
A Phono-semantic Account of the Igbo ‘take’ Verbs *wè* and *chì*

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Abstract

*Many researches have been done on the Igbo verb as the verb is central and prolific in the study of Igbo language spoken in South East Nigeria. The centrality of the verb in the Igbo language has caused the language to be referred to as a verb-centred language (Nwachukwu, 1983). These facts of the Igbo verb notwithstanding, none of the numerous researches has investigated the role of verbs in the expression of plurality and countability in Igbo. This paper sets out to fill the research gap. It gives a phono-semantic account of the Igbo verbs *wè* and *chì* in order to establish the semantic imports they carry besides ‘take’, which is often seen as their conventional meaning, and the role of tone in the achievement of the meanings. The data for this study are collected from ten Igbo native speakers and are descriptively analysed. The research discovers that the verbs perform interesting semantic functions in Igbo which range from the expression of singular and plural to portraying countable and uncountable notions. On tone, *wè* and *chì* in their canonical form, that is, when used as roots bear the low and high tone respectively. However, when the root is combined with affixes or other roots to yield complex or compound verbs with further meaning, the tone may change in accordance with the established behaviour of tone in Igbo grammar (Nwachukwu, 1995; Eme, 1998). This study adds to the existing knowledge on verbal plurality and countability in language.*

Keywords: Igbo verb, phono-semantic account, plurality, countability, verb-centred

1. Introduction

The Igbo language of Nigeria is spoken by over 29 million people (Eberhard et al, 2021). The speakers are predominantly in the south-east comprising five states: Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo States. Igbo speakers are also in some other states in Nigeria such as parts of Delta and Rivers States. Igbo belongs to the Kwa group of the Benue Congo Family within the Niger-Congo language phylum (Williamson and Blench, 2000). It is one of the developed indigenous languages of Nigeria and has received a lot of linguistic researches in the course of its development. Virtually all the aspects of the language have been studied in one way or the other. For the Igbo verb, researches have touched on verb generally or on some specific verb or verbs. In fact, many scholars have shown interest in the study of Igbo verbs, as the verb is central and prolific in the Igbo language. The centrality of the verb in the Igbo language has caused one of its foremost linguists, Prof. Philip A. Nwachukwu, to refer to the language as a verb-centred language (Nwachukwu, 1983).

These facts concerning the centrality of the Igbo verb and the numerous researches already conducted on the Igbo verb notwithstanding, none of the researches, as much as this paper's researchers know, delved into finding out how the verbs contribute in the expression of plurality and countability in Igbo. The need to fill the research gap prompts this paper, which gives a phono-semantic account of the Igbo verbs *wè* and *chì*. It is in order to establish the semantic imports *wè* and *chì* carry outside 'take', often seen as their usual meaning. Also, as tone is crucial in Igbo studies, not only because the language is a tone language but because "tone is at the core of Igbo grammar; and any accurate account of so many

syntactic phenomena in Igbo must take tone into account” (Nwachukwu, 1995), we shall investigate the role of tone in the achievement of the said meanings by the *wè* and *chì* verbs in Igbo sentence structures.

We collected the data for this study from ten Igbo native speakers randomly selected irrespective of their dialects. The data were authenticated by the researchers using their native speaker intuition. For the analysis of data, we adopted the descriptive approach. The tone marking convention used here is that of Green and Igwe (1963); high tone is left unmarked while low and downstep tones are marked with grave accent [`] and macron [¯] respectively.

2. Earlier Studies on Verbs

The verb, a grammatical category, refers to a [word](#) that conveys action, occurrence or state of being in grammatical constructions of language. It is, therefore, a universal phenomenon. Ikegwuonu (2021) explains that the functions of verb vary according to languages; in many [languages](#), verb takes different forms to depict [tense](#), [aspect](#), [mood](#) and [voice](#) while in some languages, it may also agree with the [person](#), [gender](#) or [number](#) of some of its [arguments](#), such as [subject](#), or [object](#).

