
The Semantics of the Igbo Verbs of Opening

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Abstract

Languages deploy various means in the description of opening events. Verbs of opening represent a subset of the separation verb class and comprise those verbs used to refer to the activity of removing or taking a part from an entity. The present study examines the Igbo verbs that carve up the semantic domain of opening events. The study specifically seeks to identify the members of this verb class and in addition ascertain if there are specific conceptualizations that can affect the verbs in relation to contexts of usage. Furthermore, the study seeks to determine if there are restrictions on the co-occurrence of the verbs with entities. Data for the study is based on elicitations with five competent native speakers of the Igbo language using relevant clips in the Cut and Break Video Stimuli. Other strategies devised by the researcher also formed sources of data for the study. The findings of the study reveal that Igbo verbs such as sàghéé, mèghéé, kwùghéé, kpòghéé, gbàghéé, ghùghéé, kwàghéé and kpàghéé all translate to open and are used to describe opening events. In addition, the study observes that some verbs of opening can co-occur with the same object entity but usually with an apparent difference in the viewpoint from which the opening event is construed.

Keywords: Igbo language, verbs, opening events, semantic domain

1. Introduction

The activity of separation cuts across languages and culture. Separation events have been explored in different languages and certain postulations have been arrived at. For instance, in a cross linguistic study of 28 different languages, Majid, Boster and Bowerman (2008) discover that cut and break hereafter (C&B) verbs i.e., those verbs describing material destruction formed a distinct group from opening and peeling verbs. Thus, Majid, Bowerman, Van Staden and Boster (2007) posit that separation events involving opening and taking apart involve the destruction of the affected entity in a minimal way which can be easily reversed. This study explores the semantics of verbs of opening. Verbs of opening or detachment is a subset of the separation verb class, the other being the C&B subset. Verbs of opening according to Atintono (2019) describe the separation of one distinguishable part of an object from another which is usually reversible while the C&B verbs describe the slightest or extreme severance or material destruction of an object which is usually not reversible.

Discussions concerning the linguistic encoding of separation events across languages have occupied the linguistic fronts. Notable among these discussions are the works which featured in a special issue of the cognitive linguistic journal. Though the volume explored typologically divergent languages, the research findings in the volume suggests very interesting similarities that stimulate interest towards exploring languages whose separation events are yet to be accounted for. This has formed part of the motivation for the present study. Ameka and Hill's study on the semantics of verbs of opening in Ewe, a Kwa language of West Africa and Longgu an Oceanic language of Solomon's Island further adds interesting findings particular to verbs of opening in two typologically divergent languages. Ameka and Hill (2020) demonstrate that although the

two languages carve up the semantic space of opening differently, shared properties of objects of physical actions of opening exist between the two languages. Van Staden's (2007) study of verbs of separation in Tidore language claims that many verbs cross-classify different aspects of separation events in Tidore and further posits that Tidore encodes aspects of the orientation of entities in description of specific separation events.

Despite the outstanding contributions made in the direction of accounting for separation events across languages, the present study adds further understanding to earlier discussions. In particular, the verbs used in describing opening events in Igbo language which seem to divide along the instruments used as well as the manner of separation provides interesting insights which is specialized to the Igbo verbs of opening.

Bowerman (2005) sets forth some characteristics of openable objects. According to the author, openable objects are unitary objects which may have parts. The objects separate along predetermined lines, (objects that are open can be closed, and hence the action can be reversible), separation involving opening provides access to something (a content, an interior space or a previously concealed part of the object with which one can do something). Bowerman's characteristics, though based on the English language are adequate for the present study thus affirming that cross-cultural parallels exist between cultures in the same semantic domain.

This paper centers on the verbs of opening in Igbo with the aim of determining the Igbo verbs that carve up the semantic domain of opening events, ascertaining the conceptualizations that can affect the verbs in relation to contexts of usage and the explanations behind restrictions on the occurrence of the verbs with entities. Opening verbs as earlier mentioned do not result to the destruction of the object. They describe the separation of one distinguishable part of

an object from another which is usually reversible. The rest of the paper is organized as follows; section two presents the methodology while section three and its succeeding subsections goes into the explication of the verbs of opening in Igbo. In section four, we summarize and conclude the study.

