

Combinatory Possibilities and Linear Sequence in Ibibio Verbal Morphology

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Abstract

This study investigated the degree of compatibility between grammatical elements and linear sequences of bound morphemes in the Ibibio verbal system. The data for this study were obtained from twelve native speakers of Ibibio using constructed sentences, spontaneous discussions and introspections. The study employed the morpheme-based hypothesis. From findings, this research proposes that the grammatical elements within the Ibibio verbal system are affixed to the main verb. These affixes are arranged in a linear order from left to right. Occurring after the verb root, are bound morphemes to convey negation, reversal and relativization processes. The study examines the arrangement of elements in the verbal structure of the Ibibio language. It notes that this structure typically consists of a certain order: first, a person or agreement marker is used, followed by a modal, tense, aspect, an auxiliary marker, another agreement marker, the main verb, and last, the negative marker, depending on the specific construction. The term, *m-kpá-á-ké-sí-sak-ú-kóót*, refers to a specific linguistic construct. The prefixal order for the sentence "I would have been calling you" is as follows: *m* - (first person singular agreement marker), *kpá-*, modal marker, *a-* is another agreement marker *ké* - past tense marker, *si* - aspectual marker, *sak* – another aspectual marker, *ú* – object pronominal agreement marker, before the main verb *kóót* call, the operative word. It has also been discovered that the elements *ké* and *sak* in the language serve many functions as bound elements. The study examines the occurrence of the Ibibio agreement marker, noting that it has the ability to appear multiple times, indicating a significant degree of attachment promiscuity within the verb structures. Consequently, the study reached the conclusion that the verbal structure of the Ibibio language exhibits a high degree of complexity and morphological richness. As a result, this language serves as an exemplary case for the typology of agglutinative languages, characterised by a direct and consistent mapping of morphemes to their respective meanings.

Keywords: agreement, aspects, grammatical elements, modal, verb.

1. Background to the Study

The Ibibio language including Uda spoken in Mbo Local Government Area, Akwa Ibom State belongs to the Lower Cross of the Benue-Congo language phylum, (Essien 1990, Urua 2000, Udosen and Okon, 2019, Akpan and Okon 2020). Every language has rules. This is why it is quite rare to find a language devoid of

grammatical rules. Sentences are built with lexical items which belong to different word classes including the verb. The verb is classified as belonging to the open class and accommodating categories within the Ibibio language. It has the potential to be expanded to accommodate further grammatical operations. The verb is a pervasive linguistic element, as it is observed in nearly all human languages. The verb can be referred to as the fundamental component of the grammatical structure of any language, as it serves as the basis for the derivation of other syntactic categories. The verb has garnered significant scholarly interest from numerous researchers.

According to Eka (1994, p.103), the verb is regarded as a grammatical component that possesses the ability to exhibit numerous morphological distinctions that may be explained in terms of tense, aspect, voice, mood, person, and number. The expression of Tense, Aspect, and Mood, frequently abbreviated as TAM, is typically limited to the verb as the primary carrier. The selection of verb tense serves to situate an occurrence within a specific temporal framework. The term "aspect" pertains to the manner in which an event progresses during a specified period of time. The concept of mood encompasses the speaker's intention or attitude towards their statement, whereas voice serves to differentiate the thematic ties between the verb and the arguments within a phrase. The English language for instance is characterised by the presence of three distinct categories of verbs: transitive verbs, intransitive verbs, and verbs of Incomplete Predication. Verbs serve the purpose of denoting the activities, processes, situations, or states that are stated inside the sentence in relation to noun phrases (NPs). According to Essien (1990), verbs serve as the foundational component of predicate actions (or events) or states, and in conjunction with the subject (noun phrases), they comprise a complete clause or sentence.

