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A Cognitive Analysis of the Igbo Morpheme *Na*

Maduabuchi Sennen Agbo
University of Benin

Abstract

In the literature on Igbo grammar, the prevailing idea is that the function of the morpheme *na* depends on its structural position in a syntactic construction. Therefore, the structure of the clause determines the various meanings and functions assigned to *na* in Igbo grammar. This paper argues that *na* has one consistent function in Igbo, which is rather cohesive: it functions as a grounding element in all the positions it occurs in the syntax of the language. This grounding function is explored within the Cognitive Grammar framework which proposes the systematic analysis of language within the milieu of universal human cognitive abilities. For Cognitive Grammar, the meaning of a word is not independent of the common traditions (socio-cultural beliefs included) of the users of the language in which it occurs. The study concludes that *na* functions to ground; (1) subjects to their locations, (2) subjects to their source or goal, (3) the verb in the complement, and (4) a subject to a state or condition.

Maduabuchi Sennen Agbo, PhD.
Department of Linguistics & African Languages
University of Benin, Nigeria
Phone: +234 805 602 1759; E-mail: maduagbo@gmail.com

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1. Introduction

Prominent studies in Igbo grammar ascribe five major functions to the morpheme *na* (and its dialectal variants, *nə* and *la*). The account in the studies demonstrates that *na* functions as; a preposition, an auxiliary verb, an aspect marker, a conjunction, and a complementiser (Emenanjo 1978, 2010; Uwalaka 1996, 1997; Mbah 2010). The syntactic constructions in (1a-g) below represent the analyses of the functions of *na* as presented in these previous studies.

1a. Nà¹ + úbì → núúbì
‘in’ ‘farm’ ‘in the farm’ (Emenanjo 1978:83)

1. The transcription follows Standard Igbo orthography: à (low tone); á (high tone); and ā downstep. All tones are marked to avoid ambiguity due to lexical variance among the dialects. Igbo has phonological features of vowel harmony where the eight vowels in the language are neatly divided into two sets. One set comprises vowels produced with the Advanced Tongue Root (+ATR) while the other set comprises vowels with –ATR. In Standard Igbo, –ATR vowels are represented with sub-dot, e.g. [ɔ̣] while the +ATR vowels do not have the sub-dot. The abbreviations used here are; AGR-agreement, ASP-aspect, AUX-auxiliary, COMP-complementiser, CONJ-conjunction, COP-copula, FOC-focus marker, FUT-future, IMP-imperative, IND-indicative, DUR-durative, PROG-progressive, SUBJ-subjunctive, PL-plural, S-singular, 3s (subj)-third person singular for subjects, 3s (obj)-third person singular for objects, and 3pl-third person plural.

- b. Ó bì n'Enugwu
S/he live in-Enugu
'S/he lives in Enugu.' (Emenanjo 2010: 10)
- d². Ûmùáká nà-é-rí nrí
Children Pro-Agr-eat food
'The children are eating.' (Uwalaka 1997: 86)
- e. Ó nà-é-rí nrí ùbòchì dum
S/he Dur-Agr-eat food day all
'S/he eats everyday.' (Uwalaka 1997: 86)
- f. Nné nà ònà bù ùgwù nwàtà
Father Conj mother Cop glory child
'A father and a mother are the glory of a child.'
(Uwalaka 1996: 104)
- g. Mààzí Okèzie kwù-rù nà yá gá-à-rú ùlò élú
Mr Okezie speak-Ind Comp 3s Fut-Agr-build house top
'Mr Okezie says that he will put up a storey building.'
(Uwalaka 1996: 104)

In example (1a and b), *na* functions as a preposition and according to Emenanjo (1978: 83) this morpheme is the only

² I am grateful to the two anonymous reviewers who critically assessed this paper and made very useful comments and suggestions that largely improved the content of the paper.

