Reflexive verbs in Igbo

Benjamin I. Mmadike
Department of Linguistics
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
Anambra State, Nigeria

&

Frances N. Chukwukere
Department of Linguistics and Igbo Studies
Imo State University, Owerri
Imo State, Nigeria

Abstract

The paper examines a sub-set of Igbo verbs, which are referred to as reflexive verbs. These verbs depict actions performed by an Agent NP, which revert to the same NP. A reflexive verb however may or may not take an object NP as a reflexive anaphor. To account for this, we provide the lexical- thematic representation of a typical reflexive verb. This representation specifies the choice of a null or overt object NP.

1.0 Introduction

There is a restricted class of verbs in Igbo, as well as in other languages, which can be used to depict actions performed by an Agent NP, which revert to the same NP (Uwalaka, 1988:70). Members of this class of verbs are referred to as reflexive verbs (Lyons, 1968:361, Napoli, 1993:551). However, such a verb may or may not take a reflexive anaphor as its object.

The aim of this paper is to provide a description of reflexive verbs in Igbo. It also provides the lexical-thematic representation of a typical reflexive verb. This representation will specify the relevant features, which determine the presence or absence of a reflexive anaphor as object NP. This work is divided into five sections. Section 2 is on reflexive predication, while section 3 examines a set of seemingly reflexive verbs. In section 4, we present an example of the lexical-thematic representation of a reflexive verb (Levin and Rappaport, 1986:641). Section 5 forms the conclusion.

2.0 Reflexive predication

In this section, we examine the case of reflexive predication by considering a set of reflexive verbs. The list below serves as a representative sample.

(1) a. kpụ isī/àfụ̀ ọnụ̄ shave hair/beards
b. sa/ghụ āhụ take a bath
c. te ūde rub pomade
d. ma/jè akwà put on wrappers
e. yi àfè put on dress
f. bọ/ha isī comb hair
g. sụ/ke ịchàfụ̀ isī put on head tie
h. kọ̀ ọkọ̄ scratch itches
i. kpọbì ụkwụ̄ hit toe (against an object)
j. sọji akā/ụkwụ̄ fracture hand/leg

(2) a. Òbi nà – àkpụ e àfụ̀ ọnụ̄
Obi aux shave beards
"Obi is shaving beards"
b. Òbi nà – àkpụ onwe yā àfụ ọnụ̄
Obi aux shave himself beards
"Obi is shaving himself"
c. Òbi nà – àkpụ gị̀ àfụ ọnụ̄
Obi aux shave 2sg beards
"Obi is shaving your beards"

(3) a. Àda sàrà e àhụ n'ụlọ̀
Ada bathe-pst body at home
"Ada had a bath at home"
b. Àda sàrà ònwe yā àhụ n'ụlọ
Ada bathe- pst herself body at home
"Ada had her bath at home"
c. Àda sàrà ńnwa yā àhụ
Ada bathe-pst child 3sg body
"Ada washed her baby"

(4) a. Ebì kpọbìrì e ụkwụ
Ebi hit-pst leg
"Ebi hit a toe against an object"
b. Ebì kpọbìrì ònwe yā ụkwụ
Ebi hit-pst himself leg
"Ebi hit his toe against an object"

c. Ebì ị kpọbìrị gị ụkwụ
Ebì hit-pst 2sg leg
"Ebi hit your toe against an object."

