

# A SYNTAX OF IGBO MONOSYLLABIC CONJUNCTIONS

CECILIA AMAOGE EME  
DEPARTMENT OF LINGUISTICS  
NNAMDI AZIKIWE UNIVERSITY  
AWKA

The focus of this paper is the syntax of three Igbo monosyllabic conjunctions. They are 'na', 'na', 'ka'. The paper shows that none of them has any specific inherent meaning and as such their meanings are determined by context (cf. Nwachukwu (1987)). It also shows that these conjunctions are always inherently low in tone and they retain their low tone always no matter their context of occurrence. The paper also proves that substituting one conjunction with another can have a significant semantic effect.

## 1. Introduction

The conjunctions in Igbo language are basically of two types when viewed from their morphological make-up. These two types are those that are morphologically monosyllabic and those that are non-monosyllabic/ polysyllabic in form. Examples of those that are non-monosyllabic are *mana*, *maka*, *maka na*. The monosyllabic conjunctions are not the only ones that are found in Igbo, they are the ones that come within the scope of this work. We have to point out that the tone-marking convention used in this work is that popularized by Nwachukwu, as in Nwachukwu (1987, 1995), where only high and low tone marks are used; and the first of a sequence of same tones is marked while the subsequent ones are left unmarked until a contrasting tone appears and is marked. If a sequence of two high tone marks is seen, the second in the sequence is interpreted as a downstep tone.

One interesting thing about these monosyllabic conjunctions is that they retain their inherent low tone in all their syntactic environments of occurrence. Furthermore, substituting one of the conjunctions with another in the same syntactic position is capable of bringing about a significant change in meaning.

This paper is divided into four sections. Section one is the Introduction, section two looks at the syntax of the monosyllabic conjunction, section three shows the conjunction being substituted with one another and the semantic consequence of the substitution(s). The final section is the summary and conclusion.

## 2.1 Syntax of Igbo Monosyllabic Conjunctions.

In this section we shall discuss these three Igbo monosyllabic conjunctions in that order: *na*, *ma*, *ka*. While discussing each of these, we shall, among other things, do the following:

- show the conjunction as it appears in sentences and its meanings underlined in the gloss sentences.
- use tone marks to show its unchanging tone pattern.
- put the conjunction in different syntactic positions and point out the semantic implication of this.

For a detailed discussion of the monosyllabic and non-monosyllabic Igbo conjunction as they perform both co-ordinating and subordinating functions in Igbo syntax, see Nwachukwu (1987). A brief discussion of the subject is seen in Okonkwo (1977), Adamaechi (1985), Emenanjo (1991), Ngoesi (2000). One may also refer to Emenanjo (1978); and Ume, Ugoji and Dike (1989).

Most of these works discussed the functions of conjunction in Igbo syntax but none of them tried to show the different semantic effects which substituting one conjunction with another would have on the meaning of sentences. The present paper does this, as seen in section 3.1.

As pointed out in the earlier part of this paper, the meaning of each of these Igbo conjunctions is determined by context. The different meanings each conjunction assumes in sentences might have prompted Emenanjo (1978) into identifying them as 'na 1'; and 'na 2'; 'ka 1'; 'ka 2'; 'ka 3' and 'ka 4' etc. Nwachukwu (1987) does not support this numbering of the conjunctions based on their meanings. For example, for 'na', he points out that although we see it as having different meanings, "these apparently different meanings are structure - specific, we are still dealing with the same Igbo conjunction *na* of unvarying phonemic shape and tone, which functions alike in co-ordinate as well as in subordinate structures." (p.67). This is the line of thought followed in this paper because this idea of numbering makes each of the conjunctions look as if it is no longer one type. The fact that a conjunction assumes different meanings depending on context does not remove the truth of its still being the same conjunction; retaining both its segmental and suprasegmental phonemic shape in all environments irrespective of its meaning.

### 2.1.1 *Nà*

'*Nà*' is one of the monosyllabic conjunctions used in standard Igbo. According to Green and Igwe (1963), the Ohuhu dialect has 'la' as the dialectal variant of 'na'. Oluikpe (1979) points out that 'la' is also used as the dialectal variant of 'na' in the Ngwa dialect. This conjunction should not be confused with 'na' functioning as a preposition, especially when the preposition is followed by a

word that begins with a syllabic nasal. This is because, unlike 'na' conjunction, its tone fluctuates, depending on the tone of the word following it; as seen in the following: 'ná mbido' 'in the beginning'; 'nà ndida' 'in the slope'

Below are the examples of sentences where 'nà' is functioning as a conjunction in Igbo.

