

## **Agentive in the Nkalagu lect of Igbo**

<sup>1</sup>Magnus A. Aniago and <sup>2</sup>Ebubechineke, Ifeyinwa

<sup>1</sup>*Institute of African Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka*

<sup>2</sup>*Arts Education, Faculty of Education, University of Nigeria, Nsukka*

### **Abstract**

This study investigated agentive in Nkalagu lect of Igbo. Formation of agentive has not been investigated in Nkalagu lect. This work aims at helping to fill this gap. Apart from enriching Igbo language studies, the result of the research will go a long way in solidifying the field of morphology. Data were got from primary and secondary sources. Since the researcher is a good speaker of Nkalagu lect, some of the data were generated by his native speaker experience intuition. Other data were got from books and other speakers of Nkalagu lect. The data were arranged, analysed, and discussed under their linguistic peculiar indices. The results show that noun agents are formed in Nkalagu lect by the pre-fixation of o-/ɔ- to the basic verb form. The choice of o-/ɔ- accords with the rule of vowel harmony in standard Igbo. It is also found that the o-/ɔ- prefix is mostly a low tone. Most of the basic verb forms are also monosyllabic with very few disyllabic verb forms. Though the basic form of the verb goes with complements, sometimes the complements are omitted and the last vowel of the basic form is duplicated to form an agentive.

**Keywords:** Agentive, lect, pre-fixation, vowel harmony, verb form

### **Introduction**

Agentive are noun forms that function as agents. It is sometimes called agentive nouns or noun agents. The noun agent is more of a human being that performs an action so regularly that he has acquired a kind of expertise in it. Formation of these agents is a kind of nominalisation which is a process of deriving a noun from some other Word – Class. Nominalisation can also mean the formation of a noun phrase from an underlying letter as it is the case of Classical Transformational Grammar.

Though agentive are found in many lect, it has not been fully studied in Nkalagu lect. Nkalagu is in Ishielu L.G.A of Ebonyi State, Nigeria. Despite the fact that Nkalagu is a historic town in Eastern Nigeria, because of its large deposits of limestone used in the manufacture of cement, no study on Nkalagu lect or a published work in that regard was found in literature by the researcher. The Nkalagu lect belongs to Igbo language found in South Eastern Nigeria. The Igbo language is one the three major languages spoken by in Nigeria. Others are Hausa and Yoruba. The Igbo language belongs to the KWA group of languages which is a sub-division of the Niger-Congo Group. These languages make extensive use of tones. The study of agentive in Nkalagu lect is to determine its mode of formation and other features associated with the

language. This study will not only enhance the field of general Igbo studies, but may also significantly enrich the field of syntax and morphology.

Agentive is a very important aspect of grammar. Available literature shows that no part of Nkalagu grammar has been studied or received adequate investigation from experts. Much is required to be done in this regard especially as it concerns the formation of agentive. Other aspects of Nkalagu lect beckon for attention. If a language or lect is to be fully developed, there is the need to study all the aspects that are possible to be investigated. There is much to be investigated in Nkalagu lect to assist in the continual development of the Igbo language.

This paper is restricted to studying agentive in Nkalagu lect of standard Igbo. The objective of the study is to examine the agentive in Nkalagu lect as to determine how they are derived. The result will definitely enrich Igbo language studies and contribute to the increasing area of language research. Undoubtedly the outcome of the research will be much valued by experts in Applied Linguistics, General Linguistics, and Morphology.

Data for the research were elicited from both primary and secondary sources. Since the speaker understands and speaks Nkalagu lect, the data for the research were generated through his native speaker intuition and his communication skill. Data were also got from other speakers of the lect. Some other data were sourced from books, journals, monographs and other published works. The data were arranged and analysed according to their peculiar linguistic indices.

## **Review of related literature**

The review of related literature is organised under the following headings:

Theoretical studies, Empirical studies, Agentive, and Summary of literature review.

## **Theoretical studies**

Deep knowledge is often based on copious theory. Sustainable intellectual acquisition, development, and practice are mostly based on good theoretical formulation. Theories distinguish the linguist from the ordinary language observer. Linguistic knowledge is generally based on theories of relationships. Theories serve as the foundation blocks of practices. Thus, the theoretical studies on which relevant aspects of the research are hinged upon are reviewed to enable the reader gain the background of where some necessary concepts that appear in the study are based.

