

# ON THE ROLE OF TONE IN IGBO NEGATION

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Negation in Standard Igbo is marked by the general negative suffix **ghi**. Some other Igbo dialects use other types of negative suffixes. It is a well known fact that tone plays important grammatical roles in Igbo. And so negation is also marked by changes in tone pattern. However, there are some dialects such as Nneewi and Onicha that have suffixless negative constructions and also have inherently negative auxiliary verbs. In these suffixless negative constructions, tone is the only indicator of negation. It seems that the common denominator for the suffix and suffixless negative constructions in most Igbo dialects including Standard Igbo is the presence of a floating high tone which could be borne by the 'default agreement prefix' (Dechaine 1993) or the verbal element (aux and main verb). This position is contrary to Ndimele (1995, 2004, 2009), who argues that a floating low tone plays an important part in Igbo negation. My position is supported by different constructions in different dialects of Igbo that lack the negative suffix but yet negation is overtly implied. Data from these dialects show that negation could be marked by high tone alone in some construction or high tone plus the negative suffix in some others. I therefore conclude that high tone (not low tone) plays important role in Igbo negation and in fact the primary negative marker in Igbo.

La négation en Igbo standard est marquée par le suffixe **ghi** du négatif général. D'autres dialectes igbo utilisent d'autres types de suffixes du négatif. Il est bien connu que le ton joue un rôle grammatical important en igbo. C'est ainsi que la négation est aussi marquée par le changement de ton. Cependant, il y a certains dialectes tels que le nneewi et l'onicha qui ont des constructions négatives sans suffixes et qui ont des verbes auxiliaires avec un négatif inhérent. Dans de telles constructions négatives sans suffixes, le ton est le seul indicateur de la négation. Il semble que le dénominateur commun pour les constructions négatives sans suffixes et celles qui utilisent les suffixes dans la plupart des dialectes igbo, y compris le igbo standard, soit la présence d'un ton haut flottant qui pourrait être porté par le « préfixe d'accord par défaut » (Dechaine 1993) ou l'élément verbal (aux et le verbe principal). Cette position est à l'opposé de celle de Ndimele (1995, 2004, 2009), qui soutient que le ton bas flottant joue un rôle important dans la négation en igbo. Ma position est soutenue par différentes constructions dans divers dialectes de l'igbo qui manquent le suffixe du négatif et dans lesquelles la négation est impliquée de manière explicite. Les données de ces dialectes montrent que la négation serait marquée seulement par un ton haut dans certaines structures ou par le ton haut et le suffixe du négatif dans d'autres structures. La conclusion de l'article est que le ton haut (et non le ton bas) joue un rôle important dans la négation en igbo et serait le marqueur majeur du négatif en igbo.

## 0. INTRODUCTION

Negation is usually seen as a subcategory of the category known as polarity. Polarity bifurcates into affirmation and negation. In the description of polarity, negation is usually the main focus since in most languages, only negation is marked and the absence of negative markers implies affirmation. Lyons (1977) defines negation as a "denial of an assertive proposition or a predication that a proposition is untrue". Every human language possesses some formal ways of expressing negation. Löbner (2002:61) notes, 'it is no surprise then that all language have systematic means of the polar contrary of a sentence'. While the conveyed meaning and functions of negation are relatively uniform, the formal devices employed exhibit a considerable degree of variation across languages. Dahl (1979) typified different languages based on their negation marking strategies. Some of the strategies include; the use of negative particles, affixation, independent lexical item, prosodic melody (tone and intonation).

Igbo employs two strategies: affixation and tonal prosody. Negation in Standard Igbo is marked by the general negative marker **ghì** which has no inherent tone. I shall demonstrate in this paper that high tone plays more important role in Igbo negation than the negative suffix. The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 1 is a brief introduction of the Igbo verb system. Section 2 examines the nature and function of the general negative marker **ghì** with emphasis on the role of the **e/a** prefix in Igbo negation. Section 3 dwells on the suffixless negative constructions while section 4 is the conclusion.

## 1. THE IGBO VERB SYSTEM

Igbo has been described as a verb language. This is because the verb is the only form class that accepts affixes: inflectional and extensional. The verb is also the only class from which other classes could be derived. Igbo has auxiliary verbs that can also bear inflectional affixes. Different types of sentences both in affirmative and negative illustrating the different verb forms in Standard Igbo are presented in (1). I use only one verb **ga** ‘go’ for easy illustration.

