

## FRENCH PRESENT INDICATIVE FORMS AND THE IGBO LEARNER OF FRENCH: A PEDAGOGICAL ANALYSIS

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### Abstract

*Language learning and teaching figure so much in verbal communication that attempts continue to be made to throw more light on it with a view to rendering the teacher's task less arduous and making the learner's efforts more rewarding. African multilingualism is no longer a myth. In most African countries the school curriculum exposes the primary school child to languages other than the mother tongue (MT) or the first language (L1). Often the African child begins right from the primary school to learn the official language which could be English, French, Portuguese or Spanish, Arabic, German as a second language (L2). That same child could also be introduced to a Religious language like Arabic which he begins to learn as a foreign language (L3). Where there is a concerted effort to promote national unity through the learning of a national language other than the child's mother tongue, the primary school pupil in Africa could be seen learning a fourth language (L4) as a school subject. African linguistic experience has shown that many Africans including the present writer, who have had the privilege of receiving Western education, have found themselves learning English compulsorily as a second language and French or Arabic voluntarily as foreign languages. This paper examines the Igbo speaker's French learning experience as he tries to learn the French Present Indicative forms and its implications for the learner and the teacher. The focus of the study is on a teacher-learner situation where Igbo is L1 for both teacher and learner, English is L2 for the teacher and the learner and French is L3 for the teacher and the learner. The study shows that there is a systematic interplay of L1, L2 and L3 features as the learner strives to acquire French (L3) present indicative forms.*

### 0. Introduction

Verbal language which remains the exclusive right of humans continues to be the object of enquiry of Linguists, Language teachers, Socio-linguists, Psycholinguists, Anthropologists among others. According to Bangs (1968: 3) "language, in a limited sense, is a communication system that includes the comprehension and usage of gesture, oral and written symbols".. Given that language is a communication system, every human language ought to have its own peculiarities which must be respected to effect communication. The Grammar of every language has many parts of which the verb constitutes a major part in most languages. The verb has such components as tense, aspect, transitivity, intransitivity and complements. Each of these components of the verb has implications for native speakers and non-native speakers. . Ezikeojiaku (1989: 137) recognizes the verb as 'one of the most difficult aspects of Igbo grammar'. The study investigates the acquisition of French Present Indicative Forms by an Igbo learner. The study therefore revolves around tense which is one of the components of the verb. The French Present Indicative Forms have been observed to be one of the most difficult component of the French verb for L1 (Igbo), L2 (English) learners of French (L3) as a foreign language. In what follows attempts would be made to present these

problems, understand them; their implications both for teachers and students would be pointed out with a view to enhancing learning and making the teachers' task more bearable.

### **1.0 L1 (Igbo), L2 (English) and L3 (French).**

In a Multilingual setting like Nigeria, language acquisition experiences could vary from family to family. Where the parents or guardians of the child speak the same Nigerian language, such as Igbo, Igala or Efik, that Nigerian language becomes child's mother tongue or first language (L1). If the parents speak different Nigerian languages and are not quite literate Pidgin English becomes the L1 of the child and where the parents are literate English becomes the child's L1. After the first three years of Primary education, English Language is taught as a school subject. Before completion of primary education every Nigerian child becomes according to Fromkin et al. (2011: 357) a 'sequential' bilingual. At the secondary school French is taught as a school subject so which makes it an L3 for most Nigerian learners. It is possible to have Nigerian learners of French who may have learnt other Nigerian languages like Yoruba or Hausa before coming into contact with English or French so that English could be their L3 and French their L4. Our study would be limited to the case where Igbo is L1, English L2 and French L3.

In the context of this paper the mother tongue or the child's first language (L1) refers to the language that the child learns from the cradle in a natural setting and not a classroom setting. We would use second Language (L2) to refer to English language which is taught as a school subject after the child has acquired Igbo skills while third language (L3) refers to French which the learner sets out to learn as a foreign language after acquiring Igbo and English skills. It is noteworthy that whereas English is the language of instruction in Nigerian schools French is only taught as a language. As Allard et al. (2011: 1) point out in their study on L1 (Arabic) and L2 (English) interference, teaching and learning 'scenarios' vary according to the linguistic experience of the learner and the teacher (1). Hence the teaching and learning scenario of the study is that of a French teacher whose L1 is Igbo, L2 English and L3 French whose objective is to help a learner whose L1 is Igbo and L2 is English to acquire proficiency skills in an L3 which is French. Igbokwe (2008: 204-205) acknowledges that positive and negative transfer sometimes called 'interference' as well as 'interlarding' or passage language of learner which conforms neither to L1 or L2 structures are common features of L2 acquisition. This reality holds for L3 acquisition. Indeed, Baloch's ((2013) analysis of English spelling used by Arabic speakers learning English as a second language and Wells ((2000) study on 'overcoming Phonetic Interference', indicate that interference could occur at any level of language.

