# THE SELECTIONAL RESTRICTION OF VERBS IN ỌNỊCHA IGBO

V. C. ONUMAJURU
DEPARTMENT OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES AND LITERATURES,
UNIVERSITY OF PORT HARCOURT.
PORT HARCOURT

This research examines the noun-verb selectional restrictions in Ọnịcha Igbo, a version of Igbo spoken in the Onitsha metropolitan city of Anambra State in South Eastern Nigeria. Four verb clusters – buying, cooking, eating, and washing verbs – are chosen for this study. Our discourse will clearly show that there exists rich evidence of semantic selectional restriction between the verbs and their complements in the Ọnịcha dialect. It is however to be noted that the productivity of verb-noun selectional restriction may vary with verbs.

## 1.0 Introduction

This paper seeks to examine the extent to which verbs respond to the noun-verb collocations in Ọnịcha Igbo. That is to say how the verb in the verb phrase (VP) selects its nouns. Four clusters of verbs have been chosen for the analysis. The data for the analysis are taken from the Ọnịcha dialect spoken in Onitsha metropolis and its surrounding towns. Onitsha is one of the major towns of Anambra State in the South East Zone of Nigeria. The dialect is distinctly different from the central Igbo dialect due to the presence of aspiration and nasalization in the latter, two characteristics found in Owere Igbo. Ọnịcha dialect belongs to the northern dialects according to Ejiofor's classification (1982:11).

## 2.0 Background to the Study

Selectional restriction is, according to Ndimele (1999:80), a phenomenon which specifies the constraints on possible combinations of lexical items within a grammatical context. The constraints are stated with reference to the relevant inherent semantic features of a lexical item in an adjacent structural unit. Selectional restriction therefore is essentially a semantic constraint on the occurrence of words. The internal structure of words is rule-governed (Fromkin and Rodman 1998:69). Neweyer (1990:48) states that the principles governing the internal structure of words are quite different from those determining the internal structure of phrases. Following the orderly arrangement of linguistic items in words and phrases, we recognize that the Ọnịcha Igbo verbs (words) have a complex internal structure consisting of networks of words sharing significant properties with each other. The Ọnịcha Igbo verbs do not combine in

a haphazard manner with their complements. There is an internal constraint which determines the appropriate complement of a verb in a particular construction. Anọka (1983:171) lists seventeen different verb stems which can collocate with the verb stem *-zụ* 'to buy' in the Mbaise dialect of Igbo. He points out that each verbal form presented is limited in the number and type of complements that it can take.

The Ọnịcha Igbo verb, like other verbs, consists essentially of a monosyllabic base which is the CV structure and a derivational vowel prefix *i-/ị-*; both constitute the infinitive. The infinitive in turn combines with the noun or the complement in order to constitute a unit of thought. The infinitive in Ọnịcha expresses a notion of the verb without predicating it of any subject (O.E.D. 1933:453). In isolation, the infinitive can be said to have a vague semantic notion; that is to say that it does not represent any definite semantic idea apart from the undetermined denotative sense.

## 3.0 Verbs of Buying – "The 'Buy' Cluster"

*-go* 'buy' is the nuclear or generic verb in the buy cluster in Ọnịcha dialect and it has the widest collocational range. The common mode of the infinitive 'to buy' in Ọnịcha dialect is *igō*. *Ịzū* in Ọnịcha does not specifically denote 'to buy'. Rather, its meaning is contextual because when *-zụ* co-occurs with the word *afịa* 'market', it denotes trade. For example:

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | Emeka | nà | - | à zụ | afịā |
| | Emeka | progr. | | pref[2].verb | market |
| | Emeka is a trader | | | | |

i. *-go* is the only stem that can govern nearly all the objects of buying in Ọnịcha. The other variants *–bu, -gba, -bɛ, -mà, -gụ, -kpo* collocate with names of a few objects in the dialect as in the following:

ii. *-bu* as a buying verb may be glossed as 'buy'. It has another referential meaning of lifting or carrying which really seems to be the original denotation of the stem, *–bu* is normally associated with large quantities and bulky items such as bags of beans, rice, garri, cartons of fish. Examples:

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2. | Bùte | ofu | àkpà | azù |
| | Carry | one | bag | fish |
| | Buy one bag of fish | | | |
| 3. | Bùte | àkpa | àgwà | |
| | Carry | bag | beans | |
| | Buy a bag of beans | | | |

2. Prefex

Apart from the likes of heavy commodities or bulky items mentioned in the examples above, *-bu* can also be glossed as 'buy' when speaking of heavy equipment and machines such as cars, etc.

