

# 18

## Obolo

(Lower Cross, Delta Cross, Cross River)

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### 18.1 General

Some 100,000 people speak varieties of Obolo in a group of more than twenty islands in the extreme southeast corner of the Niger Delta in SE Nigeria, facing the Atlantic Ocean. Obolo refers to the language, the people, and their homeland. The government name is Andoni. Obolo is closely related to better known Lower Cross languages such as Ibibio and Efik. Until recently many Obolo spoke Igbo and Ibibio as second languages. The younger generation speaks Nigerian Pidgin English and/or Nigerian Standard English beside Obolo. Our analysis relies entirely on Faraclas (1984, 122 pages).

Obolo distinguishes an extra high (circumflex accent), a high (acute accent), and a low tone (unmarked)<sup>1</sup>. The tonal shape of some verb forms is the sum of the tones of the SM, any AM marker, and the tone of the root, but in many forms there is a superimposed tonal shape so that the tonal contour is not the sum of the tones of individual morphemes. Tone is very important in verbal distinctions. Also, “Obolo utterances are divided into stress groups and each such group receives one stress. Stress groups are usually centered around a verb [...] Stress is normally marked by an extra high or a gliding tone”.

The central role of tone in the verb system can be illustrated by considering the structure **o-tele** (2s-leave). It occurs in several different surface tonal shapes, e.g. **ó-télé** ‘you leave/left’, **íkpá ô-télé** ‘letters that you left’, **o-téle íkpá** ‘you left the letters’. We do not attempt below to describe tone patterns fully.

The Obolo consonant system is unexceptional for the area: it has only two fricatives (/f, s/) and lacks any /p/. There are six vowel qualities, (/i, e, a, ɔ, o, u/). All occur short and long, the long ones being relatively rare and tending to shorten in many contexts. Syllables in Obolo can have these structures only: V, N̩ (only in prefixes), CV, CVC, CV:C, CGV, CGVC.

### 18.2 Word order

Obolo is predominantly S V O Other. O has the order DO V<sup>2</sup> IO, where either or both parts can be nominal or pronominal. DO, IO, and adverbials can be fronted for emphasis. Questions can be fronted (relativised) or not:

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<sup>1</sup> Faraclas says each of the three has two major allotones: for the extra high, a level extra high tone or a fall from extra high to high; for the high, a level high or a fall from high to low; and for the low, a level low or a rise from low to high. The contexts for these allotones are not given so we simply refer to the three tones as extra high, high, and low.

<sup>2</sup> O has the order DO IO, where DO and IO have to be separated by a verb, often ‘give’, so a construction with V DO IO is like a serial verb construction: **î-ge íkpá ínyí emi iyákwut** ‘He wrote the letter to me yesterday.’ lit. ‘He write letter give me yesterday’.

- (1) a **i-gé<sup>3</sup> kéké**  
 3s-write what  
 ‘What did 3s write?’
- b **kéké ké í-gé**  
 what that 3s-write  
 ‘What did 3s write?’

We did not find examples where use of an auxiliary led to inversion of V O.

### 18.3 Verb structure

The canonical verb structure is: M - SM - NEG - AM – root.

M: **mâ-** “Weak future”. A preverbal **#ke#** does or may occur before subjunctive forms.

SM: 1s **N-**, 2s **o-**, 3s is **i-** in most contexts but **o-** in contexts including subjunctive and preverbal focus. The most common SM for 1/2/3p is **e-** (most often H-or extra-H-toned). Other plural SM markers are **mi-**, **i-**, and **me-**, each occurring in a limited range of contexts. Since plural SMs are neutral for person, they have to be preceded by an independent 1/2/3p pronoun.

NEG: the plural NEG /kpe/ always occurs verb-initially, preceded by an independent pronoun, not an SM. The other negative formatives occur after the SM (see §6).

AM: **Ø** FAC; **-ki-** IPFV (always high- or extra-high-toned); **-ké-kí<sup>4</sup>** HAB; **-gâ(-kî)-** or **-mê(-kî)-** PRG; **-ke-bí-** PRESSIMUL<sup>5</sup>; **-ba-** “strong future”, conditional; **-ba-kí-** “strong future” IPFV; **-ba-** or **-ri-**, optionally followed by **-bé-** or **-ré-**, followed by infinitival **í-** PFT.

As can be seen, the AM position can be filled by zero, one, two, or, exceptionally, three<sup>6</sup> morphemes in a string. Most markers with two (or three) syllables are visibly sequences of single morphemes. IPFV **-kí-** comes last in a sequence.