Hofherr (2010) investigates plural marking on verbs and distinguishes between expressing many events together, termed event plurality, and using verbal markers in expressing multiple events, which she refers to as verbal plurality. She explains that such verbal markers can also be called pluractional markers. In her examination of what is meant for a single event to be plural, she distinguishes between distributive and non-distributive plurality, event-internal and event-external plurality, and event number and participant number. This is to say that one event can have multiple

events “due to distribution over plural times, spatial locations and participants.” She gives the following examples:

Distribution over time:

1) John sang a song, and then he sang the song again, and then again.

Distribution over space:

2) John planted trees in different places.

Distribution over participants:

3) John sang two French songs: John sang the Marseillaise and then he sang

“Je ne regretterien”.

4) John and Mary baked a cake: John baked a cake and Mary baked a cake.

Plural meanings through verbal plurality can also be achieved through such other means as repetitiveness, repeated occasions and events, persistent consequences, distributed quality and continuity.

Lee’s (2016) work examines pluractional verbs in Ranmo (Papuan) by investigating the morphological, syntactic, as well as semantic properties of root alternation in the language. Pluractionality is the term that refers to the situation of verbs being morphologically marked for plurality; and plurality “covers a range of meanings, whether in connection to multiple participants, times or locations”. The language of investigation, Ranmo, is “a Papuan (non-Austronesian) language, spoken by approximately 300 people in Yenthoroto village, Western Province, southwest Papua New Guinea.” Like the Igbo language, Ranmo is an SVO language. Only ‘extended’ roots of Ranmo exhibit pluractional verb characteristics. According to Lee, all pluractionals must have two components clearly defined in the semantics—PL(ural) and DEG(ree). DEG(ree)

is for large quantity; not necessarily simple plural. He points out that across languages, pluractional verbs are commonly formed through reduplication.

Concerning the verbs of the Igbo language, several scholars have delved into the study from different research perspectives. Let us look at a few of these studies. Emenanjo (1978) examines the Igbo verbals, verb phrase and verb forms. Under verbals, he discusses auxiliaries, participles and verbs. He explains, among other things, that the Igbo verb is the head of the VP, precedes its complements, can be nominalized, and is “the only part of speech that takes affixes.” This is to say that all the other form classes do not accept affixation. According to him, the Igbo verbs, like suffixes and enclitics, begin with consonants; unlike nouns which usually begin with a vowel or a syllabic nasal. He classifies the Igbo verb stems into simple and complex, with reference to the number of elements or morphemes they contain- the former contains one element (5a-i) while the later contains more than one element (6a-d):

- 5) a. za ‘answer’,
 b. me ‘do’,
 c. ri ‘eat’,
 e. zà ‘sweep’,
 f. bà ‘enter’,
 g. pù ‘go out’,
 h. bja ‘come’,
 i. hie ‘tie up’
- 6) a. bufè ‘carry across’,
 b. tụpùwa ‘begin to throw out’,
 c. buwe ‘begin to carry’,

d. rọ̀gò ‘bend’.

According to Ume, Ugoji and Dike (1989), the Igbo verb expresses future, past and perfective aspect as well as tense. They point out that scholars classified Igbo verbs in different forms using specified criterion. For them, Igbo verbs can be classified according to the number of morphemes they possess. Thus, there are simple verbs and complex/compound verbs. Whereas simple verbs have only one morpheme, complex/compound verbs have two or more morphemes.

According to Izunwa (2019), the verb is language universal, since it is a grammatical category found in all languages. He explains that in classifying the Igbo verbs using their morphological make-up, we have simple verbs, complex verbs and compound verbs. Each of these classes of verbs can be inflected for tense, mood, aspect, negation and ergativity. A verb that is in its citation form only is a simple verb; a complex verb has the citation form plus one or more affixes; and a compound verb has two or more independent simple verbs.

