

Theme-goal Switch in Igbo

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Abstract

Accounting for the double object construction has proved very difficult for scholars in the generative model. This may stem from the assumption that constituent structures of phrases and sentences are built only in a binary-branching hierarchical structure. In this article, theme-goal shift is seen as a direct consequence of the case assigning verb requiring its pronominal theme within its local domain.

Keywords: Double object, Igbo, Theme, Goal, Pronominal, Shift

1. Introduction

Accounting for the double object construction has proved very difficult to explain for scholars in the generative model. This may stem from the assumption that constituent structures of phrases and sentences are built only in a binary-branching hierarchical structure. Chomsky (1984) in accounting for the ditransitive objects of the verb says;

The primary object of a transitive verb is its only object but the primary object of a ditransitive verb is the one nearest to it. (Chomsky 1984:94)

What this implies is that the first object, otherwise called O1(Object 1), receives case from the verb in the usual way on the assumption that case is assigned to the adjacent phrase (O1) and that the second object, otherwise called O2 (Object 2), receives secondary case or thematic role from the same verb. This presupposes that O1 will always have primary case though not the same thematic role while O2 takes on the secondary case. The issue is not clear-cut with the Igbo data before us. There are instances of shift in positions between O1 and O2 whenever *theme* is an understood pronominal item and the verb cannot be said to particularly assign primary case or role to its nearest object.

- (1) Ọbi nyere Ada ego.

Source give goal theme

‘Obi gave Ada some money’

- (2) Ọbi nyere yà Ada.

Source give theme goal

‘Obi gave some money to Ada’

Note that *goal* comes before *theme* in (1) but *theme* comes before *goal* in (2) where theme is a pronominal. Let us do an overview of the double object structures in Igbo.

2. Overview of double objects in igbo

The Igbo ditransitive verbs can be grouped into two: those having extensional applicative morphemes and those with zero extension.

2.1 Extensional applicative ditransitives

Virtually every transitive verb in the language can be accommodated in this group by way of adding the applicative morpheme to show the recipient, benefactive or affected participant. Some of the verbs include:

- | | | |
|--------------|-------------------|---------------|
| • zụtà-ā-rà | buy in-appl.-past | ‘buy for’ |
| • chọtà-ā-rà | find-appl.-past | ‘found for’ |
| • wètà-ā-rà | bring-appl.-past | ‘brought for’ |
| • rità-ā-rà | gain-appl.-past | ‘gained for’ |
| • sì-ī-rì | cook-appl.-past | ‘cooked for’ |
| • bùtè-ē-rè | buy-appl.-past | ‘brought for’ |

- (3) Ada zutàārà Ebō ọlà.
Ada buy in-appl.-past Ebo a ring
Source goal theme
‘Ada bought Ebō a ring or Ada bought a ring for Ebo.’
- (4) Ada chọtàārà Ebō ulo obibi
Ada find-appl.-past Ebo house residence
Source goal theme
‘Ada found Ebo a residential house or found a residential house for Ebo.’
- (5) Ada wètàārà Ebō mkpụrụ osisi
Ada bring-appl.-past Ebo fruits of tree
Source goal theme
‘Ada brought Ebo some fruits or brought some fruits for Ebo.’

Without the extensional *-rā-*, *-rī-*, or *-rē-* (depending on vowel harmony) morpheme, (realized as *ā*, *ī*, or *ē*, through a phonological process of deletion of adjacent occurring identical morpheme) the verbs ordinarily are monotransitive and the addition of the morpheme makes the verb capable of subcategorizing double objects.

The order of arrangement of the verb internal arguments is that *Goal* occurs nearest to the verb than the *Theme* (Grimshaw 1994). This is the case in (3) through (5). In (3) *Ebō* is the *Goal* or recipient participant while *ọlà* is the *Theme* of the verb *ịzută* - to buy. The same process obtains in (4) and (5).