4. Ike bùtèlù ụgbọenū ọfụū
   Ike carry(+past) airplane new
   Ike bought a new airplane

5. Ànyi bùtèlù igwè òzọ
   We carry(+past) bicycle another/again
   We bought another bicycle

*-bu* has been used in the preceding examples to demonstrate that the stem *-bu* could denote 'buy'. The stem mode of *-bu* as a verb of buying can be represented as:

VP

V — NP

-bu

a. àkpà
   akpụ 'cassava'
   gàrí 'garri'
   àgwà 'beans'
   ọsɛ 'pepper'
   ọkà 'maize'
   òsikapa 'rice'

b. nkàtà
   azụ 'fish'
   tòmatò 'tomatoes'

c. akpàti
   ntụ 'nails'
   nchà 'soap'

d.
   ụgbọàní 'car'
   igwè 'bicycle'

iii. *-mà* collocates with all referential terms of commodities that are sold by measures such as with cigarette cups, tins and bowls as in the following:

VP

V — NP

-mà

òsikapa 'rice'
àgwà 'beans'
nnu 'salt'
ọsɛ 'pepper'
ègusi 'melon'

òɡbònò

Examples:

6. Màta ofu ìko ọsɛ
   Buy one cup pepper
   Buy one cup of pepper

7. Fa màlù ìko òsìkapa ise
   They buy(+past) cup rice five
   They bought five cups of rice

iv. *-gba* collocates with all referential terms of commodities that are measured in litres or other related 'fluid units'.

VP

V — NP

-gba

a. òfu bọtùlù
   mmanụ 'oil'.
   mmanya 'wine'

b. òfu ìtà
   ọgwù 'medicine'
   pètroòlù 'gasoline'

Examples:

8. Ọ gbàlù bọtùlù ọ ọgwù ìbùa
   He/she buy(+past) bottle medicine two
   He/she bought two bottles of medicine

9. Ànyị gà - à gba mmanụ nnī
   We fut[3]. pref.verb oil food
   We will buy cooking oil

*Ùtabà* 'snuff/tobacco' is not exactly a fluid item but it selects the stem *–gba*. The semantic affinity may be due to the body movements involved in discharging the commodity to the buyer – movements which are very similar to those involved in the sale of other fluids, and usually liquid items. It is pertinent to note though that slave purchase also selects the stem *–gba*.

v. *-bɛ* collocates with all referential terms of commodities that are measured before sales are made by cutting either with a knife (e.g. meat) or a pair of scissors (e.g. cloth) as in the following:

VP

V — NP

-bɛ

anụ 'meat'
akwà 'cloth'

[3] future

Examples:

10. Bɛta anụ nàírà ìlì
"Cut" meat naira ten
Buy ten naira worth of meat

11. Unù bɛtàlù akwà ọcha
You cut(+past) cloth white
You bought some white cloth

vi. *-gụ* can also be glossed as:
'to sing' as in *gùọ egwū* 'sing a song'
'to read' as in *gùọ akwụkwọ* 'read a book'
'to count' as in *gùọ fa ọnū* 'count them'
'to buy' as in *gùọ jī* 'buy seed yams'

*-gụ* as a buying verb collocates with referential terms of commodities that are counted in groups such as cobs (e.g. maize), etc.

VP
V — NP
-gụ

ọkà 'maize'
jī 'seed yams'
mangalà 'dry fish'

Examples:

12. Gùtalụ m ɛazù ofu àkpà egō
Count(imp[4].) me fish one bag money
Buy me one hundred naira worth of fish

13. Fa gùtàlù jī òkùkò
They count(+past) yam planting
They bought seed yams

The stem mode *-gụ* entails the referential terms of commodities that are measured by counting before sales are made.

vii. *-kpo* co-occurs with terms referring to commodities that are displayed and sold from heaps placed either on mats or on tables. Usually though not necessarily, the commodities are lightweight items of individual sizes ranging from relatively small to quite tiny.

