

## ASPECTS OF MORPHEME ANALYSIS IN OBOLO LANGUAGE

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### Abstract

*The paper investigates aspects of morphemes and their usages in the Obolo language- an Igboid lect. The data were got through the native speaker's competence and were analyzed using the descriptive survey design. The paper shows that the lect is a morphologically rich one which is also verb centred apart from pockets of nominal prefixation. The paper notes that given the different morphological processes of the language, the morpheme acquisition order or processes of the language differ practically with those of the English language.*

**Key Words:** Acquisition, Linguistics, morpheme, tense and affix.

### Introduction

The notion of morpheme and its acquisition across languages has attracted much attention from linguists for decades. This followed a revival of interest in morphology for its own sake in which morpheme is seen to be at the core and the belief that morpheme contains the clues to understanding the language acquisition process. Around the 1960s, there was a shift in theoretical position from the behaviourist perspective to the innatist perspective in explaining language acquisition process. Along with the innatist perspective came the idea of *independent grammars assumption* in first language acquisition. The independent grammars assumption emphasizes that children be treated holistically; their language is not just deficient fragments of the adult grammar but is a grammar in its own right (Cook, 1993). In other words, children acquiring their first language are speakers of their own personal languages rather than defective speakers of the adult languages. Children acquiring their L1, were once thought of as speakers of unknown and undocumented languages, so to enable proper

description of the child's languages researchers needed detailed written grammars of them.

Brown (1973) was unique however, in presenting an organisational framework for the grammars which yielded new insights into the stages of language acquisition or language development (Goldschneider & DeKeyser, 2005) known as morpheme acquisition order, which did not only shed important light on the order in which speakers acquire morphemes but also showed the significant roles they play in language acquisition generally. This paper therefore concerns itself with the analysis of some morphemes in Obolo language and explains their roles in the acquisition of the language.

This study proceeds on the basis of the following key assumptions, that morpheme as the basic notion of morphology, theoretically speaking is uncontroversial. Bloomfield's theoretical construct has remained basically the same over the years, and Nida's 1949 definition of morphology as 'the study of morphemes and their arrangements in forming words' is widely accepted in Linguistics (Mkanganwi, 2002). Other key assumptions are the classification of morphemes into roots and affixes, the positional classification of affixes, in relation to root morphemes, into prefixes and suffixes and the fact that morphemes are either free or bound.

Based on the above assumptions, the following observations about Obolo can safely be made. Obolo has roots and affixes, prefixes but no suffixes; free morphemes and bound morphemes. Many of the Obolo morphemes are bound, in the sense that they must occur with at least another morpheme. All free morphemes in Obolo are roots.

### **Overview of Obolo Language**

Obolo is a Nigerian language. It is spoken as a native language by the Andoni people residing in Andoni Local Government Area (ANOLGA) of Rivers State and perhaps by those in Eastern Obolo and Ibeno Local Government Areas of Akwa Ibom State. Linguistically, Obolo is classified as a Lower Cross Rivers language under the Niger- Congo phylum (Williamson, 1988; Lewis, 2009). The name Obolo is both a linguistic and ethnic term (Ejituwu, 1991) and it stands for the name of the people and the name of their language.

Typologically, Obolo is similar to English in word order: Subject-Verb-Object (SVO). The word order encodes the grammatical relations or functions and pragmatic information. As a rule, the subject (SUBJ) is the noun phrase (NP), which occurs before the verb phrase (VP), while the object (OBJ) which can be direct or indirect object is the NP that follows the verb (V) immediately. There is subject-verb agreement for every combination of person and number in the language, and because the burden of identifying the subject can be handled by the agreement morpheme attached to the verb, it is not necessary for every sentence to have an explicit subject. That is to say, Obolo is a language that permits pro-drop. Examples below show, first, the appearance of an explicit subject; second, the equivalent sentence where the subject is elided

EX.1a. Èbót mé nù  
3PL VFUT come  
They will come

1b. mé nù  
VFUT come  
will come

Morphologically, Obolo is an agglutinative language, in which verbs are formed with the stem having strings of different morphemes to express meanings, inflecting for tense, aspect, number and negation. A typological feature of Obolo is that it abounds in affixes which carry heavy morphological load. The affixes with constant form and meaning agglutinate with each other in a fixed order and are attached to nominal and verbal stems to perform various syntactic and semantic functions. More than one morpheme can agglutinate to a verb stem, such that a complex meaning can be described with a verb word consisting of many smaller meaningful parts. Verb forms in Obolo are realized by the morphological operations of affixation to a verb stem or base. In Obolo, affixes are sets of prefixes which occur before the verb stem and are inflectional. Prefixes are the units that are referred to as morphemes in Obolo and they encode tense, aspect, mood, focus, number, location, possession and negation.