- (1) a. **Obi gà-rà ahĩa**<sup>1</sup> (indicative)  
 Obi go-rV (PAST) market  
 ‘Obi went to the market’
- b. **Obi a-gā-ghì ahĩa** (negative indicative)  
 Obi AGR-go-NEG market  
 ‘Obi did not go to the market’
- c. **Ọ ga-ghì ahĩa** (neg. Indic. with a clitic subject pron.)  
 3S go-NEG market  
 ‘S/He did not go the market’
- (2) a. **Òbi nà à-ga ahĩa** (durative aspect construction)  
 Obi AUX NOM-go market  
 ‘Obi is going to the market’ (progressive)  
 OR  
 ‘Obi goes to the market’ (habitual)
- b. **Òbi a-nā-ghì à-ga ahĩa** (negative durative aspect)  
 Obi AGR-AUX-NEG NOM-go market  
 ‘Obi is not going to the market’  
 OR  
 ‘Obi does not go the market’
- c. **Ọ na-ghì à-ga ahĩa** (neg. dur. with clitic subject pron.)  
 3S AUX-NEG NOM-go market  
 ‘S/He is not going to the market’  
 OR  
 ‘S/He does not go to the market’

<sup>1</sup> I adopted the tone marking convention proposed by Green and Igwe (1963) for Igbo. High tone is left unmarked. Low tone is marked with a grave accent ( ` ) while downstep is marked with a macron ( ¯ ). This is the orthographic convention adopted by most Igbo writers. I am aware that some analysts especially in phonology use the down pointing arrow ( ↓ ) and a high tone mark to show downstep, so as to differentiate it from mid tone. Igbo does not have mid tone and so the macron indicates downstep wherever it occurs in my data

- (3) a. **Òbi gà à-ga ahĩa** (anticipative aspect (future) construction)  
 Obi AUX NOM-go market  
 ‘Obi will go to the market’
- b. **Òbi a-gā-ghī a-ga ahĩa** (neg. anticipative aspect (future))  
 Obi AGR-AUX-NEG NOM-go market  
 ‘Obi will not go to the market’
- (4) a. **Òbi à-ga-a-la ahĩa** (perfective aspect construction)  
 Obi AGR-go-OVS-PF market  
 ‘Obi has gone to the market’
- b. **Ọ ga-a-la ahĩa** (perf. asp. with clitic subject pron.)  
 3S go-OVS-PF market  
 ‘S/He has gone to the market’
- c. **Obi a-ga-be-ghī ahĩa** (negative perfective construction)  
 Obi AGR-go-PF-NEG market  
 ‘Obi has not gone to the market’

The sentences in (1) – (4) illustrate different types of affixes which the verb and the auxiliary verb could take in different types of constructions. The main verb can take an **-rV** suffix<sup>2</sup> in simple indicative construction as shown in (1a). The suffix has been argued to mark past tense (cf. Nwachukwu 1977, Uwalaka 1988). Some analysts who are opposed to the existence of tense as an overt morphological category in Igbo, argue that the **-rV** suffix marks factative aspect since it can occur with both past and non-past constructions (Green and Igwe 1963, Emenanjo 1985, Manfredi 1991). In the negative indicative, the **rV** suffix disappears and gets replaced with the **-ghī** negative suffix as shown in (1b). In addition to the negative suffix, there is a prefix which does not occur if the subject pronoun is a clitic (1c), which I gloss as AGR. (2) shows that the **na** auxiliary verb which marks durative aspect can take both the negative suffix and the agreement prefix (2b). The **ga** auxiliary verb, which marks anticipative aspect (future), behaves exactly the same way as the **na** durative marker. This is shown in (3b). (4a-c) show the affixes that can occur with the verb in perfective constructions. The same AGR prefix seen in (1b), (2b) and (3b) occurs both in affirmative and negative perfective constructions (4a&c). The affirmative verb form takes an open vowel suffix plus a **-la** perfective suffix<sup>3</sup>. In the negative perfective, the open vowel suffix disappears while the perfective suffix takes a suppletive form **-be** followed by the negative suffix **-ghī**.