Maxwell (1998) states that theories of morphology have been grouped as item-and-arrangement in which both roots and affixes are treated as morphemes, or item-and-process in which roots are morphemes, but affixes are rules. According to him, the theories are founded on whether all allomorphs are enumerated in the reference book or whether phonological conditioned allomorphs are consequences of a single listed arrangement. Maxwell observes that in truth, derivational models in company are an instrument (allomorph rules) which can do virtually the same work as listing the phonological conditioned allomorphs. For Maxwell, it is possible to mechanically map a description with multiple listed allomorphs into a description with single underlying forms and allomorphic rules. The implication of these two points as

Maxwell observes, is that a single computational implementation can serve a variety of theoretical approaches.

Crystal (2003) in his statements on morphemes said that morph tactics is the study of the arrangements of morphemes in linear sequence, taking such factors as phonological conditioning into account. He observed that the application of morphemic ideas to the analysis of language was particularly extensive in the 1940s and 1950s in post – Bloomfield and linguistics. The approach was named morphemic and several analytical challenges arose. A number of these are demonstrated by the English plural morpheme. When the plural morpheme is simply added to root as in these examples: books, bags, boxes, the correspondence or relationship between morpheme and morph is straightforward. But in cases like mouse – mice, and sheep – sheep, it is more challenging. Several solutions have been suggested to take care of such cases. For example, a zero morph of plurality may be recognised to preserve the notion sheep + plural. This being symbolised as  $\emptyset$ .

The good reason behind this, they said, is that these linguists were often dealing with languages they have never encountered and there were no written grammars of these languages to guide them. It was, therefore, necessary that they should have very explicit methods of linguistic analysis. No matter what language we are looking at, we need analytic methods that will be independent of the structures we are examining. Preconceived notions, as Arnold and Fadiman stated, might interfere with an objective scientific analysis. This is particularly true when dealing with unfamiliar languages. The second approach to morphology is more often associated with theory than with procedure. This is the synthetic approach which basically says: “I have a lot of little pieces here. How do I put them together”?

### **Empirical studies**

Writing on Igbo language, Emenanjo (1978) observes that most Igbo prefixes are clearly derivational since they can be used for deriving nominal (or nouns) from verbs or other nominal. According to him, a given prefix may have one or more forms that are conditioned by vowel harmony. Emenanjo calls these alternative forms of morphemes, allomorphs, of which O and Q are allomorphs of the agentive morpheme ‘O’ which adapts to the rule of vowel harmony. Anagbogu (1990) in his discussions on Igbo nominalisations using the Awka dialect example calls this agentive form, the ‘OVS’ under the category of Igbo nominalisation he called the concrete nominalisations. Inclusive in this category are, the NVS and the EVS forms. He observes that the group belongs to the one that has the semantic feature [+ concrete]. In his analysis, he notes that the primary meaning of the: OVS, like that of all the nominalisations is compositional.

O = doer

VS = action

Arg = pat

The agent/pat relationship, according to him operates within a given OVS form Emenanjo (1978) states in his discussion of the standard Igbo, that the Noun Agent Derivative is formed by prefixing a harmonising derivational low tone prefix’ o-/q- to the basic form of the verb with

attendant tonal changes according to the rules. Onukawa (1995) observes that the ‘low tone initial morpheme o-/ɔ- in these nouns is not the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular subject pronoun but rather a nominalising prefix which derives nominal agents or other nominal with abstract notions from the verb root. In their study of the Qhūhū dialect, Green and Igwe (1963) opine that the usual meaning of the noun agent is one who not only does something but does it as a habit or profession. They note that the morpheme constituent(s) of the Noun Agent is a CV radical and an open prefix o-/ɔ-harmonising with the vowel of the radical.

Discussing the noun instrument in standard Igbo, Emenanjo (1978), states that the noun instrument is formed by prefixing a low tone homorganic nasal to the verb root. Anagbogu (1990) discussed the noun instrument under NVS which he called instrument nominalisation with the N-prefix. He states that like the OVS, the NVS which is instrumental semantically is compositional.

