

A study on the system of theme in Igbo: Systemic functional grammar perspective

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Abstract

This paper studies the system of Theme in Igbo. Participatory observation, compilation of Igbo clauses and lifting of Igbo grammatical structures in peer reviewed publications are methods used for data collection. The theoretical framework used for the analysis of data is the Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) as revised by Matthiessen (2014). The study is motivated by a desire to enquire into the methodological implication(s) of the application of the Systemic Functional Grammar concept of Theme in Igbo. It is observed that the application of the system of Theme in Igbo has some peculiarities. The study consequently makes some propositions on Theme in Igbo based on the observed peculiarities. The study contributes to upholding the proposition that the system of Theme is applicable to different languages of the world, and calls for more applications of the concept in Igbo to affirm or otherwise of the given propositions.

Keywords: Theme in Igbo, SFG in Igbo, Functional Linguistics in Igbo

Introduction

Igbo language has undergone different grammatical investigations. Some of these include studies carried out within the framework of traditional, transformational and generative grammar perspectives.–Notwithstanding that the theory of Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) has remained one of the most popular linguistic theories today. Little has been done in terms of extending the theory to the analysis of the Igbo grammatical discourse, bearing in mind the claim that Systemic Functional Grammar is an "innovative approach of engaging with grammar through discourse has become a worldwide phenomenon in linguistics" (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2014: i). This approach shows there are considerably more variations in the way the three metafunctional contributions to structure are mapped onto one another with **rank** as the main variable while languages differ in the way that the realisational domains of THEME, MOOD, TRANSITIVITY, and related systems are distributed across ranks.

This paper studies the system of **Theme** in Igbo, which is one of the popular concepts of the theory. In addition, this study is motivated by the view of Travnicek (1962 in Vasconcellos 1992: 166) that the nature of 'Theme' should be

universal and invariant, expressing the view that all utterances have 'Theme' and that they occur without fail in initial position. The application is also in conformity with the proposition that "Igbo grammatical studies now have variety, depth and breadth" (Emenanjo 2015: vii).

Theme is an analytical tool which has been increasingly gaining popularity in the recent years. Mauranen (1993a: 104) attributes this popularity to 'its interesting position at the interface of grammar and discourse'. Some scholars like Jones (1977) are of the view that 'Theme' refers to the main idea or central thread of various levels of discourse. Babby (1980) identifies 'Theme' as conveying old or given information. Some grammatical structure terms like 'topic' and 'subject' are sometimes used as synonyms of 'Theme'. On the identification of Theme, Fries and Francis (1992) are of the view that 'Theme' is identified by its function, not its form.

Gomez-Gonzales (2001) gives a detailed history of approaches to 'Theme'. It is widely acclaimed that the pioneer in Theme/rheme studies is Henri Weil who lived from 27th August, 1818 to 5th November 1909 (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henri_Weil). Weil (1844: 2 -22) argues, in essence, that "the forward



movement of our ideas ... is the natural basis of the order of words". The progression of thought is termed **subjective movement** and that of constituents (expressed by syntactic relations) is termed **objective movement**. Weil argues that the basic rule for the communication of ideas is a movement from known information to a goal of discourse. He observes that "*there is then a point of departure, an initial notion which is equally present to him who speaks and to him who hears, which forms, as it were, the ground upon which the two intelligences meet; and another part of discourse which forms the statement (l'énonciation), properly so called.*"

Following the observation made by Weil, many linguists, particularly those from the Prague school, have shed new light on the structure of the clause. It is argued that Hallidayan framework owes much to the work of the Prague School linguists. The Prague School and Hallidayan approaches to linguistics are compared in Davidse (1987). Halliday's (1967a, 1967b, 1967c, 1968, 1985, 1994, 2004, 2014) conception of Theme is similar to Weil's ideas about the progression of thought in language use. However, the following two major differences have been identified.

a). Weil's point of departure is linked to **given** information. On the contrary, Halliday (1994: 299) prefers to separate thematic structure which is made up of **Theme** and **rheme** from information structure that is made up of **given** and **new** information.

b). Whereas Halliday's Theme is realised only by initial elements, Weils point of departure is not position bound. Instead, Weil claims that "when the imagination is vividly impressed, or when the sensibilities of the soul are deeply stirred, new information is unexpectedly put first and a reverse order surfaces (Weil 1844: 41).