2.2 Zero extension ditransitive

These are verbs that are inherently ditransitive in the environment that they occur. They require no extensional morpheme to make them ditransitive. They include:

- *inyē* ‘to give’
- *imē* ‘to make’
- *ikpọ* ‘to call’

They are exemplified as in (6).

- (6) Àda nyere Obi akwụkwọ.
Ada give (past) Obi book
‘Ada gave Obi a book’
- (7) Ndị ichiè mèrè Obi Ezè.
People elder make(past) Obi king
‘The elders made Obi a king’
- (8) Anyị kpọrọ ụmụ nwoke ahụ ndị ohi
We call (past) offsprings man that people thief
‘We called those men thieves’ or ‘we took those men for thieves.’

The examples (6) through (8) do not require a *-ra* applicative morpheme to make them capable of subcategorizing double objects. Apart from not having extensional morphemes,

they are not different, syntactically or semantically, from the ones with extensional morphemes. They are typical cases of ditransitive verbs. When the two objects are lexical NPs the order of occurrence is that Goal precedes Theme, however, when Theme is a pronominal, it precedes Goal. This same order obtains for the extensional ones.

3. Pronominal theme/goal shift

As noted above, the canonical order of objects arrangement is for goal to come before theme; but it is found that theme comes before goal when theme is a pronominal as in (9) through (12).

- (9) Ada nyèrè **yà** Obi.
Ada give (past) it (pron. Theme) Obi(Goal)
'Ada gave it to Obi'
- (10) Ndi ichie mèèrè **yà** Obi.
People elder did it (theme) Obi (goal)
'The elders did it for Obi...'
- (11) Anyi kpọrọ ha ndị ohi.
We call (past) them people thief
'We called them thieves'
- (12) Anyi wèrè ha ndị ohi
We take (past) them people thief
'We took them for thieves'

(9) through (11) show shades of pronominal placements in the Igbo double object structures. In (9), *Theme* precedes *Goal* since it is a pronoun. (12) has an implicative reading which could follow from (7) that *Obi* was made a king. Without such implicative reading, (12) would be ambiguous since the pronoun has an external reference. Although (11) and (12) are grammatical, they give readings completely different from (9) and as such, we can safely assume that they are different lexical items. They represent a different class of ditransitives, in that, they are better classified as small clauses; the two objects are of equal status, for one can be assumed to be in apposition to the other. Where goal precedes a pronominal theme, the result is illicit as in (13) through (16).

- (13) Ada nyèrè *Obi **yà**.
PN Source give (past) PN (goal) it (pron. theme)
- (14) *Anyi nyèrè **yà ya**.
- (15) *Anyi kpọrọ ndi ohi **ha**.
- (16) *Anyi wèrè ndi ohi **ha**.

(13) and (16) fail to converge notwithstanding that *theme* occurs before *goal*. (13) fails because the pronominal *theme* must come before *goal*. (14), on the other hand, fails because of the co-occurrence of two pronominals not bound within the clause. Also the pronoun *ha* in (15) and (16) is not a *theme* object since it retains its high tone. As mentioned above, the pronoun *ha* is a co-complement which constitutes a small clause. The structural possibilities

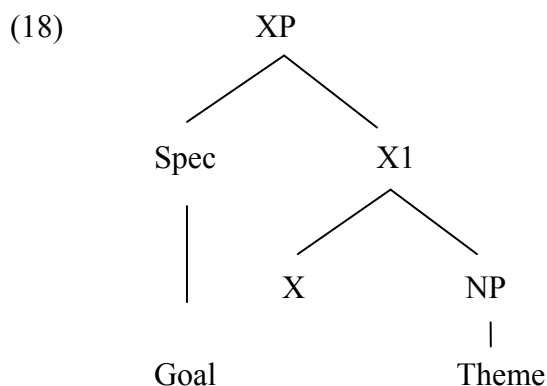
between the two objects of the transitive verb can be as in (17).

