

On the So-called *me*-type of Verb Serialisation in Igbo-English Code-switching

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Abstract

This study attempts to establish the status of a construction observed in the speech of Igbo-English bilinguals which combines the Igbo verb *me* ('do') and an uninflected English verb. Eze (1998) describes it as a type of Serial Verb Construction (SVC) which, curiously, is not attested in unmixed Igbo. This, in addition to the fact that the SVC is not attested in the other language in the pair – English – suggests that the status of the construction as a SVC, or otherwise, deserves further investigation. Data for the present study come from spontaneous speech and recorded group conversations of Igbo-English bilinguals and from published works. Recorded utterances with a joint predication initiated by *me* are subjected to structural analysis and compared with the analysis, in the literature, of the Igbo SVC, constructions with the Igbo verb *me* and the English verb *do*, and the Light Verb Construction in code-switching. The study finds that the main feature of the bilingual *me*-construction, namely the combination of a verb with diminished predicational content and a lexical verb, is typical of the bilingual Light Verb Construction. It concludes that the so-called "*me*-serialisation" is a special use of a semantically light verb with the semantic content of *do* as a verbal accommodation strategy in code-switching. The study contributes insight into patterns of interaction between elements from participating languages in code-switching, as demonstrated by a construction not attested in the Igbo language, but used as a strategy for accommodating English verbs in a morphosyntactic frame set in Igbo in mixed (Igbo-English) clauses.

Keywords: *Verb Serialisation, me-type, Igbo-English Code-switching*

Introduction

Bilinguals often combine elements of the languages in their repertoires in their utterances. The phenomenon, generally known as code-switching, was construed in the earliest studies as haphazard and deviant speech behavior and a manifestation of lack of bilingual proficiency and of interference. However, the phenomenon has been observed among bilinguals with high proficiency in both languages, and it is now generally agreed that code-switching is skilled linguistic performance that exhibits syntactic regularity and is subject to structural and grammatical constraints (see Pfaff, 1979; Poplack, 1980).

Sometimes linguistic material from the participating languages in code-switching is found across sentence boundaries and at other times within the same sentence (see Bokamba, 1989). In the language contact literature, language switching across sentence boundaries is often referred to as "code-switching" (or codeswitching or code switching), while the term "code-mixing" (or code mixing) is preferred for the combination of language material within the sentence (e.g. Bokamba, 1989; Muysken, 2000). However, the two terms have not been used consistently in the literature by various authors, and a lot of controversy, ambiguity and confusion have been created regarding their use. Some authors (e.g. Myers-Scotton, 1997, 2002) suggest the use of the term "code-switching" for both types of combination of language material, and the use of the modifiers "intersentential" and "intrasentential" to indicate switching between sentences and switching within sentences, respectively. This study adopts that position.

In intrasentential code-switching among Igbo-English bilinguals, a construction is observed that consists of the Igbo verb *me* ('do') and a lone uninflected English verb. This study focuses on that construction, which is designated as the bilingual *me*-construction. Eze (1998) refers to it as the "*me*-type serial construction" in his study of lone English verbs in Igbo-English code-switching. An example of the construction is (1):

- (1) À-cho-ghị m i-me gi **offend**.¹ (Eze, 1998, p. 191)
 (CL-want-NEG² I INF-do you offend) 'I do not want to offend you.'

According to Eze (1998), the construction represented by (1) above is a type of Serial Verb Construction (which he identifies as the only type of construction in which bare English verbs occur in otherwise Igbo discourse). Eze opines that while the construction represented by (1) is initiated by *me*, the regular type of serial construction involves Igbo verbs such as *sì* ('follow') in (2):

- (2) Lèe etu m sì disappoint-i ya. (Eze, 1998, p. 190)
 (look how I follow disappoint-V him) 'That was how I disappointed him.'

On the differences between the regular type of serialisation in (2) and the "*me*-type" in (1), Eze notes that the former is headed by a variety of verbs, while the latter is lexically constrained, i.e. initiated by the same "dummy verb" *me*, which has the semantic content of English *make* or *do*. However, a rather curious feature of *me*-serialisation noted by Eze is that it is not attested in Igbo, i.e. *me* does not initiate serial constructions in unmixed Igbo.

Eze further notes that in the code-switching literature a construction has been reported in numerous language pairs in which verbs with the same semantic content as *me* (or English *do* or *make*) are used as an alien verb incorporation strategy. The present study notes that studies on the bilingual "*do*-construction" (Myers-Scotton, 2002) frequently analyse it as a Light Verb Construction. In fact, Eze (1998, p. 190) observes that the behaviour of the "*do*-construction" is entirely consistent with that of the Igbo-English *me*-construction.

Given the obvious differences between Eze's (1998) regular Igbo SVC and the *me*-type SVC, and the existence in other language pairs of a construction that bears striking similarities with the Igbo-English *me*-construction, the present study sets out to describe the grammatical features of the Igbo-English *me*-construction with the aim of establishing its status. It provides a structural analysis of utterances, recorded from Igbo-English bilinguals, in which the Igbo verb *me* initiates a construction that contains a bare English verb – the so-called *me*-type of serialisation. The morphosyntactic and semantic features of the bilingual *me*-construction are well outlined in the study and compared with the features of the Igbo SVC, as described in the

¹ Igbo material is in normal font and English material is in bold print in the Igbo-English bilingual data. In data quoted from other sources, switching is marked in italics. Tone is marked on Igbo material following the practice in Emenanjo (1978, 2015), as follows: high tone (and its variant, downstep) is unmarked (e.g. *e*); low tone is marked with a grave accent on the vowel (e.g. *è*).

²The following abbreviations are used in the interlinear glosses for Igbo-English data: BNF = benefactive marker; CL = clitic; ES = extensional suffix; FUT = future marker; IMPERS. PN. = impersonal pronoun; INF = infinitive marker; NEG = negative suffix; OVS = open vowel suffix; PRT = participle prefix; PAST = past tense suffix; PERF = perfective aspect marker; PFX = prefix used in certain verb forms with noun (phrase) or plural pronoun subject; PL = plural; PREP = preposition; PROG = progressive aspect marker; V = epenthetic vowel; VOC = vocative part of a discontinuous subject pronoun.

linguistic literature, in order to establish the status of the former construction as a SVC, or otherwise.