VP
V — NP
-kpo

ùbe 'pear'
ọkwùlù 'okra'

[4] imperative

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | añàlà | 'garden egg' |
| | | azù | 'fish' |

Examples:

14. Kpòte ọkwùlụ nàịrà ili
Gather(imp.) okra naira ten
Buy ten naira worth of okra

15. O kpòòlù ụbe ọgụ nàịrà
He/she gather(+past)pear twenty naira
He/she bought twenty naira worth of pear

The above are the buying verbs commonly used in Ọnịcha dialect. It is the nature of the commodity that determines the stem of the verb. However, where manner of purchase, quality, and quantity of commodity is not emphasized, *-go* is used.

Next follow examples of deviant sentences which are unacceptable in the dialect because they do not possess the appropriate inherent, semantic properties in the buy cluster.

*16. Ànyị màtàlù akwā àbàda
We bought some *abada* cloth

*17. Unù gbàtàlù anụ n'afịa
You bought meat in the market

*18. Ọ gùtàlù mmanụ n'ụnò
He/she bought oil from the house

*19. Fa bɛtàlù igwe nà nnukwu afịā
They bought (a) bicycle in the big market

*20. Ekpòtèlù m ọgwù ịbà n'afịa
I bought anti-malaria drugs in the market

## 3.1 Recapitulatory Table Of The Buying Verbs In Ọnịcha

i. -go + N

| | |
|---|---|
| + | buyable |
| - | slave |

ii. -bu + N

| | |
|---|---|
| + | buyable |
| + | portable |
| + | heavy |

iii. -mà + N

| | |
|---|---|
| + | buyable |
| + | measurable |
| + | grains or powdery substance |

iv. -gba + N

| | |
|---|---|
| + | buyable |
| + | liquid |
| + | slave |
| + | snuff |

v. -bɛ + N

| | |
|---|---|
| + | buyable |
| + | cutable |

vi. -gụ + N

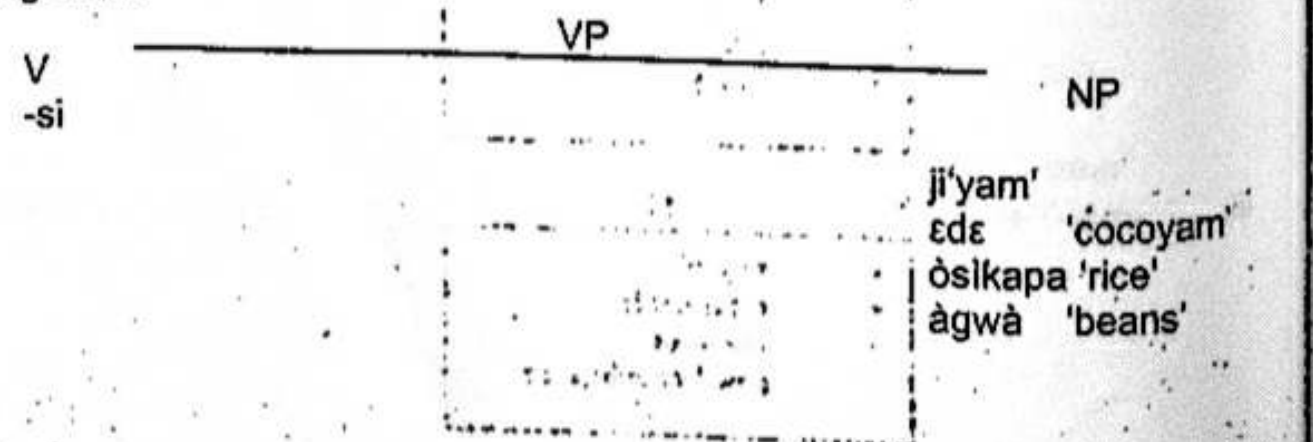
| | |
|---|---|
| + | buyable |
| + | countable |
| + | plenty |