Systemic Functional Grammar has provided the basis for more work on 'Theme'. Fries (1995a) and Ghadessy (1995) are collections of papers on the SFG's view on 'Theme'. Fries (1995a & b) give brief but authoritative overviews of 'Theme'.

In his analysis of Theme, Danes (1974) proposes that there are three different types of 'thematic progression' - (a) the 'simple linear' type

in which the 'Theme' is picked up from the 'rheme' (i.e. any element that is not a Theme) of the previous clause; (b) the 'constant' type, in which the same 'Theme' (i.e. the same referent) occurs in each clause; and (c) the 'derived hyper thematic' type, in which the clausal 'Themes' are derived from a 'hyper Theme' such as a heading. Martin (1992: 437) seems to agree with Danes (1974) on the three different types of 'thematic progression' in his view that 'Dane's concept of a hyper-Theme in a paragraph, aspects of which are taken up as the Theme of its constituent clauses'. Moreover, Matthiessen (1995: 572) also upholds Dane's three types of thematic progressions by using a passage of a geographical description from a guidebook to illustrate two of Dane's concepts. Giving his own position on the hypothesis about types of 'thematic progression', Fries (1995b: 320) states that 'thematic progression concerns where Themes come from - how they relate to other Themes and rhemes of the text'. Matthiessen (1995: 576) gives examples of how a rhetorical structure relation of contrast may affect the choice of Theme. His position comes close to saying that the choice of Theme depends on the performer's purpose.

From the above reviews, some issues are common about the concept of 'Theme' in the Functional Systemic Grammar perspective.

- i). Theme is associated with clause.
- ii). The identification of Theme is usually based on its function in a clause.
- iii). Structurally, Theme is usually placed at clause initial position.
- iv). It is worthy of mention at this juncture that after the identification of 'Theme' in a clause, the remaining part of the clause is considered as the 'RHEME' of the clause.

Data Analysis

The data used for analysis is stratified into three basic moods in Igbo - declarative clause, interrogative clause and imperative clause. The tone marking convention adopted for analyses is Green and Igwe (1963) which places low [`] and downstep [~] tones on every syllabic nasal and on all vowels where they are required but left every vowel with high tone unmarked. The tone



marking convention is demonstrated in (Obiamalu 2015: 5) with the following illustration:

akwa [H H] 'cry'
 àkwa [L H] 'egg'
 akwà [H L] 'cloth'
 àkwà [L L] 'bed'
 egō [H S] 'money'

1). *Ìgwè* bù ike.
 people are power
 "Power lies on the majority"

3). *Echi* kà ò gà-àga ahịa
 tomorrow that s/he will AGR+go market
 "It's tomorrow that s/he will go to market"

The Themes of the structures in examples (1-4) belong to **nominal group**. However, each of them is realized differently. While examples (1) and (2) are realized as **unmarked** Themes, (3) and (4) are **marked** Themes. Moreover, the unmarked Themes in (1) and (2) are realized as

Declarative Clause

The structural element of Theme in declarative clauses in Igbo consists of **nominal group, prepositional phrase, clause** and **gerund**. For instance, the bolded and italicized words or group of words are the Themes of the clauses:

Nominal Group as Theme in a Declarative Clause

2). *Òbi* gbùrù òke.
 Obi kill+pst rat
 "Obi killed a rat"

4). *Egō* kà Ike ñwèrè.
 money that Ike has
 "The powerful is the majority"

the Subjects of their clauses. But while example (3) is an Adjunct, (4) is a complement. Figure 1, which is based on Fawcett's (2007) model of tree diagrams is meant to show how the subject, adjunct and complement positions are portrayed.

Figure 1. Structural Element of a Simple Declarative Clause in Igbo

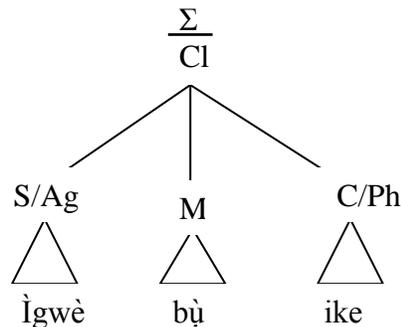


Figure 2. Structural Element of a Simple Declarative Clause with an Adjunct in Igbo