preposition in Igbo. Emenanjo (1978) identifies three different forms of *na* in Igbo syntax. The first is the form that precedes a lexical item beginning with a vowel. In this instance, the vowel of the morpheme assimilates the features of the following vowel, as illustrated in (1a). In the Igbo orthography, the vowel of *na* is omitted and this is what is represented in (1b). The second form is in the tonal dynamics of the vowel of *na*, which is affected by the following segment. If the segment is a consonant, the tone of the morpheme takes a low tone, as in *mú nà gí* 'me and you'. The third form occurs when the word following *na* begins with a syllabic nasal. In this form, the vowel of *na* takes a low tone if the syllabic nasal is low toned, high toned if otherwise. This fact is represented in example (1f). In (1c) *na* functions as an auxiliary verb while in (1d and e), it functions as a marker of aspect. For (1f) the morpheme functions as a conjunction and in (1g) it is a complementiser. Uwalaka (1996) argues that the inherent low tone of the morpheme remains stable in syntactic constructions as shown in (1c-g). Mbah (2010:30) affirms that *na* is a free lexical preposition that occupies the *prepositional slot in the syntax of the language*.

These past studies have clearly demonstrated that the structural position of *na* in a syntactic construction determines its meaning. When it precedes a locative noun, it functions as a preposition (1a and b) and when it precedes a verb, it functions as an auxiliary verb or aspect marker (1c, d, and e). On the other hand, when it shows up in-between two nouns or noun phrases, it functions as a conjunction (1f). When it occurs in-between two clauses, it functions as a complementizer (1g). Therefore,

the structural position of *na* determines its meaning and function. This however study argues that *na* in spite of its positions in syntactic constructions, serves only one linguistic function in Igbo: grounding.

1.1. Theoretical Orientation

The theoretical underpinning of this work is Cognitive Grammar (CG) as espoused in Langacker (1987, 1991, 2000, and 2008), Sweetser (1990), and Heine (1997). CG argues for the systematic analysis of language within the milieu of universal human cognitive abilities. For CG, the meaning of a word is not independent of the common traditions (socio-cultural beliefs included) of the users of the language it is used. The word is perceived as a proto-type of meaning rather than a specification of features. Therefore, the meaning of a word involves both the lexical sense and the checklist of its features.

CG also argues that semantics is consistent with syntax and pragmatics in the sense that syntactic structures often signal semantic and pragmatic goals. This means that linguistic expressions are polysemous and this multiplicity of meaning is dependent on reference and sense (Willems & Willems, 2010). The reference and sense of the linguistic expression represent its conceptualisation by the language speakers. The conceptualisation of the linguistic expression involves both new and fixed concepts and experiences, which recognises the immediate context of use (linguistic, social, physical, etc.). This context of use creates the perspective which in the literature is termed construal. According to Langacker (1987: 116-137), construal is

the relationship between a speaker (or hearer) and the situation that he conceptualises and portrays involving focal adjustments and imagery.

In other words, the construal involves the relationship between the speaker and hearer on one hand, and the context of use of language on the other. This situation gives rise to the term *ground*. The ground of any linguistic usage comprises the speaker and the hearer (the communicators) who share the knowledge about themselves and the dialogue situation. Based on this, the *ground* is essentially the common ground (GC) of the speech act. The ground in any linguistic usage is profiled by a lexical item. A lexical item usually designates a substructure within a larger structure (the base) and knowing what larger structure is involved is part of knowing the meaning of the lexical item. This profiling is known as grounding. The argument in this study is that the morpheme *na* serves this grounding function in the utterances in question. It profiles the relationship between the discourse situation and the communicators in that situation. This profiling includes all imaginable situations within the context of the dialogue.

1.2. Data and Methodology

The source of data for the study developed from five varieties of Igbo. Naturally occurring utterances with the *na* morpheme were sourced from the conversations of speakers of the Nsukka, Nnewi, Owerri, and Onitsha varieties of Igbo. The Nsukka speakers uttered the variant *nə*, while the Onitsha and Nnewi

speakers produced the variant *na*. The dialectal variant *la* originated from speakers of the Owerri variety. The speech of these speakers were recorded on a mobile device and later transcribed to select the utterances with the morpheme. The meaning of the morpheme in the utterances depended on the context of the speech of the speakers.