(1) – (4) are not the only verb forms in Igbo, but they are enough to serve as a background for a proper understanding of how negation works in Igbo. The tonal pattern of these constructions will be better appreciated in the following sections especially in section 3.

This paper makes reference to other Igbo dialectal forms, specifically Nneewi and Ọnicha. For example, (5a), (5b), (5c) and (5d) are Nneewi variants of (1a), (1b), (3a) and (3b) respectively.

<sup>2</sup> There are different types of rV suffixes in Igbo. See Green and Igwe (1963), Nwachukwu (1977), Uwalaka (1988) and Onukawa (1994) for the details of these distinctions

<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that most Igbo verbal affixes have variants which are determined by vowel harmony. Perfective suffix could be **-la/-le**, agreement prefix or nominalising prefix could be **-e/-a**

- (5) (Nneewi)
- a. **Òbi jè-lù afĩa**  
Obi go-(PAST) market  
'Obi went to the market'
  - b. **Òbi e-jē-hō afĩa**  
Obi AGR-go-NEG market  
'Obi did not go to the market'
  - c. **Òbi yà è-je afĩa**  
Obi AUX NOM-go market  
'Obi will not go to the market'
  - d. **Òbi a-yā e-je afĩa**  
Obi AGR-AUX NOM-go market  
'Obi will not go to the market'

Table 1 below is a comparison of the auxiliary verbs in Standard Igbo, Nneewi and Onicha, while Table II is a comparison of verbal affixes in the three dialects.

Table 1: Auxiliary Verbs

	Durative Aux	Anticipative Aux	Negative Durative Aux	Negative anticipative Aux
Standard Igbo	<b>nà</b>	<b>gà</b>	--	--
Nneewi	<b>nà</b>	<b>yà</b>	<b>ha</b>	<b>ya</b>
Onicha	<b>nà</b>	<b>gà</b>	<b>dị</b>	<b>ma</b>

Table 2: Verbal Affixes

	Indicative suffix (past and non-past)	Negative Suffix	Perfective Suffix
Standard Igbo	<b>-rV</b>	<b>-ghi</b>	<b>-le/-la</b>
Nneewi	<b>-lụ</b>	<b>-họ</b>	<b>-na</b>
Onicha	<b>-V</b>	<b>-rọ</b>	<b>-go</b>

While Nneewi and Onicha have negative auxiliary verbs, Standard Igbo does not have. The negative auxiliaries always bear high tone. The indicative suffix is **r+a** vowel copy from the verb root in Standard Igbo, while in Onicha, it is simply an elongation of the vowel of the root as in (6).

- (6) (Onicha)
- a. **Òbi gbù-ù òmmadù**  
Obi kill-(PAST) person  
'Obi killed somebody'
  - b. **Àda jè-è afĩa**  
Ada go-(PAST) market  
'Ada went to the market'
  - c. **Chikà mà-à mmā**  
Chika be.beautiful-INDIC beauty  
'Chika is beautiful'

2. THE GENERAL NEGATIVE MARKER **ghì**

There is no independent negative marker in Igbo and negation without the verb is impossible in Igbo. This is unlike English and Hausa that have negative particles. Negation in Igbo is affixal in nature. It is dependent on the verb. Igbo has no independent negative particle. This could explain why constituent negation of nouns is possible in English and Hausa but not possible in Igbo.

- (7) a. **No money** (English)  
NEG noun
- b. **Baa kudi** (Hausa)  
NEG money  
'No money'
- c. **\*Ego-ghì** (Igbo)  
money-NEG
- d. **Egō a-dī-ghī** (Igbo)  
Money AGR-V-NEG  
'There is no money'

(7c) is impossible because the negative suffix cannot be used to directly negate a noun. This could explain why constituent negation of an NP must involve a cleft construction where the NP is moved to a focal point as the subject or object of a semantically dummy verbs: **nwe**, **bụ** or **dị** which bears the negative suffix. This is shown in (8c).

