

## **The Study of One-Word Sentences in Igbo**

**Ikegwuonu, Christiana Ngozi**

Department of Linguistics/Igbo

Chukwuemeka Odumegwu University Igbariam Campus

e-mail: ngooikegwuonu@yahoo.com

08037776192

### **Abstract**

*This paper sets out to investigate one-word sentences in Igbo with the aim of finding out the categories of words which the language employs in expressing them, their structures, functions and the contexts or situations in which they are used in the language. The data for this study were obtained through oral interviews and also through recording of speech of Igbo native speakers in spontaneous settings. This study adopted a descriptive method of data analysis. The study identified some specific classes of verbs such as motion verbs, activity verbs, verbs of perception, verbs of recognition and verbs of contact which the language employs in expressing one-word sentences and the different contexts or situations in which they are used. These verbs can take extensional suffixes. The enclitic *nù* is attached to the verbs when issuing command to more than one person. The verbal structures are short and simple. Some nouns and adverbs are also employed in expressing one-word sentences in Igbo. The words have neither overt subjects nor objects at all. They have their peculiar tones and most of them obey the rules of vowel harmony that operates in the language. Furthermore, an attempt has been made to tone-mark all the syllables used for the study. This implies that both the high, low and downstep tones are marked.*

**Keywords:** Sentence, one-word sentence, imperative, greeting, interrogation.

## **1. Introduction**

One-word sentence is one of the sentence types that is used in every day communication in many natural languages of the world. This implies that it is a universal phenomenon. However, the degrees of usage of these on-word sentences vary from an individual to another, from language to language and even from dialect to dialect. The words which are used in expressing one-word sentence are independent and can stand on their own expressing meaningful ideas or notions. The meaning of most of these one-word sentences can be determined by the speaker's intension, concept and context. This implies that one-word sentence is pragmatically controlled.

One-word sentences appear in different forms depending on the particular language(s) they are found and the contexts in which they are used. As people interact or converse on daily basis, they may employ in one way or the other various forms of one-word sentences to express their feelings, thoughts, actions and ideas. Even, writers employ one-word sentences in their writings. Sometimes, when we speak, make suggestions, requests, promises, and prohibitions and giving invitations, we employ various forms of one-word sentences. Therefore, a single idea can be expressed using a one-word sentence. Also, one-word sentence represent a single meaning and it can be used in a specific context to convey a certain meaning. The use of one-word sentences is not restricted to any set of people, environment, sex, age, social class or occasion. This paper has eight sections. Section one is the introduction; Section two discusses the overview of what sentence is all about. Section three discusses one-word sentence while section four looks

at its characteristics. Section five examines the morphological structures of words used in making one-word sentences while section six treats the patterns of one-word sentence. Section seven analyzes how one-word sentences are expressed in Igbo and the different contexts of usage while section eight is the conclusion.

## **2. Sentence: An Overview**

Before we discuss the one-word sentences in Igbo, we will first give the brief overview of what a sentence is all about. Many scholars have attempted the definition a sentence according to each person's perspective. The fact is that a sentence does not have a common acceptable definition. A sentence is a group words that are put together to mean something. It is basic unit of a language which expresses a complete thought. It does this by following the grammatical rules of syntax. A sentence, according to Murthy (2007:235) is a "group of words that make complete sense". It denotes a free standing clause which is not contained within some larger expressions. Okoh (2010:173) posits that a sentence "is the highest meaningful stretch of an utterance on the rank scale of grammar. All the other units on the grammatical rank scale are locable within the sentence". A sentence starts with capital letter and ends with a fullstop, an interrogative mark or an exclamation mark. It must contain the obligatory elements such as a subject and a verb and the verb must be finite nature. A finite verb is that form of a verb that can comfortably stand on its own and makes a complete sense.

To Crystal (1997:94), a sentence is the highest unit to which syntactic rules apply-an independent linguistic form, not included by the virtue of any grammatical construction in any large linguistic form. A sentence is the basic unit of written communication. Ifejirika (2012:29) asserts that "a sentence is a

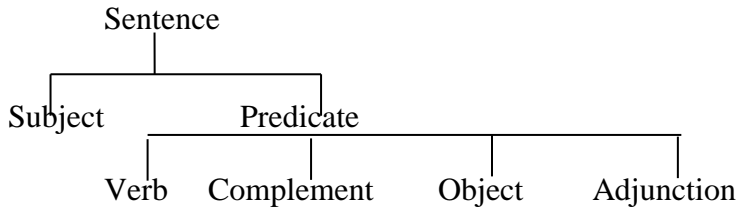
structured group of words that contain a subject, a finite verb and possess a complete sense or meaning”. To express a complete thought, a sentence must refer to someone or something (the subject), and it must tell us something about that person or thing. This job of telling us about something is done by the predicate which always contains a verb. Emenanjo (2015:331) defines a sentence as “a sequence of well selected syntactic items combined into a grammatically correct and acceptable unit in accordance with certain rules, and patterns of arrangement...”

