

Verb Serialization in Ezaa Igbo

Goodluck Chigbo Nwode, Ph.D.

Department of Languages and Linguistics, Ebonyi State University
goodluck.nwode@ebsu.edu.ng

and

Osaigbovo Obed Evbuomwan

Department of Linguistics Studies, University of Benin
osaigbovo.evbuomwan@uniben.edu

Abstract

The phenomenon of verb serialization (VS), also regarded as serial verb construction (VS), describes the linguistic situation of verb occurrence or appearance in series in given constructions. This study describes VS in Ezaa dialect of the Igbo language. Data were drawn from both primary and secondary sources. Descriptive method, content analysis, systematic review and interpretive tools were employed in the analysis of the gathered data. The Chomsky's Minimalist Program is adopted for its theoretical framework and used as the lens for realising that Ezaa possesses VS, because it meets the Universalist conditions for being a VS language or dialect. The analysis shows that the phenomenon of VS obtains and operates shabbily in Ezaa, thereby exhibiting peculiar and general constituents and features like inadequate tense marking, implicit negation marker, ordering structure and minimalism, and object sharing and deletion. The study concludes that VS obtains and operates in Ezaa in both specific and general contexts. Among others, it recommends that Ezaa younger generations should be taught their dialect. Besides, they should consistently make efforts to master VS and other linguistic aspects of their dialect.

Keywords: Ezaa Igbo, serial verb, agreement, syntactic features.

1. Introduction

This paper examines Verb serialization in Ezaa, a dialect of Igbo. Verb serialization involves the occurrence of verbs in series. The occurrence of verbs in such manner is regarded as verb serialization (VS henceforth). VS describes a linguistic situation in which verbs are characterised by two or more verbs acting together as a single predicate and marking a single event (Omachonu, 2012). Herein, VS and serial verbal construction (VS) will be used

interchangeably to mean or refer to the same subject matter. VS was first introduced or formalised by Balmer and Grant (1929) and later reintroduced by Stewart (1963). Before then, Christaller (1875) had talked about VS in Twi, while Westermann (1973) discussed VS in Ewe. Both Twi and Ewe are Western African languages belonging to the Niger-Congo family or branch of the Kwa group of languages (Omachonu, 2012).

The occurrence of VS is said to be without any interruption (Ndiribe, 2019). This linguistic situation of VS obtains in all languages of the world. That is why scholars across all the continents of the globe have carried out studies (Matisoff, 1973; Li & Thompson, 1973; Sebba, 1987). Some others are Agbedor (1994), Ejele (1995), Onuoha (2014), Okorji and Mbagwu (2008) and Sanusi and Umeozor (2015). Verb serialization varies from one language to another. For over four decades now, the theme of VS has remained of interest to different scholars in the field of Linguistics and English Studies.

Thus, linguistics studies on VS among languages and dialects vary considerably. While some languages and dialects have had appreciable volumes of scholarly work on VS, others have not or are yet to gain appreciable scholarly attention and engagement. That of Ezaa dialect of Igbo language is yet to gain scholastic attention and exploration. This study is an attempt in that direction to rouse deserving scholarly attention to the VS of Ezaa dialect of the Igbo language.

Ezaa, which is also referred to as Ezza or Ezza-Ezekuna, is spoken in the northeastern part of Ebonyi State in southeast Nigeria (see Olson 1996, Falola 2009). According to Algor (1988: 92), the Ezaa speakers are believed to be direct descendants of Anakiwha, the founder of Umuekumeyi, which includes Nnoyo, Nnodo, and Ezekuna communities. The majority of Ezaa speakers reside in twenty-two (22) settlements that are spread across six (06) local government areas in the present day Ebonyi State. The National Bureau of Statistics estimates that there are more than a million speakers in Ezaa as of 2018.

2. Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study is to examine the phenomenon of VS in Ezaa dialect of the Igbo language. The study has the following objectives:

- (i) Establish the existence of VS in Ezaa dialect of Igbo.

