



A METALEXICOGRAPHIC EXAMINATION OF PARTS OF SPEECH (POS) TREATMENT IN SELECTED IGBO DICTIONARIES

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Abstract

Lexicography is a dynamic field concerned with the theoretical and practical dimensions of dictionary compilation. As languages undergo constant change, new lexical entries are introduced daily, necessitating systematic documentation to provide writers and speakers with a robust choice of expressions. This study provides a metalexicographic examination of the treatment of Parts of Speech (PoS) within the content forms; nouns, verbs, adjectivals, and adverbials across seven selected Igbo-English bilingual dictionaries published between 1972 and 2014. Adopting a descriptive qualitative methodology, the research assesses how these dictionaries handle morphological and syntactic information, such as classification of qualificative nouns, transitivity, and verbal derivatives. Findings reveal significant structural inconsistencies and a lack of uniformity in PoS tagging across the selected dictionaries. While Williamson (2013) and Akponye (2014) provide robust morphological data and usage examples Nnaji (1985) and Eke (2001) function primarily as bilingual wordlists with minimal grammatical guidance. Identified discrepancies however are attributable to lack of specialized lexicographic training and unresolved debates within Igbo linguistic theory. In conclusion, for future Igbo dictionaries to meet international standards and effectively serve for pedagogical purposes; this study recommends that there is an urgent need for standardized PoS labeling, mandatory inclusion of contextual usage examples, and closer collaboration between lexicographers and theoretical linguists.

Introduction

Lexicography is a steady activity as it concerns with the theory and practice of compiling dictionaries. Languages undergo changes on daily basis; as a result new lexical entries are constantly introduced. To ensure proper capturing of new items, there is need for proper documentation. With the record of lexical items, Igbo users would have wider choice of words and expressions which will be a boom to Igbo writers. The art of dictionary writing does not only entail collection of word list, or having the knowledge of the language as a native speaker, it also requires linguistic training to understand the use of the language. Constructive and creative ideas are crucial in handling every lexical item appropriately. Hence, the knowledge of linguistic research method is vital as well as the skill to apply the methodology to the analysis of the language.

This study examines the Parts of Speech (PoS) as it is treated by various compilers of seven selected existing Igbo dictionaries within the content forms, specifically nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbials. The Igbo language belongs to the Igboid subgroup of West Benue Congo classification of languages. It is spoken by over 40 millions of people who are located in the South Eastern geo-political zone of Nigeria. Other speakers are located in the neighbouring states of Delta, Rivers, Benue, Cross River and Akwa Ibom (Williamson & Blench 2000). Within these areas mentioned there are several speech communities with scores of regional dialects; ranging from Ònichà (Onitsha) in Anambra state to Òlù and Owere in Imo state, Nsùkà in Enugu, Omaahia (Umuahia) in Abia, IkaUkwuanì and Enuanì in Delta state as well as Etchie and Ikwere (Ikwerre) in Rivers state. These dialects being derived from proto-Igbo language share features in common. Some of the dictionaries consulted for this study were based on some dialects of Igbo, this include Williamson (2013) 'Dictionary of Ònichà Igbo' which is based on Ònichà dialect. These dialects used by some of the compilers are mutually intelligible; hence their ability to share some lexical



items (Emenanjo 2015). The Igbo language is an agglutinating language, rich in derivational and extensional morphology, relatively poor in inflection but has lots of verb serialization (Uwalaka, 1982; Nwachukwu, 1983; Emenanjo 2015).

Beyond all these dialects, Igbo still has the standard variety that is developed for educational and literary purposes. It uses a Latin-based alphabet structure for writing system which was introduced during the colonial era by Christian missionaries in the 19th century hence influencing its orthography. The writing system uses a mix of consonant vowel (CV) or consonant vowel consonant (CVC) syllable structure which represents a single unit of meaning. The Igbo language is tonal, hence the meaning of words are altered by the tones.

Igbo has a relatively simple system of noun classes when compared to languages such as Swahili. The verbs often include pre-verbal markers that show aspect, tense, and mood. It basically employs affixation processes to form derived words. This study is necessitated because PoS serve as a critical bridge between grammar and lexis hence providing users with the morphological and systematic frameworks to use words correctly.

