Aspects of Inflectional Morphology in Urhobo

Imu, Famous Oghoghophia[1] and Ejobee, Lucky Ogheneruemu[2]
[2]National Institute for Nigerian Languages
Department of Linguistics and Nigerian Languages, Nigeria
[2]Delta State University Abraka
Department of Languages and Linguistics, Nigeria

Abstract. This study investigates aspects of inflectional morphology in the Urhobo language. The study adopts descriptive approach. The work reveals that verbs are inflected in so many ways in the Urhobo language. Therefore, verb inflection is highly productive in Urhob. The study also reveals that prefix and suffix morphemes are affixed to the verb stem to convey the exact information contained in the surface realisation. It also shows that there is no clear distinction between the simple present tense and simple past tense in the language. For instance, He kills the goat – *ọ̀ kwe ẹ̀wẹ̀ nà* in example 1 and He killed the goat *ọ̀ kwe ẹ̀wẹ̀ nà* in example 10. It is also reveals that 'O" is the only constant morpheme that is used to represent he/she in the language. One striking fact about this personal pronoun in the Urhobo language is that "o" is used to refer to male, female and neutral genders. Finally, the process of aspects of inflectional morphology in the Urhobo language is unique. Verb inflection is attained through prefixes and suffixes. This affixation does not alter the grammatical function/ category in the language. For instance, *ọ̀ kwe ẹ̀wẹ̀ nà rhẹ̀* {He has killed the goat} justifies this claim.
Key words: affixation, aspects, inflectional, morphology, Urhobo, language

Background to the Study

The dynamic nature of language requires continuous studies in order to keep pace with development and expound the frontier of knowledge. All natural language have processes of forming new words. These new words are derived through borrowing, compounding, clippings, coinage, acronyms, broadening, reduplication, affixation processes. Inflection which is the focus of this paper falls under morphology. Morphology is the study of "forms", it studies the internal structure of words (Agbedo, 2015). It is the branch of grammar which studies the structure of words as noted by Crystal (1995).

The Urhobo language is predominantly spoken in Delta State of Nigeria by the Urhob people. Imu (2015) classifies the Urhobo language as a southwestern Edoid group of language spoken extensively in Delta state of Nigeria. The term "Urhobo" refers to both the language and the people.

Previous studies on the Urhobo language morphology focused on derivational morphology rather than inflectional morphology. Therefore, this present study centers on inflectional morphology. The essence of this paper is to investigate whether verbs constitute a veritable source of inflectional processes in the Urhobo language and its processes in the Urhobo language.

In this study, intuitive knowledge, books and internet are employed for data collection. The study adopts a descriptive method for data analysis. The choice of this language is necessitated by the fact that an extensive research work has not been carried out on inflection of the language. This, in other word, makes it a rich source of linguistic data base for other researchers. The paper will limit the discussion of inflectional categories to number, tense, person and case.

Literature Review

Theoretical Studies

Morphology is the study of the forms of word or word structure. Akmajian et al. (2008) defined it as a subfield of linguistics which studies the internal structure of word and the relationship among words. For Bauer (1988), it is the study of the ways in which lexemes and word-forms are built up from smaller elements, and the changes that are made to those smaller elements in the process of building lexemes and word forms. Napoli (1996) simply defines it as the study of word formation processes. An important area of study in linguistics is word formation processes, which according to Ndimele (1999), are as old as language itself.

Throughout history, man has continued to create new outcome, word derivation processes have attracted much research interest and attention from language scholars. Amidst its many other aspects like compounding, clipping, back formation, etc., affixation stands out as the most productive in the derivation of new words. Affixation is a process of generating new words from existing ones through the addition of another morpheme or element. For Ndimele (1999), it is a morphological process of attaching an affix to the root or base of a word.

Affixes are classified into two based on the position where they occur relative to the root of the word or the function which they perform when attached to the beginning or initial position of a word. An affix which occurs in this position is called a prefix. The process of inserting a prefix is called prefixation. The English word *dispossess*, for instance, is made up of two morphemes: *dis + possess*. Prefixation is the opposite of suffixation. The English learners' web describes it as the mirror image of suffixation. The first part 'dis-' is a prefix which is added to the base, 'possess'. Prefixes, following Ndimele (1999), can be classified into negative prefixes: 'a-' as in asexual, asymmetry, 'de-' as in demerit, demystify; reversative prefixes which he said reverses an action like 'de-' in defrost, deforestation, 'un-' as in untie, undress, prefixation is less widespread than suffixation. Some languages like Khmer only have prefixation. However, when it is attached to the back, the end or final position of a word, it is called a suffix, while the process is called suffixation.