- (ii) Look at how VS obtains in Ezaa.
- (iii) Analyse VS in Ezaa to show its inherent constituents and features.

3. Research Questions

The following questions are designed to guide this study:

- (i) What is the phenomenon of VS in Ezaa dialect of Igbo?
- (ii) How does VS obtain in Ezaa?
- (iii) What are the core inherent constituents and features of VS in Ezaa?

4. Methodology

The study employs qualitative research method, based on its nature and concerns. The method allows for a purposive population, accuracy, qualitative data and in-depth analysis of data using the suitable interrogatory tools. Ezaa communities of Ebonyi State make up the research area. A concise population of twenty (20) participants, who are resident in Ezaa was designed for purposive representation. Gathering verbs and verbal constructions involves lexicostatistics. This is the linguistic techniques. Effective mannered communication is a suitable communicative technique for eliciting firsthand data.

Data are collected using both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources are focus group and observation, with thirty participants. The secondary data are sourced from library and internet materials, which include textbooks, journal and chapter articles, theses, and conference and seminar papers. These are both online and offline materials. The analysis of the gathered data is done in line with the adopted methods, approaches and tools. These include critical observation, interpretive, descriptive and analytical tools.

5. Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on Chomsky's (1995, 1999, 2002) the Minimalist Program (MP). MP situates in the linguistic theory of cognitive science. MP attempts to give a Universalist account of linguistic elements (Asher, 1994). MP basically considers linguistic elements to be what universally obtains or what should obtain in all languages of the world. It accounts 'for the rapidity and uniformity of language learning' (Ndiribe, 2019, p. 155). MP spells out linguistic

conditions that must be met by all languages or in the generation of linguistic elements and constructions in languages.

Chomsky (2001) posits that the interface levels provide instructions to two types of performance systems- articulatory-perception (A-P) and conceptual-intentional (C-I). He maintains that all syntactic conditions must express properties of these levels, reflecting the interpretive requirements of language and keeping to very restricted conceptual resources. The minimalist approach to linguistic theory is formulated and progressively developed on the theory of principles and parameters and in particular of economy of derivation and representation.

The economy of derivation is a principle stating that movements (i.e. transformations) only occur in order to match interpretable with *uninterpretable* features. Chomsky (1995) gives an example of an *uninterpretable* feature using the plural inflection on regular English nouns e.g. ‘dogs’. The word dogs, according to Chomsky (1995) can only be used to refer to several dogs, not a single dog and the inflection contributes to the meaning, making it interpretable. Economy of representation, according to Chomsky (1995), is the principle that grammatical structures must exist for a purpose.

The three economy principles that have been most written about in literature thus far are Shortest move, Procrastinate and Greed. Shortest move, in the words of Napoli (1996, p. 394) “tells us that a constituent must move to the first position...that is the hierarchically closest position in an upward direction...of the right kind from its source position”. Shortest move prevents movement from passing over an intervening node, whether that intervening node is lexically filled or empty. Thus, a verb could not move directly to AGRs (Agreement subject) for example, skipping over the head T (Tense). Instead, it must move into T and from there into AGRs. This movement is because if a verb were to move directly to AGRs, its tense feature would not be checked and the derivation would crash in PF (Phonetic form).

Violations of shortest move can result in ungrammaticality even without comparing alternative derivation. MP is the most recent version of the Transformational Grammar, which employs fewer linguistic apparatus to construct syntactic structures. The apparatus are operations Select, Merge and Agree. Operation Select takes required word items from the lexicon and put them in the numeration to build syntactic structure. Numeration is a place where selected items needed for building syntactic structure are stored. The lexical items in the numeration are in turn

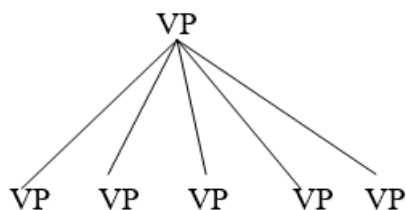
put together by an operation dubbed Merge (Olaogun, 2017). The foregoing explanation shows that the MP theory is apt for this study.