N = that which does

VS = action

Arg = patient

The instrument/patient relationship according to Anagbogu operates within a given NVS form. Emenanjo (1978) observes that not all verbs have this derivative. According to him, no stative verb has it, and not all active verbs have it either. He notes that with its prefix, the minimal noun instrument is two elements long.

The agentive negative/pat relationship operates within a given EVS form. According to Anagbogu (1990), while the OVS represents an agent, the EVS stands for an agentive negative. The prefix, he states has an agentive negative meaning.

e(e/a) = non-doer

eme njɔ

non-do evil

‘non-evil doer’

añūm manya = agentive negative/pat.

non-drink wine

‘non-drinker (of wine)

VS = action

arg = patient

examples:

ekwū okwu = agentive negative/pat.

non-speak word

‘non-talker’

emé njo = agentive negative/pat.

non-do evil

‘non-evil doer’

añūm manya = agentive negative/pat

non-drink wine

‘Non-drinker (of wine)’

Maxwell (1998) in his research discovered that an Item and Arrangement (IA) description can be mechanically translated into, and stored as an item and process (IP) description. He claimed that the implication for computational implementation is that a morphological parsing engine which implements item and process morphology can in fact be used for Item-and-Arrangement morphology by means of an appropriate user interface.

## **Morpheme**

The morpheme may be viewed as the smallest meaningful/unit of a word. It is that unit that its presence or absence can affect the meaning of a word or its grammatical category. Thus, the combination or disintegration of these morphemes brings about word formation, change of meaning or grammatical category. Some morphemes can stand out alone as independent words and are often referred to as free morphemes while others derive their meaning only when attached to other morphemes. Such morphemes are often called bound morphemes.

Crystal (2003) identifies the morpheme as the minimal distinctive unit of grammar and the central concern of morphology. He goes further to say that the original motivation of talking about morpheme was an alternative to the notion of the word, which had proved to be difficult to work with in comparing languages. Added to this, words could be quite complex in structure, and there was need for a single concept to interrelate such notions as root, prefix, compounds etc. The morpheme accordingly, was seen primarily as the smallest functioning unit in the composition of words (Crystal, 2003)

In Finnegan (2004) is stated the derivational process of morphemes. According to him, some morphemes can stand alone as words: TRUE, MOTHER, and ORANGE. Others function only as a word part: UN-, TELE-, -NESS, AND -ER. The morphemes that can stand alone are free morphemes. Those that cannot are bound morphemes. According to Finnegan, certain bound morphemes change the category of the word to which they are attached as with the underlined parts of these words:

doubt            →    doubtful

establish        →    establishment

dark → darken

fright → frighten

teach → teacher

When added to the noun ‘doubt’, FUL derives the adjective ‘doubtful’ MENT added to the verb establish ‘derives the noun ‘establishment’ “Dark’ is an adjective, ‘darken’ is a verb. ‘Fright’ is a noun, frighten, a verb. ‘Teach’ a verb; teacher, a noun.

Finnegan observes that in English, derivational morphemes tend to be added to the ends of words (and are called suffixes). He represented the relationship in the following rules of derivation:

Noun + -FUL	→	adjective (doubtful, beautiful)
Adjective +	→	LY adverb (beautifully, really)
Verb + -MENT	→	Noun (establishment, amazement)
Verb + -ER	→	Noun (teacher, rider, thriller)
Adjective + -EN	→	Verb (sweeten, brighten, harden)
Noun + EN	→	Verb (frighten, hasten, christen)

(Finnegan, 2004:47)

On the other hand, morphemes could be added at the beginning of words. These morphemes that are added at the word initial position are called prefixes. Finnegan (2004) notes that English prefixes typically change the meaning of a word but do not alter its lexical category.