### **2.0 Tense in English, French and Igbo**

English, French and Igbo are among the languages of the world where the verb is very significant. Emenanjo's ((2005:479) study on 'Igbo Verbs: Transitivity or Complementation?' and Lyons (1970:268-270) 'transitivity and egativity' show that issues relating to the verb figure prominently in linguistic theory. Indeed books like Nwachukwu's *Readings on the Igbo Verb* (1983) and Kendris' *501 French Verbs* (1996) are dedicated to the Igbo verb and the English verb respectively.. The focus of the study as has earlier been stated, is on French Present indicative forms which have to do with tense. *The Complete English Language Companion* (2007:182) explains that tense is 'the verb form that indicates the time of an action or the existence of a state', while Greenbaum and Nelson ((2009: 73) define tense as 'a grammatical category referring to the time of the situation; the tense is indicated by the form of the verb'. For Nnaji (1995: 319), tense represents a change of

‘verb to indicate when the action took place’. Although Greenbaum and Nelson recognize two tense forms: present and past, in English, Eyisi (2004: 83-84) recognizes three tense forms in English-past, present and future. Mauger (1968:195) shows that French verb forms are divided mainly into present, past and future. Furthermore, Kendris (1996: xv) indicates that French and English have three main tense forms namely past, present and future. Okeke ((1984:15-17) and Okonkwo ((1979: 29-42) show that present, past and future are the main tense forms in Igbo. Mood and aspect are verbal components in the three languages in contact. However we would like to limit our discussion to tense which to us represents the time an action took place. The traditional three main tenses-Present, past and future would be retained in the study.

Writing on tense and its demands Eyisi (2004: 83) notes ‘tense is one aspect of the English grammar that constitutes some difficulties not only to learners but also to many teachers of English in a second language situation’. Furthermore, Lyons (1970: 233-240), Simire (2003: 674), Taiwo (2003: 773) and Eyisi (2004: 83) show that tense; aspect and modality are important components of verbs. . According to Simire (2003: 674):

Tense and Aspect in Anglo-Nigerian Pidgin, like in most Nigerian indigenous languages, are expressed without verbal inflections. Rather, verbs are preceded by particles indicating tense or aspect. In fact while this language has a relative tense system, only aspect is consistently marked in it.

In addition, Taiwo (2003:773) notes:

Tense and Aspect have since been identified as functional elements (formerly referred to as grammatical categories) in generative syntax. Tense and Aspect as functors are elements of UG, though, their morphology and use (syntactic use) may differ from one language to another as part of the parametric variations that are available in language.

Our point of departure in treating the present indicative forms for the Igbo learner of French as an L3 is on the premise that tense is common to the three languages. Deriving from that, the L3 learner is battling with reconciling the new L3 tense system with the L1 and L2 systems he had already acquired. Hereafter, our reflections on tense would be based on these definitions:

## **2.1 Data Presentation**

Although tense is common to Igbo, English and French which are the languages in contact in our teaching-learning scenario, its actualization in each of the languages could constitute both a positive and a negative transfer if not properly harnessed. The transfer could be positive where the Igbo French (L3) learner recollects from his knowledge of L1 and L2 verbal systems that tense, that is time of an action whether past, present or future, is important when representing an action or a state of being. The learner could therefore assume that learning tense would mean doing ‘a familiar activity’ since tense exists in L1 and L2 of the learner. Nevertheless, the teacher knows that the tense systems of Igbo, English and French are not identical in all respects. At this juncture the learner would need the warm encouragement of the teacher who would carefully lead the learner into understanding the peculiarities of the L1, L2 and L3 systems. For the rest of the work, we would limit our investigation to the present indicative forms which in our opinion pose great difficulties to Igbo learners of French. The table that follows is a summary of the present indicative

forms of Igbo, English and French which traditionally combines tense and aspect. The examples in the table are modeled after Eyisi (2004: 87-88) for English, Okeke (1984: 15-17) for Igbo and Mauger (1968: 196-197) for French.

**The present indicative forms of Igbo (L1), English (L2) and French (L3).**

Language		Present tense	Progressive tense
Igbo (L1)	a	Ana m eri osikapa ụbọchị nile	A na m eri osikapa ugbu a
	b	Ada na-eri osikapa ụbọchị nile	Ada na-eri osikapa ugbu a
	c	Anyi na-eri osikapa ụbọchị nile	Anyi na-eri osikapa ugbu a
English (L2)	a	I eat rice everyday	I am eating rice now.
	b	Ada eats rice everyday	Ada is eating rice now.
	c	We eat rice everyday	We are eating rice now
French (L3)	a	Je mange du riz chaque jour	Je mange du riz maintenant
	*	Je suis mange du riz chaque jour.	*Je suis mange du riz maintenant
	b	Ada mange du riz chaque jour.	Ada mange du riz maintenant
	*	Ada est mange du riz chaque jour	* Ada est mange du riz maintenant
	c	Nous mangeons du riz chaque jour	Nous mangeons du riz maintenant
	*	Nous sommes mangeons du riz chaque jour	* Nous sommes mangeons du riz maintenant

