THE BASIC ROLE OF PRONOMINALISATION IN IGBO TRADITIONAL GRAMMAR

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Abstract

This paper aims at pointing out the role of Pronominalisation in traditional Igbo grammar. The paper started with brief introduction which defined the meaning of pronominal and its relationship with lexical noun. It also deals with the general overview of grammar starting from the traditional grammar, phrase structural grammar, generative transformational grammar to government and binding theory. The topic was divided into three subheadings to ensure effective treatment. They are: (1) General characteristics of pronominal in languages, (2) Functions of pronominal in Igbo traditional grammar, (3) Conclusion. In the first sub – topic, some basic distinction between Igbo and English pronominal were identified, while in the second sub-topic, the paper pointed out five basic functions of pronominal in traditional Igbo grammar such as subject, object (direct and indirect) possessive and pleonastic functions. In conclusion, the paper opined that Pronominalisation has a core function in Igbo traditional grammar.

A pronominal is defined as a word which replaces a noun or a noun phrase. Oluikpe (1978) defined Pronominalisation following Fowler as “the process by which a pronoun is substituted for a noun phrase which is not a pronoun in deep structure”. Therefore, Pronominalisation deals with direct relationship between a pronominal and a noun or noun phrase. Emenanjo (1978) described pronominals as having a closed system while nominals have open system. This is because very few pronominals in human languages substitute adequately for uncountable nominal in natural language. Therefore Pronominalisation has got a primary function of word economy in human grammar for as few as they are, they are able to accommodate uncountable nouns and noun phrases, ranging, from concrete to abstract nouns.

Human languages started with traditional grammar which defined the function of grammar in terms of different parts of speech. A grammar is the totality of one’s linguistic and communicative competence in a given language. Traditional grammar was later substituted at a higher level by phrase structural grammar, then by generative transformational grammar, which was succeeded by the government and binding theory and finally, by the minimalist theory. Despite the constant modification in the grammar, the traditional grammar still functions effectively as a medium for operation of human language.

This paper focuses on the critical assessment of the function of Pronominalisation in Igbo traditional grammar. In the discussion of this topic, the paper will be treated into three sub-contents:

a. General characteristics of pronominal in languages.
b. The functions of pronominal in the traditional Igbo grammar and
c. Conclusion

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General Characteristics of Pronominals in Language

Board (1992) classified Pronominalisation as a class of noun when he stated that “it is necessary to distinguish two major categories of nouns”.

1. The personal pronouns designated in strict categorization term (+N+Pron).
2. The lexical noun with the specification (+N-Pron). They share by and large similar distribution properties occurring in the structural position of subject, direct and indirect object. It is worthy of mention here that the word pronominal strictly refers to personal pronouns only in modern grammar.

Bright stated the condition under which pronominal will operate in human languages, thus:

1. They make up a closed set of forms.
2. They serve the grammatical role of nominal where they occur while differing from the lexical nominal in their distribution.
3. They participate in, and are limited to a fixed set of abstract, semantic paradigmatic oppositions (Bright, 1992: 281).

Whereas logical nouns are modifiable on both their left and their right as can be seen in following Igbo example; “Ogologo mmadụ and mmadụ Ogologo”, Pronominalisation can be in one direction. For example, in Igbo, it can be modified in the left e.g. “Ego ya” while in English, it can be modified in the right e.g. his money.

The Function of Pronominalisation in Igbo Traditional Grammar

Classification of Igbo Pronominals

Igbo pronouns are classified as follows:

First person singular = “m”, mụ
Second person singular = i, Ĭ, gi
Third person singular = o, o, ya
First person plural = Anyi
Second person plural = Unu/ụnụ
Third person plural = Ha

Igbo pronominal system is simpler than English pronominal system. This is because English pronominal system undergoes a lot of inflection in gender and person than the one of Igbo. For example, the third person singular undergoes a change in gender e.g. “He” for masculine, “she” for feminine and “it” for inanimate and non-human, but in Igbo, the pronouns /o/ is used for all gender. It is for this reason that Ogbalu (1972) wrote that Igbo has no gender.

Vowel pronouns can only be used as subject of sentences while other pronouns can be used in many forms such as subject, object, and possessive in Igbo sentences. The vowel pronoun i, Ĭ, o, ọ, cannot function as object and possessive. For example, one cannot use them as object such as:

i. Okeke Kpọrọ Ĭ
ii. Nwankọ na - achọ ọ
iii. Okeke Kpọrọ ọ
iv. Okoye Mara Ĭ

In some areas in Igbo, sentences (i) and (iv) exist as dialects while (ii) and (iii) do not exist at all. In possessive also
a. Ewu o.
b. Ewu Ĭ
c. Ewu ọ
d. Ewu I

Are not accepted in Igbo official dialects, though (iv) “ewu Ĭ” may be used in some dialects. Sentences (i), (ii) and (iii) don’t exist in Igbo. Like lexical nouns, all pronouns in Igbo are autonomous of Igbo Pronominalisation as follows:

Always bear in mind that these pronouns are used in place of nouns and they do the work which they stand for and supposed to do. As a rule, they are written as separate words where ever they occur. The pronoun i, Ĭ, o, ọ are never used as objects. For example, it is wrong to write - m biara be Ĭ, we use
"gi" i.e. m biara be gi – I came to your house (ALIO E.O. 1976:6). Carnochan and Iwuchukwu (1963:16) emphasized on the use of Igbo pronominal in the following statement.