The PoS in the Igbo language is subdivided into two forms; the content forms and the function forms. The content forms include the nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectivals, adverbials, holophrases, and ideophones whereas the function forms are constituent markers of prepositional notions, markers of deixis, conjunctions, affixes and clitics (Emenanjo 2015). Our area of concentration is on the content forms with our focus on the verbs, nouns, adjectivals and the adverbials as they are treated in the selected existing Igbo dictionaries.

Review of Related Literature

Lexicography entails the art and science of compiling a dictionary. It involves the principles guiding dictionary making. Hence, simply put it the practice and study of compiling, editing and writing of dictionaries. Producing dictionaries involves systematic collection, organization and presentation of words, their meanings, and other linguistic information for the purpose of reference and communication (Jackson 2002; Crystal, 2008; Oweleke 2017). Therefore the primary objective of lexicography is to create accurate, comprehensive and user-friendly dictionaries that serve as reliable language resources for various users, including learners, researchers, translators and language professionals.

A close examination of some related works in lexicography that supports this study are shown below.

PoS in Lexicographic work

The primary obligation of lexicography is to meet the needs of intended users comprising both the native speakers to language learners, therefore adequate PoS presentation is essential for lexical reasoning. Sevénson (2009) maintains that a dictionary should not only provide meanings but also describe the headword's syntagmatic characteristics as well as provide illustrative sentence examples. To buttress this further, Apresjan's (1974) systematic principle reiterates that words should not be listed as having random, disconnected meaning but rather analysed for their lexicographic types. Therefore all salient lexical classes should be described uniformly according to their linguistic relevant properties. This does not imply that PoS is bound to universal features because grammatical distinctions vary significantly across languages (Sauri, et al 2018:175). They suggest that PoS should be categorized by appealing to basic configurational properties. This includes what the lexical units combine with to form complex units (phrases) as well as the roles they play in the grammatical organization of the sentence morphologically, what type of inflection process they undergo and so on. Hence, in the Igbo language, lexicography should specify subclasses that are relevant for grammatical distinctions for instance nouns should have; proper, common, qualificative, adverbial nouns all geared to guide user comprehension.

Lexicology explores the structure of the vocabulary of a language; this includes the examination of the internal semantic structure of the individual words, their relationships, syntagmatic regularities and syntactic projections. The syntactic information which a dictionary



headword provides should incorporate its syntagmatic characteristics. This embraces the information about the PoS. To this end, in lexicography, the dictionary treatment of a word should not solely target the meanings of the word but also describe in a way that meets the needs of the dictionary users. This entails citing sentences and derivatives that could emerge from the headwords. Lexicographic processes are demanding and require high linguistic knowledge and awareness. Two stages are usually involved in this process; the analysis and the synthesis state. The analysis stage demands high linguistic knowledge because of its systematicity in handling words, for proper identification of the various senses of the headword which might invariably result into different PoS. To achieve this all relevant syntactic facts about a headword are recorded for proper analysis. Hence, syntactic constructions in which a given headword occurs with adequate details and linguistic expertise, backed up with examples are required for dictionary compilation. This involves using “integrated linguistic descriptions, with perfectly coordinated dictionary and grammar (Sevensén 2009: 205).

PoS classification is usually based on the morphosyntactic distinctions that seem relevant in each specific language. For instance, in English, the most common way for sub-classification of verbs is to distinguish between the lexical and the auxiliary verbs; while for the Romance languages, the distinction is between the structure which is transitive and intransitive. In Russia, verbs are sub-classified into perfective and imperfective. This shows that PoS cannot be bound to a universal grammatical feature, because to achieve that each PoS would divide into the various sub-classification that are found around the different languages of the world. As a result PoS would become less manageable due to several levels of information that apply. Another case is that of English where nouns are categorized according to their type (common, proper, countability (mass, countable), whereas in Spanish verbs can simultaneously feature according to their sub-categorization and pronominal properties.

Secondly, redundant features would be introduced given that many features are shared across the PoS classes. Attempting to adopt PoS terminology for each language is sure to raise issues which are feature redundancy and concept conflation. Feature redundancy results when a classification has different terms for the same lexical entry (notion) as a result of adopting what is operational in other languages. Concept conflation happens when the same term is applied to two different concepts because different languages’ descriptions use it in different ways.