**2.2 Discussion**

The sentences marked (\*) are ungrammatical but communicative. The present indicative forms presented in the Table are the present simple tense and the present progressive (continuous) tense. The present Indicative Forms presented for the three languages show certain diversities and similarities which could facilitate learning if properly handled. Firstly, the English sentence b ‘Ada eats rice everyday’ and the French sentence c ‘Nous mangeons du riz chaque jour’ indicate verb inflections for Third person singular in the English present simple tense and First person plural for the French present Simple tense. These inflections are completely absent in Igbo present simple tense. The teacher therefore needs to explain these differences to the learner who would then make a conscious effort to learn them. Secondly, whereas English distinguishes between the present simple tense and the present progressive tense, Igbo and French do not. One would expect that the Igbo learner of French would only have problems with verb inflections when learning the French present indicative tense but experience has shown other levels of errors as indicated by the sentences marked with asterisks in the Table. The ungrammatical sentences:

‘\*Je suis mange du riz chaque jour, \*Ada est mange du chaque jour and \* Nous sommes mangeons du riz chaque jour ‘ explain certain assumptions made by the learner which constitute negative transfer from L2 knowledge. The English present prograssive tense is formed with the auxiliary ‘to be’. Drawing from his knowledge of English (L2), the Igbo learner of French indicative forms erroneously transfers this feature into French giving birth to the type of ungrammatical sentences under discussion. It is noteworthy that from the learner’s L1 ‘na’, which according to Emenanjo (1983:121) ‘na’ is used as ‘a progressive marker’ in Igbo, hence making it function as an ‘auxiliary.’ To the learner, since L1 and L2 use auxiliaries to form the progressive tense, that becomes a universal feature of present indicative tense. This is nothing but an erroneous overgeneralization that does not help the learner in learning the correct forms of the present indicative tense in French. Overcoming this difficulty would definitely require consistent and patient explanations by the teacher until the learner is able to understand that no auxiliary is needed in forming the French indicative forms.

### **3.0 Recommendations**

It is pertinent now to make certain recommendations that would help the teacher as well as the Nigerian Adult French learner of the French Present Indicative Forms. To the teacher, we would say that studies in contrastive analysis, error analysis and cognitive psychology would help him immensely in understanding the psycho-linguistic disposition of his student and the positive and negative transfers he makes in internalizing the structures of the L3 and his attempts at generating sentence geared towards effective communication. The learner should seek guidance from the teacher with regard to his errors so as to know the transfers that could slow or enhance learning.

Students should be encouraged to think and even hold discussions in the vernacular during English language lessons. This helps content development. In his study 'grammatical theory and the teaching of English as a Foreign language, Newmark (1973:210) affirms the usefulness of transformational grammar but warns that teachers of English as a foreign language should not allow any analysis of the formal properties of language to take priority over the teacher's duty to teach students how to use a language. In addition, in his study 'How not to interfere with language learning', Newmark (1973: 217) further opines that since interference emanates from 'padding-supplying what is known to make up for what is not known which is 'the major reason for foreign accents', 'the cure for interference is simply the cure for ignorance: learning'. In addition, Le Compagnon (2006: 1) in her study on the role of interference in the acquisition of English dative verbs by native speakers of French underscores the relationship between the errors a second language learner will make and the particulars of the learner's native language. This then implies that as seen in our study that a learner's interference errors will be the product of his earlier languages. While L2 interference is linked essentially to L1 only, L3 interference will derive from L1 and L2.

### **4.0 Conclusion**

Learning a foreign language is quite challenging and an attempt has been made in this paper to examine the French Present Indicative Forms and their implications for the Igbo Adult learner of French as well as the teacher. The present simple and the present continuous or progressive were emphasized as they have been seen to be the bedrock of other French present Indicative forms as well as the most problematic for the Igbo Adult learner whom we presented as a speaker of a first language (L1) in this case Igbo, a second language (L2) that is English and is learning a foreign language (L3) which is French. Many may be the linguistic and extra linguistic mountains he would have to climb but these mountains become stepping stones under the guidance of a well-informed teacher which explains the pedagogical undertone of this article. We agree with Newmark (1973: 210) that 'learning' is the cure for all interference and all ignorance, the combined effort of an informed teacher and a learner who is eager to turn his difficulties into successes would go a long way in helping the Igbo(L1) learner of French (L3) present indicative forms. This paper does not pretend to have solved all the problems the Nigerian adult learner would face in learning the French Present Indicative Forms but hopes that its contribution would help not only the Igbo adult of French and his teacher but all others who are interested in language acquisition and learning.

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