The first three segments of the study provide a review of relevant literature. Section 2 provides a background for understanding the contribution of the participating languages in the Igbo-English *me*-construction by reviewing the uses of *me* in Igbo and of ‘do’ in English. One of the uses of verbs with the semantic content of ‘do’ in code-switching is taken up in Section 3, namely in the bilingual Light Verb Construction. Section 4 provides a critical review of the Igbo Serial Verb Construction. The methodology adopted in the study is presented in Section 5, while the data for the study are presented and analysed in Section 6. The bilingual *me*-construction is compared with the Igbo Serial Verb Construction in Section 7 and with the Light Verb Construction in code-switching in Section 8. Section 9 concludes the paper.

The Verb *me* in Igbo Grammar and the Uses of ‘do’ in English

There are several distinct uses of *me* in Igbo grammar. It is used as a main verb, as a causative verb, and in compound verbs, as described below:

***Me* is used as a main verb with a direct object.** This is illustrated in (3):

- (3) O mè-rè ihe ahụ mme abụọ. (Emenanjo, 1978, p. 158)
 (he do-PAST thing that doing two) ‘He did that thing twice.’

Emenanjo notes that the verb *me* is an active verb in (3). It is also observable that as a main verb, *me* subcategorises for, and assigns case to, an internal argument, namely, *ihe ahụ*.

***Me* is used as a causative main verb with a clausal complement,** as in (3c)

- 3c. Àdha mè-rè di ya a-ru-ọ ụlọ. (Uwalaka, 1995, p. 160, 157).
 Ada make-PAST husband her PFX-build-OVS house ‘Ada made her husband build a house.’

- d. Onye ezè mè-rè okwu ahụ è-bi-e.
 person chief make/cause-PAST case that PFX-end-OVS) ‘The chief caused the case to come to an end.’

In this use of *me* as a causative verb in the Igbo analytical causative construction (glossed as ‘cause/make’ in Uwalaka, 1995), the complement of *me* has a non-causative verb, which may be transitive (3c) or intransitive (3d). Anyanwu (2007) analyses the causative use of *me* within the Minimalist Program as an instance of a light verb (little *v*).

***Me* is also used as part of causative compound verb *sin* in Igbo.**

Uwalaka (1995) has observed that Igbo analytical causative constructions of intransitive verbs (such as (4b)) have equivalents in morphological causatives involving verb incorporation, as in (4):

- (4) Onye ezè me-bi-ri okwu ahụ. (Uwalaka, 1995, p. 157)
 (person chief do-end-PAST case that)
 ‘The chief caused the case to come to an end.’

A comparison of the analytical causative (3b) and the morphological causative (4) shows that in (4), the verb of the complement clause is combined with the causative verb (*me*) to form a compound verb, *mebi*.

Anyanwu (2007) follows Uwalaka (1995) in the view that the morphological causative construction is related to an analytical causative. He further notes that even though the

construction appears monoclausal, it is syntactically biclausal in origin, i.e. an analytical causative with *me* as the initial verb is related to two independent clauses. For example, the analytical causative (3c) is related to the independent clauses in (5) (Anyanwu, 2007, p. 90).

- (5) a. Àdha mètè (ya). = 'Adha made/caused it.'
b. Dì ya rùrù ụlọ. = 'Her husband built a house.'

***Me* is used in idiomatic (non-causative) morphological compound verbs.**

A non-causative compound verb formed by the incorporation of *me* and another verb can express an idiomatic meaning, as in (6):

- (6) Àdha m-mè-gbù-rù Obi. (Anyanwu, 2007, p. 101)
(Adha PFX-do-kill-PAST Obi) 'Adha cheated Obi.'

In (6), the compound verb glossed as 'do-kill' expresses the idiomatic meaning "cheat".

***Me* is also used in (non-causative) compound inherent complement verbs.**

The Igbo inherent complement verb is immediately followed by a noun which forms one semantic unit with the verb and which must be cited together with the verb in its citation form (Nwachukwu, 1984, as cited in Emenanjo, 1995, p. 480). The verb *me* can be the first element of a compound inherent complement verb, as in (7):

- (7) Eze m-mè-tù-rù itè ahụ aka. (Anyanwu, 2007, p. 104)
(Eze PFX-do-point-PAST pot that hand) 'Eze touched the pot.'

The compound inherent complement verb in (8) (*metu*) takes the noun *aka* as its complement, to give the meaning 'touched'. It does not have a causative reading (Anyanwu, 2007).

Turning to English grammar, three uses of the verb *do* are identifiable: main verb, auxiliary verb and light verb use. They are discussed in turn.

- (i) **As a main verb, *do* roughly means "accomplish something" or "perform an action"**

(Carnie, 2002), and requires a direct object. The following are examples:

- (8) a. You often do your homework. b. You have not done your homework. (Carnie, 2002, p. 209)

In (8a) and (8b), *your homework* is the direct object of *do*. This use of 'do' corresponds to the use of *me* as a main (active) verb in Igbo.

- (ii) **As an auxiliary (or dummy) verb, *do* is used as a last resort operation in English**

when a sentence with no auxiliary verb is questioned or negated. The strategy is commonly referred to as *do*-support or *do*-insertion and involves the following operation: "when there is no other option for supporting inflectional affixes, insert the dummy verb *do* into T" (Carnie, 2002, p. 209). The following examples (Carnie, 2002, p. 208, 209) illustrate *do*-support:

- (9) a. You eat apples. b. Do you eat apples?
(10) a. I ate the apple. b. I didn't eat the apple.

The sentences in (9a) and (10a) do not have auxiliary verbs. For questioning and negation to be applied to derive (10b) and (11b), respectively, the auxiliary *do* has been inserted.