The transcribed data were presented to ten speakers (two from each dialect area already mentioned). This was done to reconfirm the meaning of these utterances. Additional data were made up by the author by introspection. The author is a competent native speaker of the language. For this study, the *na* variety would be used in the analysis because it is the most prominent in the emerging Standard Igbo.

2. *Na* as a Grounding Element

In this section, we demonstrate how *na* functions as a grounding item in Igbo grammar. We show in section 2.1. that *na* functions to shape or outline the essence of the discourse situation by profiling the discourse relationship between the subject of the clause and the locative noun. We demonstrate how it profiles the relationship in the speech situation between the subject of the clause and the lexical item indicating the goal or source in section 2.2. and show how the discourse relationship between the verb and its complement is profiled by the morpheme in section 2.3. We also demonstrate in section 2.4. that *na* profiles the state or condition expressed by a clause.

2.1. Grounding of Subjects in Location

The constructions in (2) represent dialogue situations with two mental structures. The first is the base (or larger structure) while the second is the substructure. The function of *na* in these constructions is to outline this substructure from the larger structure, which we refer to as the grounding function of *na*. An examination of (2a and b) makes this fact clearer.

2a. Ó jè-rè Àbá
3sg go-IND Aba
'S/he went to Aba.'

b. Ó jè-rè n /à/Àbá
3sg go-IND in Aba
'S/he went into Aba'

c. Ó bíá-rà ùlò
3sg come-IND home
'S/he came home.'

d. Ó bíá-rà n /á/ ùlò
3sg come-IND in home
'S/he came into the house.'

The construction in (2a) contains the essence of the speech act and that is the fact that someone went to Àbá. This construction does not indicate that 'going to Aba' by the subject of the clause has a particular purpose. However, the introduction of *na* in (2b) indicates that the subject of the clause went to Àbá for a

particular purpose. Therefore, (2a) is the base of the discourse while (2b) is a substructure of this discourse that has been profiled by *Na*. The same profiling function is demonstrated in examples (2c) and (2d). In (2c) the subject has come home and home here means his ancestral town or city. Conversely, in (2d) the introduction of *Na* specifies home as a house, thereby grounding the discussion in the specifics of the subject entering a particular house in a particular town or city. A careful observation of the data shows that the open front unrounded vowel of *Na* assimilates into the following vowel. This is why in (2b) it progressively assimilates the low tone and vowel qualities of the following open front unrounded vowel in *Àbá*. Orthographically, it will be written as *n'Ábà* disregarding one of the similar vowels. In (2d) the vowel progressively assimilates the high tone and qualities of the half-close back vowel in *Úlò* and orthographically written as *n'úlò*.

2.2. Grounding Subjects in Source/Goal

The constructions in (3a-e) represent discourse situations where the subject moves towards a goal or away from a source. *Na* in these constructions is a grounding element as shown in the difference in meaning between (3a) and (3b). (3a) contains the larger mental structure of the discourse where the subject moves from Aba to Awka. This construction does not specify whether the subject moved from inside Aba to inside Awka. (3a) could also be interpreted to mean that the subject embarked on a journey where he passed by Aba on his way to Awka. There is also no indication that the subject entered Awka town. The discourse situation changes with the introduction of *na* in (3b)

and a substructure to the conversation. There, *na* communicates the specific fact that the subject has moved from inside Aba town to inside Awka town. The assimilation and tone dynamics of the open front unrounded vowel of the morpheme follows the description in Section 1.

- 3a. Ó sì Àbá gá Ókà
3sg follow Aba go Awka
'S/he went from Aba to Awka.'
- b. Ó sì n/à/Àbá gá n/á/ Ókà
3sg follow from Aba go into Awka
'S/he went (specifically) from Aba into Awka.'
- c. *Ó sì Chúkúwú
3sg follow God
'S/he comes from God.'
- d. Ó sì Chúkúwú n/á/ ákà
3s follow God from hand
'S/he comes from the hand of God.'
- e. Ó sì nà Chúkúwú
3s follow from God
'S/he comes from God.'