vii. kpo + N

| | |
|---|---|
| + | buyable |
| + | heap or portion |
| + | countable |

## 4.0 Verbs of Cooking – "The 'Cook' Cluster"

i. *-si* is the nuclear verb of the cook cluster. It has a wider collocational range than all the other modes of cooking. The common mode of the infinitive 'to cook' in Onicha is *isī*. *Isī* is normally associated with all commodities that are cooked with water in a cooking pot. The stem *–si* can govern many of the objects of cooking. The other stems, *-mɛ, -yɛ, -rụ, -da, -tɛ, -mị* collocate with names of relatively few objects of cooking. All the verb stems however entail cooking as in:



Examples:

21. O sìlì jí taàtà
He/she cook(+past) yam today
He/she cooked yam today

22. Fa gà è si àgwà echi
They fut. pref.verb beans tomorrow
They will cook beans tomorrow

ii. *-mɛ* is a stem in which either the object food item is added to hot water in a container (as in the preparation of garri) or hot water is poured into the food item which is waiting in a container (as in the preparation of some cereals).

| VP | |
|---|---|
| V | NP |
| -mɛ | gàrí 'garri' |
| | àkàmù 'pap' |

Examples:

23. Ònyɛ mɛlù àkàmụ̀ à?
Who do(+past) pap this
Who prepared this pap?

24. Fa mɛlù gàrí n' afɛlɛ́
They do(+past) garri in plate
They prepared garri in a plate

iii. *-yɛ* collocates with food items that are cooked in oil without the addition of water. It is usually equivalent to the English 'frying'.

| VP | |
|---|---|
| V | NP |
| -yɛ | azù 'fish' |
| | anụ 'meat' |
| | ọfɛ òsìkapa 'stew' |
| | jí 'yam' |
| | ndûku 'potato' |

Examples:

25. Ọ yɛlù ndûku n' ûtụ̀tù
He/she fry(+past) potato in morning
He/she fried potatoes in the morning

26. Ònyɛ yɛlù ọfɛ òsìkapa à?

Who fry(+past) soup rice this
Who made this stew?

iv. *-ɪ̀ɥ* collocates with all referential terms of commodities that can be cooked in an oven or directly over open fires without the need for containing vessels like cooking pots. Such methods of cooking usually do not require the addition of water and other ingredients.

| V | VP | NP |
|---|---|---|
| -rụ | | jị 'yam' |
| | | akwụ 'palm nut' |

Examples:

27. Ị rùlù jị n' ọkụ
You roast(+past) yam(s) in fire
You roasted yam(s) over fire

28. Ànyị rùlù akwụ n' ọkụ taa
We roast(+past) palm nut in fire chew(SVC)
We roasted and chewed palm nuts

v. *-da* collocates with all referential terms of commodities that involve recooking (i.e. warming previously cooked food). In contemporary English usage, this concept is somewhat demonstrated by the general use of a grill or broiler to warm food prepared during an earlier cooking session.

| V | VP | NP |
|---|---|---|
| -da | | ọfɛ 'soup' |
| | | anụ 'meat' |
| | | ŋnị 'food' |

Examples:

29. Ọ dàlù ọfɛ n' ọkụ
He/she warm(+past) soup in fire
He/she warmed the soup

30. Ànyị dàlù nni n' ọkụ n' èfifiè
We warm(+past) food in fire in afternoon
We warmed the food in the afternoon.

vi. *-tɛ* has a fixed collocation with soup. It exclusively entails the cooking of (different kinds of) soup.

VP

| V | NP | |
|---|---|---|
| -tɛ | ọfɛ | 'soup' |

Examples:

31. Fa tɛlù ọfɛ òsikapa
They cook(+past) soup rice
They made some stew

32. Unù tɛlù ọfɛ nnyàafù
You cook(+past) soup yesterday
You made some soup yesterday

vii. *-mị* collocates with all referential terms of commodities that can be cooked by passing through intense heat so as to remove liquid content (= drying).

| V | NP | |
|---|---|---|
| -mị | anụ | 'meat' |
| | azù | 'fish' |

Examples:

33. Unù gà - à mị anụ à n' ọkụ
You fut. pref.verb meat this in fire
You will dry this meat

34. Ọ mìlì azù n' ọkụ
He/she dry(+past) fish in fire
He/she dried the fish

We now give examples of deviant sentences which are not acceptable in the dialect because they lack the semantic qualities necessary for appropriate co-occurrence.