- (17) a. Ada nyèrè Obi egō. Lexical **Goal** and Lexical **Theme**
 b. *Ada nyèrè egō ya. Lexical **Theme** and Pronominal **Goal**
 c. Ada nyèrè ya egō. Pronominal **Goal** and Lexical **Theme**
 d. *Ada nyèrè yà ya Pronominal **Theme** and Pronominal **Goal**
 e. Ada nyèrè ya Obi. Pronominal **Theme** and Lexical **Goal**
 f. *Ada nyèrè Obi ya. Lexical **Goal** and pronominal **Theme**

Of the six possible collocations of the double objects given in (17), a, c, and e, are convergent while the rest are not. What then are responsible for the variation in occurrences? Reasons have been advanced to explain just the pronominal theme/lexical goal collocation; though syntactically motivated.

Scholars, among whom are Baedekar (1986), Saah and Eze (1997), and Radford (1997) suggest that the pronominal theme precedence is an instance of cliticization.

Baedekar holds that the verb attracts the pronominal clitic to itself. Saah and Eze reject verb attraction on the grounds that it lacks conceptual explanation but opt for an empty XP projection in which Goal is the Specifier of X and Theme is the Complement of X. The empty X node houses a pronominal clitic which surfaces when theme is a pronominal. The schema for this is drawn in (18).



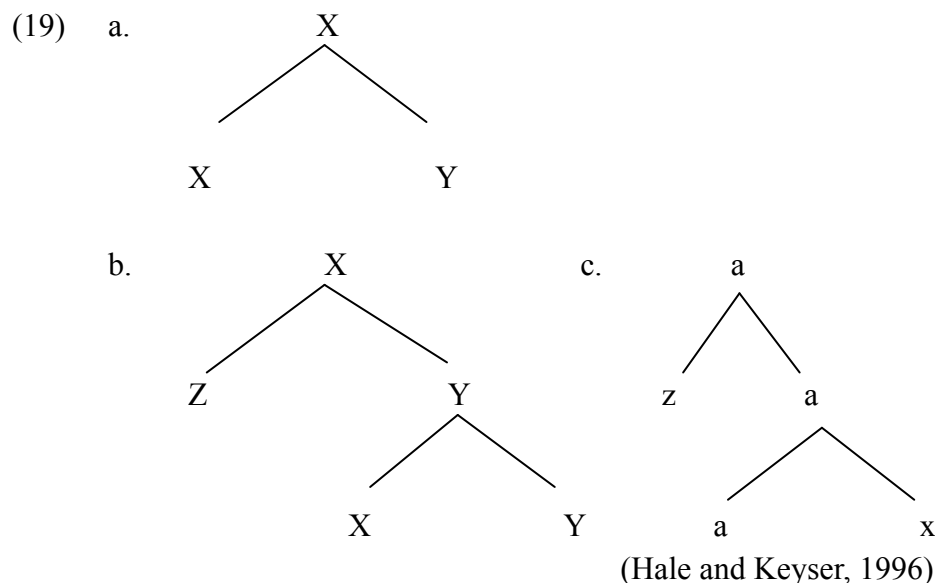
(Saah and Eze 1997)

The schema in (18) is explained such that the pronominal *Theme* is base-generated in AGRO head as a clitic and that the AGRO head always has a covert pronominal clitic *theme* which becomes visible whenever *theme* is a pronominal. The question then is; why does the pronominal theme move to the higher position above goal after cliticizing with the empty X node?

Radford (1997) sees clitics as products of adjacent constituents merger phonologically conditioned. If that is the environment for clitics, then the pronominal theme would have to cliticize with the empty category X and may not move. We reject that analysis on the grounds of not having convincing evidence.

Dealing generally with the double object construction, Hale and Keyser (1996) suggest

possible configurations which assume the same constraints applicable to lexical argument structures. The structures are represented here in (19).