In this discussion, various factors that contribute to the phenomenon under investigation will be discussed. Among the various syntactic categories present in the Ibibio language, the verb has a central position due to its unique characteristic of being transformable into a noun through the process of prefixation. Udosen and Okon (2022) suggest that inside any given linguistic phrase, there exists a prominent or operative word which is usually the verb. In syntactic analysis, the primary elements of a sentence are referred to as heads, while the remaining constituents serve as either complements or modifiers, depending on their specific role within the sentence or phrase structure. The verb holds a dominant position inside any verbal complex, surpassing other grammatical elements in its prevalence and influence. The language also exhibits instances of one-word sentences, which are prominently featured due to the verb's role in the language. The

complexity of verbs allows for their meanings to be expanded in order to encompass various phenomena in diverse disciplines. This is demonstrated by the research conducted by Udoeyo, Enang, and Okon (2023). The structure of the Ibibio language is characterised by its complexity, as it involves the concatenation of morphemes to convey a comprehensive concept. This phenomenon is evident in the observation that a singular verb has the capacity to accept various grammatical components contingent upon the speaker's purpose. According to Essien (1990), the Ibibio language can be characterised as an agglutinating language.

In this linguistic framework, words are formed through a linear arrangement of discrete morphemes, with each morpheme representing a different component of meaning. Put differently, it involves a direct association between the grammatical components and their respective meanings. Every morpheme possesses a specific meaning or representation. The verbal system of the Ibibio language has a high degree of morphological complexity, allowing for the expression of various grammatical concepts within a single verbal construction. In other words, the linguistic system exhibits a verbal framework in which a single word formation can comprise a primary free-form or lexical verb accompanied by auxiliary elements and various grammatical constituents that convey agreement, tense, aspect, mood, negation, relativization, et cetera. These components collectively contribute to the overall comprehension of the speaker's intended meaning. The grammatical elements are affixed to the main verb in accordance with the linguistic rules of the language, resulting in a linear and sequential arrangement from left to right. These affixes serve to convey additional morphological and syntactic concepts.

Therefore, the primary objective of this study is to investigate the obligatory sequence of the grammatical elements included in the Ibibio verbal system. In the context of this study, the term "grammatical components" pertains to the bound morphemes found in the Ibibio verbal structure. These bound elements are under the control of the lexical verb, which serves as the sole autonomous item or free form, with other parts being attached to it. Example:

1. \acute{N} yàá dí.
1sg Fut.tense come
I will come.

Notice that the language first presents the pronominal agreement marker \acute{N} , *I* before the future tense element yàá, and then the main verb to express the intended idea. Even though the yàá future element is

translated to literally mean will, it is not considered a modal marker as it is in English.

2. Statement of the Research Problem.

The grammatical structure of the Ibibio language has been the subject of much scholarly investigation by numerous researchers throughout the years. Notable among the academic community are the scholarly contributions made by Essien (1990) and Urua (2000). The topic of headedness and complementation has been explored by Udosen and Okon (2022). Anyanwu and Udoudom (2022) assert that complement verbs are typically inherited without regard to their verb structure. In his analysis of the Ibibio language, Essien (1990) extensively examined several aspects, such as verbs and verbals. However, it is important to note that his discussion mostly focused on descriptive analysis, without establishing any explicit connections to morphological theories. The entire analysis of the components comprising the Ibibio verbal system has yet to be taken into account. Hence, this study examines the verbal system of the Ibibio language within the framework of the morpheme-based theory, which aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of every grammatical unit.

3. Objectives of the Study.

The objectives of this study are to:

- i. identify possible grammatical components in the Ibibio verbal system;
- ii. account for every grammatical morpheme in a corresponding order;
- iii. ascertain the extent of combinatory sequences of the grammatical elements;

4. Sample and Sources of Data/Methodology

The sample population for this study was made of twelve people, six men and six women who are within the age range of twenty-one and sixty-four. The people are all native speakers of the Ibibio language. The researcher selected six consultants each from two communities (Anua Offot and Ibiaku Offot) in Uyo Local Government Area, making it a total of twelve. The language consultants were made up of civil servants, businessmen/women, and undergraduate students. Most of the respondents were literate and some were undergraduates who speak the English language fluently. The problem of interpretation did not arise, though useful explanations were made to maintain the researcher's focus. The primary source of data was the Ibadan 400 wordlist and structured sentences. For the secondary source, insights were gained from textbooks, Journal articles, and online materials. Data collection tools include a writing pad, pen, audio recorder, and cell phone. The elicited data were analysed using the Leipzig Glossing Rules (LGR), which is a norm for interlinear glossing that breaks down morphemes on a one-by-one basis where every

morpheme was accounted for in a corresponding order. The study adopted the morpheme-based hypothesis for discussion of findings. The researchers also utilised their intuitive knowledge of the language for the analysis. This study is of the qualitative research approach design.