*35. Ada gà - ɛ tɛ anū
Ada fut. pref.verb meat
Ada will make meat

*36. Ifeoma nà - à rụ ọfɛ n' ọkụ
Ifeoma progr. pref.verb soup in fire
Ifeoma is roasting soup

*37. Ọ mìlì àkàmù n' afɛlɛ
He/she dry(+past) pap in plate
He/she dried some pap in a plate

## 4.1 Recapitulatory Table Of The Cooking Verbs In Onicha

i. -si + N

| | |
|---|---|
| + | cookable |
| + | care |
| + | food item |
| + | water |

ii. -mɛ + N

| | |
|---|---|
| + | cookable |
| + | garri |
| + | *akamu* |
| + | water |
| + | care |

iii. -yɛ + N

| | |
|---|---|
| + | cookable |
| + | food item |
| + | oil |
| + | solid |
| + | care |
| - | water |

iv. -ṛụ + N

| | |
|---|---|
| + | cookable |
| + | food item |
| + | solid |
| + | care |
| - | water |

v. -da + N

| | |
|---|---|
| + | cookable |
| + | previously cooked |
| + | short period of time |
| + | care |

vi. -tɛ + N

| | |
|---|---|
| + | cookable |
| + | soup |
| + | care |

vii. -mị + N

| | |
|---|---|
| + | cookable |
| + | meat |
| + | fish |
| + | care |

## 5.0 Verbs of Eating – "The 'Eat' Cluster"

i. *-lí* 'eat' is the nuclear verb of the eat cluster. The common mode of the infinitive 'to eat' in Ọnịcha dialect is *ilí*. It has wider collocational range than its variants which are *–ta, -no, -lacha, -mịcha*.

ii. *-ta* can collocate with all edible substances which are solid (and strong). It primarily involves the use of the teeth as instruments and relates closely to the English alternative, -chew.

VP

| V | NP | |
|---|---|---|
| -ta | anụ | 'meat' |
| | azù | 'fish' |
| | ọjī | 'kola' |

Examples:

38. Ada gà - à ta anū
Ada fut. pref.verb meat
Ada will eat meat

39. Eze tàlù ọjī
Eze chew(+past) kola
Eze ate some kola

iii. *-no* collocates with edible lumps, tablet-like substances, as well as all forms of boluses. The English word closest in meaning to this variant is 'swallow'.

VP

| V | NP | |
|---|---|---|
| -no | akpụ | 'cassava' |
| | ọgwù | 'tablets' |

Examples:

40. Fa nòlù ọgwù n' ùtụtù
They swallow(+past) tablet in morning

They took some tablets in the morning

41. Ànyị gà - è no gàrị n' èfifiè
We fut. pref.verb garri in afternoon
We will eat garri in the afternoon.

iv. *-lacha* collocates with edibles whose nature requires that their ingestion be carried out by licking with the tongue as in the intake of chocolate, candy, and some kinds of fruits.

VP
V NP
-lacha
ọfɛ 'soup'
òlòma 'orange'
ùdàlà 'apple'

Examples:

42. Unù gà - à lacha ọfɛ
You fut. pref.verb soup
You will lick (some) soup

43. Ọ làchàlù òlòma
He/she lick(+past) orange(s)
He/she licked some oranges

v. *-micha* co-occurs with all the edibles that can be eaten by sucking movements of the mouth.

VP
V NP
-micha
ọkpụkpụ 'bone'

Examples:

44. Ada nà - a mìcha ọkpụkpụ
Ada progr. pref.(suck) bone
Ada is sucking a piece of bone

45. Nwata à nà - a mìcha mkpịsị akā yā
Child this progr. pref.(suck) stick hand his
This child is sucking his fingers

The following sentences are deviant and unacceptable in the Onicha dialect because they do not possess the appropriate semantic qualities necessary for correct co-occurrence.

