

## THETA ROLES AND THEMATIC RELATIONS OF TIV VERBS

**Nguemo Rachael IORJIM & Jighjigh Leo Justus ISHIMA**

Department of Languages and Linguistics  
Moses Orshio Adasu University

Markudi, Benue State

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/jolls.v15i2.4>

### Abstract

The study examines theta roles and thematic relations of Tiv verbs. These describes the semantic roles an argument plays in respect to a verb. These roles include Agent, Theme, Goal, Experiencer, and Instrument. They are assigned by the verb. Theta role is linked to argument positions where theta criterion is put to use. This exploration of theta roles and thematic relation has widely been handled in other languages but scarcely in Tiv grammar. This work, therefore, aims to examine how many argument(s) a verb selects, grammatical roles and functions that a given Tiv verb can assign to its argument(s) and the types of verbs employed for use. Data are collected from adult native speakers who are competent speakers of the language. The researcher employed introspection in the translation of the interview and to ascertain the grammaticality of those sentences made. Theta theory of Government and Binding (GB) of Chomsky (1981) is adopted. The study reveals that Tiv verbs are categorized as transitive, intransitive and ditransitive which require either one or more argument(s) to which thematic role(s) are assigned, Theta grid shows the subcategorization of those verbs given extra explanation to the analysis. The study concludes that Tiv verbs are of three kinds and can selects argument and assign roles base on the type of verb. A piece that adds to the existing works on Tiv grammar as well as create a niche for further studies.

**Keywords:** theta role, thematic relation, Tiv verbs. Syntactic structures

### Introduction

Language identifies a people as well as a means by which they communicate. Scholars have expressed this in different words yet not different in the targeted meaning. For Chomsky (1957), language is an innate, mental, rule-govern system that enables humans to generate and understand an unlimited number of sentences. Chomsky (1965) features prominently language as an internalized system of rules, competence versus performance as foundational text for understanding language as a mental grammar. In (1984) the emphasis is laid on the I-language (internal, individual) that language exists in the mind/brain not the society and it is defined by rules and principles not by list of sentences. The speaker knows instinctively grammatical and ungrammatical sentences produced without prior exposure; and the E-language (external, social) consisting of speech, writing, text and utterances shared in a community. In studying a language, one must necessarily

begin the study with its grammar which is a set of principles. Lilian Heageman (1994 :29) says “grammar of a language is a coherent system of rules and principles that are at the basis of the grammatical sentences of a language”. A grammar generates the sentences of a language. First requirement for any grammar is that it provides a characterization of the language it describes, i.e. the grammar must be able to distinguish those strings of words which are sentences of the language from those which are not. Chomsky 1960, /1965 suggests three parameters for evaluating grammars: which are observational, descriptive and explanatory levels of adequacy. This is seen as the totality of the comprehensive language structure and a raw material for communication within and across human cultures. So, in generating infinitive number of sentences, a speaker intending to carry out a study must have competence and performance in such a language.

Theta role and thematic relations describe the semantic role an argument plays in respect to a verb. Such roles include agent, theme, goal, experiencer, instrument. They are assigned by the verb. Theta role is linked to argument positions where theta criterion is put to use. Each argument gets one and only one theta role and each theta role is assigned to one argument (Cook & Newson, 2007; Carnie, 2013). Orkeghen (2025) summarizes these in theta grid and theta criterion. The emphasis here is on roles assignment by predicates to constituents. Artur (2025:2) also agreed that “theta roles are generally assumed to be assigned to arguments specifically by the verb phrase”. This means that, theta roles and semantics relations serve as interface between syntax, semantics, and cognition. They are treated as syntactic encoding of argument structure, constrained by principle like the theta criterion. This exploration of theta role and thematic relation has widely been handled in other languages but scarcely in Tiv grammar. This work therefore aims at examining how many arguments a verb selects, grammatical roles and functions that a given Tiv verb can assign to its argument(s) and the kind of verbs employed.