Theoretical Framework

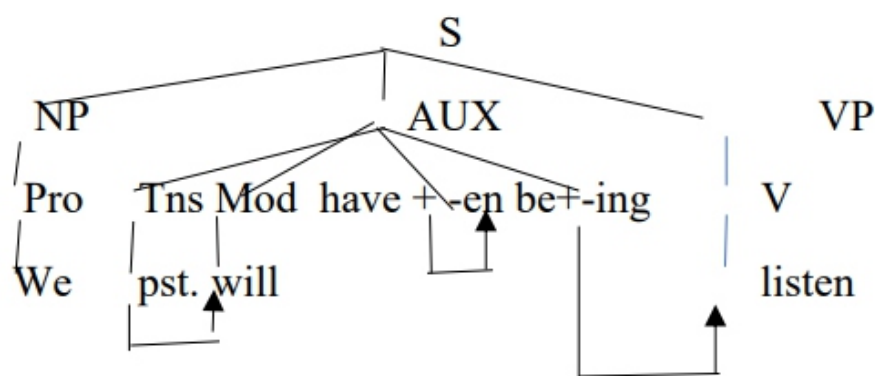
The analysis of this study is based on the Morpheme Based Theory (MBT). The idea of morpheme-based morphology posits that word formation principles can be applied to morphemes, as proposed by Siegel (1974), and Kiparsky (1982). The morpheme-based approach posits that morphological rules function similarly to syntactic rules by merging morphemes. This theory posits that the creation of new words occurs by the application of a word formation rule to an existing word. This phenomenon is observed in the Ibibio verbal system, where morphemes are appended to the verb. This process does not necessarily result in the development of a completely new word, but rather yields a verbal expression that conveys a complete meaning.

Morpheme-based morphology involves the analysis of word formations as compositions of morphemes. The morphological analysis of the word "independently" reveals the presence of four morphemes: "in-", "depend", "-ent", and "-ly". The term "depend" serves as the root morpheme, while the remaining morphemes in this instance are affixes. In the lexical item "cats," the base form "cat" serves as the root, while the suffix "-s" functions as an inflectional morpheme. The fundamental approach to examining word formations is commonly referred to as "item-and-arrangement". In this approach, both roots and affixes are seen as morphemes, whereby words are constructed by concatenating morphemes in a sequential manner, much to arranging beads on a string. According to Haspelmath and Sims (2010, p.41), "the morpheme-based model conceptualises morphological rules as operating in a manner similar to how syntactic rules combine words". This study centres on the grammatical constituents of the Ibibio verb, specifically examining morphemes such as tense, aspect, mood, and agreement, as well as the main verb. These morphemes are considered as individual units, and their combination forms the entirety of the intended expression or complete notion. In its entirety, this theory posits that a lexical item is not solely an independent word, but rather encompasses grammatical components that augment its comprehensiveness.

6. A Cross-Linguistic Overview of the Verbal System

Many things can be said about human language. languages have specific rules in which ideas can be fully expressed. The ability to merge items lies in every normal child, but language development varies from one

Diagram 2: Affixing Process



From the above tree diagram, the arrows point at the relevant positions where the different bound morphemes will affix hop.

A significant number of African languages, as well as numerous other languages within the Niger-Congo language family, have a linguistic structure that might be characterised as a complicated verbal system. The verbal system encompasses numerous grammatical factors into its creation. According to Welmers (1973, p.343), it is argued that “the verbal system observed in Niger-Congo languages exhibits a consistent structure characterised by intersecting categories, including tense, aspect, and mode”. One example of such a language is Swahili, which has a grammatical structure consisting of a Pronoun, Construction marker, Verb base, and Affix with verb-base verbal formula. To illustrate, the term

3. Tu ki sem a
 Pro. conditional marker verb bound element
 If we speak.

According to Welmers, the initial morpheme in question is a pronoun denoted as "tu." The subsequent morpheme functions as a marker that can be referred to as a "conditional marker." The third morpheme, "sem," serves as a verb root and also functions as the base. The fourth morpheme is a suffix that is present in conjunction with the conditional marker and several other verbal constructions, albeit not all. The example demonstrates that the Swahili verbal system incorporates multiple grammatical features in its structure.

