

Lesson 6:

Auxiliaries in Ìgbò

by

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Auxiliaries naturally fall within the class of verbals. But unlike main verbs which independently depict action or state, auxiliaries function more like helping verbs. They co-occur with main verbs to denote tense/aspect and mood.

The question of the number of auxiliaries in Ìgbò has become increasingly controversial. The issue has been made more complex by the existence of several dialectal lexical items that function as quasi-auxiliaries.

The most crucial defining property of the auxiliary in Ìgbò is its function as a maker of tense/aspect. Bearing this in mind, let's examine the auxiliaries in Ìgbò. Another defining property is that the auxiliary cannot appear independently as a lexical item in a grammatical construction, but must be followed by a non-finite verb for which it bears all tense and aspectual information.

The two widely recognized auxiliaries in Ìgbò are "nà" and "gà". These two auxiliaries precede the verbs for which they bear aspectual information as in the following examples:

- (1) Àdaoma nà-amù Ìgbò. (Àdaoma is learning Ìgbò)
- (2) Chinedù gà-àkuzì Ìgbò mà ọ gùchaa akwùkwọ. (Chinedù will teach Ìgbò when he graduates from school)

In sentence (1) above, "nà" marks the present progressive. In sentence (2), "gà" marks the future.

It is conventional to hyphenate the auxiliary to the verb it precedes in Ìgbò, except when the auxiliary is also the bearer of other elements (e.g. negative marker) or is accompanied by an enclitic:

- (3) Egbedàa anaghī èri ejùlà. (Egbedaa does not eat snails)
- (4) Onyenkuzì agāghì abịa akwùkwọ. (The teacher will not come to school)

Many other elements have been suggested as auxiliaries in Ìgbò. They include the following: "kà", "jì", "sì". Let's examine these closely.

kà

Echeruo (1998) rightly identifies "kà" as an auxiliary but wrongly maintains that it marks current action. The following example illustrates his use "kà" of as an auxiliary:

(5) Ànyị kà-abịa

The acceptance of sentence (5) above in standard Ìgbò is at best marginal. However, sentence (5) above may be rescued by the introduction of the prefix "a-" as in sentence (6) below:

(6) Ànyị akà abịa (We would have come.)

Consider also the following sentence:

(7) Ànyị kààrà ibịa. (We would have come.)

Notice that with the introduction of the "-vrv" suffix "-ara", the verb that is linked to the auxiliary becomes an infinitive. In other words, the auxiliary assumes the responsibility of bearing finiteness, rendering the verb that follows non-finite. That is, typically, what an auxiliary does. It bears all tense/aspectual information on behalf of the verb that follows it. If Ìgbò were a golf course, the auxiliary would be the caddie for the verb.

Clearly, there is no arguing the fact that "kà" functions as an auxiliary. However, it requires the presence of other particles for this function. The presence of those particles precludes the hyphenation of the auxiliary to the verb that follows as was done in sentence (5) above.

It is common for writers of Ìgbò to mistake the auxiliary function of "kà" with its adverbial function. In fact, it has been claimed that Ìgbò has no adverbs. Nothing could be further from the truth. It is inconceivable that a language as colorful as Ìgbò would not have a means of qualifying a verb, which is what an adverb does. In the sentence below taken from the www.kwenu.com article "Enyemaka Ngwaa n'Asùsù Ìgbò", ka has an adverbial function:

(8) Daā lfeoma kà nwèrè ike ìbịā.

Notice that in the sentence above, you could conveniently delete the item "kà" as in sentence (9) below without a significant loss in the meaning of the sentence. Also, the tense/aspectual information of "nwèrè" and "ìbịā" remained intact. In other words, "kà" is not the bearer of the tense/aspect in that sentence.

(9) Daā lfeoma nwèrè ike ìbịā.

That is the beauty of an adverb. You can get rid of it. In some languages, like English, you can move it around. All it does is provide more information on the verb. In the case of (8), it tells you that all hope is not lost on "Daā" lfeoma coming. It is like the English adverb still. This kind of usage of "kà" should not be confused with the usage of "kà" as an auxiliary as in sentence (6) and (7) above.