(5) a. Chuks ị gà-àsọjị ọ ị akā ebe ahụ
Chuks aux-fracture hand place that
"Chuks will fracture his hand there"

b. Chuks ị gà-àsọjị onwe yā ị aka ebe ahụ
Chuks aux-fracture himself hand place that
"Chuks will fracture his hand there"

c. Chuks ị gà-àsọjị Ọjị ị aka ebe ahụ
Chuks aux-fracture Ọjị hand place there
"Chuks will fracture Ọjị's hand there"

The (a) and (b) examples in (2) – (5) have a reflexive reading. In the (a) examples, the verb does not take the reflexive anaphor ònwe yā (himself/herself) as object. It however does so in the (b) examples "in which the subject and object refer to the same person..." (Lyons, 1968:361). Examples (c) of (2) - (5) have no reflexive interpretation. In (2c) for instance, the verb kpu... àfu onū takes an object NP, which is disjoint in reference with the subject, in exactly the same position as in (2b). The implicitly reflexive nature of the verb in the (a) examples of (2) - (5), is such that even in the absence of a reflexive anaphor indicated as a null category e, the verb depicts an action by the subject, which reverts to the same subject. Thus in the context such as (2a), the verb is said to be implicitly reflexive.

However, pragmatic or context dependent factors can necessitate the implicitly reflexive verb to take a reflexive anaphor as object. This option is exemplified by the (b) sentences in (2) – (5). The presence of a reflexive anaphor in these examples merely makes the reflexive interpretation to be explicit. The context dependent factor is to resolve any ambiguity which could possibly be associated with such instances as when, for example, (2a) is misconstrued as (2c).

As Uwalaka (1988:73) rightly observes, the (a) examples in (2) – (5) represent the unmarked construction because even with a non overt reflexive anaphor, it is the reflexive interpretation that is usually intended. The marked construction is represented by examples (b) of (2) – (5) where the verb takes a reflexive anaphoric NP as object.

In the (a) examples of (2) – (5), we posited an empty reflexive anaphor e, co-indexed with the subject NP. As an empty category, the null reflexive anaphor e must be licensed. By virtue of its position, it is properly governed by the verb which case-marks it and θ-marks its position.

To conclude this section, the reflexive verbs in (1) are made up of the verb and the inherent complement NP (IC), both of which constitute a semantic unit. In the unmarked construction the verb is said to be implicitly reflexive, as in examples (a) of (2) – (5). The explicitly reflexive interpretation involves a reflexive anaphor as object of the verb in the marked construction, illustrated by examples (b) in (2) – (5). In examples (b) and (c) of (2) – (5), with an overt object NP, the inherent complement is displaced from its position adjacent to the verb by the intervening object NP. This is to enable the verb to case-mark the object NP (Nwachukwu, 1987:77).

3.0 Non reflexive verbs

We now draw attention to yet another small class of verbs. These verbs seem to counter-exemplify our definition of reflexive verbs in section 2. The verbs include:

(6) a. ri eat
b. ñụ drink
c. ra lick
d. lo swallow
e. kpọ sniff

The verbs in (6) belong to a restricted set which we here refer to as 'verbs of ingestion'. They denote the action of taking in solid food, fluid, snuff, etc into the body system. The following sentences are illustrative.

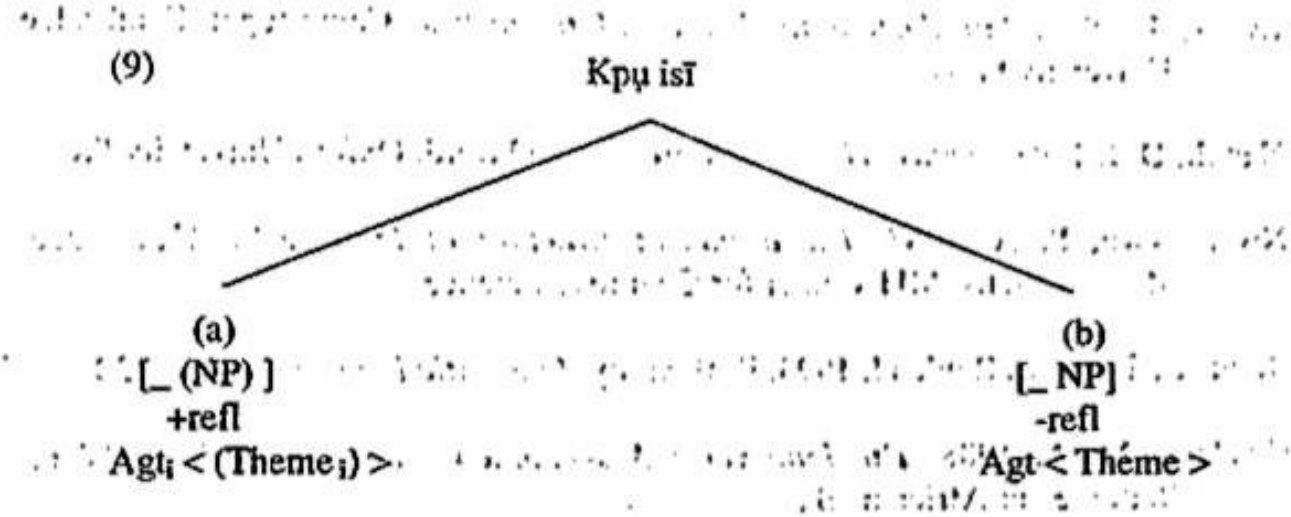
(7) a. Àda rìrì jí
Ada eat-pst yam
"Ada ate some yams"
b. * Àda rìrì ònwe yā jí
Ada eat-pst herself yam