The suffix is sometimes also referred to as a postfix or ending in linguistics. In the following examples, the *ise* is a suffix attached at the end of the words; *modernise*, *equalise*, and "centralise. Akmajian et al. (2008) remark that the morpheme to which and affix is attached is known as the base (or stem) morpheme. Suffixes carry grammatical information like changing a word from singular to plural or present to past tense. In this case, the basic meaning of the word is not altered. This type of suffixation is called inflectional suffixes convey lexical.

An inflectional suffix is sometimes called *desinence*. On the other hand, suffixes convey lexical information as in derivational suffixes whereby the new word has a new meaning derived from the original word. As regards function, an affix is used in extending the meaning of a word (i.e. derivational or changing the grammatical category of a word (inflectional).

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on segmental principles, which states that the morphological contrast consist of segmentable materials correlating on a one-to-one basis with meaning contrast segmentable, because they reflect from either suffixation or prefixation and infixation. This assumes that all languages have segmentable morphemes as their smallest meaningful unit, as such have affixation as the only morphological process while taking other processes like reduplication as special affixation.

Many works have been done on morphology by many linguists. This will compel one to assess what they have done on the premise of theoretical studies and empirical studies relating to inflectional morphology. Agbedo (2015) notes that in morphology, the concepts of word and

morphemes are considered as the basic units of analysis, they require theoretical and practical explanations from the beginning.

Empirical Studies

Aziza (2010) investigates word formation processes in Urhobo, using a descriptive approach. The study shows that Urhobo like every other languages employs different morphological strategies to expand its vocabulary. The strategies commonly found in Urhobo are; affixation, reduplication, compounding, borrowing and coinage. Aziza (2010) investigates possible word-formation processes in Urhobo, using a descriptive approach, while the present study examines syntactic classification of compound verb formation in Urhobo, using thematic criteria. Both studies examine compounding in the Urhobo language.

Ogah-Adejoh (2017) examines compounding in Igala and Idoma, using a descriptive approach. The study reveals that determining compoundhood in Igala and Idoma, favours emantic criteria above phonological and syntactic considerations. It also reveals that synthetic compounds in Igala and Idoma, exhibit initial and final heads position. Ogah-Adejoh's study and the present study examine the interface between morphology and syntactic characteristics, but differ from each other in their scope of study (grammatical classes) in the formation of compound verb in Igala, Idoma and Urhobo respectively.

Utulu (2018) investigates the phonological patterning of segments and tones in compound words in Èwùlù. The study discovers that some segmental processes such as vowel deletion, glide formation and vowel nasalisation occur in Èwùlù. In addition, it was observed that a number of tonal processes such as boundary vowel deletion, tone contraction, tone segmentalisation and final high tone downstepping. Utulu (2018) investigates the phonological patterning of segments and tones in compound words in Èwùlù, while the present study examines compounding in Urhobo and adopts thematic criteria as theoretical framework in the formation of compound verb. Both studies examine word formation processes.

Summary of Literature Review

It is evident from the preceding review on inflectional morphology huge amount of data on tense and aspects constructions in many languages have not generated the same for the Urhobo language.

Tense and aspects constructions as an aspect of Urhobo morphology is yet to receive proper attention, as such it becomes necessary to advance the frontiers of knowledge by carrying out a comprehensive analysis of Urhobo tense and aspects constructions.

Aspects of Inflectional Morphology in Urhobo

For the purpose of this work, we shall concentrate on the changes that take place in verb to denote certain grammatical features in tense, number, person and case in the Urhobo language.

Tense and Aspect

It is important to draw a line of distinction between tense and aspect. Lyons (1975) testifies that the essential characteristics of the category of tense is that it relates to the time of action, event or state of affairs referred to in the sentence, to the time of utterance being 'now' he further explains that tense has been vitiated by the assumption that the 'natural' division of time into 'past', 'present', and 'future' is necessary reflected in language. Aspect on the other hand relates to time too. Trask (1993) poses that aspect is the grammatical category which relates to the internal temporal structure of a situation. Langacker (1972) holds that tense refers to the time of an event while aspect refers to the inception, duration of completion, of an event. It can also express as a separate word. But explanation for tense and aspect in the Urhobo

language is sought for in prefixation. Tense involves a shorter time frame than aspect because it relates the exact time of the action while aspect demands both the time period over which such event took place.

Prefixes and suffixes occur before and after the root. Fromkin (2003) under studies that most of the tense and aspect markers are affixes. The most commonly used are the open-vowel affixes /o/, alveolar lateral /I/, without inflecting the grammatical function. These prefixes shall be exemplified under simple present tense and aspect formation. The table below reveals the activity verbs in the Urhobo language and how the verbs are inflected in the Urhobo language, e.g.