- (8) a. **Obi zù-rù ụlò** (affirmative)  
Obi buy-rV(PAST) house  
'Obi bought a house'
- b. **Obi a-zū-ghì ụlò** (sentence negation)  
Obi AGR-buy-NEG house  
'Obi did not buy a house'
- c. **Ò nwe-ghì ụlò Òbi zù-rù** (constituent negation)  
It be-NEG house Obi buy-rV(PAST)  
'Obi bought no house'

The general negative marker in Igbo is the verbal suffix **-ghì**. The negative suffix can attach to all types of verbs; main verb, auxiliary, stative, non-stative. The negative verb form has the following morphemic structure:

- (9) E + CV + **ghì**  
where E = **e/a** harmonizing prefix, CV = verb root,  
**ghì** = negative suffix

Examples of affirmative sentences and their negative counterparts are shown in 10-13 below (different verb types are represented):

- (10) a. **Ada mà-rà mmā**  
Ada be.beautiful-rV(INDIC) beauty  
'Ada is beautiful'

- b. **Ada a-mā-ghī mmā**  
 Ada AGR-be.beautiful-NEG beauty  
 ‘Ada is not beautiful’
- (11) a. **Ọ zù-rù akwà**  
 3S buy-rV(PAST) cloth  
 ‘S/He bought some cloths’
- b. **Ọ zụ-ghī akwà**  
 3S buy-NEG cloth  
 ‘S/He did not buy any cloth’
- (12) a. **Ike nà à-gba egwū**  
 Ike DUR NOM-dance dance  
 ‘Ike is dancing’
- b. **Ike a-nā-ghī à-gba egwū**  
 Ike AGR-DUR-NEG NOM-dance dance  
 ‘Ike is not dancing’
- (13) a. **Ị gà è-si jī echi**  
 2S ANT NOM-cook yam tomorrow  
 ‘You will cook yam tomorrow’
- b. **Ị ga-ghī è-si jī echi**  
 2S ANT-NEG NOM-cook yam tomorrow  
 ‘You will not cook yam tomorrow’

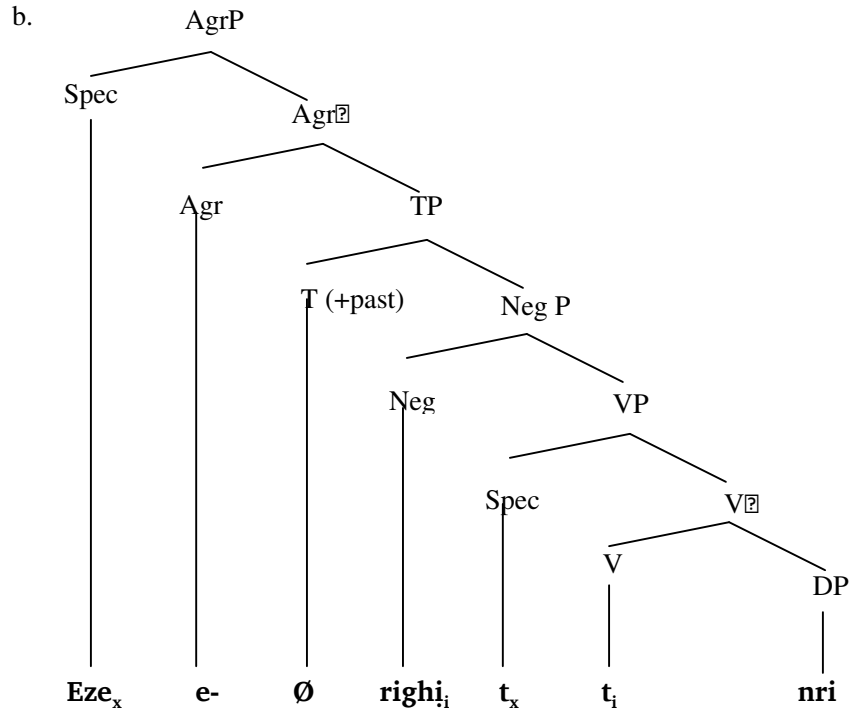
Observe that in some of the negative constructions, there is in addition to the **ghī** suffix, a prefix which is realized as **e-** or **a-** following Igbo vowel harmony pattern (I shall henceforth present the suffix as **E-**). Observe also that when the subject DP is a clitic pronoun, the **E-** prefix does not occur in the negative (see (11b) and (13b) above). I have, following Dechaine (1993), gloss this prefix as AGR and I shall demonstrate in the next paragraph that the prefix is not part of a discontinuous negative morpheme contrary to the general belief in Igbo linguistics. It is important to also note that the verb forms (main and auxiliary) bear low tone in the indicative affirmative sentence (10a, 11a, 12a, & 13a). In their negative counterparts (10b, 11b, 12b & 13b), the tone is high followed by a downstep. It seems to me that the high tone in the negative constructions displaces the low tone of the affirmative which causes the downstepping of a following high tone. I shall demonstrate the role of high tone in Igbo negation in section 3.