Function, Position and Form of PoS

Indicating the PoS membership provides information about the grammatical properties of the headword. It is a call on the user’s knowledge of regularities in the grammar of the language concerned. The position of the PoS in the dictionary entry should be clearly stated in the introductory notes. If a word belongs to more than one PoS because of its usage, the lexicographer ought to specify which PoS is being presented at the start of each section for clarity. The structure indicators used for PoS should also vary such as the font (could be italicized, ordinary or small type) indicating alternative or deviation from the norm. Non-typographical structure could also be used as an indicator for example an adjective could be presented thus <Adj> Sevensén (2009).

Types of Information

Information about the PoS, not minding how simple the word might seem generally conveys details about the headword. For example; book *n.*, from the notion used in the dictionary, *n* in this position shows that the word is a noun because it does not have any contradictory statement after it. There could also be a preceding article (*definite or indefinite*), should have a regular formed plural (*a book, the book, books, the books*). The possessive form of the word should also be shown (*the book’s cover*). Determiners such as possessive pronouns and demonstrative adjectives could also be stated (*my book, this book*). It can also serve as the subject or object of the sentence (*a book needs proper care, I have bought a book*). In languages where nouns are gender marked, such as French, it should also be indicated where feminine *f* or masculine *m.* as in ‘livre *m*’, fille *f* because it also helps in determining the predicative modifier of the noun (Sevensén 2009).



For the Igbo language where noun is not inflected for number, gender, person or case, it should be worthwhile to state the sub-class of the noun; *proper noun*, *common noun*, *qualificative noun* or *adverbial noun*. This classification guides the user to understand the different usages of any given noun (Emenajo, 2015).

Verbs are usually designated with *verb*, *vb.*, and *v.* additional information can be added to the PoS to indicate its usages such as *v.i* (intransitive verb), which some authors might indicate as *with obj.* and *no obj* because of confusion that usually arise from the use of transitivity. Phrasal verbs are also usually labeled as *phr.v.*, while some other dictionary would present same as look carefully *v adv*; look into *v prep*; look forward to *v adv prep*.

In most dictionaries, adverbs are marked with *adv.* and there may be some sub-classifications such as *sentence adverb* (fortunately, regrettable) and *sub-modifier adverb* (altogether, simply) Svensén (2009).

Implication of PoS Variability

A major challenge facing contemporary lexicography is handling words undergoing grammatical and lexicalization. PoS tagging has vital implication on the users of dictionary because it aids in the lexicographic reasoning. The different forms which a headword undergoes should be properly addressed. Approach to PoS usage affects the whole structure of a dictionary starting with the number and the organization of entries. Hence, Paulsen et al (2019) suggest that for such transitional forms, the base word class should remain fixed or the questionable form should be a sub-entry rather than an independent head word.

Most lexicographers still believe that it is an acceptable phenomenon for a headword to have two PoS tags. In such cases, the dictionary should reflect the actual usages with adequate examples shown to clarify the different constructions typical of such PoS presentation. This will facilitate the comprehension of the users especially the language learners who will learn the possibilities of the word usage rather than having to create examples to make their own inferences.

Igbo Lexicographers: An Overview

Dictionary is an integral part of any language pedagogy, one of the sole responsibilities of the Igbo lexicographers should be to produce works that are in agreement to the grammatical tradition of the Igbo language. The question then is,

- i) How many Igbo dictionary compilers are trained lexicographers and linguists?
- ii) Do Igbo lexicographers access the linguistic insights during the compilation of the existing dictionaries?
- iii) Are the linguistic descriptions in the Igbo language thoroughly presented and accessible to the normal dictionary user?

Methodology

This paper employs a descriptive approach to analyse seven (7) bilingual (Igbo-English) dictionaries currently used in academic and digital spaces. The analysis focuses on how these texts handle the content forms of the Igbo language against the backdrop of contemporary linguistic theory.