The Igbo language, spoken in the southeastern region of Nigeria, exhibits distinct verb forms that are employed in its grammatical structures, similar to other natural languages. The verb form in the Igbo language can exhibit simplicity or complexity. According to Mbah (2011:19), Igbo can be characterised as “a language that heavily relies on verbs”. The prominence of verbs in the grammatical structures of the language accounts for this phenomenon. According to Ikegwuonu (2015, Igbo verbs entail coherency, grammaticality, and meaningfulness in every aspect. The Igbo verbal system demonstrates its richness by its capacity to incorporate numerous bound parts inside a single construction as shown below:

4. À gára m í wèrè yá.
 1sg pst tense me Agr take it
 I would have taken it.

5. À máhí m yá.
 1sg know not me it
 I did not know it.

6. A gara m í bia
 1sg go me Agr come
 I would have come.

From examples 4-6, the Igbo language is also seen as putting up grammatical components in its strings of verbal construction. The expressions show the stringing up of PRONOUNS + TENSE + NEGATION + VERB to express different ideas.

7. The Ibibio verbal system

The Ibibio verbal system is different from that of English in that verbs in Ibibio are transitive in nature, and some of them take inherent complements. Transitive verbs are those that have object complements. while intransitive verbs do not take objects. Essien (1990) notes that all verbs in Ibibio are capable of taking some kind of object, at least a cognate one. Inherent complement verbs are those which select objects in order to express meaning. Examples, saho–nsù, *lie*, daiyá–ídáp *sleep*, tìbbé–àbàkpà *roast corn*, kwó–íkwó *sing*. kóíí–m̀m̀oq̃ñ *fetch water*, fèghé–ìtók *run* sàná–ísáñ *walk*, et cetera. This fact reveals the complexity in the Ibibio verbal system. Based on the above, Udosen and Okon (2022) observe that verbs in Ibibio are semantically

empty, and can only be defined by their accompanying objects or complements.

8. Data Presentation and Discussion

As stated earlier, the Ibibio verbal system has a rich morphology, accommodating various grammatical components on a string to express ideas, processes, and these components occur in a linear order, from left to right. The data are presented in a linear order of occurrence to accommodate the different grammatical elements from one to any number that could be found on a verbal string.

9. Combinatory Possibilities and Linear Sequence in Ibibio Verbal Elements

a. Agreement Marker and Verb

This is a situation where the personal agreement marker is compatible with the verb as illustrated below:

6. m- brè.
1sg play
I play

7. ì- fèghé
1pl run
We run.

b. Agreement marker, Modal Marker, Agreement Marker and Verb

This language also attests a situation where the agreement marker is followed by the modal marker, an object agreement marker and the verb. The following examples demonstrate the possibility:

8. M- kpa a yem.
1sg mod. Agr. Want
I may want.

9. ì- kpà ú yém.
We mod obj. agr. want
We may want you.

c. Agreement, Past Tense and Verb

This is a possibility where the agreement marker, the past tense marker and the verb are compatible in the sequence below:

10. M màákít.
1sg pst tense see
I saw.

11. M mà ú kít.
1sg pst tense obj. agr. see
I saw you.

12. À mà ñ kịt
 2sg pst. tns obj.agr. see
 You saw me.

Observe that example (12) above contains a second person object pronominal agreement marker (ú) which is always compatible with fién *you*. In the same, example (13) contains first person object pronominal marker, (ñ) which is always grammatical with mièn, *me*.

d. Agreement, Modal Marker, Past Tense Markers and Verb

This is another possibility in which the verb hosts the agreement marker, modal marker, and the past tense marker in that order as shown below:

13. M- kpá- ké táñ.
 1sg. mod pst.perf say
 I would have said.

14. Ì kpà í kí kà
 1pl mod agr. pst tns go
 We would have gone.