(19c) without doubt is similar to Saah and Eze's (1997) XP schema and (19a) is the normal head/modifier or head/complement relation (cf. Emenanjo, 1978). (19b) does not apply to this study. The problem with assuming the same constraints that applies to verb argument structure with double object construction as posited by Hale and Keyser is that objects do not assign any case or thematic role. They only require linearly adjacent co-objects and not arguments. Also Haddicam (2007) examining theme-goal in English language holds that PF analysis is a plausible analysis for theme-goal sequences which are products of object movement. An alternative analysis is explored below.

4. Further on pronominal theme-goal shift

If we assume that the two adjacent objects of a ditransitive verb are in the computation taken to constitute a phrase, say XP (Saah and Eze (1997)), then the realization for the phrase may either be a projection of *Goal* or a projection of *Theme*. That oversimplifies the issue and does not give a correct reflection of the problem. If we consider the co-occurrence possibilities of the double object as shown in (17), represented here as (20), one notices that the issue is more of a semantic selection than syntactic.

- | | |
|--|--|
| (20) a. Ada nyèrè Obi egõ.
Source give goal theme
'Ada gave Obi some money.' | Lexical Goal and Lexical Theme |
| b. *Ada nyèrè egõ ya.
Source give theme goal | Lexical Theme and Pronominal Goal |
| c. Ada nyèrè ya egõ.
Source give goal theme
'Ada gave him some money.' | Pronominal Goal and Lexical Theme |
| d. *Ada nyèrè yà ya | Pronominal Theme and Pronominal Goal |

Source give theme goal

e. Ada nyèrè ya Obi.

Pronominal **Theme** and Lexical **Goal**

Source give theme goal

‘Ada gave him some money.’

f. *Ada nyèrè Obi ya.

Lexical **Goal** and pronominal **Theme**

Source give goal theme

It is obvious that *Obi* in (20a) is the recipient, while *egō* is what was received. (20b) crashes because; *egō* can never be the recipient. (20c) is acceptable because, the pronoun is understood to refer to an external recipient. (20d) fails because two pronouns occurring as objects of a verb cannot both receive case from the same verb thereby making the statement ambiguous. (20e) converges since the pronominal refers to theme. Note that (20c and d) both have pronominals with different readings. One refers to a human recipient not mentioned in the sentence, while the other refers to an item that was received. This state of things is brought about by the fact that the 3rd person pronoun in Igbo has two readings. One is ‘plus human’ and the other is ‘minus human’. The only way to determine which pronoun is in use is for one of the objects to be a lexical noun.

However, (20f) shows that under no situation should a lexical *Goal* precede a pronominal *Theme*. Thus, where one of the objects is a pronominal, the pronominal must come first then the lexical one. Also Ndimele, (personal communication) holds that the pronoun is attracted to the verb in order to receive case. That is why it comes before the lexical one. Again the pronoun occurring after the noun would have a reading as a modifier of the noun and not as Theme as shown in (20f). One general structural rule derivable from this analysis is this:

(21) Pronominal first rule: A double object pronominal must precede its lexical one in order to have case assigned by the verb.

This rule seems a more economic way of explaining the syntax of double objects in Igbo and languages like it since it proposes a simpler and easier way for a child learning the language. Simply put, where there is a pronominal in double objects, put the pronominal first. Given minimalist assumptions; that where there are two possible configurations for a given operation, the one involving the least effort should be preferred over the less economic one, it follows that (21) should be preferred over Chomsky’s (1984) O1 and O2 case-theoretic analysis and Saah’s AGRO clitic analysis.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, we have looked at Goal/theme shift. We see that ditransitive verbs permit the switching of the sequences of its thematic roles when one of the roles is filled by a pronominal. This shift is conditioned by the verb and possibly because of the need for pronouns to be nearer to case assigners, the verb being the only case assigner in these environments. We posit then that Theme/goal shift is conditioned by the need for a pronominal to be properly governed by the case assigning verb. Thus, the theme-goal shift phenomenon is accounted for here.

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