6.1. Concept of Verb Serialization

Verb serialization (VS) has been defined by Welmers (1973) as a syntactic phenomenon generally known as ‘serialization’ (p. 336). This definition is shared by George (1975). This definition suggests VS concerns the order in which verbs occur in given constructions in different languages and dialects. Consider the diagrammed representation of VS below:

1a. $VP \longrightarrow VP (VP^n)$

b.



According Alerechi (2018), VS is ‘sometimes referred to as serial verbs and naively called by some split verbs’ (p. 18). She observes that VS is a common distinguishing syntactic feature of West African languages, particularly the Niger-Congo family of Kwa languages, such as Yoruba, Igbo, Edo, Esan, Tiv, Yatye, Nupe, Akan and Ewe, among others. It is also noted to be a common feature of Mandarin Chinese, Thai, Tok Pisin, and so on (Alerechi, 2018).

Bámgbóṣé (1974) has said, “the term ‘serial verbal construction’ or ‘serial verbs’ has been applied to the combination of verbs found in many West African languages where all the verbs share a common subject in the surface structure” (p. 17). Schachter (1974) defines VS as what refers to ‘constructions in which two or more verbs, including their possible complements, are juxtaposed without overt conjunction, and share a common surface subject and one or more common aspect, tense or polarity markers’ (p. 254). The definition is shared as well as sustained by Williamson (1989), who has agreed that the two or more verbs, which share the same subject noun phrase (NP), may or may not have an intervening object between them. On verb sequence, Ikoro (1996) agrees with them, as he observes that ‘the sequences of verbs indicate a

simultaneous action performed by a common subject, but not necessarily applying to the same object' (p. 250).

VS is described by Aikhenvald (2006) as 'a sequence of verbs which act together as a single predicate, without any overt marker of coordination, subordination, or syntactic dependency of any other sort' (p. 1). Aikhenvald (2006) defines VS as 'a sequence of verbs which acts together as a single predicate, without any overt marker or conjunction, subordination or syntactic dependency of any sort' (p. 1). It should be noted that not having overt marker is better to say than saying they have no overt connector. Aikhenvald (2006) also states that VSs are mono-clausal structures having 'intonation properties that are the same as those of a mono-verbal clause, and they also have one tense, aspect, and polarity value' (p. 1).

Besides, VSs, Aikhenvald (2006) notes, 'may also share core and other arguments' (p. 1). He emphasizes that 'each component of an VS must be able to occur on its right' (p. 1). Omachanu (2012) describes VS as a syntactic phenomenon in which two or more verbs or verb phrases are strung together in a single clause. This definition captures what make up VS and the syntactic categories and functions of what make up the VS.

6.2. Types of Serial Verbs

There are three kinds of VS (Williamson, 1989; Medua, 2010). These are unmarked, consecutive and concordial VSs (Williamson, 1989, p. 30). Williamson (1989) has noted that the consecutive VS has the first verb fully marked, while the later ones bear a general marker showing that they are 'consecutive' to the first (p. 30). Consecutive VS obtains where the second action is dependent on the first action or verb (Ikoro, 1996). The unmarked VSs involve the full marking of the first verb (in SVO languages) or the last verb (in SOV languages) for tense, aspect or polarity while the others occur as bare stems.

Different types of VS in Igbo, Kana, Degema, Echie and other languages have been identified by scholars, such as Emenanjo (2015, 1978), Martins (2010), Nwogu (2005), Kari (2003) and Ikoro (1996). The commonly identified types of VS are comparative, instrumental, manner, accompanimental, direction, and simultaneity. For Martins (2010), the aforementioned types of VS are the semantic types of VSs in Ikwere. Benefactive and sequential VSs are two other types of VS in Ikwere language identified by Alerechi (2018). In other words, although

Alerechi (2018) sustains the comparative, instrumental, manner, accompanimental, direction and simultaneity types of VS in Ikwere, as affirmed by Martins (2010), she adds two other types (benefactive and sequential VSs) to the other six (comparative, instrumental, manner, accompanimental, direction and simultaneity) types.