Most Igbo analysts view negation in Igbo as templatic and comparable to French **ne ... pas** or the Hausa **ba ... ba** negation frame (cf. Emenanjo, 1985, Clark, 1989, Uwalaka, 2003, Ndimele, 2009). In other words, the structure of Igbo negative morpheme is **E ...ghī**. Dechaine (1993) does not agree with the template view of Igbo negation. She rather argues that the **E-** prefix in negative constructions is a ‘default agreement’ marker (Manfredi 1991) which surfaces as a result of stranded tense. According to Dechaine, ‘Neg between T and V is a barrier for V to T movement. As V can’t raise beyond Neg, T above Neg is empty’. The **E-** prefix

surfaces in the Agr head position to give support to the empty T position which has strong tense features.

Dechaine’s position is illustrated with the negative sentence in (14a) and its diagrammatic structure in (14b).<sup>4</sup>

- (14) a. **Ezè e-rī-ghī nri**  
 Eze AGR-eat-NEG food  
 ‘Eze did not eat food’



The presence of such E- prefix in Igbo perfective construction where no negation is implied, gives support to Dechaine’s analysis. Consider (15) below.

- (15) a. **Àda a/à-zà-a-la ụlò**  
 Ada AGR-sweep-OVS-PF house  
 ‘Ada has swept the house’
- b. **Ha a/à-zà-a-la ụlò**  
 3P AGR-sweep-OVS-PF house  
 ‘They have swept the house’

<sup>4</sup>V-movement to different functional heads for feature-checking is part of the Minimalist assumptions. This paper does not focus on these theoretical assumptions. For details of v-movement and negation in Igbo, see Dechaine (1993) and Obiamalu (2006).

- c. **Ọ zà-a-la ụlọ**  
3S sweep-OVS-PF house  
'He/She has swept the house'
- d. **Òbi è-gbu-o-la agū**  
Obi AGR-kill-OVS-PF lion  
'Obi has killed a lion'
- e. **Ọ gbu-o-la agū**  
3S kill-OVS-PF lion  
'S/He has killed a lion'

In the perfective construction the **E-** prefix occurs in exactly the same environment as in the negative construction. If the same kind of prefix will behave the same way in both negative and perfective constructions, then it cannot be part of a negative morpheme as claimed by Uwalaka (2003) Emenanjo (1985) and Clark (1989).

Dechaine (1993) rightly notes that the **E-** agr prefix bears a high tone. I have shown in (15) that the same prefix can bear low tone in perfective construction. It then means that the high tone borne by the prefix in negative construction is not inherently part of that prefix. I shall demonstrate that a floating high tone is part of the negative marking strategy in Igbo by looking at some negative constructions without the negative suffix.

### 3. SUFFIXLESS NEGATIVE CONSTRUCTIONS

There are some Igbo lects such as Nneewi and Onicha where some auxiliary verbs are inherently negative in meaning and so do not require the negative suffix to mark negation. Compare the affirmative sentences and their negative counterparts in Nneewi and Onicha below.

(16) (Nneewi)

- a. **Ọ nà è-li nnī**  
3S DUR NOM-eat food  
'S/He is eating'
- b. **Ọ ha è-li nnī**  
3S DUR.NEG NOM-eat food  
'S/He is not eating food'
- c. **Èmeka nà à-gụ akwụkwọ**  
Emeka DUR NOM-read book  
'Emeka is reading'
- d. **Èmeka a-hā à-gụ akwụkwọ**  
Emeka AGR-DUR.NEG NOM-read book  
'Emeka is reading'

(17) (Onicha)

- a. **Ọ nà è-li ifē**  
3S DUR NOM-eat thing  
'S/He is eating'