In Igbo writing, the pronouns are written as separate words whether they precede or follow the verb or whether they follow the noun. They cited the following examples in Igbo language:

1. M hụrụ gi
2. Ahụrụ m gi
3. I hụrụ ha
4. A hụrụ enyi
5. O hụrụ m
6. Anyi hụrụ unu
7. Unu hụrụ anyị
8. Ha hụrụ ya
9. Ahụrụ ha ya

One of the major differences between Igbo pronominal system and that of English is the presence of vowel pronouns in Igbo. Vowel pronouns don't exist in English language. In Igbo, vowels like i, ị which are used as pronominals are also used to indicate infinitive verbs like ime, ire, igbute, ịmata. In using these vowels as pronouns, they are separate from the verbs that follow them, while in infinitive they are prefix to the verb e.g.

I jere (pronoun)
Ije (infinitive)

Ogbalu also pointed out this difference in his statement as follows: “when I or ị precedes a verb root e.g. ịtụ, ịtụrụ, it becomes an infinitive marker, and it must be written together with verb root as one word. When it precedes it as a pronoun e.g. (ị tụ ya iche) it must be written separately” (Ogbalu, 1979:24). Oluikpe in his rewrite rule observes that there is a difference between English and Igbo pronominal rewrite rules. He said the rewrite rules show that English third person singular personal pronoun is marked by different forms for gender; such is not the case on Igbo (Oluikpe, 1978:32).

This shows that in Igbo pronominal system, there is no gender distinction as in English language for third person singular. In Igbo, there is a distinction in the second person singular and plural, while there is no such distinction in English language.

Apart from the vowel pronouns, which can function as subject only, other pronouns in Igbo can perform several functions such as subject, object and possessive as can be found in some languages. But in English language, every pronoun performs a specific function. No singular pronoun can perform two functions for example, in the following Igbo data;

1. Ha gburu ewu (subject)
2. Okeke na – akpo ha (object)
3. Ewu ha buru ibu (possessive), but in English, there is a change in the morphological structures of the pronouns as they change functions
4. They killed a goat (subject)
5. Okeke is calling them (object)
6. Their goat is fat (possessive)

In the data above, the single Igbo pronoun “ha” performs the three functions but in English, the three functions are performed by three different pronouns. This is because, Igbo pronouns are very few.

Pronominal As A Subject
All the Igbo pronominals can function as subjects. By this, we mean that all the pronouns in Igbo can start a sentence. Illustration is made with the following Igbo pronouns below.
In Igbo, the second person plural pronoun “unu” can be suffixed to a verb at the subject position, and becomes a bound pronoun. For example, “únù bịa rie ihe” becomes “bịa rie ihe” (come and eat).

Únù jee ahịa = jeenù ahịa (go to market)
Únù gbue mmadụ = gbuenù mmadụ (kill human being)

As can be rightly observed above, the pronoun is enclitised in imperative constructions. The enclitic “nu” is a short for the second person plural pronoun (unu/ụnụ). It is worthy of note that enclitic “nu” has a low tone, and it is different form of the second person plural pronoun (unu/unu). It is worthy of note that the enclitic “nu” has a low tone, and it is different from the suffix “nú” bearing a high tone which is not pronoun but a word of appeal e.g.

riendu riri (please eat food)
riendu riri (you eat food) plural.

one can still combine the suffix “nú” with the plural pronoun “nù” in a sentence to show pathetic appeal to a group of people e.g.

riendunu riri (please, you eat food)
gbaanunu egwu (please you dance)

The suffix “nú” changes the construction from imperative to subjunctive. In Igbo, there are impersonal pronouns, which are Oluikpè’s indefinite pronoun. They are A/E. they occur only in subject position e.g.

a. E gburu ewu (goat was killed)
b. E churu mmiri (water was fetched)
c. A tara anụ (meat was eaten)
d. A ga – eri ihe (food will be eaten)

These impersonal pronouns obey the rule of vowel harmony in their occurrence. It is necessary to state here that these pronouns A/E are quite different from the verbal prefixes A/E which are prefixed to the verb in Igbo e.g.