2. Methodology

Data for the study is based on elicitations with competent native speakers of the Igbo language using relevant clips in the Cut and Break Video Stimuli designed by Bohnemeyer, Bowerman and Brown (2001). The Video Clips contains fourteen (14) scenes which feature spatial separation such as opening the hand/mouth/eyes, a door, a cup, a scissors, a book, removing the cap of a pen etc. The consultants were asked to first observe and then describe the event observed in the video clips. Their explanations yielded the expressions used in the description of the observed clips. Further interrogations were put forth to the consultants especially where different verbs are used to describe the same scene. Other discussions resulted in the elicitation of verbs used for culture specific items. One other source of data involves the construction of some sentences involving opening events based on my own native speaker intuition. These sentences were cross- checked and discussed with the competent speakers. The elicitations are presented and discussed in section 3 following.

3. Verbs of Opening in Igbo

Some of the Igbo verbs used in describing opening events are *mèghéé*, *kwùghéé*, *kpòghéé*, *kpàghéé*, *gbàghéé*, *sàghéé*. The verbs have their variants as *mèpéé*, *kwùpéé*, *kpòpéé*, *kpàpéé*, *gbàpéé*, *sàpéé*. These verbs all translate to English ‘open’ but in terms of intrinsic semantics, factors such as manner or instrument contribute

to their meanings. Although it is possible for more than one verb to occur with an entity, usually, this reveals a difference in the perception of the opening event. For instance, the verbs *mèghéé* ‘open’ and *sàghéé* ‘open wide apart’ can occur with parts of the human body but there is perceived difference in the magnitude to which the body part is opened. Whereas *meghe* ‘open’ occurring with the body part *onụ* ‘mouth’ can suggest open in such a way that the two lips are not together, *sàghéé* ‘open wide apart’ portends a scenario where the content of the mouth can be revealed. In subsections three following, we provide the elucidations of specific verbs used in the description of opening events in Igbo language.

3.1 The Verb *Meghe*

Mèghéé is a verbal compound comprised *me* ‘do’ depicting the action and *ghe* from *ighe oghe* ‘to be open’ which denotes the result. The verb *mèghéé* is the general verb for open in Igbo language. This is due to its prolific occurrence with diverse entities which can be animate, inanimate or institutions such as banks and schools. *Mèghéé* as a verbal compound denotes action result and is derived from *ghé óghē* ‘be open’. The examples in (1) show the different occurrences of *mèghéé*.

- 1) a. *Mèghéé anya gi*
Open eye 2SG
‘Open your eye’
- b. *Ọ́ nà è- méghé úlò yá táà*
3SG PROG pref open house 2Sg today
[Lit]He is opening his house today
‘He is organizing a house warming ceremony’
- c. *Ụlọ akwụkwọ ga e meghe echi*

- House School FUT PREF open tomorrow
'School will resume tomorrow'
- d. A chọ rọ m i meghe akanwụtu n' ụlọ
akụ
1SG want PST 1SG PREF open account PREP
house wealth
'I want to open an account with the bank'
- e. Onye nkuzi meghe re akwụkwọ
Teacher open PST book
'The teacher opened the book'
- f. O ji aka meghe ụzọ
3SG hold hand open door
'He/She opened the door with hand'
- g. Meghe obi gi nabata Jizos Kraist
Open heart 2SG accept Jesus Christ
'Open your heart and accept Jesus Christ'

Examples (1a) – (1g) illustrate some of the structures that *mèghéé* can occur with. In all the examples there is a sense of opening associated with the verb. In example 1a, the verb is used intransitively in its occurrence with the body part *ányá* 'eye'. 1b instantiates a usage that is rather metaphorical where the whole event associated with housewarming is captured by activity of opening. In 1b and 1c, the verb is used transitively. Example 1d shows *meghee* occurring in a ditransitive construction. The event described by the verb has to do with opening account with financial institution typically, a bank. *Meghee* can occur with *akwụkwọ*

‘book’ as in example (1e) to suggest targeted opening of the book as opposed to flipping through the book. Example (1f) suffices as a serial verb construction where the verb *mèghéé* occurs alongside another verb *ji* ‘hold’. In all these instances, one observes that the verb *mèghéé* ‘open’ retains its form irrespective of position occupied in the sentence i.e. when occurring in the initial or medial positions in sentential construct.

3.2 The Verb *Kwùghéé*

The verb *kwùghéé* typically occurs with openable objects for instance containers especially those with removable parts such as pots, cups, bottles, pen etc. The use of *kwùghéé* to describe an opening event suggests that the hand is the typical instrument involved even when it is implicit in the expression. Furthermore, *kwùghéé* seems to collocate with entities which when opened, the openable part remains detached from the whole. Consider the examples below:

- 2) a. *kwùghéé ite ahụ*
Open pot Dem
‘Open that pot’
- b. *kwùghéé mkpisi ode dee aha gi*
Open pen write name 2SG
‘Open the pen and write your name’
- c. *Nne m kwùghe-re bọtụlụ gbanye ogwụ na ngaji*
nye m
Mother 1SG open - PST bottle pour drug
PREP spoon give 1SG
‘My Mother opened the bottle, poured syrup in the spoon and gave me’

The verb *kwùghée* do not collocate with body parts but only suffice for entities with detachable parts whose opening is achieved through the use of a body part typically, the hand.