(iii) **The verb *do* is also used as a light verb in English.** The English Light Verb Construction (LVC) is an expression in which a verb that is “semantically light” in the sense of having a “diminished” predication impact” as opposed to its full/main verb counterpart, which has a full semantic predication content (Butt, 2010, p. 10), combines in a monoclausal syntactic structure with a lexical element that contributes the bulk of the semantic information. In other words, the meaning of the verb is “somewhat bleached... and therefore “light” (Tu & Roth, 2011, p. 31). Examples of the English LVC are:

- (11) have a look, a rest, a read, a think, a re-think
- (12) make war, a transmission, a speech, a clap, a whistle, a plop, an offer
- (13) take a sneak, a drive, a dive, a look, a chance, a guess, a shower, a bath
- (14) give help, a sigh, a shout, a shiver, a pull, a call, a lecture, an order, a bath

The lexical element in an English LVC is typically a noun in the direct object position of the verb (Tu & Roth, 2011), as in (12) through (15). However, lexical elements of other categories may be used in the LVC, such as adjectives (e.g. *make good, do well*); verbs (e.g. *make do*), and some English LVCs include the modifier *some* (e.g. *do some knitting/some thinking*) (Edwards & Gardner-Chloros, 2007). Furthermore, some English LVCs express idiomatic meanings; for example, ‘do the States’ means ‘to visit or tour the United States’ and ‘do a Thatcher’, means ‘to behave in a way that is associated with Thatcher’ (Edwards & Gardner-Chloros, 2007).

Tu & Roth (2011) note that as a multi-word expression, the LVC cannot be clearly classified as either compositional (e.g. *take a wallet*) or non-compositional (e.g. *take a while*) and are, therefore, semi-compositional complex predicates (e.g. *take a walk*). They also note that the verb usage of the direct object can either replace the LVC in a sentence without changing the meaning of the sentence, or is related (via derivational morphology) to a verb that can replace the LVC. For example, the expression *give (someone) a kiss* is equivalent to the verb ‘kiss’ (Edwards & Gardner-Chloros, 2007); the expression *take a walk* only means ‘walk’ (while the meaning of the verb *take* is bleached or impoverished); in *make a transmission*, *transmission* is derivationally related to the verb *transmit* (Tu & Roth, 2011). Similarly, the expression *take a plunge* does not mean that one actually physically “takes” a “plunge” but rather that one “plunges” (Butt, 2010). It has, however, been noted that the production (and interpretation) of the Light Verb Construction requires more processing effort than the single-word alternatives ((Wittenberg & Piñango, 2011; Wray, 2002, as cited in Edwards & Gardner-Chloros, 2007).

It is also worthy of note that the Light Verb Construction has sometimes been referred to in the literature as “compound verb” (see, e.g., Edwards & Gardner-Chloros, 2007). However, Butt (2010) argues that this seems inappropriate particularly because the two predication elements do not form a lexical compound, neither does their combination exhibit the features usually associated with compounds (Butt, 2010; Butt & Lahiri, 2013).

The Light Verb Construction in Code-switching

The use of a verb with the semantic content of ‘do’ as a light verb has been reported frequently in the language contact literature as a strategy of code-switching (e.g. Muysken, 2000) or borrowing (e.g. Wohlgemuth, 2009). The morphosyntactic features of the bilingual LVC are somewhat different from those of the monolingual LVC basically because two languages interact in the bilingual LVC. This section describes the features and patterns of use of the LVC in code-

switching as a necessary background for a comparison between the LVC in code-switching and the bilingual *me*-construction, which is presented in Section 8.

In monolingual contexts, light verbs are a small closed class of verbs with a broad referential scope (Wohlgemuth, 2009), somewhere between 5 and 20 cross-linguistically (Butt, 2010). They include the verbs for ‘do’, ‘make’, ‘come’, ‘go’, ‘take’, ‘give’, ‘hit’, ‘throw’, ‘rise’, and ‘fall’. The six most frequently used light verbs in English are *have*, *take*, *give*, *do*, *get* and *make* (Tu & Roth, 2010) and the canonical light verb across languages is a verb with the meaning ‘do’. That is why the Light Verb Construction is sometimes called ‘the *do*-construction’.

The bilingual LVC is generally comprised of a verb with the meaning of ‘do’ or ‘make’ from one of the participating languages and a lexical element (e.g. a verb), which supplies the bulk of the meaning of the construction, from the other language. The lexical verb can replace the bilingual LVC in a sentence without changing the meaning of the sentence (Myers-Scotton, 2002).

Structurally, bilingual LVCs generally show asymmetry in the roles of the participating languages. One language (the matrix language) provides the light verb, while the other language (the embedded language) provides the lexical element (González-Vilbazo & López, 2011; Muysken, 2000). The language that supplies the light verb also structures the morphosyntax of the clause (Muysken, 2000; Myers-Scotton, 2002), and the lexical element from the other language remains in bare form. Wohlgemuth (2009, p. 104) describes the pattern of inflection observed in the bilingual LVC as one in which an “inflectable” light verb from one language combines with an “uninflectable” member of “an open class of stems” from the other language. For example, González-Vilbazo & López (2011) have observed that bilingual Spanish-German speakers that create and accept sentences in which the Spanish light verb *hacer* combines with a German lexical verb, as in (16), reject sentences with the German light verb *tut* and a Spanish lexical verb, as in (17).

(15) Juan *hace* nähen das Hemd
 (Juan does.3rd sew.INF the shirt) ‘Juan sews the shirt.’

(16) *Juan *tut* *coser* una camisa.
 (Juan did.3rd sew.INF a shirt) ‘Juan sewed the shirt.’

The fact that it is the matrix language, and never the embedded language that supplies the light verb subsumes that the Light Verb Construction is used in an insertional pattern of code-switching (Muysken, 2000). The light verb bears all the grammatical information in the form of inflectional affixes of the matrix language (González-Vilbazo & López, 2011; Muysken, 2000; Myers-Scotton, 2002; Seiss, 2009; Wohlgemuth, 2009), while the embedded language lexical verb appears in an infinitive or a bare form.

A number of LVC patterns are observable in code-switching. In participating languages in which the Light Verb Construction is a regular strategy for forming predicates, the light verbs are used productively within the context of code-switching (or borrowing) as verbalizers for incorporating foreign words (Butt, 2010; Wohlgemuth, 2009); e.g. ‘phone-do’ for the verb ‘telephone’ in Urdu (Butt, 2010). Another example is the Turkish *yap* (‘do’) used in Turkish-Norwegian code-switching (Muysken, 2000) and *yapmak* (‘to do’) used in Turkish-Dutch code-switching (Backus, 1996, as cited in Edwards & Gardner-Chloros, 2007) to incorporate Norwegian verbs, and Dutch nouns and verbs, respectively.