A sentence is therefore, a set of expressions that is complete in itself and typically containing a subject and a predicate conveying a statement, question and exclamation. It is the highest level of elements in the study of syntax. Traditionally, a sentence is divided into two main parts, namely: subject and predicate. The subject of the verb tells us what or whom the sentence is about. In other words, it refers to a person, a place, a thing, an idea, or a concept we are talking about. The subject could be a single word, a phrase, or a dependent clause. The predicate tells us something about the subject. The predicate begins with the verb and right through to the end of the sentence. It says what happens to the subject. Consider the following sentences:

1.

	<b>Subject</b>	<b>Predicate</b>
a.	Òbí	gbùrù òké ùnyààhù
b.	Úchè nà Èbélè	bèrè ákwá
c.	Nwókē à	lùrù ògù
d.	The books	are neatly packed
e.	Awka	is the capital of Anambra State
f.	His children	travelled to Abuja yesterday

It is interesting to note that the subject of the verb is obligatorily a noun phrase (NP). In addition to function as the subject of the sentence, the noun phrase can perform the following functions in the sentence: object of the verb, complement of the sentence and object of the prepositional phrase. Note that this study will not go into the detailed discussion of the above functions. The diagram of a sentence is represented thus:



### **3. One-Word Sentence**

One-word sentence refers to a single word that can form a full sentence that is meaningful and acceptable. It is simple in form and structure. Sweet (1900: 127) describes one-word sentence as a variety of words which have the peculiarity of always forming a sentence by themselves. A one-word sentence usually does not contain a subject or a complement, yet, it conveys meaning. In the use of one-word sentence, context is very important and relative to the word chosen and the intended meaning. The words that are employed in expressing the one-word sentence in various natural languages may belong to different word classes such as noun, verb, adverb, adjective and so on. In some languages of the world, it manifests greatly in spoken forms rather than in written forms while in some it manifests both in spoken forms and written forms. Hirst (1998:372) posits that “in Japanese, word sentence is meant to carry the least amount of information as syntactically possible, while intonation becomes the primary carrier of meaning”.

#### 4. The Features of a One-Word Sentence

The one-word sentence has the following features:

- i. It contains only a single word.
- ii. It has no overt subject.
- iii. It does not take any complement or object.
- iv. It is simple in form and structure.

#### 5. Morphological Structures of a One-Word Sentence

In terms of morphological structure, the one-word sentence is simple in form. The words that are employed in expressing one-word sentences are made up of consonants and vowels as in 'go' which has the CV structure. Sometimes, in some languages like Igbo the CV root may take extensional suffixes to express one-word sentences as in:

2.	a.	pù + tá + wá	→	pùtáwá (come out)
		CV CVCV		CVCVCV
	b.	kwù + sị	→	kwùsị (stop)
		CV CV		CVCV
	c.	ba + nye	→	banye (enter)
		CV CV		CVCV

#### 6. Patterns of the One-Word Sentences in Igbo

By patterns, we are referring to the constituents that can make up one-word sentences in Igbo. The words which are employed in expressing one-word sentences in the language can belong to any of the following categories. Consider the following examples:

3.	a.	Verb (V)	=	bị́á 'come'
	b.	Verb (V)	=	pùtáwá 'come'
	c.	Noun (N)	=	nnóò 'welcome'
	d.	Adverb (Adv.)	=	ngwá 'hurry'

- e. Adverb (Adv.) = èbéē ‘where’  
f. Adjective (Adj.) = óchá ‘white’

## **7. Analysis of the Expression of One-Word Sentences, their Functions and the Contexts or Situations in which they are used in Igbo Language**

The single words which the Igbo language employs in expressing one-word sentences and their different contextual functions in the language are grouped under the following sub-categories:

- |                              |                           |
|------------------------------|---------------------------|
| a. Imperative/Command        | b. Greeting               |
| c. Question/Interrogation    | d. Exclamation            |
| e. Requests                  | f. Apology/Reconciliation |
| g. Humiliation/Abuse/Mockery | h. Adverbial notions      |
| i. Reply/answer to questions |                           |