3.3 The Verb *Kpàghée*

Kpàghée is used to describe opening events construed as being affected through the aid of an instrument other than the hand and key. The use of *kpàghée* is usually evoked in a scenario where for instance an entity is locked with a padlock and the key to the lock is misplaced or not readily available. In order to open the padlock, an instrument other than the key and definitely not the bare hands will be required. *Kpàghée* and for some varieties of Igbo *kpàkàá* denotes forceful opening of a previously locked entity. The verb collocates only with entities that can be locked for instance doors and boxes. Most times, entities which *kpàghée* or *kpàkàá* collocates with have tops (for boxes) or sides (in the case of doors) which when opened, remains attached to the whole.

3.4 The Verb *Kpòghée*

The verb *Kpòghée* is typical for corked entities which such as bottles or tins which can be opened using either the hand or an instrument for instance tin openers or keys. It is also used in the description of opening events pertaining to garments especially those with zips and/or buttons. *Kpòghée* is also appropriate for describing the opening of taps as well as events that involve unlocking fastened objects such as belts and/or seat belts on cars and planes. In the description of opening involving the hand as instrument, when the verb *kpòghée* is used, it is required that the openable part of the entity be twisted with hands, for instance when trying to open a corked bottle of syrup. *Kpòghée* co-occurs with entities that can be locked whose openable part for the most times remains attached to the whole. Entities opened using the verb *kpòghée* can be locked i.e the action is reversible usually evoking the antonym *kpòchié* 'lock',

an antonym which is inappropriate for *kpàghéé*. Typically, one can open the door with a key and afterwards lock it but when it is opened forcefully using the verb *kpàghéé*, there is often a partial damage inflicted on the entity.

3.5 The Verb *Sàghéé*

Sàghéé is used in the description of opening events involving entities that can be opened along predetermined lines, for instance a book. The opened part remains attached to the whole and can be closed thus being reversible. Consider the examples below

- 3) O_i na a- saghe akwukwọ
 3SG PROG pref-open book
 ‘He/She is flipping through a book’

The opening of the book as described by the example above is not considered targeted hence the use of *sàghé*. Targeted opening with regard to a book evokes the use of *mèghé*.

Sàghé typically describe opening events where entities with divisible parts separate from each other in a manner that is wide apart. This separation causes the inner content of the entity to be revealed or accessed. Example following represents the collocation of *sàghé* with body parts.

- 4) O_i gwa -ra ya ka O_i saghee ukwu
 ya
 3SG tell PST PRON COMP 3SG open leg 3SG
 ‘He asked her to open her legs’

Example 4 above suggests a separation of the legs in a way that is wide apart such that the place in between the legs can be accessed.

3.6 The Verbs *Gbàghéé* and *Kwàghéé*

Gbàghée is used in the description of opening events involving a body part as the instrument. The part of the body commonly involved is *ɔkwɔ* ‘leg’ while the means usually adopted to achieve the opening is the application of force. Consider the instance below which depicts a scenario of force opening an entity (door) using the leg.

- 5) Ha gbaghe - re ɔzɔ
3PL open PST door
‘They opened the door’

The expression above conveys a sense of opening adjudged illegal. Usually, it is expected that rightful owners gain access through normal rather than forceful opening of an entity. Such normal opening will evoke the use of either *mèghée* or *kpòghée* but not *gbàghée*.

Kwàghée comprising *kwà* ‘push’ and *ghee* ‘open’ literally means push open and is used to describe opening events which involve forceful opening of an entity using a part of the body other than the leg. The body part involved as instrument in achieving the opening though usually the hand can be other parts of the body such as the buttocks, the sides etc. *Kwàghée* collocates with entities which can be locked for instance doors and windows.

- 6) Ọ kwaghe- re ɔzɔ bata n’ ime ɔlɔ
3SG open - PST door enter PREP inside house
‘He/She opened the door and entered inside the house’

Whereas, the examples in 5 and 6 above suggest a forceful access to an entity, they differ in the body part used in achieving the event as well as associated conceptualization. While *gbàghée* suggests an

opening that is somewhat ‘illegal’ and carried out by hoodlums, *kwàghéé* typically describes an opening event which though achieved forcefully is devoid of a sense of illegality. In both cases, the opening event affords one access to something which hitherto remained inaccessible.