*46. Uzo làchàlù anụ

Uzo licked some meat

*47. Obi gà - àta òlòma
Obi will chew some oranges

*48. Ànyị nà - èno ọfɛ
We are swallowing some soup

*49. Fa mìchàlù gàrị
They sucked garri

*50. Unù gà - àta ọfɛ taàtà
You will chew soup today

## 5.1 Recapitulatory Table Of The Eating Verbs in Onicha

i. -li + N

| | |
|---|---|
| + | edible |
| + | solid |
| + | soft |

ii. -ta + N

| | |
|---|---|
| + | edible |
| + | hard |
| + | dry, as of nuts |
| + | teeth |

iii. -no + N

| | |
|---|---|
| + | edible |
| + | soft/lumps/pulp |
| + | tablets |

iv. -lacha + N

| | |
|---|---|
| + | edible |
| + | soup |
| + | fruits |

v. -mịcha + N

| | |
|---|---|
| + | edible |
| + | bone marrow |
| + | items ingested by sucking |

## 6.0 Verbs of Washing – "The 'Wash' Cluster"

Verbs in the wash cluster cannot be classified into nuclear (or generic) and non-nuclear because there is no variant that has a catholic application to all 'washable' nouns.

i. *-sụ* in Ọnjcha Igbo may be glossed as:

'pound' as in *isū nni*
'clear' as in *isū ọfịa*
'speak' as in *isū asûsụ*
'wash' as in *isū akwà*

Unlike the verbs previously examined in this discourse, no stem or mode in the wash cluster can be regarded as a common mode. In other words, none of the stems can really be said to have wider or narrower collocational range than the others. The stems *-kwọ, -wụ, -fịọ* can however be said to have a relatively fixed range. All the variants of the wash cluster appear in simple verb forms as in: *-sa, -wụ, -kwọ, -fịọ.*

ii. *-sa* collocates with all 'washable' nouns that describe instruments, equipment, and most body parts.

| V | VP | |
|---|---|---|
| -sa | | NP |
| | ntì | 'ear' |
| | nti | 'cheek' |
| | afɛlɛ | 'plate' |
| | ụnò | 'house' |

Example:

51. Uche nà - à sa afɛlɛ
Uche progr. pref.wash plate(s)
Uche is washing/doing the dishes

iii. *-wụ* has a fixed collocation with the human body. Example:

52. Fa wûlù àrụ n' ùtụtù
They bathe(+past) body in morning
They bathed in the morning

iv. *-kwọ* has a fixed collocation with the human hands. Example:

53. Ọ nà - . . . à kwọ akā
He/she progr. pref.wash hand
He/she is washing his/her hands

v. *-fịọ* has a fixed collocation with the human face. Example:

54. Jɛɛ fịọọ irū gī n' ilo
go wash face you in outdoors
Go and wash your face outside

Next follow some examples of deviant sentences lacking semantic properties necessary for appropriate co-occurrence.

*55. Ibe kwòlù akwà
Ibe washed some clothes.

*56. Ànyị gà - ' àwụ afɛlɛ
We will wash some plates.

## 6.1 Recapitulatory Table Of The Washing Verbs In Ọnịcha

i. -sụ + N

| | |
|---|---|
| + | washable |
| + | clothing/fabrics |
| + | soap/detergent |
| + | squeezable |
| + | at least two hands |

ii. -sa + N

| | |
|---|---|
| + | washable |
| + | body parts |
| + | instrument |
| + | equipment |

iii. -wụ + N

| | |
|---|---|
| + | washable |
| + | human subject |
| - | instrument |

iv. -kwọ + N

| | |
|---|---|
| + | washable |
| + | at least two hands |

v. -fịọ + N

| | |
|---|---|
| + | washable |
| + | human face |
| + | hands as instruments |

## Conclusion

We have so far been examining the co-occurrence possibilities of four verb clusters in the Onicha Igbo dialect. Evidence from the data we have presented in this discourse strongly suggests that there exists a strong selectional restriction between verbs and their complements. Most of our examples have shown that certain verbs can co-occur only with particular NP objects and not with others. The research has also shown that there is a high degree of verb-noun selectivity in the dialect.

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