- b. **Ọ dī è-li ifē**  
3S DUR.NEG NOM-eat thing  
'S/He is not eating'
- c. **Nnekà a-dī è-li ifē**  
Nneka AGR-DUR.NEG NOM-eat thing  
'Nneka is not eating'
- d. **Ọ gà a-zà ụnò**  
3S ANT NOM-sweep house  
'S/He will sweep the house'
- e. **Ọ ma n-zà ụnò**  
3S ANT.NEG NOM-sweep house  
'S/He will not sweep the house'
- f. **Ngọzi gà à-la mmīlī**  
Ngọzi ANT NOM-drink water  
'Ngozi will drink water'
- g. **Ngọzi a-mā n-la mmīlī**  
Ngọzi AGR-ANT.NEG NOM-drink water  
'Ngozi will not drink water'

In Nneewi, the durative auxiliary **na** has a negative counterpart **ha**. While in Onicha, the durative auxiliary **na** has **dī** as its negative counterpart. Also in Onicha, the Future (anticipative) auxiliary **ga** has **ma** as its negative counterpart. Observe that in Onicha, in the negative anticipative construction, the main verb takes a homorganic nasal as its nominalising prefix. This could be as a result of the influence of the negative auxiliary verb **ma** which starts with a nasal. The negative auxiliary verbs bear high tone (15b,16b & 17e). When the agr prefix is present, it bears high tone while the negative auxiliary verb bears a step tone (15d,16c & 17g). This implies that in all the negative constructions above, high tone is seen in the environment between the agr prefix and the auxiliary verb.

The role of tone in these negative constructions cannot be ignored. It is very obvious in these dialects where negative auxiliaries exist. For example, there is no way of distinguishing (18a) and (18b) below except by tone.

(18) (Nneewi)

- a. **Ọ yà è-li nnī**  
3S ANT NOM-eat food  
'S/He will eat food'
- b. **Ọ ya e-li nnī**  
3S ANT.NEG NOM-eat food  
'S/He will not eat'

(18) presents some interesting insight into the role of tone in Igbo negation. Ndimele (1995, 2004 and 2009) claims that a floating low tone plays an important role in Igbo negation. According to him, 'The low tone on the subject pronominal clitics in negative constructions is due to the presence of an abstract (underlying) floating low

tone. What happens is that the underlying floating low tone merely displaces the high tone feature of the subject pronominal clitic' (Ndimele 2009:133). Is it actually the low tone of the subject clitic pronoun or the high tone of the auxiliary verb **ya** that marks negation in (18b)? Now consider, in addition these two other possible tone patterns for the same structure.

(19) (Nneewi)

a. **Ọ yà è-li nnī?**  
3S ANT NOM-eat food  
'Will s/he eat food?'

b. **Ọ yā e-li nnī?**  
3S ANT.NEG NOM-eat food  
'Will s/he not eat?'

My focus here is on the tone pattern of the two elements: subject pronoun and the following auxiliary. The tone of the verb root and its prefix follows from the tone of the auxiliary preceding them. Let us show the tone patterns observed in (18) and (19) and their meanings in the table below.

Table 3: Tone patterns in Nneewi affirmative/negative-interrogative constructions

Data Nọ	Tone on the subject pronoun	Tone on the auxiliary verb	Meaning
18a	H	L	Future affirmative
18b	L	H	Future negative
19a	L	L	Future affirmative interrogative
19b	H	S	Future negative interrogative

From the table, one can easily see at a glance that the auxiliary is constantly on low tone in the affirmative and on high tone in the negative. In the negative interrogative, the auxiliary bears a step tone which is caused by the underlying low tone interrogative marker which forces the high tone negative marker to become a step tone. The subject pronoun has no tone pattern that correlates with any of the meanings. The pronoun bears low tone in the affirmative in (19a) but high tone in (18a). It bears high tone in the negative in (19b) but low tone in (18b). The same pronoun bears low tone in the interrogative in (19a) but high tone in (19b). From this analysis, it is clear that the tone on the subject pronoun is not the indicator of negation, but rather the tone on the auxiliary verb. This suggests that Ndimele's assumption that low tone plays an important role in Igbo negation might not be correct. It is rather the high tone that plays an important role in Igbo negation. Let us look at more examples of negative constructions without the negative suffix from Nneewi dialect.