3.7 The Verb *Ghùghéé*

Ghùghéé has culture specific restriction in usage. This verb of opening comprises verbal compound *ghù* ‘bore and *ghéé* where the later is the action while the former represents the result. *Ghughéé* is used in description of opening events relevant to culture specific items such as *akị bekee* ‘coconut’. To achieve this opening, a pointed instrument which can be manipulated with the hand is required. A typical application of this verb is revealed when one tries to open the eye of a coconut in order to access the inner content (water) before finally breaking the coconut. The verb *ghùghéé* suffices as shown in the following example

- 7) Ada ji mma ghùghéé akị bekee
 PN hold knife open coconut
 Ada opened the coconut with knife

The above example in 7 is different from breaking the coconut which is described by the verb *kùwá* ‘break’ but will not be discussed as it is beyond the scope of the present study.

Ghùghéé is also appropriate for describing opening events involving blockage for instance opening a blocked pipe to ease the flow of liquids and or semi-liquids.

Having discussed the Igbo verbs of opening elicited from the study, I present below the verbs, instrument and manner of opening in addition to the compatible entities in table 1.

Table 1: Igbo Verbs of Opening

Verb	Gloss	Instrument	Typical Manner	Compatible Entities
mèghéé	Open	Hand	Volitional	Institutions, bodyparts, inanimate entities such as doors and windows
kwùghéé	Open	Hand	Volitional	Utensils, containers especially those with detachable parts
kpòghéé	Open	Hand, key	Volitional using either a key or hand or teeth.	Corked entities, taps, padlocks, belts and other fastened entities.
kpàghéé	Open	Metal such as pliers	Exerted force aided by an instrument	Inanimate entities
sàghéé	Open	Hand and voluntary opening	Flipping and spontaneous opening	Body parts, books and other plane surfaces

gbàghéé	Open	Leg	Force using the leg	Inanimate entities
kwàghéé	Open	Bodyparts other than the leg	Force aided by a bodypart	Inanimate entities
ghùghéé	Open	Sharp pointed instrument	Exerted force using a sharp pointed instrument	Coconut

4. Summary and Conclusion

This study has identified eight Igbo verbs used in the description of opening events. The verbs which include *sàghéé*, *mèghéé*, *kwùghéé*, *kpòghéé*, *gbàghéé*, *ghùghéé*, *kwàghéé* and *kpàghéé* translate to open in English.

Igbo Verbs of opening differentiate opening events along the dimensions of degree of opening, manner of opening and the instrument(s) used in opening. With regard to the degree of opening, we notice the distinction drawn in the semantics of *mèghéé* and *sàghéé* when used to refer to opening a part of the body. As earlier indicated, *mèghéé* when used in conjunction with any part of the body denotes normal opening whereas *sàghéé* in collocation with any part of the body represents a ‘careless’ opening where the affected parts are flung wide open. The two verbs *mèghéé* and *sàghéé* also capture the differentiation along the dimension of manner of opening as observed in the use of the verbs in collocation with the entity book where the former represents targeted opening while the later has to do with flipping through the book. This points

to the fact that more than one verb can be used for the same opening event but with a difference in view.

The distinction along the dimension of instrument used in the opening event is obvious in the use of use of *gbàghéé* for opening events where the leg is the sole instrument and *ghùghéé* where a sharp pointed instrument is required. *Kwàghéé* also reveals the distinction along the dimension of instrument used. These distinctions collaborate the opinion of Enfield (2007) who suggests that “to truly figure out verbs of material separation requires an ethnographically grounded understanding of the social purposes for which communities maintain the semiotic distinctions they maintain”.

Obvious restrictions exist in the occurrence of Igbo verbs of opening with object entities. This restriction at times, divides along animate/inanimate dimensions. Using the verb *kwùghéé* as an instance, we notice that *kwùghéé* is not compatible with body parts. This is also true of verbs such as *kpoghéé*, *ghàghéé* and *kpàghéé* which all translate to open but restricted to collocation with inanimate entities.

The present study asserts the verb *mèghéé* as the basic verb for open in Igbo. This position is supported by the fact that among the Igbo verbs elicited from competent native speakers, the verb *mèghéé* cuts across the various dimensions of distinctions which seem to exist in the semantic domain of opening events in Igbo.

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