### **7.1 Imperative/Command**

Imperative sentences are used to issue simple commands. In Igbo language, the imperative sentences are restricted with regard to certain verbal categories. An imperative sentence is usually the shortest at the surface level commonly occurring with no overt subject and sometimes even without an object. This implies that it consists of just a verb with no overt subject and object as in:

- |                                |                            |                              |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------|
| 4.a. Pùó<br>Go-ovs<br>Go       | b. Bìá<br>Come-ovs<br>Come | c. Sìé<br>Cook - ovs<br>Cook |
| d. Nùó<br>Drink - ovs<br>Drink | e. Tàá<br>Chew-ovs<br>Chew | f. Kùó<br>Beat-ovs<br>Beat   |
| g. Nòró<br>Stay-rvsuff         | h. Wèré<br>Take-rv         | i. Bàtá<br>Enter-suff        |

	Stay		Take		Enter
j.	Nàtá	k.	Pùtá	l.	Tànyé
	Receive-suff		Come-suff		Pour-suff
	Receive		Come out		Pour into

In the data (4a - f), the verbs constitute of the CV root which open vowel suffixes are attached to indicate command given to one person. The structure is thus: [CV + OVS]. The tone of the verbs is low high. In data (4g and h) the RV suffix is attached to the CV roots to indicate command. The structure is thus [CV + RV]. In data (4i - l) imperative notions are expressed without attaching either OVS or RV suffix to the verb roots rather CV suffixes are attached. The structure is thus [CV + CV]. In the negative form, command in Igbo is signaled by the attachment of the negative imperative suffix *-la* and the vowel prefix *a-/e-* to the CV root to indicate prohibition as in:

5.	a.	Ápùlà	h.	Éwèlà
		Pref-go-suff		Pref-take-perf
		Don't go		Don't take
	b.	Ábǎlálá	i.	Ábàtálà
		Pref-come-suff		Pref-enter-suff-perf
		Don't come		Don't enter
	c.	Ésílá	j.	Ánātalá
		Pref-cook-suff		Pref-receive-suff-perf
		Don't cook		Don't receive
	d.	Áńùlálá	k.	Ápùtálà
		Don't drink		Pref-go-suff-perf
		Pref-drink-suff		Don't go
	e.	Átālá	l.	Átānyélá
		Don't chew		Pref-pour-suff-perf



	Pref-chew-suff		Don't pour
f.	Ákūlá	m.	Ábànyèlà
	Pref-beat-perf		Pref-enter-perf
	Don't beat		dont enter
g.	Ánólá		
	Pref-stay-perf		
	Don't stay		

However, when the command is given to more than one person, the verb attracts an enclitic 'nụ' as in:

6.a.	Pùọ̀nụ	f.	Lèénụ
	Go-ovs-encl		See-ovs-encl
	You (pl) go		You (pl) see
b.	Bìánụ	g.	Chètánụ
	Come-ovs-encl		Remember-suff-encl
	You (pl) come		You (pl) remember
c.	Sìénụ	h.	Ghòtánụ
	Cook-ovs-encl		Understand-suff-encl
	You (pl) cook		You (pl) understand
d.	Ñùọ̀nụ	i.	Nùrúnụ
	Drink-ovs-encl		Hear-rv-encl
	You (pl) drink		You (pl) hear
e.	Tàánụ		
	Chew-ovs-encl		
	You (pl) chew		

In the above data, the enclitic *nụ* is attached to the verbs to indicate that the command is given to more than one person.

Sometimes, extensional suffixes are attached to the CV root to express one-word sentences in Igbo as in:

- |    |    |                                       |    |  |
|----|----|---------------------------------------|----|--|
| 7. | a. | Sèbé<br>Cook-suff<br>Begin to draw    | b. | Bàtáwá<br>Come-suff<br>Start coming in |
|    | c. | Dòwé<br>Keep-suff<br>Keep it          | d. | Rìwé<br>eat-suff<br>Start eating       |
|    | e. | Chìtá<br>Collect-suff<br>Collect      | f. | Pùtá<br>Come-suff<br>Come out          |
|    | g. | Chètá<br>Remember-suff<br>Remember it |    |  |

It is important to note that all the examples shown in (4, 5, 6 and 7) indicate direct command.