According to Mbah (2018), cited in Ikegwuonu (2021:217), while talking on the structure and behaviour of Igbo verbs avers, “A simple verb form must not change its form by vowel harmony rules in any morphological alternation”. The simple verb form comprises a consonant at the onset and a vowel at the peak. In other words, the structure of the simple verb form in Igbo can be represented as consonant (C) + vowel (V) (i.e. CV structure). Thus, the simple Igbo verb root has a CV structure. The Igbo ‘take’ verbs we are investigating, *wè* and *chí*, align with this CV syllable structure.

3. Data Presentation and Analysis

The 'take' verbs *wè* and *chì* can be realized in different morpho-syntactic forms to give complex verbs and different meaning realizations. Our data and their analysis substantiate this claim.

- 7) *i-wè* 'to take'
- 8) *ì-chì* 'to take'

In (7) and (8), *wè* and *chì* are in the infinitival form, marked by the prefixation of the harmonizing vowel prefix *i-* and *ì-* for *wè* and *chì* respectively. The prefix is determined by the phonetic feature of the vowel of the verb; as the Igbo vowels harmonize in terms of the phonetic feature of advancement or retraction of tongue root [\pm ATR]. Although they have the same semantic notion of 'to take', the nuances in their meanings have the implications of singularity and countability for *wè*, while *chì* indicates plurality and or countability, depending on the noun involved. This will become clearer in our further analysis of the data. On their tone, observe that *wè* retains its inherent tone after the prefixation of the infinitive marker while the tone of *chì* changes from H to a downstep. This is in line with the behaviour of Igbo tones during affixation for infinitive formation; where a low tone CV root retains its L tone while a high tone CV root has the *i/ì* prefix on H tone while the H of the root steps down to a downstep tone.

- 9) *wè-re* 'take'
- 10) *chì-rì* 'take'

In (9) and (10), the verbs are realized in their imperative form. Unlike the imperative form of most Igbo verbs, that is, CV + open vowel suffix, *wè* and *chì* take the -rV suffix for their imperative, that

is, ‘r’ followed by a harmonizing vowel. This explains why we have *wèrè* and *chìrì*. As we can see, the suffix is on H tone. Semantically, the verbs mean ‘take’. However, whereas *wèrè* commands the hearer to take the only one item or one item out of the countable lot like yams and bales of cloth, *chìrì* implies that the hearer should collect, sometimes with both hands, uncountable items such as sand, groundnut, roasted breadfruit, and quantity of firewood.

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|-----|----|---|-----------------------------|
| 11) | a. | wèèrè | ‘took’ |
| | b. | chìrì | ‘took’ |
| 12) | a. | wedà / chidà | ‘take down (from a height)’ |
| | b. | wepù / chipù | ‘take out/take away’ |
| | c. | wèga / chiga | ‘take to’ |
| | d. | wèli / chìli | ‘take up’ |
| | e. | wètù / chitù | ‘take down’ |
| | f. | wèkpu / chikpu | ‘take inside’ |
| | g. | wèla / chila | ‘take home’ |
| | h. | we(ghà)chi/ chì(ghà)chi | ‘take back’ |
| 13) | a. | i - wè - gà = iwègà / ì - chì - ga = ìchiga | ‘to take to’ |
| | b. | i - wè - kpù = iwèkpù / ì - chì - kpu = ìchikpu | ‘to take inside’ |
| | c. | i - wè - lì = iwèlì / ì - chì - li = ìchìli | ‘to take up/ to raise’ |
| | d. | wè - gà - rà = wègàrà / chì - ga - rà = chìgàrà | ‘took to’ |
| | e. | wè - kpu - rù = wèkpurù / chì - kpu - rù = chìkpurù | ‘took inside’ |

- f. *wè* - li - rì = wèlìrì / *chì* - li - rì = chìlìrì
 'tookup/ raised up'