### **Linguistic profile of Tiv**

The word Tiv is a term that bears three varying meanings. Udu (2009:1), asserts that “first, it refers to the ancestral father of Tiv race of Central Nigeria. Second, Tiv refers to the ethnic group which is a descendant of Tiv. Lastly, it refers to the language spoken by this race.” This means that the ‘Tiv’ stands for the ancestral father, the people and also their language. The Tiv people by classification of African language are a unique ethnic group of semi-Bantu linguistic affinity (Ishima 2017). They speak one common language though with varieties but mutually intelligible to all since the language is homogenous. Tiv language is largely spoken across Nigeria, particularly in the states of Benue, Taraba, Nasarawa, and Plateau with a numerical strength of over six million speakers.

### **Objectives**

In the framework of Government and Binding as developed by Chomsky (1981), the concept of theta roles and thematic relations remains central

to the analysis of argument structure and the interpretation of sentence meaning. Theta roles, as syntactic requirements imposed by predicates, determine the number and type of arguments a verb can license, while thematic relations capture the semantic roles that participants play within an event structure. This forms an interface between syntax and semantics. These has been the concern of some scholars like; Baker (1988), Larson (1990), and Pesetsky (1995). In recent developments, scholars have re-examined the status of these phenomena in relation to our indigenous languages and their relationship with case assignment, agreement, and even syntactic movement. Despite all these, under-documented languages still lack syntactic investigation on how these roles are assigned and interpreted. It is against this backdrop that the present study seeks to;

1. identify argument structure.
2. classify Tiv verbs, and
3. analyses theta roles assignments

### **Theoretical Framework**

This research adopts Theta Theory which is one of the modules identified in the Government and Binding framework of syntactic analysis. Developed from Principles and Parameter framework of syntax. It aims is to give explanations on how verbs in syntax assign roles to argument in a construct. The role assignment is referred to as thematic relation. Agbedo (2018:230). States that the theory “deals with the functional relationship between a predicate and its argument: a predicate is said to assign a theta role to each of its argument” therefore, theta theory in a nutshell, is about grammatical roles and functions that certain arguments perform in a sentence. In other words, the theory stipulates that grammar should go beyond only providing information regarding the categorial, sub-categorization and selectional properties of lexical items, but also providing thematic information about lexical entries.

Yusuf (1998) in his description considered theta theory as a module which is concerned with the subtle observation that lexical category will have theta attributes either as a receiver or an

assigner. It deals with assignment of roles to NPs, collectively referred to as arguments. It also operates on the principle of theta criterion which holds thus; “each argument bears one and only one theta role, each theta role is assigned to one and only one argument”. Such theta roles are said to be constant at all times.

The commonly expressed roles identified by the following scholars: Yusuf (1998), Haegeman (1994), Radford (2009) and Agbedo (2018), are seen thus;

**AGENT:**The instigator of some action i.e. the person or thing that carries out or performs the action.

**THEME:** The person or thing that is affected by the action i.e. the entity that has undergone or suffered the effect of some action.

**LOCATION:** the place an entity is situated i.e. the resting place of something.

**SOURCE:** The point of origin of an entity.

**GOAL:** Final destination of a theme the location towards which an entity moves.

**PATH:** The point or route through which an entity moves.

The theory is important in discussing any syntactic structure like argument/constituent. This is because it accounts for the phenomenon of predicate and argument structure of human languages. The theory is employed because its tenet provides a good ground for the analysis in Tiv sentence structure.

### **Empirical Review**

Several descriptive and grammatical studies have examined verb morphology, transitivity, and valency patterns with explicit references to theta theory of Government and Binding even in Tiv grammar with various findings and conclusions. However, the present work aims to portray of its applicability to Tiv verbs and to ascertain the number a verb can select to make a grammatical construct. Closely related are some works by scholars as considered here.

Muhammed (2014) carried out research to ascertain the argument structures of verbs in Hausa. Using theta theory of universal grammar, he identified several theta roles that can be assigned by the verb such as Agent, Theme, Instrument, Locative, Goal etc. He was able to

prove that in Hausa language, verbs have similar behaviour as verbs globally. Also, the argument structure of a verb was inherent to the verb and properly applied by the native speaker. Muhammed concludes that theta theory can safely be applied to Hausa in order to make semantic meaning of syntactic structures. The difference here is that, the present research seeks to know the number of roles a given verb assigns to its argument with verb classification which both Idoko and Muhammed exclude in their works.

