two verb roots, each of which occurs independently as a monosyllabic verb base. A "meaning suffix" is a morpheme which appears in second position in a two-

syllable verb base, but which does not occur independently as a monosyllabic verb base, yet which adds something to the meaning of the preceding root. She recognizes the possibility that what she calls "meaning suffixes" may be bound verb roots, or at least may originally have been verb roots; and she observes, rightly, that the distinction between the two formations is irrelevant to the grammar of Igbo in so far as she treats it. However, Miss Ward's remarkable intuition in matters of language analysis makes the question of the validity of her "meaning suffixes" as a separate class of morphemes well worth pursuing.

3.1. Some examples of two-syllable verb bases in which each syllable is attested as an independent verb root are given here. The tones of the resultant combinations may not be obvious in all cases, but they follow statable rules which are irrelevant to this discussion.

-gá	'go',	-fè	'cross, pass over':	-gáfè	'go across'
-byá	'come',	-fè	(as above):	-byáfè	'come across'
-kwà	'push',	-cí	'be stopped up':	-kwàcí	'push shut'
-mé	'do, make',	-cí	(as above):	-mécí	'close, shut'
-mé	'do, make',	-ghé	'be open':	-méghé	'open'
-tí	'hit, beat',	-wá	'split open':	-tíwá	'shatter'
-wè	'take, pick up',	-pù	'exit':	-wépù	'take out'
-kwó	'scoop up',	-pù	(as above):	-kwópù	'scoop out'
-wú	'pour',	-nyé	'give':	-wúnýé	'pour in, on'
-tù	'throw',	-fù	'get lost':	-tùfù	'throw away'

3.2. Examples of two-syllable verb bases in which the second syllable is not attested as an independent verb root, but is one of Ward's "meaning suffixes", are:

With /-tá/, indicating action performed in the direction of the subject or speaker, or in his interest:

-zŷ	'buy':	-zŷtá	'buy and bring, buy for oneself'
-wè	'take, pick up':	-wètá	'bring'
-mŷ	'study':	-mŷtá	'learn, master'
-dŷ	'pull':	-dŷtá	'attract, be attractive to'
-ŋwé	'obtain, get':	-ŋwétá	'receive'

With /-cá/, indicating action performed to completion or to the exhaustion of the object:

-rí	'eat':	-rícá	'eat all of, eat up'
-hŷ	'see':	-hŷcá	'get a good look at, inspect'
-gŷ	'count, read':	-gŷcá	'read all of, finish reading'

With /-sŷ/, indicating action performed up to a stopping point or to temporary completion:

-rí	'eat':	-rísŷ	'finish eating'
-kwŷ	'stand':	-kwŷsŷ	'stop'

With /-cí/ (not the independent root meaning 'be stopped up'), indicating action performed as a replacement of another action:

-zŷ	'buy':	-zŷcí	'buy as a replacement'
-nŷ	'be at, sit':	-nŷcí	'take the place of'
-lŷ	'marry':	-lŷcí	'remarry (e.g., as a widower)'

With /-hyè/, indicating action done in a wrong way or by mistake:

-gá 'go':	-gáhyè 'go the wrong way' (obj. 'road')
-kwú 'speak':	-kwúhyè 'speak disrespectfully of; (with object 'mouth':) make a slip of the tongue'

With /-wá/, indicating action taken up or initiated (more than merely begun):

-gá 'go':	-gáwá 'get going'
-gý 'count, read':	-gýwá 'get at reading'

3.3. In some three-syllable bases, the second and third syllables are not readily analyzable as separate morphemes, but are bound to each other; further, these combinations do not appear as independent verb bases, and thus belong with Ward's "meaning suffixes". Examples are:

With /-gidé/, indicating continuation of an action:

-nò 'be at, sit':	-nògidè 'stay'
-rý 'work':	-rýgidé 'keep on working'

With /-ghárf/, indicating action performed at random, aimlessly, or in other than a straight line:

-gá 'go':	-gághárf 'walk around, stroll'
-lé 'look':	-léghárf 'look around, turn one's head'

3.4. In other three-syllable bases, the second syllable, as in two-syllable bases, may be either an independent root or a bound morpheme. However, the third syllable is only very

rarely an independent verb root. Bound morphemes of the type discussed in 3.2 above are common in this position. Only a few independent roots may occur in third position; only /-gá/ 'go' indicating action away from the speaker or subject, and /-fè/ 'pass by' indicating action past a place; have been recorded, though it would not be surprising to find also /-pù/ 'exit' indicating action out of a place. Significantly, these form a semantic group with the bound morpheme /-tá/ indicating action toward the speaker or subject. Examples of three-syllable bases of this type are:

- wè 'take, pick up', -dà 'fall', with /-tá/:
 -wédàtá 'bring down'
- wè 'take, pick up', -pù 'exit', with /-tá/:
 -wépùtá 'bring out'
- mé 'do, make', with /-kù/ indicating action done together,
 and /-tá/: -mékùtá 'do together, bring together'
- ké 'tie', -cí 'be stopped up', with /-sá/:
 -kécísá 'tie up, fasten up completely'
- dà 'fall', -sá 'spread', with /-sá/:
 -dàsàsá 'fall apart and scatter all around'

3.5. The same patterns apply to bases of more than three syllables: the first syllable must be an independent verb root, the second (or second and third; see 3.3 above) may be either an independent root or a bound morpheme; any syllable thereafter must be a bound morpheme or one of the very few directional

verb roots mentioned above in final position.

4.0. Igbo verb bases may thus be composed of morphemes of two definably different types in terms of distribution. Independent monosyllabic roots may occur alone to constitute verb bases. They may also occur in either first or second position in a longer verb base. With only a few exceptions, they may not occur after the second position, and those which do must be in final position. On the other hand, certain bound morphemes, Ward's "meaning suffixes", may not occur in first position in a base of two or more syllables; they may occur in any position after the first.

4.1. The bound morphemes in question, which occur as parts of verb bases, may be given a label more formal than "meaning suffixes"; namely "base formatives". Most base formatives, like verb roots, are monosyllabic, but a handful of bisyllabic morphemes are included in this class. Some thirty such base formatives have been identified in Igbo. Semantically, they indicate motion or direction of various sorts, completion, inception, and comparable modifications of the action indicated by the preceding independent root or roots. No claim is made that every morpheme involved in Igbo verb bases has been unambiguously identified, but it is clear that a morpheme class of "base formatives" can be recognized as distinct from verb roots.

4.2. Since base formatives do function as part of the verb base, and since there is a sizable number of them, it might

appear more attractive to compare these, rather than the two morphemes discussed in 2.0-3 above, with verbal extensions in Bantu. However, Igbo base formatives and Bantu verbal extensions have little if anything in common in specific semantic reference. The typical references of Bantu extensions -- passive, causative, reciprocal, stative, and others -- are not found at all among the Igbo base formatives.

4.3. The morphotactics of Igbo base formatives in bases containing more than one has not been investigated. However, it is clear that there are certain restrictions on their co-occurrence and order. What has been accomplished is to define the task of a fuller statement of Igbo verb morphology in terms of four morpheme classes: roots, base formatives, inflectional affixes, and extensions. This is particularly significant in that a verb morphology of this type has not been reported for any other West African language, though it probably appears in the languages most closely related to Igbo, which have often been called dialects of Igbo.