Na in the constructions in (3a and b) precedes locative nouns and functions to ground the subjects in the specific communicative situations of these nouns. In examples (3d and

e), *na* precedes a proper noun and an abstract noun respectively and functions to specify that the subject of the clause is sourced from the communicative situations of the nouns in question. A careful observation of the data reveals these facts. Example (3c) is not meaningful to native speakers because the discourse situation is not specified due to the absence of *na*. This confirms the fact that there is no grounding in (3a) because of the absence of *na*. However, (3a) is meaningful because the verb *sí* 'follow' takes a concrete noun as complement. These are cognitive facts of the language that deals with verbs and their specific complements. The introduction of the morpheme in (3d and e) changes the discourse situation by specifying the source of the subject. So, (3d) is meaningful because *na* profiles the source of the subject as 'hand of God'. In (3e), the source of the subject is God Himself. These explanations show that *na* makes concrete an otherwise abstract discourse situation thereby profiling a substructure of concreteness as in (3d) and (3e) from a larger structure of abstractness as indicated in (3c).

2.3. Grounding Verb in Complement

The grounding function of *na* on Igbo verb is demonstrated with examples (4a-c). In (4a) the -rV suffix on the verb indicates the fact of the event depicted by the verb. In (4b), the open vowel suffix is an imperative marker which encodes the fact that the truth has been imperatively spoken. Therefore, (4a) and (4b) translate the communicative situation where the verb, its suffix, and complement represent a factual event of speaking the truth. Nonetheless, (4c) changes the dynamics of the factual event given the affixation of *na* to the open vowel suffix. This process

specifies the factual event as being certainly grounded in the very act of speaking.

- 4a. Ó kwù-rù ézíókwú
3sg speak-IND truth
'S/he spoke the truth.'
- b. Ó kwú-ó ézíókwú
3sg speak-IMP truth
'S/he has spoken the truth.'
- c. Ó kwú-ó-ná ézíókwú
3sg speak-IMP-ASP truth
'S/he has indeed spoken the truth.'
- d. Ó kwú-ó-ná
3sg speak-IMP-ASP
'S/he has indeed spoken.'
- e. É kwú-ghí ézíókwú
Foc say-NEG truth
'Not speaking the truth.'
- f. É kwú-ná ézíókwú
Foc say-IMP truth
'Don't speak the truth.'
- g. É kwú-ná
Foc say-IMP

‘Don’t speak.’

The difference between (4a and b), on the one hand, and (4c) on the other is that while (4a and b) consist of the base or larger structure of a communicative situation of speaking the truth, (4c) delimits this communicative situation to the act of speaking only whereby the speech itself inherently represent factual events. This is why example (4d) is acceptable and meaningful to native speakers. The morpheme *na* in (4d) grounds the communicative act to just speaking.

The difference between examples (4e) and (4f) illustrate the function of *na* as a marker of constituent negation in Igbo. The morpheme suffix *-ghi* (4e) indicates sentential negation while the suffix *na* functions to encode constituent negation. The difference between sentential and constituent negation is akin to the difference between the base of a communicative situation and the substructure of that same communication. The base of the communicative situation is essentially the sentential negation (4e) while the substructure is (4f) which indicates constituent negation. To further illustrate that the role of *na* is constituent negation, it is possible to omit the complement of the verb *éziókwú* and the sentence will still be meaningful as shown in (4g). Therefore, *na* grounds negation on the verb, *kwú*, not on the entire communicative situation.

2.4. Grounding a State/Condition

The verbs in (5) are state verbs which express communicative situations where there is the presence of a condition. Such verbs are classified as Prepositional Complement Verbs in the

literature which takes prepositional complements (Emenanjo 2005). This is because of the presence of *na* in the position preceding the noun complement of the verb. Recall that Emenanjo (1978) asserts that the morpheme is the only preposition in the language, hence the term prepositional complement verb.