(8) a. Òbi ānụọla mmīrí
Obi drink-perf water
"Obi has drunk some water"
b. *Òbi ānụọla onwe yā mmiri
Obi drink-perf himself water

In (7a) for example, the action of eating performed by the subject NP Àda also reverts to it. Interestingly, (7a) is not assigned a reflexive reading, as is the case in the analogous (2a). Example (7b) is ungrammatical. This is so because with the occurrence of the reflexive anaphor, the verb ri, as it were, is made to take two object NPs, ònwe yā and ji. The verbs in (6), unlike those in (1), do not feature as reflexive verbs.

4.0 Lexical – thematic representation of reflexive verbs

Let us consider the set of reflexive verbs in (1) and examine how an instance of such verbs can be specified in the lexicon. The verb kpu isī in (1a) will serve as an illustration.



The representation in (9) shows that the verb kpu isī can be utilized to derive the following readings. The choice of (9a) will account for two options. The first is that the verb can occur without an overt reflexive anaphor as object. In this case, it is assumed that the verb has absorbed the θ-role Theme (Reinhart and Reuland, 1993:662). This option is exemplified by (2a).

For the second, the verb takes a phonologically realized reflexive anaphor as s-structure object. Example (2b) illustrates this option. With regard to (9b), the verb will take a non-reflexive object NP, with the θ-role Theme. Thus for instance, it is illuminating to account for the choice of any of the (a) – (c) examples in (2) – (5) on the basis of the representation in (9) rather than by resorting to object deletion to account for the (a) examples as proposed by Lyons (1968:365).

5.0 Conclusion

This paper has examined the nature of reflexive verbs in Igbo. We showed that a reflexive verb can be intransitive when it takes a null category as reflexive anaphor. In this case, the implicitly reflexive verb is said to have absorbed the θ-role Theme. However, pragmatic considerations can make the verb to take an overtly realized reflexive anaphor as object. Furthermore we showed that a reflexive verb can equally be used in a non reflexive sense. This is the case when such a verb takes any other nominal that is disjoint in reference with the subject, as its object. These interpretations are derivable from the feature specifications of the verb's lexical-thematic structure.

References

Levin, B. and M. Rappaport. 1986. The formation of adjectival passives. *Linguistic Inquiry, 17*, 623-661

Lyons, J. 1968. *Introduction to theoretical linguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Napoli, D. J. 1993. *Syntax: Theory and problems*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Nwachukwu, P. A. 1987. *The argument structure of Igbo verbs*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Center for Cognitive Science.

Reinhart, T. and E. Reuland. 1993. Reflexivity. *Linguistic Inquiry, 24*, 657 720

Uwalaka, M. A. 1988. *The Igbo verb: A semantico- syntactic analysis*. Wein: Beitrage zur Africanistik.