6.3. Related Studies

As Emenanjo (2015) shows, in Igbo, ‘a serial verb construction is a complex syntactic structure internally made up of a series of verbs with their complements, which go together without an overt linker, or conjunction (pp. 541-2). He the foregoing point with:

1. (a) A nà-ejì mmà àşu ọrū, ègbu anū, ègbu osisi, alù aghā (‘People use the knife for cutting the bush in preparation for farming, for slaughtering animals, for cutting trees (and) for fighting wars.’).

The above sentence contains five verbs without any connectives or conjunctions linking them in spite of the gloss. They are all accompanied with their complements. The verbs all function syntactically as one consistent unit or whole in terms of subject NP. The underlying or deep structure of the above sentence is shown in the example below:

1. (b) A nà-ejì mmà na-àşu ọrū, na-ègbu anū, na-egbù osisi, na-alù agha (‘People use the knife for cutting the bush in preparation for farming, slaughtering animals, cutting trees and fighting wars.’)

Emenanjo points out that (a) and (b) have exactly the same meaning as demonstrated in the gloss. The only difference is that the simple progressive/durative marker, the auxiliary, na, has been deleted in (a) because VS requires that all the verbs agree in terms of affirmation and aspect. However, ‘if (a) becomes a case of futurity, the future marker will be found in the deep structure with the first verb, while other verbs will retain their simple participle or narrative form’ (Alerechi, 2018, p. 22).

Emenanjo (2015) emphasises that ‘one of the most problematic issues in Igbo VS is how the different sentences have come to be (p. 542). He states that it is easy to postulate and prove that the (b) above is the underlying or deep structure of the (a) above (Emenanjo, 2015, p. 543). It is not easy to do so with (a), whose semantics is the same in spite of obvious differences in

surface structure. The structural difference in the surface structure suggests two different deep structures.

VS in Obio dialect of Ikwere language is described by Martins (2010). He identifies ‘comparative, instrumental, manner, accompanimental, directional and simultaneity VSs’ as the semantic types of VS in Ikwere language (Martins, 2010, p. 33). He exemplifies with:

2. Ézé tòrù ógólógó kárú Uche
PN be -tall tall surpass PN

Eze is taller than Uche (Martins, 2010, p. 33).

The above Example 2 shows that the verb kárú ‘surpass’ is used to mark comparison in Obio dialect of Ikwere language. Clearly, Martins (2010) identifies the unmarked variety of VS in Obio. Alerechi (2018) notes that ‘serial verb constructions in Ikwere may reflect series of two or more verbs without an intervening conjunction, coordination or complement between the verbs’ (p. 4). Up to four verbs can co-occur in a sequence without an intervening object NP. This is particularly true with imperative sentences, which require the presence of the addressee at the point of speaking. Therefore, the presence of the addressee presupposes the fact that the addressee is perfectly aware of the context of speaking and may not require explanation to certain issues as he would when absent.

Martins (2010) states that based on Williamson’s (1989) classification of VS into: unmarked, consecutive and concordial VSs, Ikwere records the unmarked VS (p. 37). As ‘an SVO language, the first verb in the language is fully marked for tense, aspect or polarity, while others occur as bare stems’ (Martins, 2010, p. 37). This means that ‘the initial verb and non-initial verb(s) share a common tense, aspect or polarity in a VS of the Ikwere language’ (Alerechi, 2018, p. 26). Alerechi (2018) points out that similar to Kari’s (2003), observation in Degema, ‘the VS in Ikwere is derived from two or more underlying sentences by deleting all, but the first subject NP in the serial construction’ (p. 275).