Similarly, Imu (2015) examined argument structure of Urhobo verbs. Using the minimalist approach, he identified ten types of theta roles and thematic relations. Also, he discovered that the valency structure of a verb determines its argument structure. Based on the research findings, Imu concludes that Urhobo verbs possess all the qualities that makes it fit into the universal grammar framework. This is a language spoken in Delta state, Nigeria by the Urhobo people also found in Bayelsa State. A related study by Terfa & Adzer (2023), the findings of the study revealed that in Tiv syntax, nominal subjects get theta roles when they bind the trace directly or equivalently. Theta roles are also assigned to object complements of transitive verbs. Though he speaks of transitive verbs but not the strength of the verb that selects the number of argument(s) for use. The present study seeks to know the number of argument(s) a Tiv verb selects and the thematic function assigned to each. Idoko et al (2023). Carried out a study on Idoma verb using theta theory. It aims to portray the extent to which the theory can be applied to Idoma. The researcher uses verbs as the assigners of roles, explores the various types of roles and the structural position occupied by arguments which largely determine the theta role assigned to them. The work concludes that theta theory can be applied in Idoma language with each thematic relation and theta roles aptly applied. Given the example used, Idoko fail to explain the role of Agent in voice change.

According to this, Agentive role strictly occupies the external grid without change to avoid ungrammaticality.

Énúwá kwú òhí a  
Enuwa carry(pst) pot the  
Enuwa carried the pot

The difference with the present research lays in the ability of the verb to select and assign roles even in voice change. Extensive studies on theta roles and thematic relations have been carried out on well-documented languages such as English and other Indo-European Languages. However, there is a relative scarcity of detailed empirical research on how these concepts operate in African Languages, (owing to the limited empirical review) particularly Tiv. Specifically, there is limited work that systematically analyses the argument structure of Tiv verbs, classifies Tiv verbs based on their theta grid properties, and explains how theta roles are assigned across different verb classes. More so, existing studies often overlook the interaction between thematic relations and verb classification in Tiv leaving out how semantics roles map onto syntactic structures in the language. This calls for a comprehensive investigation that integrates argument identification, verb classification, and theta roles assignment in Tiv, in order to contribute both to the description of the language and to broader theoretical discussions on the universality and variability of thematic relations.

### Methodology

This research adopts qualitative research design. It consists of open-ended questions. Responses are analyzed by non-statistical methods. Data were obtained through semi-structured interviews and participant observation involving competent native speakers aged 50 and above from Gboko and Buruku local government in Benue state, Nigeria. The sample size represents linguistics variation, captures diversity (age, gender, region), availability/ accessibility of participants, accuracy and a representative power of the participants. Gboko and Buruku were deemed fit for this research due to the fact that the variety of Tiv spoken in Gboko is the standard and

central Tiv language. It is used in education, media, Bible translation and formal writings. In addition, Gboko is the administrative capital of Tiv where their paramount chief (the Tor Tiv) resides, as such a home to a huge number of Tiv people who are also the custodian of Tiv culture. The variety spoken in Buruku is similar because, they share a geographical location.

Twenty participants were selected through purposive sampling of those with formal linguistic knowledge to reflect fluency and dialectal standard. Interviews were conducted in informal settings such as participants' homes and village gatherings, reflecting natural language use. Observational notes were recorded in a field notebook. Selected data are presented in the data analysis section to illustrate different types of Tiv verbs and how the verbs select theta roles and assign thematic functions. The data is presented in Tiv language with research's introspection, morpheme-by-morpheme glossing (three-tier of interlinear glossing) and translation into English is employed on the Tiv sentences to facilitate understanding and interpretation. Tiv verbs and transitivity are well indicated. Each theta role is indicated separately with clear explanation. The theta grid is also used. The methods for analysis were guided by Theta Theory within the framework of Government and Binding model (Chomsky, 1981)