In some other languages, certain verbs are used as light verbs only in the bilingual context. For example, in Chicheŵa, the verbs *chita* ‘do’ and *panga* ‘make’ are regularly used

as full verbs that take noun complements, but in bilingual contexts they are used for the accommodation of foreign verbs; e.g. ‘*chite* fire’ (do fire) = ‘fire’ (verb); ‘*pang-ire* decide’ (make-APPL-decide) = ‘decide for’ (Wohlgemuth, 2009). Similarly, the Spanish verb *hacer* is generally used as a causative verb but in the context of code-switching, it is used as a light verb to accommodate German verbs (González-Vilbazo & López, 2011). In some of such languages (including Chicheŵa), the Light Verb Construction is the only means of introducing embedded language verbs into a code-switching structure (Myers-Scotton, 2002).

In another scenario, a Light Verb Construction is attested in code-switching varieties while there is no equivalent construction in the grammars of the participating languages (Edwards & Gardner-Chloros, 2007; Muysken, 2000). An example is found in Bantu languages, which use a ‘*do*-construction’ to incorporate English verbs, although such a construction is not attested in the monolingual grammars (Myers-Scotton, 2002). Some researchers suggest that the Light Verb Construction in such instances may constitute a universal feature of code-switching drawn from Universal Grammar but absent in the component grammars (Edwards & Gardner-Chloros, 2007; González-Vilbazo & López, 2011).

Serial Verb Constructions in Igbo: A Critical Review

The Serial Verb Construction (SVC) is a multi-verbal construction described in Aikhenvald (2006) as:

a sequence of verbs which act together as a single predicate, without any overt marker of coordination, subordination, or syntactic dependency of any other sort. Serial verb constructions describe what is conceptualized as a single event. They are monoclausal; their intonational properties are the same as those of a monoverbal clause, and they have just one tense, aspect, and polarity value. SVCs may also share core and other arguments. (p. 1)

Although there is a substantial body of literature on the Serial Verb Construction, there is no agreed upon set of defining characteristics. Seiss (2009) attributes this state of affairs to the fact that cross-linguistically, serial verb constructions do not form a coherent syntactic class. She notes that while the common properties of serial verbs proposed in the literature are useful for a typology of serial verbs, they do not account for all constructions which may be so classified, neither do they distinguish serial verbs from similar constructions such as auxiliaries and light verbs. She outlines the general properties of serial verbs noted in the literature to include that the verbs “must be full lexical verbs which can head simple predicates in their own right”, “share at least one argument” and “behave as a single unit for tense, aspect, and polarity marking” (p. 505).

In Africa, the SVC is attested in some Benue-Congo, Kwa and Gur languages of Niger-Congo, although it is not limited to Niger-Congo (Watters, 2000). Elsewhere it is found in Oceanic and Asian languages (Seiss, 2009). The construction is found in up to one-third of the languages of the world, but seems not to occur in Europe or north or central Asia, (Dixon, 2006).

Emenanjo (1978, 2015) suggests that the SVC is very productive in Igbo. According to him, the SVC is used in Igbo to express a wide range of semantic notions, such as comparison, instrument, manner, accompaniment, direction, dative, simultaneity, purpose and sequence. He describes the Igbo SVC as:

a complex syntactic structure internally made up of a series of verbs with their complements, which go together without an overt linker or conjunction...all the verbs in the SVC function syntactically as one consistent unit or whole in terms of subject NP, syntactic processes like interrogation or assertion, and, also in terms of verbal categories like negation, tense and aspect. (Emenanjo, 2015, pp. 541-542)

An example of the SVC in Igbo is the following (Emenanjo, 2015, p. 541):

- (17) A nà-èjì mmà àsụ ọrụ,
 (IMPERS.PN. PROG-use knife PRT-cut trees for farm
- ègbu anụ, ègbu osisi, alù agha.
 PRT-kill animal PRT-kill tree PRT-fight war)
- ‘People use the knife for cutting the bush in preparation for farming, for slaughtering animals, for cutting trees (and) for fighting wars.’

The serial construction in (18) has four verbs phrases, namely *ji mma* (‘use a knife’), *sụ ọrụ* (‘cut trees for farming’), *gbu anụ* (kill animal’) and *lụ agha* (‘fight wars’). Each of the verbs has an object, but the subject NP and the progressive auxiliary verb *na* are found before the first verb and are shared by all the verbs. However, each verb in the series has morphological marking for the participial form that is required after the auxiliary verb *nà*.

Emenanjo (1978, 2015) identifies the expression of prepositional ideas as central to the semantics of the Igbo SVC. Syntactically, the Igbo SVC has characteristic features which, in addition to the some tonal features, include the following:

- i. The verbs share surface structure NP(s),
- ii. The verbs belong to the same or almost the same type of construction, and
- iii. Auxiliaries and tense-and-aspect markers are found on the first verb, although extensional suffixes and the open vowel suffix may be found on the other verbs.

On the basis of the above features, Emenanjo (2015) identifies three types of SVC in Igbo, namely the coordinate, the consequential and the durational. In the coordinate SVC, there is a sequential relationship between the serial verbs. This is exemplified by (18) above which, according to Emenanjo (2015), can be construed to have an underlying structure in which the progressive/durative marker *na* is found before each of the serial verbs, and, as such, can be said to have been deleted in surface structure.

In the consequential SVC, “V₂ results from V₁” in a series of two verbs (Emenanjo, 2015, p. 545, as in the following example:

- (18) Ndị egwu kùrù egwu (kụ)juo afọ ha.
 (musicians play-PAST music play-full stomach their)
- ‘The musicians played music to their hearts’ desire.’

In the durational SVC, “V₂ terminates in V1 or V1 modifies V2”, as in (20a) and (20b), respectively (Emenanjo, 2015, p. 545.

- (19) a. Uche gbàrà ọsọ ruo ụlọ.
 (Uche run race reach-OVS house) ‘Uche ran all the way home.’
- b. Ata tòrò (to)juo ebe niile.
 (weed grow-PAST grow-full place every) ‘Weed grew quickly over everywhere.’