So, what is the bearer of the tense/aspect in sentence (9) above? In an unpublished paper I wrote for a seminar at the University of Lagos, in what seems like a lifetime ago, I argued that "nwèrèike" functions as an auxiliary. Sentence (9) does not indicate that "Daā" lfeoma has the power to come. It is saying that she may come. In all contexts in which I have examined it, "nwèrè ike" has always functioned as a modal auxiliary. It is the bearer of tense/aspect in all such constructions. It is also the marker of negation as in the following sentence:

(10) Daā lfeoma enwēghị ike ịbịā. (Daā lfeoma could not come)

jì

"Jì" is one of those quasi-auxiliaries that prove to be a torn in one's flesh. But as MOE wrote, it clearly has auxiliary functions. Examine the following sentence:

(10) Ọ bụ ihe dị etu à kà e jì-egbu mmadụ. (It is this that of thing that leads to homicide)

Notice that, just like the auxiliary "nà", "jì" is the bearer of the aspect in this sentence, letting the verb that follows it remain non-finite. If you are a warped psychopath who loves homicides, you may complain about something by easily negating the sentence in (10) and the negation will still fall on the auxiliary "jì".

(11) Ọ bụ ihe dị etu à kà e eḣghị ègbu mmad. (It is this kind of thing that does not lead to homicide).

One must be careful not to confuse the use of "jì" as an auxiliary with the use of "ji" as a verb. In sentence (12) below, "jì" functions as a verb.

(12) Ànyị jì mmanya bịa. (We came bearing wine)

When "jì" functions as a verb, it will, typically be followed by a noun.

So, should we hyphenate "jì" to the verb that follows it when it is an auxiliary? Why not?

sì

"Sì" does not differ much from "jì" in function. In example (13) below, taken from www.kwenu.com, MOE correctly identifies "sì" as an auxiliary.

(13) Kedụ kà eke sì-ànya anwụ? (How does the python sunbathe?)

In sentence (13) above, "sì" is the marker of aspect. As in sentence (11), you could use negation as diagnostic and you will get sentence (14):

(14) Kedụ kà eke esīghi ànya anwụ? (How does the python not sunbathe?)

However, MOE provides the following wrong example:

*(15) Mgboeke si si-soro ya bewe akwa maka na nkita ya nwuru. [not tone marked]
(Mgboeke sought sympathy because her dog died)

In sentence (15), the si which MOE hyphenated to the verb does not provide aspectual information to the verb. In fact, that verb is in the imperative form, which means that it does not require tense/aspect. That "sì" is actually an indefinite pronoun, albeit one that has not been discussed much in the literature. Compare sentences (a) and (b) in what follows:

(16a) Si nyèrè m aka nà ọrụ ègbuo m̄. ("Unidentified someone" should help me because work is killing me)

(16b) Otù onye nyèrè m aka nà ọrụ ègbuo m̄. (Someone should help me because work is killing me)

Clearly, "sì", in sentence (16a) functions as an NP and appears in the subject position where it refers to an unidentified person just like in (16b). Such use of "sì" is different from the use in (15).

I ask a similar question to the one I asked regarding "jì". Should we hyphenate "sì" when it functions as an auxiliary? I am happy to answer in the affirmative. We cannot fault MOE's logic here. It makes life easier to do it that way. It is not conventional, but then, we never really gave much heed to conventions in Ùwàndiìgbò. Si (Ndị Ùwàndiìgbò) mezie Albaat ọkpa ka ọ dị ka ibe ya. [not tone marked]

Emenanjo also identifies the following dialectal items that function like auxiliaries: dī (e.g. Nneka adīghī abjā), mà (e.g. Nneka amà bīa), ka (e.g. Nneka akà abjaro). We will not discuss these because we can achieve all the meanings intended by sticking to the standard forms.

Conclusion: My take is that the following are all auxiliaries and that each auxiliary should be hyphenated to the verb that follows it: nà, gà, jì, sì. "Kà" also functions like an auxiliary but always seems to have other verbal particles attached to it. I suggest not hyphenating it to the verb.