	<p>Cold (adj./n) – <i>oyi</i></p> <p>Beauty (n.u.) - <i>mma</i></p>	<p><i>ya</i> – read it carefully</p> <p><i>Mmiri a dī oyi.</i> – This water is cold</p> <p><i>Mma nwaanyi ahụ n'atụ n'anya.</i> – The beauty of that woman is striking</p>	
Echeruo (2001)	<p><i>abü</i> (n) [HL] (Önica) - hymn, psalm, song of joy, especially one associated with religious</p> <p><i>afö</i> (n) [HH] –</p> <p>1) belly; stomach; abdomen; entrails; intestines; also womb</p> <p>2) <i>afö</i> (n) [HH] - womb</p> <p>3) <i>afö</i> (n) [HH] tube; tyre; any inner tubing made from rubber or similar material-tube;</p>	<p><i>afö na-agba ya</i> - he has a running stomach.</p> <p><i>nwa afö ya</i> - a child of her womb;</p>	<p><i>Abüöma</i> - [Book of] Psalms;</p> <p><i>ndiabü</i> - singers; musicians; choristers.</p> <p><i>afö ukwu</i> - pot-belly; <i>afö anu</i> - entrails ora slaughtered animal;</p> <p><i>afö ime</i> – pregnancy</p> <p><i>afö moto</i> - motortyres; <i>afö taya</i> - tyre tube. *A meaning derived by analogy with "afo" = stomach, intestines.</p>
Williamson 1972 (2013)	<p><i>be</i> (n.) – home; dwelling;</p> <p><i>be</i> (v.) – cry out</p> <p><i>be</i> (v.) – stop (on reaching sufficiency)</p>	<p><i>ọ nò nà be yā</i> – he is at home, he is in</p> <p><i>ọ nà-èbe kà ewu</i> - He is crying like a goat</p> <p><i>kà o be nọọfụ!</i> – That is enough!</p> <p><i>ọ bụ etu a ka o</i></p>	<p><i>ndi be</i> - household; people of the house; fellow-townfolk</p> <p><i>obube</i> – crying</p>



		<i>belu?</i> – Is it only this? Is this all?	<i>òbùbè</i> – ending; stopping
	<i>be</i> (v.) – cut; stop		
Akponye (2014)	<i>ịba</i> (v.) – to enter	<i>ọ banyare n'ụlọ</i> - he entered the house	<i>ịbata</i> – to enter towards the speaker
	<i>akwa</i> (n.) – cry/ crying	<i>nwata nà-ebe akwa</i> – the child is crying	
	<i>akwà</i> (n.) - egg	<i>ọkụkọ tiri àkwa n'upà</i> – the hen laid an egg in the nest	

Table 1

Findings

From the data above as presented in Table 1, there is a lack of uniformity in the treatment of PoS in the selected dictionaries. Williamson (2013) is considered an advancement of the (1972) edition. PoS are well presented with various extensive usage examples. Williamson (1972) does not include PoS, therefore presenting difficult for new users especially to master the usage of the words. Though the dictionary has a couple of examples included for the headwords, while listing some derivatives from the verb roots.

Nnaji (1985) offers meanings of headword in both English and Igbo for a very wide selection of English headwords essentially translating to standard dictionary definitions of headwords in Igbo. There are few usage examples of the words included with derivatives/infinitives. Hence, it becomes very hard for users to apply adequate use of words.

Igwe (1999) presents the most detailed morphological analysis by including derivatives from verb roots as well as the infinitive forms of some of the derivatives but there were limited usage examples included in the text. However, he classifies some entries as adjectives that other compilers treat as noun such as *enyùnyò* (capable of being peered into).

Eke (2001) only lists the abbreviations of the PoS used in his text while there were no introductory grammar on conventions and guides to the use of the dictionary. There are few usage examples provided for the headwords list and no derivatives/infinitives added. This method limits the user's ability to distinguish between a standard subject/object noun and one serving as adverbial or qualificative function.

Echeruo (2001) attempts having a comprehensive reference material for the Igbo language. Various forms of different dialects were used with occasional example sentences where he deemed necessary. The headwords were with free-form words or noun/verb phrases. PoS were indicated in italics immediately after the headword. Qualificative nouns were identified to function as adjectives without morphological change (e.g. *ogologo*), which is typically marked by a preceding *dị* verb.

Finally, Akponye (2014) has lists of abbreviations used, includes PoS of the headwords with usage examples and also shows derivatives of some of the treated verb roots.