1. ọ̀ kwe ẹ̀wẹ̀ **n**à
   s/he kill TENSE goat that
   s/he kills the goat
2. ọ̀ kẹ̀ **vwè** ighọ̀ nà
   s/he give TENSE me money that
   s/he gives me the money
3. ọ̀ riè ẹ̀m**ù n**à
   s/he eat TENSE food that
   s/he eats the food
4. ọ̀ **vw**è ighọ̀ nà rhẹ̀
   s/he bring TENSE money that come
   s/he brings the money
5. ọ̀ dà àmè nà
   s/he drink TENSE that
   s/he drinks the water

From the data presented (examples 1-5) above, the timeless present aspect of verb The 's' at the end of verb, is an agreement marker, it signifies that the subject of the verb is the third person and is singular, the verb is in the present term. The prefix to the verb stem denotes the verb inflection in the Urhobo language, in spite of this affixation, the grammatical category remains the same. The example below depicts prefixes occurring with the regular and irregular verbs to denote the simple past of activity verbs in the Urhobo language.

6. ọ̀ kwe ẹ̀wẹ̀ **n**à
   s/he kill PAST goat that
   s/he killed the goat
7. ọ̀ dà àmè nà
   s/he drink PAST that
   s/he drank the water
8. ọ̀ riè ẹ̀m**ù n**à
   s/he eat PAST food that
   s/he ate the food
9. ọ̀ **vu**è **vw**è ọ̀tà nà
   s/he tell PAST me talk that
   s/he told me the issue/ story
10. ọ̀ yonu **vw**è im**ù**
    s/he teach PAST me things
    s/he taught me things

From the data presented above, the verb stems are maintained in all the constructions with open vowel /o/ prefix as the constant element combine with the verbs to realised grammatical constructions.

11. ọ̀ kwe ẹ̀wẹ̀ **n**à rhẹ̀
    S/he kill PAST goat that TENSE

    s/he has killed the goat

12. ọ̀ dà àmè nàrhẹ̀
    s/he drink PAST that
    s/he drank the water

13. ọ̀ riè ẹm**ù n**à rhẹ̀
    s/he eaten food that TENSE
    s/he has e the food

14. ọ̀ yonu **vw**è im**ù** rhẹ̀
    s/he teach me things TENSE
    s/he has taught me things

15. ọ̀ kẹ̀ **vw**è ighọ̀ nà rhẹ̀
    s/he give me money that TENSE
    s/he has given me the money

From the above examples (10-15) show the perfective aspect of the verb in the Urhobo language, the distinguishing feature that exist between the past and the present perfect is the addition of *rhẹ̀*-present perfect tense in all the constructions, this distinguished the grammatical category from the simple past constructions.

Examples below depicts figurative tense affirmative in the Urhobo language. The future tense discusses events, situations that has not taken place. The desired goals are yet to be achieved.

16. ọ̀ chà kwẹ̀ ẹ̀wẹ̀ nà
    s/he will kill goat that
    s/he will kill the goat

17. ọ̀ chà kẹ̀ mẹ̀ igho nà
    s/he TENSE give money that
    s/he will give me the money

18. ọ̀ chà dà àmè nà
    s/he TENSE drink that
    s/he will drink the water

19. ọ̀ chà riè ẹm**ù n**à
    s/he TENSE eat food that
    s/he will eat the food

20. ọ̀ chà yonu **m**è em**ù**
    s/he TENSE teach me things
    s/he will teach me things

A careful assessment of the above examples reveals that the language has a definite term to express futurity, but the syntactic pattern deviates from the normal conventional way of sentences formation.

Person

Person, according to Crystal (2008) is a category used in grammatical description to indicate the number and nature of the participants in a situation. Participants in this instance refer to person which could be 1st, 2nd or 3rd. Matthews (2007) says that person is a grammatical category distinguishing speaker and addresses from each other and from other individual. He goes further to say that speaker is 1st person, address is 2nd person, one which is involves reference to neither is 3rd person. Leach, Cruickshark and Ivanic as cited in Omachonu (2008) defines personal pronouns as terms that are used when it is clear who or what is being talked about. Omachonu argues further that in the sentence, "Solomon is my son. He is a doctor" He refers to Solomon. All personal pronouns except 'it' can refer to people. Like personal pronouns in English that has different form, Urhobo has personal pronouns also have different

forms each performing grammatical functions. This examples below is a table showing different types of personal pronoun as regards to person in the Urhobo language.

21. Person	Singular subject	Plural subject	Singular object	Plural object
1st	mè- I	owa- we	mè- I	ayè- they
2nd	wè- you	wè- you	wè- you	ayè - they
3rd	ọ̀- **s/he, it**	ayè- they	ọ̀- **s/he, it**	ayè- they

The example below shows singular and plural subjects of 1st, 2nd, and 3rd person is used in the Urhobo language.