Ndiribe’s (2019) journal paper entitled ‘Serial verb constructions in Igbo: A critical assessment’ is a relevant empirical literature. The paper investigates VS Igbo language, using transformational generative grammar (TGG) and a minimalist framework of analysis. Its aim is to ascertain whether or not qualifies in Igbo can be classified as VS. The paper relied on extant secondary data. It shows that VS obtains in Igbo in a slight different way from how it obtains in

other African languages. Some VSs in Igbo incorporate NPs covertly. They are realised using the concept of Empty Category Principle (ECP) [e], which co-indexes the first NPs with all other NPs in the sentence and some others have disjointed NPs.

The foregoing finding of Ndiribe (2019) disproves the claim made by Okorji and Mbagwu (2008) that Igbo language does not qualify to be described as an VS language. Ndiribe (2019) show that the following VSs obtain in Igbo: object sharing and deletion, the multiple covert object NP in the deep structure, and peculiar VS negation. Ndiribe's (2019) offers a landing ground for this present study. While it explored VSs in Standard Igbo, the present study seeks to explore VSs in the Ezaa dialect of Igbo.

Medua (2010) confirms the existence of unmarked variety of VS in the Akwukwu dialect of Igbo. Among other observes she that the perfect tense (aspect) is marked by attaching a perfect suffix to the initial verb while the non-initial verb remains bare (Medua, 2010). In the case of the concordial VS, each verb refers back to the subject by means of a concord marker or pronoun (Alerechi, 2018). Alerechi (2018) observes that 'of the three varieties of VS (unmarked, consecutive and concordial), the unmarked variety is typical of the Ikwere language' (p. 20).

Taiwo's (2009) article entitled 'Derivation of serial verbal constructions' is an important literature here. It notes that previous studies failed to engage with VSs, the deletion method adopted is incapable of accounting for the derivation of the modified type of VS. Employing the Minimalist Program (MP), a theoretical construct of generative syntax, the article shows that the derivation of the modified VS type problematic.

Kari (2007) confirms the existence of the concordial VS in Degema, noting that the concordial VS with only subject clitic. He observes that "it is the type of VS where the only subject clitic that occurs in the serial construction precedes the initial verb" (Kari, 2007, p. 12). Kari (2007) observes that the verbs in series tá 'go' and dẹ́ 'buy' concord with the subject NP *Ohoso* in person and number, and that the subject clitic ɔ̄ precedes the initial verb tá 'go' (p. 12).

Ikoro (1996) points out that the position of a derivative suffix depends on the particular suffix involved. Suffixes marking causative, instrumental, reciprocal, etc. occur on the second verb, whereas those marking repetition and modality occur on the first verb. One criterion for identifying VS, as in Kana, is negation. This is additional to a succession of verbs. It is noted that 'negation occurs only once on the first verb, but in a non-serial construction, a negative marker

may occur more than once, (Ikoro, 1996, p. 253). Ikoro finally identifies five types of VSs in Kana viz: ‘instrumental, benefactive, allative, source and comparative constructions’ (Ikoro, 1996, p. 253).

7. Data Presentation and Discussion

From the corpus of data collected for the purpose of the present study, the following examples represent cases of verb serialization in the language of concern.

- 3a. Nweke la-ata awhuwuhu.
Nweke is going to suffer.
- b. M’ agu epfu le ulo uka ntanu.
I am going to sing in the church today.
- c. O tekwaru enya nshi kutata hu.
I have been calling you.
- d. Ndehunu eka ishi noduts?
Where have you been staying?
- e. M’ agu ekwo mu le enyanshia.
I am going to read my book this evening.
- f. M’ anwu nwa le onwa.
I am going to put to bed this month.
- g. O bu onye oka nwata la awha odo.
She is going to be a professor by next year.
- h. E ge o bule osokwa te odu, Anyi le emeriri agha ono.
In all, we are going to win the battle.
- i. Ishi chotata opfu nkeshi
You have been looking for trouble.
- j. O mebukwaro uche ya.
She is going to do her mind.
- k. O kwa nri anyi bu oshi ritata.
She has been eating our food for long.
- l. A suakwari y ate okwaphu.
He has been told to pack out.