Examples:

MIS + verb	→	verb (misspell, misstep)
UN + adjective	→	adjective (unkind, uncoil)
UN + verb	→	(undo, unclean)
UNDER + verb	→	(underbid, underrate)
RE + verb	→	reestablish, rephrase)
EX + Noun	→	Noun (ex-cop, ex-convicts)

(Finnegan, 2004:48)

Finnegan further observes that the processes of derivation that transform a word into another word that has a related meaning but belongs to a different lexical category are common in the

languages of the world. He gives example with Persian (where [æ] is pronounced like the [á] in English ‘hat’ and x like ch in German Bach)

Dáerd	‘pain’	dá <u>er</u> dnak	‘painful’
Náem	dampness’	ná <u>em</u> nak	‘damp’
Xáetaer	‘danger’	xá <u>et</u> aernak	‘dangerous’

(Finnegan, 2004:48)

Finnegan further gave example of another type of bound morphemes which he called inflectional morphemes. These can be found underlined in the following words; cats collected, sleeps and louder. Finnegan said that these inflectional morphemes change the form of a word but not its lexical category or its central meaning. They create variant forms of a word to conform to the different roles in a sentence or in discourse.

Nouns are commonly defined as the name of a person, animal, place or thing. A more advanced concept places the noun as the head of an NP or anything that could occupy the subject or object position of a sentence. There may be other approaches to defining a noun. Finnegan (2004) views the action of inflectional morphemes on noun as that of making semantic notions, such as number and grammatical categories such as gender and case. The verb is often regarded as the most important part of speech. It depicts the action or state of the subject. Inflectional morphemes mark such things, as tense or number on verbs. The adjective describes or modifies the noun. The inflectional morpheme marks degree with adjectives.

Morphemes are categorised in different shapes and shades. Crystal (2003) classifies a word consisting of a single (free) morpheme as a monomorphemic word and that consisting of more than one morpheme is polymorphemic. According to Crystal, a further distinction may be made between lexical and grammatical morphemes; the former are morphemes used for the construction of new words in a language, such as in compound words; (e.g. blackbird), and affixes such as, -ship, -ize, the latter are morphemes used to express grammatical relationships between a word and its CONTEXT, such as plurality or past TENSE (i.e. the inflection of words). Grammatical morphemes which are separate words are called (inter alia) FUNCTION WORDS. Finnegan (2004) observes that morphemes have a strict and systematic linear sequence within a word.

From all that is said, it could be noted that morphemes are essential as agents of nominalisation since nouns do not exist in isolation of morpheme constructs. By its position and function, morphemes are indispensable element in morphology. It is realised in different forms.

### **Realisation of morphemes**

A morpheme may be realised in different ways in speech depending on the environment of its occurrence. When a particular morpheme is in a word initial position, its realisation may differ as when it is at word final position. The case of the clear “L” and the dark “L” in English is an example. The influence of adjacent tones can change an “s” morpheme from its [s] realisation in speech to [z]. Crystal (2003) observes that as with all EMIC (phoneme morpheme, etc). Morphemes are abstract units which are realised in speech by DISCRETE units known as



morphs. The relation is generally referred to as one of EXPONENCE, Or REALIZATION. He notes that most morphemes are realised by single morphs while some are realised by more than one morph according to the position in a word or sentence where such alternative morphs are being called allomorphs or morphemic alternates/variants. Thus the morpheme of plurality represented orthographically by the -s in example cots, digs and forces has the allomorphs represented phonetically by [-s], [-z] and [- iz] respectively. In the present example, the allomorphs result from the phonetic influence of the sounds with which the singular forms of the words end. The process is being referred to as one of phonological conditioning. Crystal calls the phenomenon of alternative morphemic realisation ‘allomorphy’.

Emenanjo (1978) found that in agglutinating language like Igbo, the smallest meaningful grammatical elements are affixes, enclitics and tonal morphemes, and additional morphemes. He added that an element may have grammatical or inflectional meaning or simply lexical (or semantic) meaning. Igbo affixes could be realised as prefixes, suffixes or interfix. Circumfix could be discovered in some cases.