- | | | |
|-----|-----------|---------------------|
| 5a. | kwé n'ísí | 'agree in the head' |
| b. | bú n'óbì | 'carry in the mind' |
| c. | nú n'ń̀tì | 'hear in the ear' |
| d. | bà n'ányá | 'enter in the eye' |
| e. | fú n'ányá | 'see in the eye' |

The sentences in (6b, d, f, h, j, and l) exemplify the communicative situations represented by these verbs.

- 6a. Ó kwè-rè
 3sg agree-IND
 'S/he agreed.'
- b. Ó kwè-rè n /á/ísí
 3sg agree-IND on head
 'S/he affirms.'
- c. Ó bù Àdá
 3sg carry Ada
 'S/he is carrying Ada.'
- d. Ó bù Àdán /á/ óbì
 3sg carry Ada in the mind

‘S/he has Ada’s interest at heart.’

e. Kà m nù ntì
Subj 1s hear ear
‘Give me some quietude!’

f. Kà m nù ná ntì
Subj 1sg hear in ear
‘Let me understand.’

g. Àdá fù-rù Òbí anyá
Ada see-IND Obi eye
‘Ada saw Obi with her own eyes
/ that is Ada physically saw Obi.’

h. Àdá fù-rù Òbí n/á/ányá
Ada see-IND Obi in eye
‘Ada loves Obi’

i. Mmányá bà-rà anyá yá
Wine enter-IND eye 3s
‘Some wine entered his/her eyes.’

j. Mmányá bà-rà n /á/ányá yá
Wine enter-IND in eye 3sg
‘Some wine entered in his/her eyes.’

k. Mmányá bà-rà yá anyá
Wine enter-IND 3s eye

‘S/he drank some wine and is feeling tipsy.’

1. Mmányá bà-rà yá n/á/ányá
Wine enter-IND 3sg in eye
‘He/she has been intoxicated with wine.’

For example, in (6a) the verb *kwé* ‘agree’ has no visible object complement such that the meaning of the clause is indicated by the fact of the verb. However, a look at (6b) reveals that when *na* follows the verb, the communicative situation changes from simple agreement to affirmation. In other words, (6a) indicates that the subject has reached a decision while (6b) designates that the subject has sustained this decision, indicating a state of being. We therefore, conclude that *na* performs the function of grounding a substructure within a larger one in this context; where (6a) is the larger communicative structure of making a decision and (6b) the substructure of the assertion, i.e. a state of being.

(6c) represents a discourse where the subject physically carries Ada. However, with the introduction of *na* in (6d) the discourse situation changes to that of a condition where the subject has the interest of Ada at heart. This made us to conclude that *na* grounds the discourse situation of physical carrying to a sentimental state. Examples (6e) and (6f) reveal similar facts in (6c) and (6d). (6e) is an imperative declaring the subject’s wish for some quietude. (6f), however, introduces *na* to the discourse as a designate of the concept of understanding, with the subject wishing to understand the situation.

The analysis for (6b, d and f) applies to (6h). The base of (6h) is (6g) where the communicative situation represents the act of Ada seeing Obi in person. In (6h) *na* profiles the conversation to a state of love, where Ada is in love with Obi. The clauses in (6i-1) are interesting: (6i) specifies that some wine entered the object's eyes. The clause encodes the fact that something splashed into the wine and some of the splashed wine splattered towards the direction of the object's eyes and entered them. The introduction of *na* in (6j) delimits the meaning of the clause and specifies that the wine indeed entered his eyes. This again is considered a grounding function of *na*. In (6k) the sentence means that the referent of the object *ya* drank some wine and is already feeling tipsy. However, in (6l), the effect of the wine on the object is more profiled with the introduction of *na* to the clause. In that context, the object *ya* is intoxicated by drinking some wine. Therefore, (6i) and (6k) represent the larger substructure of the communicative situation while (6j) and (6l) represent the grounding or substructure of the base. Note that the dynamics of tone in examples (5) and (6) follow the explanation in Section 1.