The morpheme in Obolo can be categorized into two classes, affixes and the roots. The relationship between the two is that affixes are subsidiary to roots, whereas roots are the centres of constructions such as words. In Obolo, the root morphemes carry the semantic content of the word hence they are the lexical morphemes. Affixes in Obolo, except in the second person singular imperative and a form of the continuous present, subject person markers are always

prefixed to the verb. It may not be linguistically adequate to discuss the morphology of any language especially when describing the verbal category without reference to morpheme. Suffice therefore to review the literature on morpheme before the detailed analysis of Obolo morpheme.

### **Morpheme**

The term morpheme had been in existence far back as 1880 as Russian morfema, later German morphem (Anderson, 2015, p. 2). It was introduced by Jan Baudouin de Courtenay, who defined it as “that part of a word which is endowed with psychological autonomy and is for the very same reason not further divisible. Consequently, it subsumes such concepts as the root (radix), all possible affixes, (suffixes, prefixes), endings which are exponents of syntactic relationships, and the like” (Baudouin de Courtenay, 1895, p. 153 cited in Anderson, 2015).

In modern linguistics, the reference point for discussions on the concept of morpheme is Bloomfield’s (1933) classic book. This is partly because Bloomfield’s notion of the morpheme provided a basis for later theorizing and study of morpheme (Anderson, 2015, p. 3). Linguists used the term morpheme to name the smallest unit of meaning in a language. Morpheme is the most important component of the word structure, the smallest, indivisible units of language that conveys a meaning or that has a role in grammatical structure (Cook, 1993; O’Grady, 2005; Ngulube, 2015; Nwala, 2015). The relevance of the study of morpheme in linguistics cannot be overemphasized because new words are continuously formed. For instance, in Nigeria, a new word ‘Dasukigate’ has been coined by the news media after the famous Watergate scandal that happened in the 1970s in the United States of America (USA). English thus, gains a new morpheme, (-gate), meaning “scandal involving high profile persons or government figures.” In addition to serving as resources for the creation of vocabulary, morphemes supply grammatical tags to words, helping to identify on the basis of form the parts of speech, of words in sentences (Klammer, Schultz & Volpe, 2010, p. 39).

In the literature, it is held that every word of English contains at least one morpheme. A word like *boy* contains only one unit of meaning; others contain two or more like *boyish* and *boyishness*. Morpheme may be represented by a single sound; for example, the morpheme *a*, meaning ‘without’ as in *asocial* and *apolitical* or by a single syllable, such as *girl* and *ish* in *girl + ish*, and two or more syllables, as in *pepper* (two syllables), *elephant* (three syllables), *impressionist* (four syllables).

Morphemes can be classified as free or bound. A free morpheme is that which root is independent and can stand alone as a single word, like *man*, *woman* and *house*; known also as lexical morphemes. In contrast, a bound morpheme is that which cannot stand on its own, it depends on some other word-building elements to make meaning (Katamba & Stonham 2006; Ngulube 2015 and Nwala 2015), as in the plural morpheme *-s* and the past tense morpheme *-ed* in words such as, *girls* and *cats*, *walked* and *worked* respectively.

A morpheme may be lexical or functional. Lexical morphemes have consistent meanings and consist of nouns, adjectives, adverbs, pronoun and verbs. They have referent in the real world even for abstract concepts. For instance, *goat* is a lexical morpheme as it has a meaning of its own and does not require a particle to convey meaning or a referent. And because new lexical morphemes can be added to these classes both in English and some other languages, they are also described as open class words (Celik, 2007, p. 94). In other words, membership of this class is based on the ability of the word itself to inflect or by its ability to substitute for another word that inflects

Conversely, functional morphemes are noted to contain mainly functional words such as articles (*a*, *an*, *the*), prepositions (*on*, *with*), conjunctions (*but*, *because*) and quantifiers (*few*, *many*). This class of morphemes is referred to as closed class because they are incapable of changing form through inflection or derivation. The meaning of functional morphemes can be understood when they occur with other words in a sentence.