### **Agentive**

This is a term that refers to a form or construction whose main function in a sentence is to specify the means by which a particular action came about (the agent). Wikipedia states that the term ‘agentive’ pertains to a grammatical agent that performs the action of the verb. Crystal (2003), states that in some languages, the term is used as one of the cases for ‘nouns’ along with ‘accusative’ etc. In English for instance, the term has a special relevance with reference to the passive constructions where the agent may be expressed or unexpressed (agent less). Crystal gives example with English where in active constructions, the agent is usually the grammatical ‘subject’, though in some other languages, a more complex statement of agentive is required as in such sentences as: (i) The window broke (ii) we ran the car out of petrol. According to Crystal, agentive (or agent), as later is the case has a special status in several linguistic theories, such as: ‘case grammar’ and government – binding theory, where it is also seen as one of the fixed set of ‘semantic cases’ or roles (THETA ROLES) along with, OBJECTIVE, DATIVE, etc. Crystal says that the term ‘counter agents’ is also used in the context of case grammar.

‘Agent’ is derived from the Latin agēns, which is the present active participle of ‘agere’ (to drive, lead, conduct, manage, perform, do). Agentives or agents in a sense refer to the participant of a situation that carries out the action in this situation (<https://en.wiktionary.org>). Its synonyms include: actor, performer, etc while its antonyms are: patient, recipient, undergoer, etc. The agent or agentive is regarded as the performer of the action in a sentence (<https://en.wiktionary.org>). An agent noun in the same vein is a noun that denotes an agent that performs the action denoted by the verb from which the noun is derived, such as “rider” derived from to “ride” or “cutter” derived from “to cut”. The noun agent ‘cutter’ means a person who cuts or a thing that is made to or is able to cut something (<https://en.wiktionary.org>). Noun agents can also be called no men agents (plural) or nomina agentium.

A distinction has been made between ‘agent’ and subject of a sentence. While the subject is determined syntactically primarily through word order, the agent is determined through its relationship to the action expressed by the verb. It is also observed that an ‘agent noun’ is not necessarily the agent of the sentence, as in, “Jack kicked the runner” (<https://en.wiktionary.org>). Aniago (2011) studied agentives in Eke and discovered that just like the Igbo standard form, it is



produced by a pre-fixation of o/ọ to the basic form of the verb based on the principle of vowel harmony.

### **Summary of literature review**

The above review reveals that some works on agentive have been done somehow in the standard Igbo, and in some lect like Ọhụhụ and the one done by the researcher in Eke. In spite of the above the review did not show any work done in Nkalagu lect. One feature of a language or lect may not necessarily account for every other language or lect. This gap beckons on the need for this particular study.

### **Nkalagu Nouns in derivational morphology**

#### **The Noun Agent**

The data below show the pattern of the noun agent in Nkalagu lect.

-li basic verb (v)	‘eat’	ńlī complement (cp)	‘food’
òlí (v) nī (cp) -	‘eater/great eater’		
-fú (v) ókwū (cp)	‘to talk’		
also, òfúř	‘talker’		
ofú òfū	‘talkative/talker’		
-ηṽ (v) mēnyê (cp)	‘to drink wine’		
onṽ mēnyê /	‘wine drinker/drunkard		
-gbu (v) egṽ (cp) -	‘to kill-tiger/leopard		
ògbu egṽ / -	‘tiger/leopard killer’		ògbuu
-gbá(v)ńtā(cp)	‘to hunt’		
ogbá ntā -	‘hunter’		”ogbáà
-kṽ (v) ékwē(cp)	‘beat wooden drum’		
okṽ ékwē / -	‘wooden drum beater’		
-kpọ ubọ	‘play guitar’		
òkpọ ūbọ . . .	‘guitar player’		
-zṽ eshwā/ -	‘trade’		
ôzə ashwā/ -	‘trader’		
-mé mmā /	‘do good’		

ómé ihe oma	‘doer of good’
-jé òzhi –	‘go to on errand’
òjé òzhi \	‘errand person’
-kwe ekwā	‘to cry’
òkwe ekwa	‘crier’
-shi nī	‘to cook’
òshí nī	‘cook’
-kwá nkà \	‘to be artistry’
òkwá nkà \	‘artist’
-gbu mmà	‘to out with matchet’
ogbu(v) mmà(cp)	‘one who cuts with matchet’
-chụ ajà	‘to make sacrifice’
ọchụ (v) ajà(cp)	‘one who sacrifices’
-ti(v) [ìgbà(cp)	‘to beat drum’
oti ìgbà	‘drummer’
-li(v) ọkpà(cp)	‘to eat ground beans’
oliọkpà	‘ground beans eater’
-gbu(v) ọjà(cp)	‘to blow flute’
ogbu(v) ọjà(cp)	‘flute blower’
“-gba shili	‘to gossip’
ọgbá àshili	‘gossiper’
-wá(v) nkà(cp)	‘to break firewood’
ọwá (v) nkà-(cp)	‘one that breaks firewood’
-shi(v) nli(cp)	‘to cook’
oshi nli	‘one who cooks’