3. Conclusion

The thrust of the foregoing discussion has been to argue for a cohesive function of the morpheme *na* in Igbo grammar. Based on relevant data in communicative situations, we have argued that *na* functions as a grounding element in the speech acts in which it occurs. The grounding functions of *na* include profiling the: discourse relationship between the subject of the clause and the locative noun; relationship in the speech situation between

the subject of the clause and the lexical item indicating the goal or source; discourse relationship between the verb and its complement; and state or condition expressed by a clause.

These identified grounding functions of *na* can be applied to reanalyse the previously assigned functions of the morpheme in the literature. The data in (1) represented here as example (7) for ease of reference is reanalysed within the cognitive framework adopted for this study.

7a. *Nà + úbì* → *núūbì*
 'in' 'farm' 'in the farm'
 (Emenanjo 1978:83)

b. *Ó bì n'Enugwu*
 S/he live in-Enugu
 'S/he lives in Enugu.' (Emenanjo 2010: 10)

c. *Òbí kà nà-à-gú ákwúkwó*
 Obi Asp Aux-Agr-read book
 'Obi is still studying.' (Uwalaka 1997:45)

d. *Úmùáká nà-é-rí nrí*
 Children Prog-Agr-eat food
 'The children are eating.' (Uwalaka 1997: 86)

e. *Ó nà-é-rí nrí úbòchì dùm*
 S/he Dur-Agr-eat food day all
 'S/he eats everyday.' (Uwalaka 1997: 86)

f. Nné nà nnà bù ùgwù nwátà
Father Conj mother Cop glory child
'A father and a mother are the glory of a child.'
(Uwalaka 1996: 104)

g. Mààzị Okèzie kwù-rù nà yá gà-à-rú ùlò élú
Mr Okezie speak-Ind Comp 3sg Fut-Agr-build house top
'Mr Okezie says that he will build a storeyed building.'
(Uwalaka 1996: 104)

For (7a and b), the analysis follows on the function of *na* profiling the relationship between the subject of a clause and the locative noun. This function is specified in (7b) where the residential location of the subject is grounded in the city of Enugu. Examples (7c, d and e) illustrate clauses in the literature where *na* functions variously as an auxiliary verb, marker of progressive aspect and duration, respectively. However, the reanalysis in this study show that *na* functions to ground the events denoted by the verbs in (7c, d and e) to occur synchronously with the speech event. Therefore, *na* functions to ground the simultaneity of the actions of the subjects of the clause with the dialogue situation. The counter example to (7c, d and e) is illustrated in (8) where the *-rv* suffix (which functions to indicate the facts of the events denoted by the verb) does not function to show co-occurrence between the action of the subject of the clause and the dialogue situation.

8a. Òbí gù-rù ákwúkwó
Obi read-IND book

‘Obi is learned.’

b. *Úmùáká rì-rì nrí*
 Children eat-IND food
 ‘The children ate some food.’

c. *Ó rì-rì nrí ùbòchì dùm*
 S/he eat-IND food day all
 ‘S/he ate everyday.’

In (7f) above, *na* is reanalysed as functioning to link two noun phrases by grounding their semantic similarities or grammatical functions in the clause. For example, *Nne na nna* is a frozen expression in Igbo which does not occur in any other form unless the nouns *nne* and *nna* are used in isolation. So, we conclude that *na* functions to ground their semantic similarities in a dialogue situation. In (7f), the morpheme functions to ground both nouns as the subject of the clause. For (7g) *na* functions to ground the event denoted by the subordinate clause *yá gà-à-rú ùlò élú* in the subject of the clause, *Mààzí Okèzie*. The function there is akin to the grounding function of *na* between the subject of the clause and the locative nouns in examples (2b and 7b). In (7g), *na* specifically emphasises the action of the subject and in this case it grounds the dialogue situation in the fact that *Mààzí Okèzie* has committed himself by saying that he would build a house.

In conclusion, we hope this study will provoke further inquiry into the cognitive functions of other morphemes such as *ka*, *ma*, and *kwa* which are collectively designated as

conjunctions in Igbo grammar. A cognitive study of these morphemes may reveal also unified or diversified functions of the morphemes.

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