The -rV past tense marker can also be suffixed to the *wè* and *chì* verb roots to depict past tense, as seen in (11 a, b). Here, *wè* and *chì* again behaves differently from most Igbo verbs that form their past by the -rV suffixation only. For *wè* and *chì*, the vowel of the root is reduplicated before the -rV suffix is attached. However, like other Igbo verbs, the tone is L for the verb and its inflections. This L tone of the -rV past suffix differentiates it from the -rV of the *wè* and *chì* imperative (seen in 11 a, b), which is H tone. Both *wèrèrè* and *chìrìrì* mean 'took'. Further description of what was taken could show the 'took' meaning to have nuances of number and countability. For instance, if 'it' is the pronoun of what was taken, it implies one countable item or a bundle or pack of an uncountable entity. In this case, *wè* can be used in all the options, excluding *chì* when one countable item is involved. In fact, *chì* when used for a bundle or pack of an uncountable entity would subtly imply that the bundle or pack was loose and so not intact. However, if 'them' is the pronoun for what were taken, an idea of plurality emerges for both verbs. This would, therefore, imply that what were taken were two or more pieces of the countable item or two or more bundles or packs of an uncountable entity:

- 14) a. O wèrèrè ya/ O chìrìrì ya 'He/She took it (e.g. cloth, rope)'.
 b. O wèrèrè ha/ O chìrìrì ha 'He/She took them (e.g. tubers of yam, books, goats)'.

Furthermore, the Igbo 'take' verbs *wè* and *chì* can combine with other simple verb roots to form compound verb structures. This can

be illustrated with the verb forms in Example 4. Each of the items comprises two roots, giving the syllable structure of the compound verb as CVCV. Item 4 (h) has an optional element, *ghà*, between the two CVCV roots; hence the realization of *wè* (*ghà*) *chi*/*chì* (*ghà*) *chi* ‘take back’. In all the items, the idea of ‘take’ inherent in *wè* and *chì* verbs still manifest; further information about the ‘take’ is then given by the additional root. For instance, in (12a) *wèda* / *chìda* achieves its meaning of ‘take down (from a height)’ by the combination of *wè* ‘take’ and *dà* ‘fall (down)’. For *wèpụ* / *chìpụ* (seen in 12b), the idea of ‘take out/take away’ comes in because of the addition of *pụ* ‘go (out/away)’. For the meaning got for 12 (c) *wèga* / *chìga* ‘take to’, it is clear because of the meaning of the CV root *ga* ‘go to’.

The items in Example (13) show that the Igbo compound verbs can be inflected. Whereas (13a-c) show the verbs assuming infinitive forms by the addition of the infinitive marker *i*/*ì*, (13d-f) show simple past tense by the suffixation of the L tone past tense morpheme, *rV* suffix, to the compound verbs.

3.1 Further Discussions

The verb *wè* in its canonical form cannot be used to indicate present tense in Igbo sentences. This is because only the infinitive form of the verb *iwè* ‘to take’ can occur in the present time meaning. In the expression of ‘take’ in the present tense, *wè* is not acceptable but is substituted with *jì* which has the basic semantic import of ‘take’. Examples are shown in below:

- 14) Ike *jì* akwà èje ahịa
Ike take cloth pref-go market
‘Ike takes cloth to the market’
- 15) Ike *jì* akwụkwọ èje ụlọ akwụkwọ

- Ike take book pref-go house book
'Ike takes a book to school'
- 16) Ògbu ehi jì ehi èje ahĩa
killer cow take cow pref-go market
'The butcher takes cow to the market'
- 17) Ede jì ụkwà èje ahĩa
Ede take breadfruit pref-go market
'Ede takes breadfruit to the market'
- 18) Ede jì àhụekere èje ụlọ akwụkwọ
Ede take groundnut pref-go house book
'Ede takes groundnut to school'
- 19) Ede jì ajaòtò àrụ ụlò
Ede take soil clay pref-build house
'Ede builds house with clay soil'

In the above data (14-19), the verb *jì* relates to the actions/events that are current or that are happening or taking place at the time of utterance or at the time of speaking. The verb *jì* depicts singularity in (14-16), which invariably influences the object in the sentence to become singular. It, however, is neutral to countability, as it can be used with countable (singular) and, as seen in (17-19), uncountable nouns. This shows that one of the grammatical functions of the substitute take verb *jì* in Igbo is to mark singularity for the object NP in the sentence. In the data above (14-16), *cloth*, *book* and *cow* are singular and collocate with the verb *jì*. Also, the data (14-19) show that the 'take' verb is usually followed by the object NP. This

makes for ease of transfer of action from the subject to the object thereby making the verb transitive in that sense. Let us look at the *chì* ‘take’ verb in sentences below:

- 20) Ibè *chì* akwà èje ahĩa
Ibè take cloth(es) pref-go market
‘Ibe takes a cloth/some clothes to the market’
- 21) Ibè *chì* akwùkwọ èje ụlọ akwùkwọ
Ibè take(pl) book pref-go house-book
‘Ibe takes some books to school’
- 22) Ibè *chì* ehi èje ahĩa
Ibè take(pl) cow pref-go market
‘Ibe takes some cows to the market’

Examples (20-22) illustrate the plurality of the *chì* ‘take’ verb in the present tense. The verb’s depiction of plurality invariably influences the object NP in the sentence to become plural, though not overtly marked in Igbo. So in the data (20-22) above, *clothes*, *books* and *cows* are in the plural. We must point out that in (20), the meaning could be in the singular; for whatever noun that could be described as long/wide and flexible is usually associated with *chì*. Other example in that category is ụdọ ‘rope(s)’.

The ‘take’ verbs *wè* and *chì* can be used in certain sentential constructions or contexts to relate to the actions or events that took place in the past at the time of utterance. In such cases, *wè* and *chì* change to their past form *wèrè* and *chìrì* respectively. It is, however, acceptable for *wè* to be substituted with the verb *jì*, as in (23-25); and *chì* being retained but with L tone in line with the tone structure of Igbo past tense verbs, to realize *chì* to give the plural forms, as in (26-28). This is illustrated below:

- 23) Àda wèèrè/jì akwà je ahĩa.
Ada take-pst cloth go market
'Ada took cloth to the market'
- 24) Ànyị wèèrè/jì ehi je àkwamozu
1pl take-past cow go funeral
'We took a cow to the funeral'
- 25) Onye nche wèèrè/jì egbè je ọrụ
person security take-pst gun go work
'The security man went to his work place with a gun.'
- 26) Àda chì òkụkò je ahĩa.
Ada take(pl) chicken go market
'Ada took some chickens to the market.'
- 27) Ànyị chì ehi je àkwamozu
1pl take(pl) cow go funeral
'We took some cows to the funeral'
- 28) Onye nche chì egbè je ọrụ
person security take(pl) gun go work
'The security man went to his work place with some guns.'

The above data (23-28) indicate that the actions or events have happened in the past at the time of speaking. This implies that the actions have ceased to happen at the time of speaking. The verb is followed immediately by the object NP and gives the object NP its form of singularity (in 23-25) or plurality (in 26-28).

Example (29a and 29b) illustrate the structures where *wè* and *chì* change to their past form *wèèrè* and *chììrì* respectively, by the suffixation of the -rV past tense morpheme, to express past tense. Examples (29a, 30a and 31a) explain *wèèrè* while (29b, 30b, 31b) illustrate *chììrì*:

- 29) a. Òbi wèèrè akụ
Obi take-pst kernel
'Obi took a kernel nut'
- b. Òbi chììrì akụ
Obi take(pl)-pst kernel
'Obi took some kernel nuts'
- 30) a. Ha were ùdò
3pl take-pst rope
'They took a rope'
- b. Ha chììrì ùdò
3pl take(pl)-pst rope
'They took some ropes'
- 31) a. O wèèrè akwụkwọ
3sg take-pst book
'He/She took a book'
- b. O chììrì akwukwo
3sg take(pl)-pst book
'He/She took some books'

All the data items in Example (29a, 30a and 31a) and (29b, 30b, and 31b) above indicate past time meaning because of the attachment of the past tense suffix -rV to the *wè* and *chì* verb roots.