15. Ì kpàá í kí nám
 1pl Modal Agr Pst. Tense do
 We would have done it.

It is to be observed that the agreement morphological reflex in the language exhibits a promiscuity of attachment just like clitics in other languages. The agreement marker can occur multiple times for the grammaticality of the verbal complex.

In this language too the sequence below is grammatically impossible.

e. *Agreement marker, future tense marker, past tense marker, aspectual marker and the verb

16. *Á yá ké sí dí.
 3sg fut pst asp. Come

For example (17), it is important to state that, the future tense marker is not compatible with the past tense marker. Consider another impossible combination of grammatical elements below:

f. *Pronominal agreement marker, past tense marker, future tense marker and the verb

17. *M máà yá dí.
1sg pst fut. Come
18. *Ì kí yá í dí.
1pl. ps fut. agr. come

This structure is impossible because, the future tense which is translated as 'will' is not considered as a modal marker in the language. Therefore, the future tense marker is compatible with the past tense marker.

g. Pronominal Agreement Marker, Future or modal marker, agreement marker, a be particle, aspectual marker, past tense marker and the verb

19. À yà á ké sí kí brê.
2sg fut agr. be asp process play
You will be going to play.

This is a complex structure which permits an agreement marker, future tense, another agreement marker, a be particle aspectual marker and a kí process marker before the verb. It is also possible to have a situation in the future tense marker can be substituted for a modal marker as shown below:

20. À kpà á ké sí kí brê.
2sg mod agr. pst asp process play
You would have been going to play.

This implies that he has not been doing so.

h. Pronominal Agreement Marker, Past perfect, aspectual marker and the Verb

21. M mé diá.
1sg Pst. perfect eat
I have come.
22. M mé sí dí.
1sg pst perf. asp. come
I have been coming
23. M máà si ka.
1sg Pst.tense Asp go
I used to go/attend.
24. N yàá sí nám
1sg Fut. tense be do
I will be doing.

Observe that examples (23 – 25) show verbal expressions with three grammatical components attached to the main verb to express an idea, **agr +tense +aspect +verb**.

These elements which are units on their own are strung together to express the speaker's intended idea, as posited by the morpheme base theory.

The Ibibio verbal system can get even more complex with the concatenation of more grammatical as in:

i. **Pronominal agreement, past tense or future agreement and aspectual markers before the verb.**

26. É màá é sí nò
3pl past Agr Asp give
They used to give

27. É yàá é sí dép
3pl future Agr Asp buy
They will be buying

The examples in (26 - 27) present a verbal construction having a string of pro + tense + agreement + aspect + verb. They demonstrate the fact that the Ibibio verbal construction can have 4 grammatical elements attached to the main verb in one expression.

Other forms of verbal construction with four grammatical components are expressions with negative markers. The order of the string is pro + mood + tense + verb + negation suffix.

28. Ḿ kpí ḱ nám má.
1sg Modal pst do Neg
I would not have done it.

29. Í kpí ḱ tèm mé.
1sg Modal pst cook Neg
He would not have cooked.

30. Ú kpú kú dép pé.
2sg Modal pst buy Neg
You should not have bought it.

31. Í kpí kí tághá ké.
 3sg Modal pst kick Neg
 He should not have kicked it.