22. Person	Semantic realisation	Singular	Plural
1st	I am coming	mè cha rhè- I will come	ayè cha rhè - they will come
2nd	you are coming	wo cha rhè - you will come	ayè cha rhè - they will come
3rd	ọ̀- s/he is coming	ọ̀ cha- s/he will come	ayè cha- they will come

The above example depicts various ways the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd person singular and plural is used in the subjective case. The singular marker for the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd person in the language include: *mè-I, wè-yo, ọ̀-* **s**/he, it while the plural marker are: *owa- we, wè-* you, and *ayè-they.*

Example 23 below demonstrates how the singular and plural markers of the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd person is used objectively in the Urhobo language.

23. Person	Semantic realisation	Singular object	Plural object
1st	**s/he speaks to me**	ọ̀ totà kẹ mẹ̀ **s/he talks to me**	ọ̀ totà kẹ ayẹ̀ **s/he talk to them**
2nd	**s/he speaks to you**	ọ̀ totà kẹ wẹ̀ **s/he talk give you**	ọ̀ totà kẹ ayẹ̀ **s/he talk them**
3rd	**s/he speaks to him/her**	ọ̀ totà kẹ wẹ̀ **s/he talk talks him/her**	ọ̀ totà kẹ ayẹ̀ **s/he talk them**

The study reveals from the examples above that Urhobo language distinguishes between singular and plural pronouns as well as grammatical person and function not altering the semantic context.

Genitive Possessive Case

The genitive possessive case typically expresses possessive relationship as explains by crystal (2007) yet, Mattews (2007) opines that is, a case whose basic role is to mark nouns or noun phrases which re dependents of another noun. The example below will suffice.

24. Person	Singular Subject	Plural subject
1st	ọ̀mẹ̀-mine	avware- ours
2nd	ọ̀wẹ̀-yours	ọ̀wẹ̀-yours
3rd	ọ̀wẹ̀- **s/he**	**owa-their**

Number

According to Mattews (2010) number is an "inflectional category basically distinguishing reference to one individual from reference to more than one. The simplest distinction is between singular (one) and plural any member lager than one". For example in English, singular woman versus plural women. He goes further to explain that many languages also distinguish in particular a dual (two). Also of corresponding notional category, that may or may not be represented or may be only partly represented by inflections. Quirk & Greenbaum (1980) render rendition to above explanation by saying the English number system comprises singular, which denotes 'one' and 'plural' which denotes 'more than one'. This singular category includes common, non-commons and proper nouns, e.g. boy-boys the '-s' suffixes denote more than one boy.

Unlike, English, the Urhobo language has various ways of denoting plurality such as prefix morpheme 'a', additive plural form, reduplication 'a' copular to form plurals. Examples include the following:

25. *Singular*   *Plural*
    ọ̀hwọ̀- person   ihwọ̀-persons
    ọ̀mọ̀- child   emọ-children
    àyè̩-woman   è̩yà-women
    oshare̩-man   e̩share̩-man
    okpako- elder   e̩kpako-elders
    omoshare̩- boy   e̩meshare̩-boys
    oghè̩lè̩-youth   ighè̩lè̩-youths
    omotè̩-girl   è̩mè̩tè̩-girls

From the above data, it reveals that the initial vowels in the words in their singular forms are changed to *è̩* and *i* in their plural form to denote plurality. This proves that concept of number is universal to all language but achieved diversely.

Summary of Findings

The study reveals that verbs are inflected in so many ways in the Urhobo language. Therefore, verb inflection is highly productive going by the available data before us. This study is by no means exhaustive, therefore, more researches on inflectional morphology of the Urhobo language should be encourage with sole aim of improving upon the existing one. For the timeless present tense aspect of inflectional processes of activity verbs used in the analysis, prefix and suffix morpheme are affixed to the verb stem to convey the exact information contained in the semantic realisation. However, there is no clear distinction between the sample present tense and simple past tense in the language. For instance, he kills the goat – *ọ̀ kwe e̩wè̩ nà* in example 1 and He killed the goat *ọ̀ kwe e̩wè̩ nà* in example 10. It is also reveals that 'O" is the only constant morpheme that is used to represent he/she in the language. One striking fact about this personal pronoun in the Urhobo language is the "o" is to refer to male, female and neutral genders.

The process of verb morphology in the Urhobo language is unique. Verb inflection is attained through prefixes and suffixes. This affixation does not alter the grammatical function/ category in the language. For instance, *ọ̀ kwe e̩wè̩ nà rhè̩* {He has killed the goat} justifies this claim.

Conclusion

This work has investigates some aspects of inflectional morphology in the Urhobo language with the aim of disputing the claim that derivational processes are not productive in Nigerian languages. Inflectional processes in the Urhobo language are very productive as revealed in this study. This work reveals that Urhobo word formation processes can be proved in so many ways. Urhobo verbs are inflected in so many aspects to certain grammatical features.

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