- 1.a. Nnu nà mmanụ adighi ụkọ  
Salt and oil are not scarce.
- b. Àda nà Ógè gara ahia.  
Ada and Oge went to the market.
- c. Nne m nà nna m bàra ogaranya.  
My mother and father are rich.
- d. Ndi nkuzi nà ùmù akwukwo puru.  
The teachers and students went out.
- 2a. Ọ gwàra m na há gá - agá.  
He told me that they will go.
- b. Ó doro anya nà ó bù ogbu.  
It is clear that he is a dumb person.
- c. Há siri na ikpe amaghí ya.  
They said that he is not guilty.
- d. Ndi enyi yá màara na ó bù ónye eziokwú.  
His friends know that he is an honest man.
- 3a. Nà há erighi nri joro njo.  
That they did not eat food is bad.
- b. Nà ó bù ógbú doro anya.  
That he is a dumb person is clear.
- c. Nà anyi gara ulò ikpé abaghí úrú.  
That we went to court is not important.
- 4a. Nà ó dara ulé pùtara na o mághí akwukwo.  
That he failed the examination indicates that he is not intelligent.
- b. Nà há erighi nri pùtara na águú agughí ha.  
That they did not eat meant that they were not hungry.
- c. Nà há sàra ákwà gosirj na há anoghí nkítj  
That they washed clothes shows that they were not idle.

From the above examples we see that 'nà' can occupy the sentence initial and sentence - medial positions, but never sentence final position since 'conjunctions are never found in utterance - final position'. (Emenanjo 1978:86). This results from their name - conjunction - which derives from Latin 'conjungo' meaning 'I join together'. If a conjunction occurs sentence-finally then there could be nothing to join. For it to function as its name implies, there must be something to be joined eg. 'A' to be joined to 'B'; thus 'A nà B'. In example 1,

the conjunction appears at the sentence medial position, connecting words and phrases. Here it has the meaning 'and'. Although it also appears at the sentence medial position in examples 2 a, b, c it connects clauses or sentences. Its meaning here becomes 'that'. Examples 3 a, b, c show 'nà' occupying the sentence initial position. It has the meaning 'that' in this position.

In certain constructions, 'nà' as a conjunction can come both at the sentence – initial position and sentence – medial position. In such sentences, 'nà' translates into 'that' in both positions, as examples 4 a, b, c show.

One interesting thing to be observed from all the examples above is that whether 'nà' is at the sentence – initial or sentence medial position, or whether it means 'and' or 'that', it still retains its low tone.

### 2.1.2 Mà

'Mà', like 'nà' discussed in section 3.1.1, is a monosyllabic conjunction whose meaning is determined by the context in which it occurs; and it retains its inherent low tone no matter its syntactic position or semantic implication. Below are examples of sentences where it occurs at the sentence – medial position.

- 5a. O juru ha ma ha ga – eri nri.  
He asked them whether they will eat (food)
- b. Achoro m ima ma o nwere ji.  
I want to know whether he has yams
- 6a. Nyé ya egó mà o bia.  
Give him money if he comes.
- b. Akú amáka mà a mara kpaa yá.  
Wealth is very good if properly acquired.
- 7a. Há buru íbù ma ñne há di girigiri.  
They are fat but their mother is slim.
- b. Ndi nwoke buru óche mà ndi nwaanyi zara ezi.  
The men carried seats but the women swept the compound
- 8a. Wétá egó mà o bu okuko.  
Bring money or fowl
- b. Zútara yá àgwa ma o bu osikapa.  
Buy him beans or rice.
- 9a. Nápútá yá egbè; ma mgbò kwu.  
Retrieve the gun from him; and the bullets too.
- b. Sópùrù mà feé Chínèkè gí nke óma.  
Honour and adore your God profoundly.

These examples showing 'mà' at the word medial position, also show, among other things, that 'mà' has varying meanings as the English gloss indicates. In sentences 5 a, b, 'mà' is translated into English 'whether'; in 6a, b it translates into 'if'; in 7 a, b it is realised as 'but'; sentences 8 a, b have 'mà'

translating into 'or' while in 9 a, b it becomes 'and' (For 'mà' to translate into 'or', it has to be followed by 'ò bù' as seen in example 8).