Another classification of the SVC in Igbo is given in Anyanwu (2009). It is based on the classification of SVCs in West African languages into coordinate (or linking) SVC, modifying, purpose and complex verb SVCs (Bamgbose, 1982), but recognizes only the co-ordinate, purpose, and complex SVC types for Igbo, as illustrated in (20), (21) and (22), respectively (Anyanwu, 2009, p. 112-114):

(20) O bù abọ ga-a ahja.
 (s/he carry basket go-OVS market) ‘S/he went to the market with a basket.’

(21) O bià-rà ri-e nri.
 (s/he come-PAST eat-OVS food) ‘S/he came to eat/for the purpose of eating.’

(22) O kù-wà-rà itè ahù.
 (s/he hit-split-PAST pot that) ‘S/he broke that pot.’ (lit: hit-split that pot)

Anyanwu (2009) outlines the general features of the Igbo SVC to include the denotation of a single event, shared tense, aspect, modality and polarity, core argument sharing (including subject sharing), intonational properties of a monoverbal clause and lack of an overt conjunction or complementiser (pp. 110-111). These features mirror those outlined in Emenanjo (1978, 2015), suggesting a set of core features of the SVC in Igbo.

The inclusion or otherwise of specific Igbo constructions as SVCs has, however, been a matter of disagreement among scholars. For example, Uwalaka (1995) suggests that analytical causative structures such as (4a) and (4b) double as Serial Verb Constructions but Anyanwu (2007) invokes the feature of shared arguments against categorising them as SVCs. He argues that analytical causative constructions have two noun phrases that function as agentive subjects – the causer agent, which is the subject of the matrix (*me-*) clause, and the causee agent, which is the subject of the embedded clause. In Serial Verb Constructions, however, all the verbs share one subject. Argument sharing distinguishes SVCs from other multi-verb constructions (Ameka, 2006) and is an important feature of the SVC because at the level of event structure, serial verbs denote a complex conceptual event, which is “normal” in a given cultural context” (Butt & Lahiri, 2013).

A distinction in SVC types noted in Omachonu (2012) is important in the description of Igbo SVCs, namely the distinction between symmetrical and asymmetrical SVCs. In symmetrical SVCs, the verbs have equal status and each is taken from a grammatically and semantically open class. In addition, the order of occurrence of the component verbs in symmetrical SVCs, in most cases, reflects the temporal sequence of sub-events described in the construction. An Igbo example is the sequential SVC in (23):

(23) Uchè bà-rà motò ya la-a. (Emenanjo, 2015, p. 543)
 (Uche enter-PAST car his leave-OVS) ‘Uche entered his car and left.’

The order of occurrence of the verbs *ba* and *la* reflect the sequence of sub-events in the SVC in (24). The verbs have equal status and are taken from an open class of verbs.

In contrast, an asymmetrical SVC generally includes a verb from a grammatically and semantically closed class. Such a SVC is, therefore, said to possess a head, which usually is the main verb. Examples are direction/motion SVCs, as well as causative, benefactive, instrumental and accompaniment SVCs. The following Igbo manner SVC (Emenanjo, 1978, p. 202) illustrates asymmetry:

(24) E jì uchè àzụ ahja.
 (IMPERS.PN. use intelligence PFX-buy market) ‘Intelligence is used in trading.’

The verb *ji* ('use') in (25) belongs to a closed class of verbs (which includes *si* ('follow') used in certain categories of SVCs. In fact, *ji* is the only verb cited in Emenanjo (1978, 2015) for initiating SVCs that express the semantic notions of instrument and manner. The other verb in the construction *zu ahja* in (25) is the head or main verb.

An idea that has influenced the recognition and classification of SVCs in Igbo and attributed to Lord (1973, 1975, as cited in Emenanjo, 2015), is a lexical relationship between compound verbs and SVCs in Igbo. For example, (25a) with a compound verb and (25b), which is a SVC, express the same meaning.

- (25) a. Uchè bi-nyè-rè Àda ego. (Emenanjo, 2015, p. 546)
 (Uche lend-give-PAST Ada money) 'Uche lent Ada some money.'
- b. Uchè bi-i-ri ego nye Àda.
 (Uche lend-BNF-PAST money give Ada) 'Uche lent Ada some money.'

The (V-V) compound *binye* in (25a) and the verbs in a serial structure (*bi...nye*) in (25b) express the same meaning, the difference being that the compound verb expresses simpler and more straight-forward meaning (Emenanjo, 2015). (25a) is an example of the complex SVC in the classification given by Anyanwu (2009).

The lexical relationship between the complex V-V compound and the SVC in Igbo is well documented in the literature (see Uwalaka, 1995). In fact, Lord (1977, as cited in Eze, 1998, p. 191) has suggested that "Igbo historically migrated from serialization to compounding." Such a view has led some authors to adopt a narrow perspective on verb serialisation in Igbo and to argue that V-V compounds are the true SVCs in Igbo. For example, Okorji and Mbagwu (2008) opine that Igbo can hardly be said to have Serial Verb Constructions and that many existing examples of Serial Verb Constructions in Igbo are in fact instances of covert co-ordination. They cite as examples of covert co-ordination sentences such as the following (Okorji & Mbagwu, 2008, pp. 388, 389):

- (26) Àda si-rì nri ri-e.
 (Ada cook-PAST food eat-OVS) 'Ada cooked food and ate (it).'
- (27) Èmekà jì àzìzà zà-a ụlò.
 (Emeka use broom sweep-OVS house)
 'Emeka swept the house with a broom/had a broom and swept the house.'

The sentences in (26) and (27) would be categorised as SVCs that express the semantic notions of sequence and instrument, respectively, under Emenanjo's (1978, 2015) classification. Okorji and Mbagwu (2008) note that the sentences have equivalents in which the second verb (phrase) is preceded by the co-ordinator *ma* ('and') and, therefore, argue that the co-ordinator is covert in (26) and (27). They claim that the Igbo construction that exhibits the features of "true serial verb constructions," such as those attested in Yoruba and Edo, is the construction with a V-V compound (such as (25a) above, and (28), in which the component verbs share argument NPs and tense marking.