- m. M' eri nri shi echite.
I am going to eat plenty of food tomorrow.
- n. Echi ya igwe ntanu.
He will be crowned the king today.
- o. Q lapfu nna ija ntanu.
She is going to meet his father today.

As evident in the sentences above, tense marking in the VS of Ezaa Igbo is compulsory for the V₁, while that of the V₂. That is, the V₁ must be assigned the [-rV] suffix past tense marker, the V₂ may or may not be assigned the [-rV] tense marker. The [-rV] suffixation of the V₂ is a must because without it, the sentence becomes ungrammatical. Thus, the sentences can assign the [-rV] past tense marker to V₂ or be without the [-rV] past tense suffix.

In what justifies the above, Ndiribe (2019) states that the only basic thing is that the V₁ must have the [-rV] past tense marker. For the past tense marker to spread to the V₂ or V₃ depends on the structure involved. Ndiribe (2019) and Sanusi and Umeozor (2015) observe that the verb *jì* 'use', which incorporates preposition and instrumentation in its frame might not be a very good example in the analysis of the characteristics of VS in the Igbo language. The V₂ theta marks the NP₂, which is deleted at the point of the S-structure. The same NP₁, which is the object of V₁ is also the object of V₂. As such, there is no movement of NP₂ to V₁. Also, it is realised that tense marking in the VS of Ezaa is not appropriate. Ndiribe (2019) confirms this about VS in Igbo language as a whole.

Onuoha (2014) claims otherwise that the verbs in VSs in Igbo are marked with [-rV] suffix, which is the marker of the simple past tense in Igbo. She maintains that this [-rV] suffix could be marked on both the V₁ and the V₂ in verb serialization (Onuoha, 2014). This present study argues that the said suffix cannot or do not mark other tenses. Suggesting that it should be used to mark other tenses implies making such a suggestion to cover up for the inadequacy of tense marking in Igbo VS. Negation in Ezaa VS is implied or infused interpretively. No real or obvious negation markers for negation in VS. Ndiribe (2019) confirms that Igbo VSs have no real but interpreted negation markers. For Ndiribe (2019), verb serialization obtains in some cases in Igbo and does not in other cases. Sanusi & Umeozor (2015), Okorji and Mbagwu

(2008), Emenanjo (1978) and some other scholars argue that VSs do not realistically obtain in Igbo.

8. Conclusion

Verb serialization (VS) obtains in Ezaa. While some extant studies claim that the Igbo language does not have or exhibit verb serialization, others argue that it does. It follows that if Igbo language does not possess the linguistic feature of verb serialization, Ezaa does not too and vice versa. However, the fact that serial verb construction (VS) obtains in Ezaa, though shabbily, is a proof that the Igbo language possess VS. The concept of object verb suffix (OVS) is used to refer to an affix that is attached to a root verb in order to enhance the semantic content. The attachment must be based on the principle of vowel harmony. OVS gets removed from verb root when there is need for past tense or negation marker. This study represents a call on the African linguistics community to examine phenomena in the language from a dialect basis perspective instead of unifying everything in view of the standard. It is in the dialectal variation that one is able to understand the resources available in the Igbo language in general.

9. Recommendations

The following recommendations are made:

- (i) Ezaa speakers of Igbo should endeavour to learn and teach the younger generations their dialect so as to get familiarised with the phenomenon of serial verb construction.
- (ii) Teaching and learning of Igbo should not be centred on the Standard Igbo alone, but the different dialects too.
- (iii) More studies should be carried on Ezaa VS and its other aspects of linguistic analysis.
- (iv) A comparative study on Ezaa VS and those of other dialects of Igbo would be more revealing, engaging and expository.

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