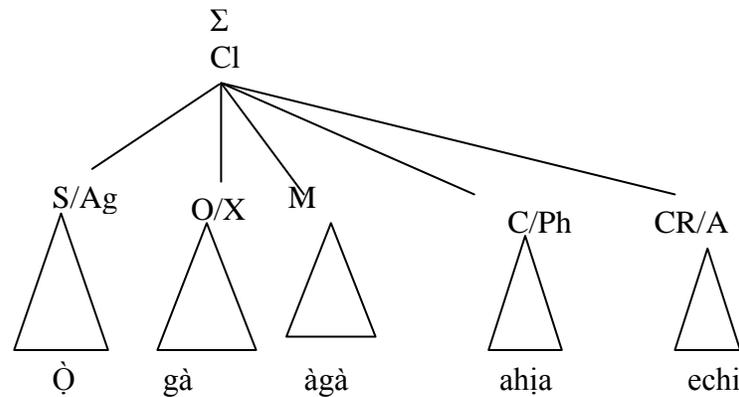


Figure 3. Structural Element of a Simple Declarative Clause with a Thematised Adjunct in Igbo

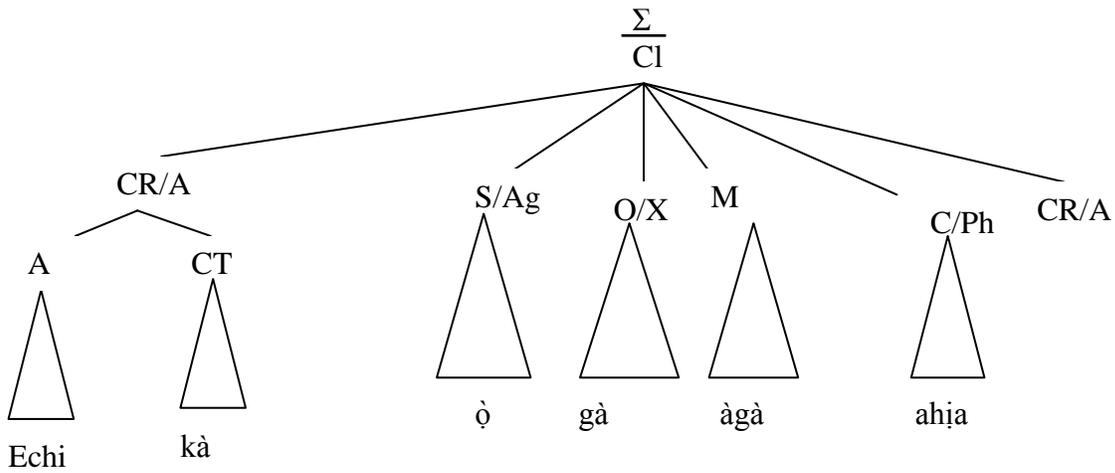


Figure 4. Structural Element of a Simple Declarative Clause in Igbo

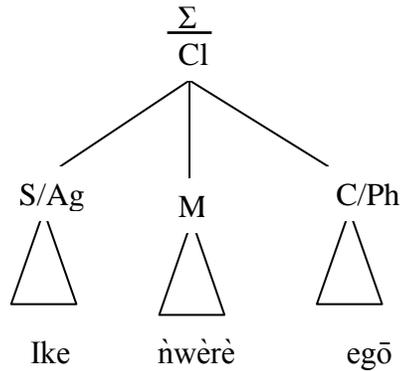
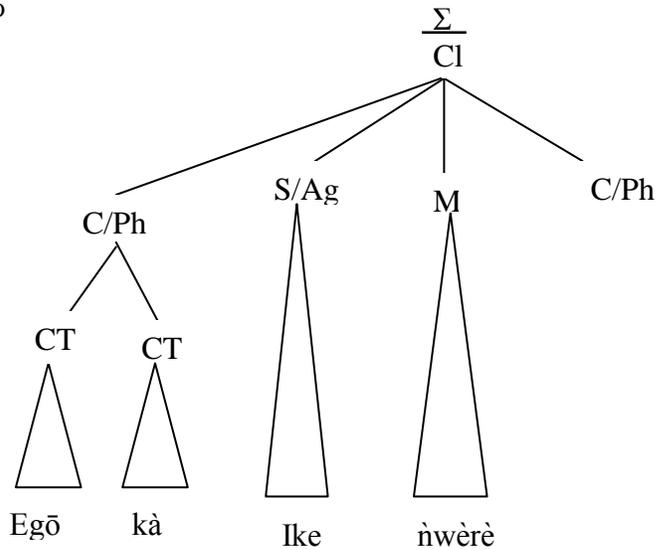