(20) (Nneewi)

a. **Ike ya e-li nni**  
Ike ANT NOM-eat food  
'Ike will eat'

- b. **Ike a-yā e-li nnī**  
Ike AGR.NEG-ANT NOM-eat food  
'Ike will not eat'
- (21) a. **Ọ yà è-be ụrĩa**  
3S ANT NOM-cry cry  
'S/He will cry'
- b. **Ọ ya e-be ụrĩa**  
3S ANT.NEG NOM-cry cry  
'S/He will not cry'
- (22) a. **Àda nà a-zà unyò**  
Ada DUR NOM-sweep house  
'Ada is sweeping the house'
- b. **Àda a-hā a-zà unyò**  
Ada AGR.NEG-DUR NOM-sweep house  
'Ada is not sweeping the house'
- (23) a. **Ọ nà a-zà unyò**  
3S DUR NOM-sweep house  
'S/He is sweeping the house'
- b. **Ọ ha a-zà unyò**  
3S NEG.DUR NOM-sweep house  
'S/He is not sweeping the house'

In the (b) examples in (20-23), negative meaning is expressed. In all of them, the negative suffix is missing. The agreement prefix occurs with non-clitic subjects as in (20b) and (22b). In (21b) and (23b), there is no agreement prefix and no negative suffix, yet negation is clearly implied. In (22) and (23), the auxiliary durative marker **na** changes to **ha** in the negative. In that case, **ha** is the negative suppletive form of **na**. However, the tone pattern of the durative negative remains the same with the anticipative in (20) and (21).

The data in (20-23) are particularly revealing. In all the instances where negative meaning is expressed, a high tone is found somewhere between the agreement prefix and the verbal element, in this case the auxiliary verbs. In (20b) and (22b), the agreement prefix bears a high tone and the inherent low tone of the auxiliary verb which is obvious in the indicative affirmative causes a downstepping of the negative high tone, giving rise to the H S tone pattern seen in (20b & 22b). In the absence of the agreement prefix, the auxiliary verb is the only element that bears the high tone negative marker as in (21b) and (23b). The tone of the subject pronoun has no role to play in Igbo negation. The same pronoun can bear a low tone in the interrogative construction. Moreover, there is no low tone in the environment where there is no subject clitic pronoun. This is unlike the interrogative low tone which could be found with non-clitic subjects as shown in (24) below (also from Nneewi).

- (24) (Nneewi)
- a. **Ọ nà a-zà unyò?**  
3S DUR NOM-sweep house  
'Is s/he sweeping the house?'

b. **Àda à-nà a-zà unyò?**

Ada AGR-DUR NOM-sweep house  
 ‘Is Ada sweeping the house?’

I have earlier noted that Dechaine (1993) observes that the agreement prefix bears a high tone, but we have seen that the same agreement prefix can bear low tone if no negative meaning is implied. Even main verbs can sometimes be negated without the negative suffix as in (25) (adapted from Uwalaka (2003:11), glossing is mine).

(25) a. **A-mā Jizọs bù ọrĩa**  
 AGR.NEG-know Jesus be sickness  
 ‘The lack of knowledge of Jesus is sickness’

b. **Madù a-mā Jizọs bù ọrĩa**  
 person AGR.NEG-know Jesus be sickness  
 ‘For a person not to know Jesus is sickness’

In (25a & b), the agreement element bears a high tone. This high tone marks negation and influences the low tone (which most verbs bear in simple declarative sentences, irrespective of their inherent tone pattern) of the main verb **ma** ‘know’ to become a downstep. This is why I gloss the agreement prefix as AGR.NEG.

Another evidence in support of the role of high tone in Igbo negation, could be found in Igbo personal names. Igbo personal names provide good examples of economy in language. Most names are clausal in structure but made as short as possible, ensuring that the intended meanings are not lost. There are Igbo names that carry negative meaning,<sup>5</sup> but do not occur with negative suffix. For example, **Ife anyighi Chukwu** meaning, ‘Nothing is too difficult for God’ is rendered **Ifeanyichukwu**. **Amaghi nna** with the literal meaning ‘One does not know father’ is rendered **Amanna**. The morphemic make-up of the two names are shown in (26).