### Data Presentation

#### Theta Roles and Thematic Relation of Tiv Verbs

The relationship between syntax and semantics brings structural well-formedness of the grammar of any language. It is on this basis that this study checked the number of argument(s) a Tiv verb must select for a grammatical construct bearing in mind that the Tiv verbs fall into three groups intransitives, transitive and ditransitive and each form grammatical sentences if given the correct number of argument(s). In a syntactic analysis, the verb is the head of the verb phrase (VP) and normally determines the structure of the VP and other constituents at the predicate level. Each verb has a demand that must be fulfilled to make a grammatical construct. The subcategorization feature of a transitive verb

requires an NP and a direct object to complete it meaning. Intransitive is not used in a passive voice, it uses modifiers, and does not require object but makes a grammatical construct. Ditransitive requires two objects (direct and indirect), it uses passive voice which either of the object can be the subject in such cases. Morpheme by morpheme glossing and three tier glossing are used. The use of theta grid here clarifies theta criterion. In the grid, each of the argument is represented by the use of boxes with each column contained a theta role and indices for co-indexing ensuring the agreement between the argument(s) and theta criterion. Here are few of the Tiv verbs sample. A few are used in the sentences analysis indicating for each verb the number of argument(s) that it has selected.

ya, yav, yém, yam, yila ,za, téé, va, tese, tsébe, kôr, ngee, ór, pande, wua, gba, kile, téma, gbide yevese ,kaha, lôô ,tôr ,tuu, kpela ,vaa, due,ngee ,tema, sor, mough, kunde, hula. Kpe, káá

## Discussion

### Theta role and thematic relation of Agent in Tiv.

The Agent is the entity that deliberately performs, initiates, or causes an event. It usually occupies the subject position in active sentences and it is normally a living being conscious of taking action. Even in voice change, the actor still remains the Agent. For instance;

2a. Heneter hembe jingi. (transitive verb)  
NP1-Heneter-Vpst-break-NP2-mirror.  
Heneter broke the mirror.

2b. jingi la ka Heneter a hembe ye.  
NP1-jingi-Aux -is NP2 -Heneter-Pro he-Vpst-break.

The mirror is broken by Heneter.

The sentences in example 2a and b explain the change in voice but maintains the thematic roles. Though, a change in subject. This contradicts Idoma verbs even as one of the SVO languages as stated by Idoko (2023:37) that Idoma, Agent enjoy “a static structural position”. Static role is associated with states or conditions not actions. State or condition goes with experiencer and

theme. Agent is dynamic, intention, and causation. In Tiv sentences, Agent can be used in both voices; active or passive.

3. Á yém (intransitive verb)  
NP<sup>1</sup> Indef.pro. vb-pst-go  
(s)he left. Grid

4. Sena hidé. (intransitive verb)  
NP1-phrasal V-come back.  
Sena is back.  
Øgrid for yém/ hide.

NP1
Agent
i

The Agent is the entity that intentionally initiates, control, or performs an action. Being a sentient or inanimate being that act out of volition. The verb (predicate) yém (left- past tense of leave) is an intransitive verb and does not act upon an object. “Á” is the noun phrase(pronoun) performing the action. A subject (argument) taking a conscious, intentional decision to exit a place therefore, satisfies the definition of an Agent. The same applies to “Sena” as unergative subject bearing the thematic role of initiator or doer of the action. He performs the action of returning (hidé.)

### Theta role and thematic relation of Theme in Tiv.

The role of theme/ patient is assigned to the argument that suffers as a result of the action expressed by the predicate. It expresses the relation between the predicate and its direct object. The role of theme is identified when used in sentences where the predicate is a transitive or ditransitive verb. Cook & Newson (2007). This is because the sub categorization features of such verbs require obligatory complement which is realized by an NP. Theme as a theta role is realized within the VP and is controlled by the predicate. The thematic role here is fixed in the “deep structure” of a sentence, meaning even if you change the “voice” the role remains. For instance;

5. Heneter wua iyô.  
NP1-V-pst-killed-NP2-snake.  
Heneter killed a snake.

6. Heneter ya luam.

NP1-Heneter-V-pst ate- NP2 -food.