The data above shows that the noun agent can be formed in Nkalagu lect by prefixing o-/ɔ- to the basic form of the verb. The o-/ɔ- is prefixed according to the rule of vowel harmony. There is also a complement following the basic form of the verb. This complement is most-often a noun or a prepositional phrase. The data also show that the o-/ɔ- prefix in the formation of the agentive in Nkalagu lect is most often a low tone. The available data show no case of a high tone or a step in the o-/ɔ- prefix. It is also found that most of the basic verb forms are monosyllabic and have high tone. Though, some disyllabic or multisyllabic basic verb forms of the Nkalagu agentives may be discovered, they are not numerous. Examples include:

Nkalagu lect

-furu ôhà ‘to be mouthpiece of the people’

ofuru ɔha ‘people’s mouthpiece’

-shiru ɔha ‘to cook for the crowd

shiru ɔha ‘people’s cook’

## **Summary of findings and conclusion**

### **Summary of findings**

Agentive or noun agents in Nkalagu lect are formed by prefixing a low tone o-/ɔ- to the basic form of the verb following the vowel harmony rule. The complement of the basic verb form is in most cases a noun or a prepositional phrase. The noun agent considered is human. The o-/ɔ- prefix in most cases, have a low tone. Most of the basic forms are monosyllabic and have high tone.

### **Conclusion**

The agentive is a very important aspect of derivational morphology. The noun agent plays a significant role in nominalisation. The noun agent is very productive in Nkalagu lect. The result of the findings can go a long way in enriching the field of morphology which was for a very long time neglected as a result of the emergence of Chomsky’s 1957 *Syntactic Structures*. According to Anagbogu (1990), it is interesting to note that it is the same Chomsky who in his 1972 *Remarks on Nominalisation* made proposals that liberated morphology from syntax. These findings will further solidify the field of morphology as a major branch of linguistics for according to Anderson in Anagbogu (1990), the program for reducing it to other domains have proven over ambitious.

### **References**

Agentives. <https://en.wikipedia.org>. Retrieved 17<sup>th</sup> March, 2025.

Agentive. <https://www.dictionary.com>. Retrieved 29<sup>th</sup> March, 2025

Agentive <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/agentive>. Retrieved 18th March, 2025

- Anagbogu, P. 1990. *The grammar of Igbo nominalizations*. Onitsha: UPC.
- Aniago M. 1989. *A Critical analysis of the problems facing the standardization of the Igbo language*. M. Ed Thesis, Department of Education, University of Nigeria, Nsukka.
- Aniago, M. (1985). *Segmental phonemes in Eke - an Igbo dialect*. Unpublished B.A (Ed) Project: Department of Art Education, university of Nigeria, Nsukka.
- Chomsky, N. (1957). *Syntactic structures*. The Hague: Mouton.
- Chomsky, N. (1972). *Remarks on nominalization* in Anagbogu (1990). *The Grammar of Igbo nominalizations*. Onitsha: UPC.
- Crystal, D. (2007). *A dictionary of linguistics and phonetics*. Australia: Blackwell Publishing.
- Emenanjo, N. (1978). *Elements of modern Igbo grammar*. Ibadan: CUP.
- Green, M. and Igwe, G. (1963). *A descriptive grammar of Igbo*. London: CUP.
- Kinegan, E. (2004). *Language: Its structure and use*. U.S.A: Wards worth.
- Maxwell, M. (1998). *Two theories of morphology*. <http://www.o1.sil.org>. Retrieved 19<sup>th</sup> Jul 2017.
- Onukawa, M. (1995). A re-analysis of the so-called Igbo de-sentential nominal in essays in Honor of Kay Williamson 226-277.