The *wè* and *chì* 'take' verbs can be inflected to depict different negative semantic realizations by attaching the negative suffixes to the verb roots. The general negative marker '-ghì' and the perfective negative marker '-beghì' as well as the imperative negative marker '-la' are the negative suffixes that can be used to achieve negation with the Igbo *wè* and *chì* 'take' verbs. Examples are shown below in (32-34) with '-ghì' negative marker for *wè* and *chì* respectively:

- 32) a. Ò weghì akwụkwọ ahụ
 3sg take-neg book dem
 'He/She did not take the book'
- b. Ò chighì akwụkwọ ahụ
 3sg take(pl)-neg book dem
 'He/She did not take the books'
- 33) a. Uchè ewèghì mkpụrụ akwụ
 Uche pref-take-neg seed palm nut
 'Uche did not take palm nut'
- b. Uchè achighì mkpụrụ akwụ
 Uche pref-take(pl)-neg seed palm nut
 'Uche did not take palm nuts'
- 34) a. Ì weghì akwà gị
 2sg take-neg cloth 2sg
 'You did not take your cloth'

- b. Ì chighī akwà gị
2sg take(pl)-neg cloth 2sg
‘You did not take your clothes’

We illustrate the suffixation of the perfective negative marker ‘-beghì’ to *wè* and *chì* ‘take’ verbs in Examples (35-37) below:

- 35) a. Ò webèghì akà ahụ
3sg take-perf-neg bead dem
‘He/She has not taken that bead’
- b. Ò chibèghì akà ahụ
3sg take(pl)-perf-neg bead dem
‘He/She has not taken those beads’
- 36) a. Akụ ewebèghì akwà ahụ
Aku pref-take-perf-neg cloth dem
‘Aku has not taken that cloth’
- b. Akụ ewebèghì akwà ahụ
Aku pref-take-perf-neg cloth dem
‘Aku has not taken those clothes’
- 37) a. Ò webèghì ùdò
3sg take-perf-neg rope
‘He/She has not taken a rope’
- b. Ò chibèghì ùdò
3sg take(pl)-perf-neg rope

Although we have glossed (38a, 39a and 40a) for singular and (38b, 39b and 40b) for plural, it is pertinent to note that (39b) could also imply single entity. For example, if pieces of meat are shared into slots whereby a slot could contain ten pieces, one is right to use the sentence as in (39b). We see, however, that in this instance, we are referring to a singular entity or set containing many pieces, hence the use of *chi* ‘take’ verb. This issue is further exemplified in the following paragraph.

The *wè* and *chi* ‘take’ verbs can be used with certain nouns to depict both singularity and plurality. In this sense, both *wè* and *chi* can be used as singular and also as plural. In such a case, the verbs denote the nature of the noun, which often involves something long or wide that requires folding together or items in a set, such as cloth, rope, a share of pieces of meat, heap of groundnuts. This is illustrated in the examples below:

- 41) a. Wepù akwà
 take-leave cloth
 ‘Take away the cloth/clothes’
- b. Chipù akwà
 take-leave cloth
 ‘Take away the cloth/clothes’
- 42) a. Wepū ùdò
 take-leave rope
 ‘Take away the rope/ropes’
- b. Chipū ùdò
 take-leave rope
 ‘Take away the rope/ropes’

- 43) a. Wèrè òkè m
take-imp share 1sg
'Take my share/shares'
- b. Chìrì òkè m
take-imp share 1sg
'Take my share/shares'

4. Conclusion

The research is a phono-semantic account of the Igbo 'take' verbs *wè* and *chì*. It discovered that the verbs perform interesting semantic functions which range from the expression of singular and plural to portraying countable and uncountable notions. On tone, *wè* and *chì* in their simple structure bear low tone and high tone respectively. However, when the root is combined with affixes or other roots to yield complex or compound verb forms and portraying further meanings in declarative, imperative, perfective and negative constructions, the tone may change. The change in tone is as expected, as it aligns with the already established behaviour of tone in Igbo grammar in some of the earlier studies on the Igbo verbs, including the fact that Igbo verb + -rV past suffix is always on a low tone. This study adds to the existing knowledge on verbal plurality and countability, not just in the Igbo language but in language in general.

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