Heneter ate food.

Øgrid for hide/ ya.

NP1	NP2
Agent	Theme
I	J

In example 5, *Iyô* (snake) is the entity that is being acted upon and directly affected by the action (it is killed). It undergoes the profound change of the state (living to dead) so, even when the sentence is said either in active or passive form, *iyô* (snake) still remains affected. The verb *wua* (kill) is a transitive verb requiring two noun phrases to make a complete grammatical sentence; one to be the Agent (subject) and another to be the Theme (direct object). The theme stands as the internal argument of the verb *wua* (kill) while *Heneter* is the Agent and the external argument. In 6, *luam* (food) moves from being a complete, external entity to being consumed. *Iyô* and *luam* takes the thematic role of theme. They are the direct objects and complements of the predicate involved. This is in agreement with the assertion by Haegeman (1994: 41), ‘if a VP has a transitive verb as its head, one NP (the direct object) is required’.

**Theta role and thematic relation of Locative in Tiv.**

Locative, is the theta role assigned to a noun phrase (NP) or Prepositional (PP) that identifies the place where an action, state, or event occurs. According to Radford (2009), is the place in which something is situated, where an entity may be found or where an action transpired. For instance;

7. Sena ver takerada sha tebul.

NP1- Sena V-pst- kept-NP2-book-pre-on NP3-tebul.

Sena kept the book on the table.

8. Sena ver mato na shin galeji.

NP1-Sena-V-pst kept-NP2-car- pro-her-pre-in NP3-galeji.

Sena kept her car at the garage.

Øgrid for ver

NP1	NP2	NP3
Agent	Theme	Location
I	J	K

In sentence 7 and, *sha tabul* (on the table) shows the static location of the “book” as well as *shin galeji* (at the garage) in 8. Unlike Goal or Source, which involves movement towards or away from a place, the locative role indicates a stationary position or the setting of an activity.

**Theta role and thematic relation of Source in Tiv.**

Source defines the entity from which an action, motion, or transfer originates. According to Haegeman (1994), the role is assigned to argument from which motion takes place opposite of Goal. Source is a complement of preposition. In Tiv, it is preceded by *shin* (in) *hi*(from)

9. Heneter va shin mato.

NP1-Heneter- V-pst came-pre-in-NP2-car.

Heneter came in a car.

10. Heneter yam takerada hi tica.

NP1-Heneter-V-pst-bought pre-from-NP2-teacher.

Heneter bought a book from the teacher.

Øgrid va/yam	NP1	NP2	NP3
	Agent	Theme	source
	I	J	K

In 9 and 10, *shin Mato* (in a car) and *hi tica* (from the teacher) indicates the source from which the Agent arrived and from where the book is bought.

**Theta role and thematic relation of Goal in Tiv.**

This theta role is assigned to an argument that represents the endpoint, destination, or target of a motion or action. The goal is not the same as source or locative in English. Goal is evident with “to”, source uses “from” and locative uses “at”. In examples 6, “*sha tebul*” gives the location of the

“book”. In 9, “hi tica” gives the source from which the book is gotten. While Goal use “ke”. For example;

11. Mato mough sha Gboko yem Makurdi.  
 NP1-mato-V-pst-. moved pre-sha NP2-Gboko-V-pst-go-NP3  
 Makurdi.  
 The car moved from Gboko to Makurdi.

12. Sena due shin mato yem ke yough.  
 NP1-Sena -V-pst come out-pre-in-NP2-car V-pst-go- pre-to-  
 NP3-house.  
 Sena left the car to the room.

This identifies where an action ends or who receives the result.