However, these are not the only realisations of 'mà'. In some contexts it comes in pairs – mà ... mà. In such contexts the pair often translates into 'both... and' and 'whether...or'. Examples are shown below:

- 10a. O kuziiri ma nwóké mà nwaanyi.  
He taught both men and women
- b. Ihe mere gbásara ma ókènye ma umùáká.  
What happened concerns both the adult and the young.
- c. Mà gị mà ñne gị gara ñzùkọ.  
Both you (sing) and your mother attended the meeting.
- 11a. Nyèrè yá aka mà ọ rjoro gị ma ọ rjoghị gị.  
Help him whether he solicits your help or not.
- b. Dọkítà ya siri ya rié nri mà ọ gurụ ya ma ọ gughị ya.  
His doctor asked him to eat whether he is hungry or not.
- c. Mà ọ soro gị ma ọ soghị gị, kwuoro yá ugwo.  
Whether you like it or not, pay for him.

The different syntactic appearances of 'mà' and its semantic realisations in the foregoing examples (5-11) go to support Nwachukru (1987:71) that " 'mà' is a very versatile conjunction occurring freely in different structures and functioning as the equivalent of various English conjunctions – but, and, whether, if et cetera"

### 2.1.3 Kà

As an Igbo conjunction, 'kà' appears in different syntactic structures and the meaning it bears depends on the context. In some constructions it is used singly; its syntactic position at this time being either sentence – medially or sentence – initially. But in some constructions 'kà' is used in pairs, just as 'nà' and 'mà' discussed in the earlier sections. Examples of sentences where 'kà' occurs include:

- 12a. Anyị hụrụ ha ka anyị lọtara.  
We saw them when we returned.
- b. Há b́jara ka mmiri nà –ézo.  
They came when it was raining.
- 13a. Kúziere yá kà o mụtá.  
Teach him so that he may learn
- b. Ó kwùru okwu kà ha ghọta onye o bù.  
He spoke so that they might recognise him.

- 14a. Ódò ádíghí àkpá ágwá ká ókénye.  
Odo does not behave like an adult.
- b. Ánu ọhjá à kwụrụ ọtọ ká mmàdụ.  
This animal stood up like a human being.
- 15a. Ọ dj oji ká ọ dj ọcha?  
Is it black or white?
- b. Anyị azutara anyị ehi ká ọ bụ anyị ezi?  
Did we buy beef or pork?
- 16a. Ká Chukwu gozle gi.  
May God bless you.
- b. Ká ọganiihu buru nke gi  
May progress be yours.
- 17a. Ká dj ká nwunye ọ́ọ́ọ́ ịzuta ede.  
Both husbands and wives wanted to buy cocoyam
- b. Ká ndị oji ká ndị ọ́cha tosi ịri ezigbo nri.  
Both black people and white people need to eat good / nutritious food.
- c. Ezi omume diji ká nwóké ká nwáanyi.  
Good behaviour is for both men folk and women folk.

The 'ká' conjunction as used in 12 and 13 above translates into 'when' and 'that' respectively. In 14 it means 'like' while in 15 it stands for 'or'. The hortative sentences in 16 a, b have 'ká' translating into 'may'. In all these, the conjunction appears singly. However, in 17, we see 'ká' appear in pair – 'ká ... ká'. Here the pair translates into 'both... and'. There may be other meanings of 'ká' depending on context. But whatever its meaning or context of appearance as a conjunction, it still retains its inherent low tone.

### 3.1 Conjunctions' Substitution: Semantic Implication

According to Schacht (1989:929), and Cohen and Nagel (1993:17) respectively, "... the meaning of a sentence is a function of the meaning of the singular and general terms that are its parts" and "the information conveyed by words depend both logically and psychologically on... the information conveyed by sentences".

But we also have to add that when an incomplete sentence is left with a specific vacant syntactic slot, the particular word that appropriately fills the slot can, sometimes, cause the whole sentence to assume a meaning different from what it would be when another word occupies the slot. The different semantic realisations of the examples below, showing the substitution of one monosyllabic conjunction with another in the same slot of the same sentence, attest to this. (For the sake of clarity, the English gloss of the Igbo sentence is

numbered "a, b", or "a, b, c" to correspond to the meaning of the Igbo sentence when the slot is filled with a conjunction in the order of listing). The examples are:

18. Ó gà - abia  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{nà} \\ \text{mà} \\ \text{kà} \end{array} \right\}$  há gaa.