Lexicographic Inconsistency and Challenges in Selected Dictionaries

From the above analysis there is a significant lack of uniformity in the treatment of Parts of Speech (PoS) across the seven selected dictionaries. This inconsistency is not just a matter of stylistic preference but is rooted in several systemic challenges within the field of Igbo lexicography this include:



- i) *Lack of Specialized Lexicographic Training*
Scarcity of trained lexicographers is the primary factor that contributes to the discrepancies noted in the selected texts. Though most of the compilers are native speakers, the art of dictionary writing requires specialized linguistic training in order to bridge the gap between theory and practice. This is evident in the selected dictionaries as most function as bilingual word lists rather than comprehensive linguistic tools as the works strive for translation equivalents in English without adequately addressing the unique grammatical tradition of Igbo.
- ii) *Theoretical gaps in Igbo Morphology and syntax*
The labeling inconsistencies of the headwords especially over the size of the adjectives stems from unresolved issues in Igbo linguistic analysis. Words undergoing functional shifts were poorly addressed while some dictionaries failed to use sub-entries or fixed base-classes to clarify the transitions. Reliance on dialectal variety to create dictionaries can limit the universal applicability of the PoS labels across the standard variety.
- iii) *Pedagogical implication and user experience*
Lack of standardized PoS presentation has direct consequences for the end-user, particularly the language learners. Dictionaries that omit examples such as Nnaji (1985) and Eke (2001) force users to make their own inferences which of course could lead to syntactic errors. Secondly, omitting introductory grammar notes or clear guides to abbreviations leaves users without the necessary framework to interpret PoS tags effectively. Improper PoS tagging with illustrative sentences expose user to the difficulty of mastering the usage of words that can occur in different constructions.

Summary

The PoS treatment in the Igbo dictionaries studied is not without their shortcomings. PoS presentation is critical for the headwords entries in the dictionary as they facilitate the user's understanding of the headword. Proper PoS tagging for the headwords helps to disambiguate the dictionary entries with adequate examples cited. It equally guides new users to generate their own sentences based on the entries. This metalexigraphic study shows that the dictionary compilers do not have sufficient knowledge of lexicography as some of the dictionaries could easily pass as word lists. The dictionaries studied are bilingual dictionaries which one could classify as general dictionary. The compilers strive to provide headwords with their corresponding meanings in the English language. PoS of some of the headwords were presented while others were not. Some of the headwords as discovered were not universally labeled. Adopting same Coding systems for the PoS, however is universal for all the dictionaries.

Conclusion

This study has examined the representation of PoS in Igbo lexicography, specifically focusing on the inconsistencies and structural challenges present in the contemporary works. The analysis reveals that while efforts to compile Igbo dictionaries have spanned over a century, there remains a significant gap between traditional lexicographic labels and the actual morphosyntactic behaviour of the language. The findings suggest that the lack of standardized PoS labeling often stems from a reliance on Eurocentric grammatical models that do not fully account for the agglutinating nature and tonal complexities of Igbo.

Ultimately, the objective of evaluating these dictionaries was to determine their efficacy for both learners and professional linguists. The results indicate that current entries often lack the grammatical clarity required for deep linguistic engagement, particularly regarding the fluid boundaries between nouns and stative verbs. By bridging the gap between recent linguistic research and lexicographic practice, we can move toward a more 'natural choice' for language description, one where the dictionary reflects the internal logic of Igbo grammar. This research concludes that a



standard user-friendly Igbo dictionary is achievable only through a deliberate, research-led synchronization of PoS labels across the discipline.

Recommendations

To address the irregularities identified in this study and elevate Igbo lexicography to international standards, the following strategic recommendations are proposed:

i. Professionalization

There is urgent need for Igbo dictionary compilers to be trained lexicographers, by this they must undergo formal training in lexicographic theory and practice as this will move them beyond the production of simple wordlists. They should collaborate with theoretical linguists to ensure that recent research findings in Igbo morphology and syntax are accurately reflected in dictionary entries.

ii. Structural and grammatical standardization

Future dictionaries should target perfect coordination between the dictionary and grammar. They should ensure that PoS tagging is supported by an introductory grammar guide. Use of standardized labels for word classes must be ensured to reduce the current discrepancies found across the selected works.

iii. Pedagogical enhancement

Lexicographic reasoning will be facilitated if every headword entry is accompanied by empirical sentence examples which will clarify its syntactic behaviour and PoS membership. For the verb entries, there should be an explicit indication of transitivity and clear labels for phrasal verbs in order to assist users both advanced and learners. Leveraging projects like the Igbo Archival project can provide a rich database of dialectal and standard data to ensure dictionaries are comprehensive and representative

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<http://www.rogerblench.info>

List of Abbreviations

Adv. - Adverb

f. - feminine

n. - Noun

prep - Preposition

phr v - phrasal verb

vi - intransitive verb

Adj - Adjective

m. - masculine

obj - Object

PoS - Parts of Speech

v. - Verb