## **7.2 Greeting**

One-word sentences can be used to express greetings of all sorts in the Igbo language in different contexts or situations. Greeting is the first word used on seeing somebody or writing to somebody to express one's feeling for being received. Greeting is a universal phenomenon. It manifests itself in many natural languages but there exist some parametric variations as regard to the mode of greetings from one language to another. In Igbo, there exist various specific greetings which are associated with various types of situations or contexts which are employed to express one's feelings or emotions. They are expressed using the following single words:

Examples:

8

	<b>One-word sentence</b>	<b>Situation/Context of usage</b>
a.	Ñdó ‘take heart’, ‘it is a pity’	used to sympathize with the person who is in the sorrowful condition or depressed or injured or sick or grieved or lost something.
b.	Káà ‘take heart’, ‘it is a pity’	used to sympathize with the person who is in the sorrowful condition or depressed or injured or sick or grieved or lost something.
c.	Mésié ‘take heart’, ‘it is a pity’	used to sympathize with the person who is in the sorrowful condition or depressed or injured or sick or grieved or lost something.
d.	Dàálú ‘thanks’	used for expressing appreciation
e.	Ñnọ̀/nnọ̀ ‘welcome	used for welcoming/receiving someone
f.	Ñdèèwó/déèwó/déèmé ‘well done/thanks’	used for encouraging someone for something/a job well done or a task well done
g.	Déèménù ‘thank you’ (pl)	used for appreciation
h.	Nàgídé ‘tolerate’	used to indicate tolerance for someone

### 7.3 Question/Interrogation

One-word can be used to indicate interrogative expressions. In the Igbo language, some question words can be used to express one-word sentences as in:

- |    |    |                 |    |                |
|----|----|-----------------|----|----------------|
| 9. | a. | Ònyé? ‘who’     | b. | Gị̀nị́? ‘what’ |
|    | c. | Èbéē? ‘where’   | d. | Kèdú ‘how’     |
|    | e. | Òlé? ‘how many’ |    |                |

When these question words are used in isolation to ask question, information is elicited.

#### **7.4 Exclamation**

One-word can be used as an exclamatory sentence:

10. a. Chéì! b. Éwóò!  
c. Háà! d. Yáà!  
e. Hîà!

Furthermore, one word can be used to indicate affirmation where someone is giving blessing or wishes to another person. Examples:

11. a. Íséē! b. Íyáā! c. Òfó!

#### **7.5 Requests**

In Igbo, the notion of request can be expressed by employing single words such as:

11. a. Bikō ‘please’  
b. Dòó ‘please’

#### **7.6 Apology/Reconciliation**

Apart from using some verbal categories to express imperative in Igbo, some verbal categories can be used to express one-word sentences when tendering an apology or reconciling with someone in Igbo as in:

12. a. Gbághàrá ‘forgive’  
b. Ghàrá ‘forget’  
c. Dòzíénù ‘you (pl)reconcile’  
d. Gbághàránù ‘you (pl) forgive’

#### **7.7 Humiliation/Abuse/Mockery**

A single word can be used to express humiliation and abusive notions to someone who exhibits unworthy or negative behaviour. Examples of such words include:

13. a. Ntòṛ/ímméē/nyòṛ ‘a kind of mockery word’

- b. Tùfjà 'God forbid'
- c. Tùfjàkwà 'God forbid'
- d. Àzìgbá 'God forbid'
- e. Árū 'abomination'

### **7.8 Adverbial Notions**

One-word sentences can be expressed using the following adverbs to indicate adverbial notions as in:

- 14. a. Ñgwá 'quickly'
- b. Ósọ 'quick'
- c. Nwáyòò 'slowly'
- d. Ósìísọ 'hurriedly'

### **7.9 Reply/Answer to questions**

One-word sentences can be expressed using the following words to indicate reply or answer to a question.

- |         |       |         |       |
|---------|-------|---------|-------|
| a. Èèyé | 'yes' | b. Éē   | 'yes' |
| c. Èyé  | 'yes' | d. Óóó  | 'yes' |
| e. Mbà  | 'no'  | f. Òóló | 'no'  |

## **8. Conclusion**

This study investigates the one-word sentence in Igbo, its structure, functions and the various contexts or situations in which it is used in the language. It examines how one-word sentences are employed. It examined how one-word sentences are employed in issuing commands, greetings, questions, exclamation, requests, apology and so on in Igbo. The findings of the study show that Igbo language has elaborate ways of expressing one-word sentences. Some specific classes of verbs such as motion verbs,

activity verbs, verbs of perception, verbs of recognition and verbs of contact are employed in expressing one-word sentences. These verbs can also take extensional suffixes. The imperative verbs which indicate a command being issued to more than one person take the enclitic *nù*. Their structures are short and simple. Some nouns and adverbs are also employed in expressing one word sentences in Igbo. These words do not have overt subjects or objects. All one-word sentences are expressed in direct speech acts. They have their peculiar tones and most of them obey the rule of vowel harmony that operates in the Igbo language.

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