a. A tara anụ (pronoun)(meat was chewed)
b. Atara ha anụ (verbal prefix) (they chewed meat)
c. E riri ji (pronoun) (yam was eaten)
d. Eriji ha ji (verbal prefix) (they ate yam)
e. E rie ha ego (pronoun) (their money was embezzled)
f. Erie ha ago (verbal prefix) (they embezzled money)
g. A gbara ha akwukwọ (they were wedded)
h. Agbara ha akwukwọ (verbal prefix) (they wedded)

The pronouns are written separately to indicate unidentified person or object, while the verbal prefixes only support the verbs in sentence formation. For example, “erirị ha ego” is the same thing with “ha riri ego”. The personal pronoun “ha” is written separately. The indefinite or impersonal pronoun is not glaring in English, and this marks one of the major differences between English and Igbo pronominalisation.
Pronominal Function As An Object

Igbo pronouns can function as object in sentence constitution apart from the vowel pronouns. Example of this can be seen in the sentences below:

a. Okeke Kpọọ M = Okeke called me
b. Okeke na-akpo Mụ = Okeke is calling me
c. Nweke Chọrọ Gị = Nweke looked for you
d. Chukwu nonyere ya = God be with him
e. Chukwu na – edu ya = God is guiding her
f. Nwafọr kpọọ anyị = Nwafọr called us
g. Nna m chọrọ ha = My father looked for them

In the data above, the pronouns underlined, function as direct object of the verbs which govern them. They are direct object because they serve as the immediate complement of the verbs which they follow. Igbo pronouns can also function as indirect object. Let us examine the data below:

a. Okeke zụrụ ya nye m (Okeke bought it and gave to me)
b. Nwankwo sirị m gwa ya okwu (nwankwo told me to talk to him)
c. Okeke zutara ya bunye anyị (Okeke bought it and gave to us)

d. Okeke zụrụ ya nye m (Okeke bought it and gave to me)
e. Nwankwo sirị m gwa ya okwu (nwankwo told me to talk to him)
f. Okeke zutara ya bunye anyị (Okeke bought it and gave to us)

In the data above, two verbs are involved with two pronouns which act as the complements of the two verbs. These two verbs govern the two pronouns. The first verb governs the direct object pronouns while the second verb governs the indirect pronoun.

Pronominal Function as a Possessive

Possessive means ownership. All the vowel pronouns including the impersonal pronouns do not indicate possession in Igbo, for example, see the data below:

a. Ego m (my money)
b. Isi gị (your head)
c. Anya ya (his/her eyes)
d. Ụlọ anyị (our house)
e. Chi unu (your God)
f. Ala ha (their land)

d. Ụlọ anyị (our house)
e. Chi unu (your God)
f. Ala ha (their land)

Igbo has a post nominal adjective as in “Nwoke ọma”, “Nwaanyị Ojọọ”, unlike English which has pronominal adjectives as in good boy, tall man etc. Igbo possessive pronouns behave as post nominal in function. They modify the nouns they follow and as such, indicate possession of such nouns. Example can be seen from the sentence below:

a. Ewu m buru ibu (my goat is fat)
b. Nwoke a bụ nna m (this man is my father)
c. Nara Okeke ego gị (receive your money from Okeke)
d. Ala anyị di, n’eligwe (our land is in heaven)
e. Ụlọ nna unu amaka (your father’s house is beautiful)
f. Wetere m akpa ha (bring me their bags)

The sharp contrast between English and Igbo pronouns is that there is no morphological distinction for the subject, object (direct and indirect) and possessive pronouns in Igbo, while in English, there is a morphological distinction among these categories of pronominalisation e.g.
Subject  object  possessive
I  Me  My
He  Him  His

**Pronominal Function As Pleonastic Element**

In some construction in Igbo, some pronouns perform pleonastic function. Pleonastic pronouns are pronouns which do not replace any noun or noun phrase. Some Igbo pronouns such as O/O in some sentences, do not substitute any lexical NP. Such pronouns help to balance sentences, and they are referred to as expletive. Examples of pronouns with pleonastic functions are shown in the sentence below:

a. O Kwesiịr inye Chukwu ekele – it is good to thank God
b. Ọ đị mmị isịpụ'/ịmsịdị - it is worthy to respect human – beings
c. Ọ maka ụgụ akwụkwọ - it is good to read
d. Ọ jọka ụgụ ọhị – it is bad to steal
e. O ziri ezi na a ga elele akwụkwọ - it is justifiable that examination should be conducted
f. Ọ đị oke egwu ịdaba naka chineke đị ndị - it is very dangerous to fall into the hand of the hand of the living God

**Conclusion**

Five basic functions have been identified here as functions of pronominal in traditional Igbo grammar. They are subjects, direct and indirect objects, possessives and expletive. From these functions, it is clear that pronominalisation has a core role in Igbo traditional grammar. It is possible that other functions may exist, but we have decided to limit the scope of this essay to the ones mentioned above.

**References**


Carnochan & Iwuchukwu (1963), *An Igbo revision course using the official orthography*, Britain OUP.