Figure 5. Structural Element of a Simple Declarative Clause with a Thematised Complement in Igbo



In the above tree diagrams, figures (1) and (4) simply show the structural elements of typical simple clauses in Igbo. They are in conformity with the popular Subject-Object-Complement (SVO) of the Igbo syntactic structure. Figure (2) is the same as figures (1) and (4). The only difference is that while the structure in figure (2) is modified with an adjunct, (1) and (4) have no adjunct. However, figures (3) and (5) are transformed structures of (3) and (4), respectively.

In figure (3), the speaker, who for personal reason(s) - ideation - decides to thematise the **adjunct (CR/A) - echi** - against the **agentive subject (S/Ag) - ọ** - at the insitu position of an unmarked Theme, is forced to move the adjunct, **echi**, to the clause initial position in order to fulfill the required initial position of any Theme. As shown, in the process of moving the adjunct to the clause initial position to be marked as Theme, the speaker is being forced to insert and use the complementizer - **kà** - to mark off the thematised adjunct from the primary/inherent Theme by the syntactic behaviour of the Igbo language. This development can best be accounted for under the syntactic analysis of movement in Igbo language. Similarly, in figure (5), the complement of the

clause, **egō**, is fronted by the speaker as required for its thematisation. The fronting also results in the insertion of the complementiser - **kà** - to separate and mark-off the thematised complement from the inherent unmarked subject Theme - **Ike**.

Prepositional Phrase as Theme in a Declarative Clause

As we have in nominal group, prepositional phrases in Igbo can also be thematised. This is exemplified with examples (5) and (6).

5). *N'ugbo àlà* kà ọ bàrà.

In car land that s/he enter+pst
 "S/He boarded a car"

6). *N'ahia Eke* kà ọ zùrù jì.

at market eke that s/he buy+pst yam
 "S/he bought yam at Eke market"

As shown in examples (5) and (6), every thematised prepositional phrase in Igbo is marked. However, as we have in nominal group, thematised prepositional phrases are realized from different structural elements. For instance, while example (5) is complement, (6) is an adjunct. This is illustrated with the tree diagrams in figures (6) - (9).

Figure 6. Structural Element of a Declarative Clause with a Prepositional Phrase as Complement

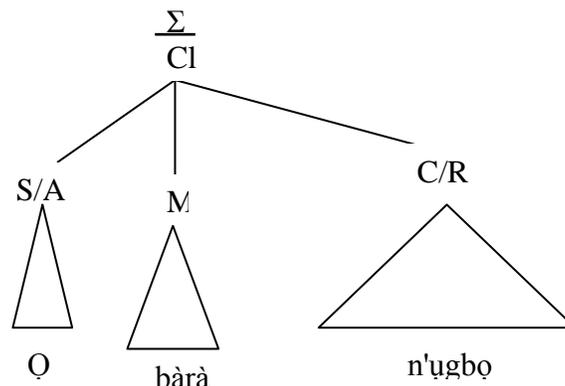


Figure 7. A Thematised Complement Prepositional Phrase of a Declarative Clause in Igbo

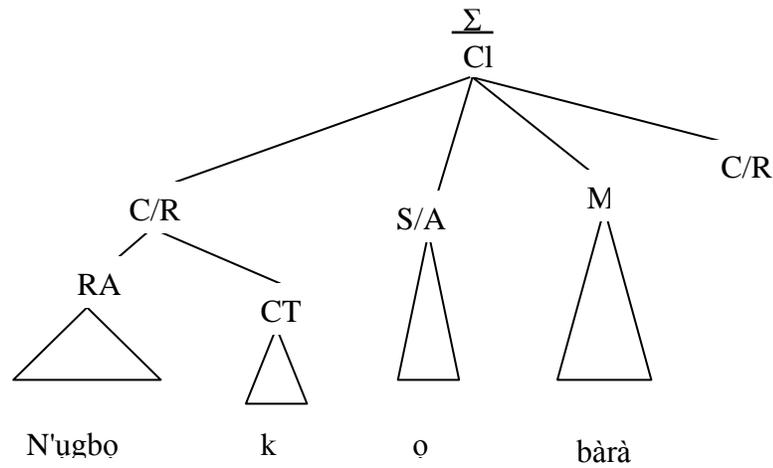


Figure 8. Structural Element of a Declarative Clause in Igbo with a Prepositional Phrase Adjunct