<b>Øgrid mough/du</b>	<b>NP1</b>	<b>NP2</b>	<b>NP3</b>
	Agent	Theme	Goal
	I	J	K

**Theta role and thematic relation of Path in Tiv**  
 This identifies an argument that represents the route or course along which an object moves. Haegeman (1994) says it is the point or route through which an entity moves. The role is usually assigned to prepositional phrase (PP). it explains the “how” and “where” of movement. For instance;

13. Heneter yevese kar hi ijor.  
 NP1-Heneter-Vpst-run-V-pass-Pre-around-NP2-well.  
 Heneter ran around the well.  
 Øgrid for yevese

<b>NP1</b>	<b>NP2</b>
Agent	path
I	J

**Theta role and thematic relation of instrument in Tiv.**

The means or tool used by the Agent to perform an action or cause an event. It answers the question “with what?”. Example;

14. Heneter gber kon sha shom.  
 NP1-V-cut-NP2-tree-pre-with-NP3-cutlass.

<b>Øgrid gber</b>	<b>NP1</b>	<b>NP2</b>	<b>NP3</b>
	Agent	Theme	instrument
	I	J	K

**Conclusion**

This study examines theta role and thematic relations of Tiv verbs. it investigates how verbs select arguments and as well assign thematic roles to them. The study is able to establish that the Tiv verb (intransitive, transitive and ditransitive) require a particular number of argument(s) for use and also the thematic function of each selected argument. Therefore, for any grammatical construction in the language, the correct required number of argument(s) must be available. The study among other aspects on the grammar of Tiv creates a niche to which Tiv grammar can be further studied and explored.

**References**

Agbedo, C.U. (2018). General Linguistic: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives. Enugu. KUMCEE-Ntaech Press Inc.

Artur, G. (2025) (n.d.). *Theta Roles in Yoruba Argument Structures* <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/391738390>

Carnie, A. (2013). *Syntax: A generative introduction. (3rd ed.)*. UK: Wiley-Blackwell. Chichewa. Natural languages and linguistic theory. 6: 353 –389

Chomsky, N. (1957) Syntactic structures. Mouton, The Hague.

Chomsky, N. (1965). *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*. Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology MIT Press.

Chomsky, N. (1981). Lectures on government and binding. Dordrecht: Foris.

Cook, V.J., Newson, M. (2007). *Chomsky’s universal grammar: An introduction. (3rd ed.)*. UK: Blackwell Publishing.

- Haegeman, L. (1994). Introduction to government and binding theory. (2nd ed.). UK: Blackwell Publishing.*
- Idoko, T. D., Ikwu, L. O., & Eragbe, C. U. (2023). *Thematic Relations and Theta Roles of Idoma Verbs*. 3(2), 31–46. *International Journal of General Studies (IJGS)*, Vol. 3, No. 2, April-June 2023
- Imu, O. F. (2015). *Argument structure of the Urhobo verbs: A Minimalist approach (an unpublished thesis)* submitted to the Department of Linguistics, Igbo and Other Languages, University of Nigeria, Nsukka.
- Ishima, J.L.J. (2017). The syntax of agreement in Tiv counting system. *Journal of the Linguistic Association of Nigeria*, 20(2), 88-94.
- Larson, R. (1990). Double Objects revisited: A reply to Jackendoff. Linguistic Inquiry 21: 589 –632*
- Muhammed, A. U. (2014). *An analysis of theta roles of verbs in Hausa. An unpublished thesis submitted to Faculty of Linguistics, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur*
- Orkeghen, M., Justus, J. L. (2025). <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/jolls>. 14(July).
- Pesetsky, D. (1995). Zero syntax. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.*
- Radford, A. (2009) *An Introduction to English Sentence Structure*. Cambridge, University Press, Cambridge.
- Terfa, M., Phd, Z., & Adzer, T. F. (2023). Analysis of WH-Trace, Case, and Theta Assignment Interface in Tiv Syntax. *Journal of Arts, Management and Social Sciences*, 3(2).
- Udu, T.T. (2009). *Tiv Language: A reference Book*. Kaduna: Labari Publishers.
- Yusuf, O. (1998). *Fundamentals of Syntax and the study of Nigerian languages*. Ijebu-Ode: Shebiotimo.