- (28) Òbì kwa-dà-rà itè. (Okorji & Mbagwu, 2008, p. 392)
 (Obi push-fall-PAST pot) 'Obi pushed down the pot.'

The component verbs in the V-V compound *kwàdà* ('push-fall') in (29) share subject and object arguments and the past tense marker and are considered by Okorji and Mbagwu (2008) as the true SVCs in Igbo. Such a narrow perspective on verb serialization in Igbo is, however, not common in the literature, and the SVC is generally viewed as a very robust construction type in the language.

Methodology

The corpus for the study comprises two sets of code-switching data collected in Jos, Central Nigeria. The first set consists of utterances from the spontaneous speech of Igbo-English bilinguals recorded in interactions carried out in a variety of social settings, including the family, the workplace, school, market, public transport and other public places. A cell phone was used to transcribe segments of conversations as they occurred. The second set of data supplements the first, for the reason that specific constructions (such as the bilingual *me*-construction) cannot be predicted to occur in actual speech. It comes from four group discussions of approximately six hours in length, which were audio-recorded with the permission of the participants, eight male Igbo-English bilinguals aged between 23 and 55. To minimize the effect of the observer's paradox, the discussion groups were constituted of friends, and they were recorded as they engaged in regular in-group conversation about social issues and events, while relaxing after work. They felt comfortable to use the languages in their repertoires, and code-switching occurred as unconscious language behaviour.

The recorded data in both sets were transcribed, and the transcripts were classified. Only utterances identified as instances of intra-sentential code-switching, in which the grammatical systems of the participating languages interact (Bokamba, 1989) were utilised in the study. Further scrutiny of such utterances led to the isolation of utterances with a lone English lexical item (one hundred and seventy-five tokens). The isolated utterances were further sub-classified into those with a lone English verb (one hundred and sixty-seven tokens) and those with a lexical item other than a verb (eight tokens).

Among the tokens with a lone English verb, utterances in which the lone English verb is inserted directly into the structure (one hundred and forty-nine tokens) were separated from those in which Igbo *me* co-occurs with the lone uninflected English verb. The latter were identified as the Igbo-English *me*-construction – a total of eighteen tokens. These were subjected to structural analysis, with the aim of identifying the morphosyntactic features of the construction and its status as a SVC or otherwise.

Utterances illustrating the bilingual *me*-construction are presented as examples in this study in a three-line format. The first line gives the utterance in the form it was recorded; the second line provides the interlinear glossing and the third line, the English translation of the utterance.

Unmixed Igbo and English data were taken from published works to illustrate the uses of *me* in Igbo and *do* in English. Such examples are duly referenced and are presented as they occur in the source material, although the original glossing has been adapted, in some instances, to the abbreviations and symbols used in the present study.

The 'me-type of Serialisation' and *Me* in Igbo-English Code-switching

This section analyses the data for the study by outlining the morphological, syntactic, semantic and phonological features of the so-called 'me-type of serialisation' (the bilingual *me*-construction), and describing the uses of *me* in Igbo-English code-switching. It is shown that

certain uses of *me* in unmixed Igbo are also attested in code-switching, and, in particular, that the use of *me* in the bilingual *me*-construction does not correspond to any of its uses in unmixed Igbo.

The most obvious morphological feature of the bilingual *me*-construction is the marking of inflection on the Igbo verb *me*, while the English verb is in its basic (bare) form. Structurally, the English verb in the bilingual *me*-construction can be intransitive, as in (29) and (30), or transitive verb, as in (31) and (32):

- (29) **The thing** e-me-ghi **appear** nà **national conference.**
 (the thing PFX-do-NEG appear PREP national conference)
 ‘The thing did not appear at the national conference.’
- (30) **My father** è-me-e-la **retire.**
 (my father PFX-do-OVS-PERF retire) ‘My father has retired.’
- (31) Enyi, e-me-zi-le m **confuse.**
 (friend PFX-do-ES-NEG me confuse) ‘Friend, do not confuse me.’
- (32) I gà- è-me ya **manage.**
 (you FUT PRT-do it manage) ‘You will manage it.’

The above examples illustrate the fact that intransitive English verbs immediately follow *me*, while the direct object of an English transitive verb (i.e. *m* (‘I’) and *ya* (‘it’) in (31) and (32), respectively), intervenes between *me* and the English verb. However, if the direct object is a noun (phrase) rather than a pronoun (as in (31) and (32) above) *me* and the English verb are adjacent, as in (33):

- (33) Ndị **inspectors** nà- à-ga [è-me **inspect**] ụlọ akwụkwọ.
 (PL inspectors PROG PRT-go PRT-do inspect house book)
 ‘The inspectors go/went to inspect schools.’

In (34), the verb *me* in the embedded (bracketed) clause is followed by the English verb *inspect*, which is in turn followed by its object (expressed in Igbo), *ụlọakwụkwọ*.

In addition, the morphosyntactic frame in (30) through (34) is structured in Igbo, i.e. the order of constituents in the bilingual construction is derived from Igbo, which also supplies the inflectional elements. In the terminology of Myers-Scotton (1997, 2002), Igbo is the matrix language and English is the embedded language in (30) through (34). It is also observed that the verbal complex consisting of *me* and an English verb is treated as one unit with respect to tense/aspect marking. All the morphological marking is on *me*, and the English verb remains bare (except for the occasional use of an epenthetic vowel that reflects Igbo syllable structure³).

Phonologically, there seem to be certain constraints on the use of the bilingual *me*-construction for the accommodation of English verbs. Out of a total of 18 tokens of the bilingual *me*-construction recorded in the corpus for this study, there were 15 tokens (of 12 English verbs) that begin with a vowel (over 80%), namely, ‘operate’, ‘expect’, ‘export’, ‘approve’, ‘improve’, ‘advise’, ‘agree’, ‘acclimatize’, ‘indicate’, ‘inspect’, ‘introduce’, and ‘organize’, while English verbs that begin with a consonant were 3 (less than 20%), namely, ‘manage’, ‘confuse’, and

³ There are no consonant clusters in Igbo, and bilinguals often use epenthetic vowels to break English consonant clusters (Emenanjo, 2015).

‘retire’. It is noted that the verb in Eze’s (1998) example of the bilingual *me*-construction – (1) above – is a vowel-initial English verb ‘offend’.