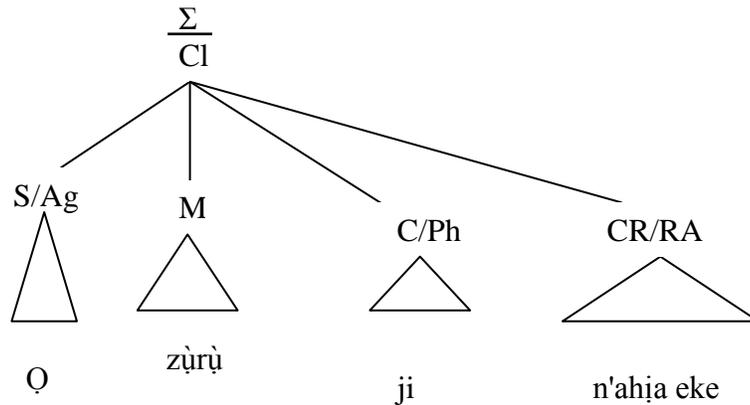
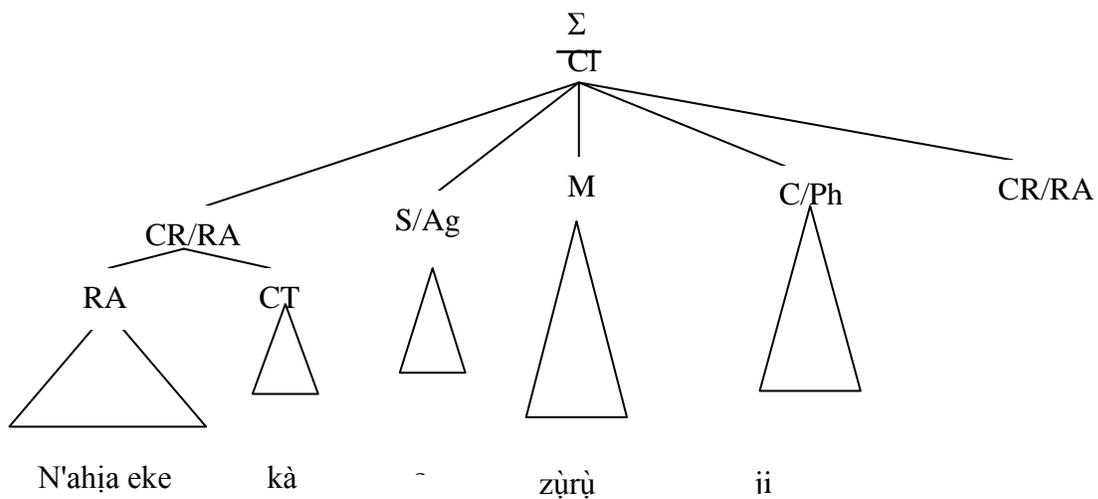


Figure 9. A Thematised Adjunct (Prepositional Phrase) of a Declarative Clause in Igbo



While figures (6) and (8) illustrate the kernel structures in examples (5) and (6) respectively, figures (7) and (9) illustrate the fronting of the thematised complements and adjuncts in figures (6) and (8) respectively.

Clause as Theme in a Declarative Clause

Clauses can also be thematised in Igbo. Examples 25 - 36 demonstrate instances where clauses are thematised in Igbo.

7). *Ọ bu Obi* gburu oke.

It is Obi kill+pst rat

"It is Obi that killed a rat"

8). *Ọ bu igwè* bụ ike.

it is crowd is power

"It is the majority that has the power"

9). *Ọ bụ n'afọ à* kà ọ lùrù nwaanyị

it is in year this that he marry+pst woman

"It is this year that he got married"

10). *Onye kwuru ya tupu ọ lawa* bụ Nnekà

person say+pst it before s/he leave+part is

Nneka

"The person that said it before leaving is Nneka"

11). *Otū n'ime ihe ndi ọ gà-ème echi* bụ igā ahịa.