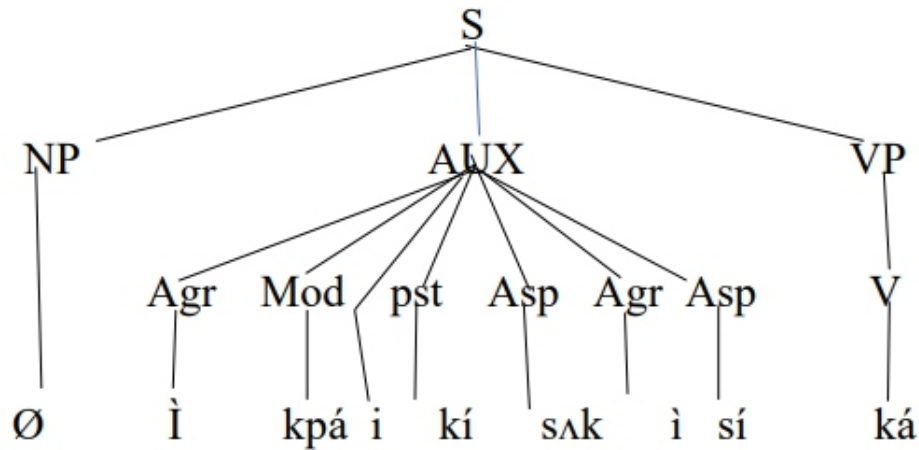
In the Ibibio language, the lexical verb in the verbal construction only permits the negative marker after itself, unlike other grammatical components which occur before the verb.

j. Pronominal agreement, modal, tense, aspect, agreement, aspect markers and the verb

32. Ì kpá i kí sɔk ì sí ká.
 3pl Modal agr. pst asp agr asp go
 We would have still been going
33. À kpà á ké sɔk á sí dí.
 2sg Modal agr Pst asp agr asp come
 You would have still been coming.
34. À kpà á ké sɔk á sí nám.
 2sg Modal agr pst asp agr asp do
 You would have still been doing.
35. À kpà á ké sí á sɔk nám.
 2sg Modal agr. pst asp agr asp do
 You would have still been doing.

Examples (32-35) demonstrate the possibility to have double aspectual marker in one verbal structure and even multiple agreement markers in one verbal string as observed in the above examples. The sɔk and sí aspectual markers are found in between the agreement markers. This is what this language tolerates. It is also important to indicate the freedom of movement of the adverbial elements in examples (34 and 35) without rendering any of the structures ungrammatical. This paper calls this situation aspectual mobility. It is important to note that every grammatical element which precedes the verb is realised as the constituent of the auxiliary node or inflection as illustrated on the tree below for example (32)

Diagram 3: Constituents of the Auxiliary Node



Interestingly, the grammar of the Ibibio language allows for the reduplication of the main verb as shown on the next linear sequence

j. Pronominal agreement + Modal + Tense + Asp. + Agr. Asp. and Reduplicated verb

27. À kpé ké sɔk à sí dí-dí.
 2sg Modal pst asp agr asp come-come
 You would have still been coming.
28. Ì kpí kí sɔk ì sí ná-nám
 3pl Modal pst asp Agr Agr doing-doing
 We would have still been doing it
29. À kpé ké sɔk à sí ká-ká
 2sg Modal Pst. asp agr asp going-going
 You would have still been going.

The doubling of the lexical verb which can be argued to show emphasis further reveals the complex nature of the Ibibio verbal system.

The last pattern of verbal structure considers a situation where the verbal string contains two verbs.

k. Double Verb Structure

30. Ḿ kpàá má í nám.
 1sg Modal V(like) Agr V(do)

I would like to do it.

31. Á kpaá má í dó.
3sg Modal love agr marry
He would love to marry
32. Á kpaá yém í dí.
3sg Modal want agr come
He would want to come.

In examples 39 - 41, the verbal construction is seen to have two verbs where the first one occurs after the modal marker, and the other at word final position. The dominating verb out of the two is an area researchers can take up. This is an issue for further research.

3. Conclusion

This study examined the grammatical constituents present in Ibibio verbal construction, as well as the sequence in which these parts occur. The research findings indicate that the verb has the capacity to incorporate a significant number of bound parts inside its syntactic structure. Additionally, it brought attention to the observation that the incorrect positioning of certain grammatical factors leads to the formation of grammatically incorrect formulations. It is noteworthy that the verb has the ability to constitute a substantial portion of an utterance. The present study provides additional support for the claim that verbs belong to the category of open word classes. This is due to their ability to generate new words within the lexicon, thereby highlighting their significant role as a syntactic category in language. It should be acknowledged that the potential combinations of spoken utterances within the language extend beyond the dataset utilised in this study. Therefore, it is advised that more investigation be conducted.

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