## **Methodology**

The study employed the primary source of data collection and a descriptive survey method of analysis. The data was got from the researchers who are native speakers of the language. The researchers resorted to their primary and native competences to supply the data, which were analyzed using the descriptive survey design. The design is a type that describes the features of data as they are. Nwankwo (2011) explains the survey design as the type in which the researcher collects data usually from a large sample drawn from a given population and describes them as they are at that particular time. The researchers used this method to only analyzed the research data without any form of influence or massage.

## **Obolo Morphemes**

When compared to English, Obolo has a more complex morpheme system. English has eight inflectional morphemes, all of them suffixes: four are verb based (progressive-ing, past tense -ed, present tense/third person singular-s, past participle -en/ed)] two are nouns (plural -s and possessive-'s) and two are adjectives/adverbs (comparative-er and superlative-est). There are more than fifteen morphemes in Obolo, all prefixes. Unlike English, about 40% of Obolo morphemes end in vowels, and almost all stem morphemes begin with a consonant, a vowel or with a syllabic nasal prefixed to the stem (Faraclas, 1982, p.70). The morphemes in Obolo can be categories into two classes, affixes and the roots. The relationship between the two is that affixes are subsidiary to roots, whereas roots are the morphological centre of words. In Obolo, the root morphemes carry the semantic content of the word hence they are the lexical morphemes.

Morphemes, according to Nwala (2015) are generally described based on their lexical or grammatical functions; Obolo morphemes are viewed also from this perspective, hence accounted for in the environment they appear. As earlier stated, morphemes indicate grammatical relationships, such as agreement between person and number, status of tense, negation and aspect in the language. Seven categories of morpheme markers can be attached to Obolo verbs, these are subject, tense, aspect, focus, mood, negation number and object (auxiliary). In Obolo, all verbs must be prefixed with a subject morpheme, which must agree in person and number with the subject. The subject morpheme markers by class are

i. N: [I] 1st person singular subject marker. It is a syllabic nasal which is articulated and written sometimes as the consonants /n/ or /m/ as in Ex. 2a & b.

Ex 2. N-ryé garri

1sg-eat garri

I ate garri

b. M-bén éboli

1sg-carry plate

I carried (the) plate

ii. O: [you] 2nd person singular subject. When this morpheme is used alone with the independent subject (pronoun) òwù (you singular), it implies a yes or no question.

Ex 3. Ó-fôô Ùwò?  
2sg- leave house  
Have you left for home?

b.Òwù fôô Ùwò  
2sg – leave house  
You, (leave) go home

iii. I: [he, she or it] 3rd person singular. It is the subject or object talked about in Ex. 4.

Ex 4. Î-fùk íkpá  
3sg -read book  
He/ she read (the) book

iv. E: [we, you, they/them], the subject morpheme marker for all plural persons. The independent subject pronouns, èjì-‘we’, ènyì-‘you’, èbót-‘they’ usually precede -e to indicate to the listener whether one is speaking in the first, second or third person. When it is used without a preceding subject-object pronoun, an impersonal (passive) meaning is conveyed:

Ex 5. mîdù èjì  
PCP-ask IPl  
We were asked

In Obolo, the marking of the subject morpheme on the finite verb is obligatory, else an ungrammatical construction would occur. The tense morpheme markers in Obolo and how they occur in sentences are outlined below.

v. Mi- This is the past tense morpheme marker used for 1st, 2nd and 3rd person plural. The morpheme mi- replaces e- for all plural forms as in Ex. 6

Ex.6 Èjì mî-gé íkpá  
1pl PST-write book  
We wrote the book

vi. I. This is the past tense marker for the 3rd person singular pronoun. It is used when the verb is an agentive plural or second person imperative plural or when it occurs in phrases that precede other verb phrases in the same construction. It can replace the morpheme *e-* as seen in Ex. 7.

Ex 7. *ì-gé íkpá*

1sg-PST IMP write (the/ a) book  
S/he wrote a/the book

b. *èbí í-fúk íkpá*

people PST-read book  
People who read the book

vii. Me. This is the continuative present tense marker used for plural persons. It can as well replace the morpheme *e-* to agree with persons and number. It also often precedes the progressive morpheme *kí* as seen in Ex. 8.