- a. He will come if / when they go (dialectal- Adazi-Nnukwu dialect)
- b. He will come if / when they go.
- c. He will come so that they go.

19.  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{Nà} \\ \text{Mà} \\ \text{Kà} \end{array} \right\}$  chi bọọ.

- a. If / when the day breaks (dialectal- Adazi-Nnukwu dialect)
- b. If / when the day breaks.
- c. May the day break.

20. Ó mèrè  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{mà} \\ \text{kà} \end{array} \right\}$  nwoke.

- a. It affected even men.
- b. He acted like a man.

21.  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{Nà} \\ \text{Kà} \end{array} \right\}$  há kwùrú  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{nà} \\ \text{kà} \end{array} \right\}$  há mèrè

- a. That they said that they did (it)
- b. As they said so they did

22. Ó puru  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{nà} \\ \text{mà} \\ \text{kà} \end{array} \right\}$  há bíara

- a. He left because they came.
- b. He left but they came.
- c. He left when they came.

23.  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{Nà} \\ \text{Mà} \\ \text{Kà} \end{array} \right\}$  nwóké  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{nà} \\ \text{mà} \\ \text{kà} \end{array} \right\}$  nwáányi. gara

- a. That men and women went
- b. Both men and women went.
- c. Both men and women went.

24. Q.doro anya  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{na} \\ \text{ka} \end{array} \right\}$  o dara ogbu'
- a. It is clear that he is a dumb person
- b. It is clear when he became dumb.
25. Q jürü ha  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{na} \\ \text{ma} \\ \text{ka} \end{array} \right\}$  ha ga - eri nri

- a. He asked them if / whether they will eat (food).
- b. He asked them if / whether they will eat (food).
- c. He asked them if / whether they will eat (food).

It is seen from the above examples that although there may be instances where substituting one conjunction with another in the same syntactic slot does not bring about any meaning difference (as in 25 a, b, c) there are instances where such substitutions do have significant semantic implication (as in 18 - 24). For instance, in 18 whereas gloss 'a' and gloss 'b' mean the same thing, 'a' being somehow dialectal, 'c' has an entirely different meaning. This is also the case in 19 where 'a' and 'b' could be said to mean the same thing while 'c', the hortative expression, means something different.

#### 4.1 Summary and Conclusion.

This paper discussed the Igbo monosyllabic conjunctions 'ná', 'má', 'ká'. The paper showed that they are both inherently and syntactically low in tone. Their meanings are determined by the context in which they appear. For instance, the paper shows that 'ná' may mean 'and', 'that'; 'ma' may mean 'and', 'or', 'but', 'if' etc; 'ká' may translate into 'that', 'when', 'or', 'like', 'may' etc - all depending on the context. Substituting one conjunction with another in the same sentence in the same environment often brings about a meaning difference, as shown in the paper in section 3.1

In conclusion, Igbo language is seen to be able to express its conjunctive notions by using one conjunction to achieve different meanings in different constructions in the language.



### References

- Adamaechi, B.C. 1985. *Igbo grammar*. Onitsha: Kawuriz and Manilas.
- Cohen, M.R. and Nagel, E. 1993. *An introduction to logic*. Cambridge: Hackett.
- Emenanjo, E.N.1978. *Elements of modern Igbo grammar*. Oxford: OUP
- Emenanjo, E.N.1991. *Nchikota asusu na utoasusu Igbo izugbe*. Ikeja: Longman
- Green, M.M. and Igwe, G.E. 1963. *A descriptive grammar of Igbo*. Berlin: Akademie – Verlag.
- Ngoesi, M.C. 2000. Nchikota ihe omumu nke asusu Igbo. Nkpor: Optimal press.
- Nwachukwu, P.A. 1987. Conjunctions in Igbo syntax. *Nsukka Journal of Linguistics and African Languages*. No.1, April, pp.63-86.
- Nwachukwu, P. A. 1995. *Tone in Igbo syntax*. Nsukka: Igbo Language Association
- Okonkwo, M.N.1977. *A complete course in Igbo grammar*. Lagos: Macmillan.
- Otuikpe, B.O.1979. *Igbo transformational syntax*. Onitsha: Africana.
- Schacht, R. 1989. Philosophy in *The encyclopedia Americana* vol 21. Danbury: Grolier Inc.
- Ume, I. A., Ugoji, J.U. and Dike, G.A. 1989. *Umi nkowa utoasusu Igbo*. Onitsha: Kawuriz and Manilas.