One of in something among s/he will AGR+do tomorrow is to go market

"One of his/her tomorrow's schedules going to market"

Similar to what we have in prepositional phrases, all the thematised clauses in examples (7), (8) and (9) are marked. While example 30 is fronted adjunct, examples (7), (8), (10) and (11) are subjects. The examples also reveal that both dependent and independent clauses can be thematised in Igbo. For instance, while examples (7), (8) and (9) are independent clauses, (10) and (11) are dependent clauses. Moreover, virtually all the dependent clauses are nominal in nature. Hence, examples (10) and (11) can best be described, in Halliday's view, as "Thematic Equative". Thematic equative is an instance where a clause has been nominalised and thus functions as a single constituent in the clause.

Gerund as Theme in a Declarative Clause

Gerunds are not left out among the structural elements that can be thematised in Igbo. Examples (12) and (13) are instances of thematised gerunds in Igbo.

12). *Ọgbùgbù* kà Òbi gbùrù oke.

part+kill that Obi kill+pst rat

"Killing (+ emphasis) is what Obi did to a rat"

13). *Ọtita* kà Ìkennà tàrà ya.

part+chew that Ikenna chew+pst it

"Ikenna chewed+emphasis it"

Examples (12) and (13) indicate that every thematised gerund is marked and is followed by the complementiser "kà". The gerunds are not subjects. They are neither complements nor adjuncts. As they are virtually the reduplications of the main verbs, it can be concluded that thematised gerunds in Igbo are ways of thematising the main verbs of the clauses. It can also be said that the thematised main verbs in the forms of gerunds are not deleted in order to avoid rendering the structure ungrammatical, bearing in mind the crucial role of the verb in a clause especially in a 'verb language' like Igbo.

Theme in Interrogative Clauses

Interrogative clauses in Igbo are commonly grouped into **polar questions** and **wh-questions**. Polar questions that have pronouns as their subjects usually have their subjects and the verbs or verb groups thematised when the verbs or verb groups are transitive. However, only the subject pronouns are thematised where the verbs are intransitive. These are demonstrated with examples (14) to (17); where (14) and (15) involve the use of transitive verbs, while 52 to 55 involve the use of intransitive verbs.

45). *Ọ kwùrù* ezi okwu?

S/He say+pst true talk

"Did s/he say the truth?"

47). *Ọ gbùrù* oke?

S/He kill+pst rat

"Did s/he kill a rat?"



52). *Ō* bjàla?
S/He come+pst
"Has s/he come?"

53). *Hà* puọla
They leave+pst
"Have they gone?"

One common thing about thematisation of the subject or pronoun and its transitive verb is that the realized Theme is unmarked. For instance, examples (14) and (15) have unmarked Themes. We also have instances where independent clauses are thematised in compound or complex structures of polar questions.

18). *Ō bụ ezi okwu* ka ò kwùrù?
It is true talk that he say+pst
"Is it truth that s/he said?"

19). *Ō jùrù gi* mà iga-abja echī?
S/He ask+pst you if you will AGR+come echi
"Did s/he ask you if you are coming tomorrow?"

20). *There ònwe gī*, ò naghī ème gi?
shame self you it isn't AGR+do you
"Aren't you ashamed of yourself?"

Example (18) is an instance where the thematised clause, *Ō bụ ezi okwu?*, is an independent clause which is linked to a dependent clause, *ò kwùrù ...?* Example (18) also demonstrates that a thematised marked polar interrogative clause can be the complement of a matrix clause. Example (19) is an instance where one of the independent clauses - *Ō jùrù gi ?* and *Ì gà-abja echī?* - that form a compound polar question is thematised. Example (20) is an instance of one clause being thematised in a parataxis polar question. Another interesting thing about polar questions in Igbo is that they are usually unmarked pronominal subject Themes, as demonstrated in examples (14) and (15) above, can be marked by placing the nominal antecedents of the subject pronouns before the pronouns. This is exemplified with examples (21) and (22).

21). *Ifeanyi*, ò kwùrù ezi okwu?
Ifeanyi he say+pst true talk
"Did Ifeanyi say the truth?"

22). *Ikenna*, ò gbùrù oke?
Ikenna he kill+pst rat
"Did Ikenna kill a rat?"

A closer study will reveal that examples (21) and (22) are mere re-written form of examples (14) and (15) respectively. The only difference between the two sets of examples is the addition of the nominal antecedents of the subject pronouns in examples (14) and (15). Consequently, the unmarked subject Themes in examples (14) and (15) shift to the antecedents of the subject pronouns as marked Themes.