Ex 8. *Èjì mē-kí fùk íkpà*

1pl PRES PROG-read book  
We are reading (the/a) book

Viii. *Ma, Mo, Me, Ba* are future tense markers.

Following Aaron (1994), the future tense in Obolo, particularly the simple future, is marked by a kind of 'portmanteau' morpheme, *mV*. Khullar (2015) describes portmanteau morpheme as the same form of a morpheme that performs more than one grammatical function in a language. The morpheme is said to encode both the subject prefix and the future tense (Enene, 1998). The simple future morpheme for 1st person singular is *mâ* and it is distinct from the 2nd and 3rd person singular marker which is *mô*, and it marks both categories of person. For the plural categories of person, the future morpheme *mê* applies to all.

Again it is important we observe that the vowels in the future morpheme alternate for person and number. The plural makers are neutral for persons, as such are preceded by an independent 1st, 2nd and 3rd person plural (Nurse, 2010). Further, Enene (1998) explains that the tone on the morpheme influences any verb following it, hence becomes low throughout irrespective of the tone pattern or the syllables. The following constructions explain further.

Ex 9a. *Èmi mâ- fuk*

1sg FUT read

- I will read  
b. Òwò mô rié  
2sg FUT eat  
You will eat  
c. Ènyi mê si  
2pl CplFUT go  
You (pl) will go

The simple negative future is marked by the portmanteau morpheme kpV. It has kpa for 1st person singular, kpo for 2nd and 3rd person singular and kpe for all persons plural. The plural negative kpe, always occurs verb-initially, preceded by an independent pronoun, not subject marker; while the other negative markers occur after the subject marker (Nurse, 2010).

Ex 10a. Èmi m- kpâ - nù  
1sg NEG come  
I will not come

b. Ì - kpô - nù  
3sg NEG come  
S/he will not come

c. Èbòt- kpé - nù  
3pl NEG come  
They will not come

Comrie (1976, p. 2) cited in Enene (1998) states that the so called future tense of many languages has modal as well as tense value. In the analysis of Obolo tense, Enene (1998) observes that tense in Obolo may combine with mood in certain instance, like the definite future morpheme ba- referred to as the “strong future” which indicates the certainty of an event happening and when, as well as marks the verb for intention. The Ex 17 clearly shows this.

Ex11. n- bâ - sí ùwò-ikpá mé ikaraá  
1sg- DFUT go school in afternoon  
I will go to school in the afternoon

## **Conclusion**

Thus far, we have analyzed some of the morphemes used in different forms of constructions in Obolo language. Obolo like Igboid lects is a morphologically

verb centred language; hence the verb serves as the host of all the morphemes, except in few cases where the noun is involved. In this paper, we identified and showed such morphemes as the syllabic nasal [N] used as subject morpheme; the morpheme [O] used for personal plural subject and yes/no questions. We also identified the morpheme [I] which is for third person singular pronoun; the [E] morpheme used for subject marker for all plural persons; the [mi] morpheme used as past tense for the first, second and third persons. In the same vein, we identified the [I] morpheme used as past tense marker for the first person; the [m ] used as continuative present marker for plural persons; the ma, mo, me and ba morphemes used for different types of future reference. The paper also identified instance of portmanteau morpheme [kpv with is variants of [kpa], [kpo] and [kpe] used to indicate first persons, seconds and third persons for all cases respectively

Even though all instances of morphemic affixations obtainable in the lect are not identified and discussed here, for example, the definite future tense morpheme [mv] used to indicate the immediate future, the morpheme [ga] used to mark present tense, the morpheme [ki] used for progressive simultaneous tense, the morpheme [gak] used for adjective morpheme, the morpheme [ka] used for negation marker, the morpheme [kpe] used for negation marker for all plurals, among others.

We have clearly shown that morphemes in Obolo perform numerous discourse and grammatical functions. Apart from the numerous functions they perform, the paper has also showed that the two types of morphemes, affix and the root morpheme are very necessary for sentence formation in this lect. The affix (prefix) is so important that all verbs must be prefixed with a subject morpheme, which must agree in person and number with the subject unlike the English language where the verb does not in all circumstance take a prefix. The paper in summary has shown that the Obolo lect is rich in morphology, which means that the acquisition order or processes of the Obolo morphemes must differ practically with those of the English language.

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