Similarly, only 3 out of 149 English verbs (less than 1%) inserted directly into the morphosyntactic frame were vowel-initial verbs (*na-insist*, *i-operate*, *na-announce*). In contrast, consonant-initial English verbs were accommodated mostly via direct insertion. This suggests a preference of the bilingual *me*-construction for the accommodation of vowel-initial English verbs, while consonant-initial English verbs are often accommodated via direct insertion. This constraint on the accommodation of vowel-initial English verbs seems to be related to the fact that Igbo inflectional elements generally consist of vowels such as *e-/a-* and *i-/i-⁴*, or auxiliaries that consist of a single open syllable, such as *na* and *ga*.

The use of the verb *me* for the accommodation of English elements was also observed with lexical categories other than the verb, namely the noun, as in (34), and the adjective, as in (35):

- (34) Lè-godu onye na- e-me **guy**.
(look-ES person PROG PRT-do guy) Look who is showing off.’
- (35) E-me-e-la m **late**.
(VOC-do-OVS-PERF I late) ‘I am late.’

In (35), the verb *me* combines with an English noun to derive a bilingual verbal expression that means ‘to show off’ and in (36) *me* is used to accommodate an English adjective. Note, however, that an adjectival expression corresponding structurally to the bilingual expression ‘be late’ in (36) does not exist in Igbo and may therefore be considered a calque of the English expression. Examples of other calques formed with the Igbo verb *me* include ‘*me plan*’ = ‘make a plan’, ‘*me mistake*’ = ‘make a mistake’ and ‘*me case*’ = ‘make a case’. In some of the calques, *me* is used to express meanings other than ‘do’; for example: ‘*me proposal*’ = ‘prepare or write a proposal’; ‘*me wrong spelling*’ = ‘write or give a wrong spelling’; ‘*me conference/primary*’ = ‘hold a conference/primary’; ‘*me registration*’ = ‘conduct registration’. The uses of *me* highlighted in this paragraph illustrate the fact that it has a marginal use in the accommodation of English nouns and adjectives in Igbo-English code-switching, as opposed to its productive use for the accommodation of English verbs.

Having considered the features of the bilingual *me*-construction, it is pertinent to note that there are other contexts in which the verb *me* is used in Igbo-English code-switching. Each of these other uses differs significantly from the bilingual *me*-construction, as outlined below.

The verb *me* is used as a main verb in Igbo-English code-switched utterances, as in (36) and (37):

- (36) Ha nà- à-chọ i-me **another business**.
(they PROG PRT-want INF-do another business) ‘They want to do another business.’
- (37) Ha gà na- è-me **buying and selling**.
(they FUT PROG PRT-do buying and selling) ‘They will be doing buying and selling.’

The main verb *me* in (37) and (38) takes a direct object ‘another business’ and ‘buying and selling’, respectively. This use of *me* is attested in unmixed Igbo, as described above, and does not correspond to the use of *me* in the bilingual *me*-construction.

⁴ The appropriate forms of morphological markers that appear in pairs are usually selected on the basis of vowel harmony with the closest vowel in the verb root.

The analytical causative use of *me*, noted in unmixed Igbo above, is also attested in Igbo-English code-switching. The following are examples.

- (38) **Drink** à nà- è-me mmadù è-**put**-ù-o **onweight**
 (drink this PROG PRT-do person PFX-put-V-OVS on weight)
 ‘This drink makes one put on weight.’

- (39) Ha mè-rè **thething** à-ghà-ra i-**work**-ù.
 (they do-PAST the thing PFX-leave-NEG INF-work) ‘They made the thing not to work.’

In the bilingual causative construction in (38) and (39), the causative verb of the main clause (*me*) takes a complement clause with an English verb. However, the Igbo causative construction does not correspond to the bilingual *me*-construction under consideration in this study, which does not involve an embedded clause. If the bilingual *me*-construction is assumed to be an analytical causative with an English verb, such an assumption can be shown to be unfounded, as the bilingual *me*-construction cannot be related to two independent clauses. Thus, the feature of being biclausal distinguishes the analytical causative use of *me* from its use in the bilingual *me*-construction. This is related to the fact that the bilingual *me*-construction denotes a single event. For example, (40) cannot be related to the two independent clauses in (41).

- (40) O bù m mè-rè ya **introduce**.
 (it be I do-PAST him introduce) ‘It was I that introduced him.’

- (41) a. O bù m mè-rè ya.
 (it be I do-PAST him) * ‘It was I that did him.’

- b. O bù m **introduce**-u-ru ya.
 (it be I introduce-V-PAST him) ‘It was I that introduced him.’

The sentence (41) cannot be related to two clauses, not even with identical subjects in the clauses, as in (42a) and (42b). This is because there is only one subject for the verbal complex in the bilingual *me*-construction, since *me* and the English verb together denote a single event.

It is noteworthy that the verb *me* was not recorded in Igbo-English code-switching as part of a (bilingual) morphological compound verb, such as the causative compound verb or non-causative inherent complement verb found in unmixed Igbo. This suggests that *me* generally does not form compounds with English verbs in a bilingual construction.

The Bilingual *me*-construction Compared with the Igbo Serial Verb Construction

A similarity observable between the bilingual *me*-construction and the Igbo asymmetrical SVC is that the verbs in both constructions do not have equal grammatical status. The verb *me* in the bilingual *me*-construction constitutes a grammatically closed class, being, in fact, the only verb that can be used to initiate the construction. The second verb is from an open class of (English) verbs and constitutes the main verb of the construction. This asymmetry is reflected in the semantics of the bilingual *me*-construction. The bulk of the meaning of the construction comes from the English verb, such that a finite English verb can be used as a substitute for the bilingual *me*-construction (See Section 8). This contrasts with the Igbo SVC, in which verbs carry their full semantic content.

Further differences between the Igbo Serial Verb Construction and the bilingual *me*-construction are discussed below:

Argument sharing is an important feature of the Igbo Serial Verb Construction. However, the bilingual *me*-construction denotes a single event and, argument sharing is not a feature of the construction, as noted above.

Morphological marking in the Igbo SVC can be on one, on more, or on all verbs. However, in the bilingual *me*-construction, the English verb is always bare, while *me* is inflected.