On **Wh-questions**, only the wh-words are thematised as shown in (23) and (24).

23). *Ōnye* kwùrù ya?
who say+pst it
"Who said it?"

24). *Ebeē* ò ìhe à?
where is something this
"where is this?"

25). *Ōle* ka ha ò?
How that they is
"How many are they?"

26). *Gīnī* bụ nke à?
what is POSSESSIVE this
"What is this?"

27). *Èbee* kà ò nà-àzụ ahịa?
where that s/he is AGR+trade market
"Where does s/he trade?"

As the wh-words have nominal features, they also behave like the nominal group in the declarative clauses. For instance, while examples (23) and (24) are unmarked thematic subjects, (25) and (26) are marked Themes. However, while (25) and (26) are complements, (27) is an adjunct. Moreover, examples (25) and (27) demonstrate the application of the "kà" insertion to mark off complements and adjuncts being thematised as witnessed in the declarative clauses. However, unlike the declarative clauses which have no exemption to the "kà" insertion, wh-questions have exemptions to the "kà" insertion. For instance, example (26) does not involve the "kà" insertion in the process of thematising its complement. It rather demonstrates high application of 'economy' by using the finite operator "bù" to separate and mark-off the

thematised complement from the unmarked subject Theme.

Theme in Imperative Clauses in Igbo

In imperative clauses in Igbo, the inherent unmarked subject Theme is usually hidden by means of ellipsis. Consequently, the verb (i.e. PROCESS) or any other structural element that comes before the verb is thematised. This is demonstrated with examples (28) and (29).

28). Bja ebe à. / Bja
Come place this/come
Come here"

29). Abjala ebe à./ Abjala
AGR+come+ASP place
this/AGR+come+ASP
"Do not come here"

It is not ungrammatical in Igbo to re-write examples (28) and (29) as (30) and (31). The only difference is that the instructor(s) in (28) and (29) deem it unnecessary to mention the subjects in (30) and (31) as both the instructor(s) and the instructed know whom the subjects are. Moreover, while the thematised verbs in (28) and (29) are unmarked, the resurfaced subjects which are deleted by means of ellipsis in (28) and (29) are marked in (30) and (31).

30). *Chiomā* bja ebe à.
Chioma come place this
"Chioma come here"

31). *Ifèanyi* abjala ebe à.
Ifeanyi AGR+come+ASP place this
"Ifeanyi do not come here"

Summary and Conclusion

This paper investigated Theme in declarative, interrogative and imperative clauses in Igbo. It is observed that Theme has different realisations based on the structural element that is being thematised. For instance, some are marked while others are unmarked. It is also observed that most of the nominal groups that are used as subject Themes are unmarked, while most of the prepositional phrases and adverbial groups functioning as complements or as circumstance are marked. The most marked is the thematised

complement. The study also reveals the following:

- that while clauses as subject Themes may be marked, words as subject Themes are not usually marked except in imperative structures.
- that the thematisation of the main verb in a declarative clause appears as a gerund, while the thematisation of the verb in an imperative clause involves the fronting of the verb.
- that the thematisation of complement and adjunct involves the fronting of the complement or adjunct and the separation of the complement or adjunct from the subject with either inserted complementizer - *kà* - or with the moved finite operator - *bù*.
- that both dependent and independent clauses can be thematised in Igbo.

The above findings justify the aim of this study by affirming that Systemic Functional Grammar's perspective on Theme is applicable in the Igbo language. It is worthy of mention that the thematisation of verbs in imperative clauses in Igbo and other realisations of Theme in Igbo do not violate the position of Halliday that THEME must belong to either the PROCESS, a participant in that PROCESS, or any circumstantial feature of the PROCESS.

In conclusion, this study is proposing the following Theme Rules and the System Network of Theme in Igbo. The study also calls for more studies on the Themes in Igbo under the framework of Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar to confirm or otherwise the proposed rules and system network.

Theme Rule in Igbo

Rule 1: Every thematised complement or adjunct is marked.

Rule 2: Insert the complementizer, *kà*, between the fronted thematised complement or adjunct if the kernel structure is devoid of the finite operator - *bù* - otherwise use the finite operator - *bù* - to separate the fronted thematised complement from the inherent subject, if and only if the kernel structure has the finite operator - *bù*.



Figure 18. Proposed System Network of THEME in Igbo



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