(26) a. **Ife-a-nyị-chukwu**  
 thing-AGR.NEG-surpass-God  
 ‘Nothing surpasses God’

b. **A-mā-nnà**  
 AGR.NEG-know-father  
 ‘father is not known’

There is no negative suffix in (26a and b). But the high tone borne by the agreement prefix gives the names their negative reading. The indicative low tone of **ma** changes to a step tone which is an indication of the presence of high tone. A change in the tone pattern of (26b) for example will give different readings to the name as demonstrated in (27) below

(27) a. **A-mà-nnà**  
 AGR-know-father  
 ‘The father is known’ (affirmative)

<sup>5</sup> Here I am referring to syntactic negation and not the pragmatic assumption that certain names have negative connotations.

b. **À-mà-nnà?**

AGR-know-father

'Is the father known?'

(interrogative)

(27) shows that an interrogative could be differentiated from non-interrogative by a low tone on the subject pronoun (in (27) an agreement prefix, traditionally referred to as impersonal pronoun). Since the affirmative (non-interrogative) bears a high tone subject pronoun (in (27a), a prefix), the high tone of negation forces the inherently low tone verb to bear a downstep tone (26b). This could explain why the only difference between (27a) (affirmative) and (26b) (negative) is the change of **ma** verb from a low to a downstep.

## 4. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

It has been demonstrated in this paper that even though negation in Igbo is marked by the suffix **-ghī** or its dialectal variants such as **-họ**, **-ra**, **-shọ**, etc, tone plays a very important role in Igbo negation. I argued that contrary to Ndimele (2009) who sees the low tone of the subject pronoun in (28b) as one of the indicators of negation,

(28) a. **Ọ nà à-gụ akwụkwọ**

3S DUR NOM-read book

'S/He is reading a book'

b. **Ọ na-ghī à-gụ akwụkwọ**

3S DUR-NEG NOM-read book

'S/He is not reading a book'

it is actually the high tone on the verbal element (in this case, the durative auxiliary **na**) that indicates negation. The high tone displaces the low tone usually borne by the verb in the affirmative and this triggers downstep tone which is usually seen in negative constructions. The low tone on the subject pronoun in (28b) does not indicate negation since the same low tone can be seen on an interrogative sentence where no negation is implied as in (29) below.

(29) **Ọ nà à-gụ akwụkwọ?**

3S DUR NOM-read book

'Is he/she reading a book?'

My argument is further advanced by looking at two dialects of Igbo: Nneewi and Ọnicha where negation could be expressed without the negative suffix. In these dialects, the negative auxiliary verbs always bear high tone or downstepped high.

I therefore conclude that negation in Igbo is marked with the negative suffix and with high tone borne by some other element in a higher position that c-commands the functional category, Neg. The high tone negative marker displaces the low tone of the indicative affirmative verb form which triggers off downstep tone pattern usually seen in negative constructions. The fact that negation can be expressed only with tone is an indication that high tone plays a more important role in Igbo negation than the negative suffix. The **e-** agreement prefix which normally bears high tone in negative construction is therefore a joint spell-out of stranded T and Neg. The segmental morpheme belongs to T/Agr, while the prosodic morpheme belongs to Neg.

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS USED WITH EXPLANATIONS

- AGR – Agreement prefix. It appears before a main verb or auxiliary verb if the subject is a non-clitic pronoun in some constructions such as negative and perfective.
- ANT - Anticipative Aspect marker (future). It exists in form of auxiliary verb in Igbo
- AUX – Auxiliary verb. In some places the specific grammatical function of the aux is used as the gloss. (See DUR and ANT)
- DUR – Durative Aspect marker (Progressive or Habitual). It exists as auxiliary verb in Igbo.
- INDIC- Indicative. Used when the rV suffix is non-past
- NEG - Negation
- NOM - Nominalising prefix which attaches to the main verb root when the verb is the complement of an auxiliary verb.
- OVS - Open Vowel Suffix. Found in different types of verb forms in Igbo. This suffix seems to be semantically empty in most verb forms where it appears
- PF – Perfective Aspect marker
- rV - A verbal suffix with the form r+vowel, the vowel being a copy of the vowel of the verb root. There are different types in Igbo in Igbo but the one I use here marks past tense.
- 3P - Third person plural pronoun.
- 3S - Third person singular pronoun.

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