A peculiar feature of the verb *me* as used in the bilingual *me*-construction is the fact. That *me* only incorporates single English verbs (Eze, 1998). This restriction suggests that it is not the first verb in a Serial Verb Construction, as other verbs used in serial constructions are not so restricted. Note, however, that there are instances of the bilingual *me*-construction as the non-initial verb in a code-switched serial construction, as in (33) above, and the following examples:

- (42) **Postgraduate Board** gà- è-meet-i me-e ya **approve.**
 postgraduate board FUT- PRT-meet-V do-OVS it approve
 ‘The Postgraduate Board will meet and approve it.’

- (43) À-ma-ghì m kà e sì è-me ya **operate**
 VOC-know-NEG I as IMPERS. PN. follow PFX-do it operate
 ‘I do not know how it is operated.’

The serial verb structure in (42) and (43) is provided by Igbo. The first verb in the serial construction is an English verb in (42) and an Igbo verb in (43), and the second serial verb in both cases is the verb *me* that initiates the bilingual *me*-construction. This suggests that the bilingual *me*-construction is not in itself a serial construction but may be part of a serial construction.

In addition to the differences noted above, the status of the bilingual *me*-construction as a Serial Verb Construction is further controverted by the suggestion that certain verbs could be considered as serial verbs only if they are used as such outside their use in a bilingual construction (Wohlgemuth, 2009). This condition does not seem to apply to the “*me*-type serial construction” identified in Eze (1998). Based on Wohlgemuth’s suggestion, a bilingual *me*-type serial construction should not occur in Igbo-English code-switching if *me* is not used as serial verb in Igbo.

The Bilingual *me*-construction Compared with the Light Verb Construction in Code-switching

A major point of similarity between the bilingual *me*-construction and the Light Verb Construction in code-switching is that the English verb supplies the bulk of the meaning of the construction, while Igbo *me* contributes little to the semantic content of the joint predication. Thus, the verb *me* in the bilingual construction is semantically light in comparison with its regular use as a full verb in other contexts. As a result of this, the lexical (English) element in the construction is approximately a substitute for the entire construction (e.g. ‘*me* **manage**’ = ‘manage’; ‘*me* **condemn**’ = ‘condemn’; ‘*me* **indicate**’ = ‘indicate’; ‘*me* **register**’ = ‘register’, etc.). This is a feature of the Light Verb Construction in English and in code-switching, as noted above. The following pair of utterances illustrates this:

- (44) a. òfòdu a-ma-ghì i-**operate** ya.
 (some PFX-know-NEG INF-operate it) ‘Some (people) do not know how to operate it.’
 b. Haa-ma-ghì i-me ya **operate.**
 (they PFX-know-NEG INF-do it operate) ‘They do not know how to operate it.’

Both sentences in (45) were uttered by the same speaker in different turns in a conversation and seem to lend credence to the argument that a single English verb can replace the verbal complex comprised of *me* and a bare English verb. This implies that the English verb contributes the bulk of the meaning of the construction and that the Igbo verb *me* is a light verb.

A similarity is also observed in morphosyntactic structure between the bilingual *me*-construction and the Light Verb Construction in code-switching. Morphological marking is usually just on Igbo *me* and not on the English verb in the bilingual *me*-construction, a pattern of inflection noted cross-linguistically for the Light Verb Construction in code-switching. Related to this is the asymmetry observable in the roles of Igbo and English in the bilingual *me*-construction – it is the inflectable Igbo verb *me* ('do') that combines with an uninflectable English lexical verb, and not the other way round, implying that Igbo is the matrix language and English, the embedded language.

However, considering the fact that the production of the Light Verb Construction requires more processing effort, it is not clear why the bilingual *me*-construction is used at all by Igbo-English bilinguals. A suggestion in this regard is that the construction is one of the strategies available to the Igbo-English bilingual for the accommodation of English verbs in a morphosyntactic structure framed in Igbo (See Akinrẹmi (2016) for a detailed description of various strategies for the accommodation of English verbs in a morphosyntactic frame structured in Igbo).

However, a peculiar feature of the bilingual *me*-construction is that the inflectable part of what appears to be a Light Verb Construction (i.e. *me* ('do')) is supplied by a language in which the Light Verb Construction is not attested (i.e. Igbo). This is similar to light verb use attested in some code-switching pairs, while not attested in the language that frames the morphosyntactic structure.

Summary and Conclusion

In an attempt to establish the status of the Igbo-English *me*-construction as a Serial Verb Construction, or otherwise, the study described the features of the construction and compared it with the Igbo Serial Verb Construction and constructions that utilise the verb *me* in Igbo and 'do' in English. It demonstrated that the verb *me* is not used in serial constructions in unmixed Igbo and that its use in the bilingual *me*-constructions shows a number of differences with the Igbo SVC, including lack of subject sharing between the verbs in the bilingual *me*-construction, and the fact that while the verbs in a serial construction carry their full semantic content, the core semantic content of the bilingual *me*-construction is provided by the lexical (English) verb in the construction.

Furthermore, the study demonstrated that the use of the verb *me* in the bilingual construction does not correspond to any of its uses in unmixed Igbo. The verb *me* was shown to be semantically light and to combine, in the bilingual construction, with an English lexical verb which supplies the bulk of the meaning of the construction. In addition, there is asymmetry in the contribution of the participating languages to the construction, in such a way that Igbo is the matrix language that supplies the verb with the semantic content of 'do' as well as the inflectional features of the construction, while English is the embedded language that supplies a lexical element that remains in its bare form. These features were shown to be typical of the Light Verb Construction attested in other code-switching pairs.

The Light Verb Construction is not attested in Igbo, and its use in a code-switching in which the morphosyntactic frame is structured in Igbo was shown to represent a pattern of light

verb use in code-switching in which a structure that is not attested in the matrix language is available in the context of code-switching for the accommodation of other-language verbs, or in which certain verbs are used as light verbs only in bilingual contexts. The bilingual *me*-construction is one of the strategies available to the Igbo-English bilingual for the accommodation of English verbs. The study concludes that the structure and use of the bilingual *me*-construction indicate that the construction exhibits the features of a bilingual Light Verb Construction and is, therefore, not a Serial Verb Construction.

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