Root: verb roots have these shapes: CV, CVC, CGV, CV:C, CVCV. The commonest type CV, and CGV are always H-toned, whereas the other types can be H or L. In CVCV verbs, the vowel of the second syllable is that of the first. The few three syllable verbs involve reduplication.

Productive root reduplication reduplicates the initial consonant and the initial vowel, /i, u/ of the root lowering to /e, o/. For the function of reduplication, see §5.3, below. With the possible exception of **-na**, only occurring on monosyllables, Obolo verbs do not have suffixal extensions.

<sup>3</sup> In all examples we follow Faraclas in using four verbs, shown with their basic/lexical tone: **-gé** ‘write’ and **-télé** ‘leave’, **-fuk** ‘read/count’ and **-bokó** ‘receive!’.

<sup>4</sup>Faraclas regards **ké-kí** as reduplication of **-kí-**, with accompanying lowering of [i].

<sup>5</sup>Abbreviation PRESSIMUL is used in this chapter for Faraclas’ “present simultaneous”, an apparently subordinate form, explained and exemplified below (§18.4).

<sup>6</sup>The one three-morpheme combination is an alternative Progressive form, omitted here.

## 18.4 Aspect, mood

Faraclas shows a total of forty-two positive forms contrasting indicative, subjunctive, aspect, modal futures, focus, and imperative. Six of these are regional or are variants (often short), reducing the total to thirty-six.

He distinguishes two basic aspects, completive and continuative, and several tenses: “present”, “present simultaneous”, three “futures” (weak, strong, very strong), and “past anterior”. Following the general practice in this book we accept completive and continuative as (the basic) aspects but re-label them as Factative (FAC) and imperfective (IPFV), respectively. FAC is the unmarked member; IPFV is marked by adding **kí** and changing the tone pattern. Faraclas shows all forms as basically FAC or IPFV, plus their other categories. This includes subjunctive and imperative (seen §18.5, below), which are Factative, but can be made imperfective.

- (2) a **ń-ge**      **íkpa**  
1s-write    letter  
‘I write/wrote a letter’<sup>7</sup> (FAC)
- b **n-kí-ge**      **íkpa**  
1s-IPFV-write    letter  
‘I am/was writing a letter’ (IPFV)

We reinterpret his “tenses” as aspects or modals. This reinterpretation has to be tentative because forms are described and illustrated briefly – in line with his intent “to provide an adequate, though by no means exhaustive, description of the grammatical structures of the languages” (p. vii) – and there is no body of texts that would enable us to more fully explore the functions of the “tenses”.

We interpret his “futures” as modal forms rather than future tenses (and thus gloss these morphemes as M). This is because their primary function is not simply reference to future time but a combination of time reference with a strong modal component. Thus he says of the “weak future” patterns that they “often express desire or speculation about the future, rather than what will actually come to pass”, and translates them by “will” or “want to”. The “weak future” is also shown in sentences translated by English conditionals. The “weak future” is encoded by a morpheme /ma/ at the verb-initial M slot, where it combines with following SMs like this: 1s **mâ-**, 2s and 3s **mô-**, plural **mê-**. The **ma** that occurs in the “weak future” derives from the independent verb **-má** ‘like, love’.

He talks of the “strong future” in two ways: 1. “used to express actions or states of being that the speaker is sure will occur in the future”, and 2. “conveys a very strong sense of obligation to realize an action or state of being in the future”. It is represented by the morpheme /-ba-/, which shows the same range of vowels as the “weak future”. Examples of “weak futures” (3a-e), “strong futures”, (3f-g)”, both in (3h):

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<sup>7</sup>We follow Faraclas’ glosses. It should be noted that he varies between singular and plural glosses for nouns, and between English present and past glosses for verbs.

- (3) a **mâ-gé** **íkpá**  
1s.M-write letter  
'I will (want to) write a letter.'
- b **owu mô-tele íkpá**  
2s 2s.M-leave letter  
'You will leave a letter.'
- c **omô mô-fuk íkpá** '3s will read a letter.'
- d **ejí mē-bòkò íkpá** 'We will receive a letter.'
- e **ke má-gégê íkpá**  
ke 1s.M-write letter  
'I should (could, will) have written a letter.'
- f **m-bâ-ge íkpá** 'I will write a letter (it's a sure thing).'
- g **m-bâ-gê íkpá** 'I will write a letter, I will have to write a letter.'
- h **mé mgbo mâ-bâ-ge íkpá omô mô-nu**  
by time 1s.M-M-write letter, 3s 3s.M-come  
'By the time I will begin to write a letter, he will have come.'

Despite our interpretation of his futures as modals we will continue to refer to them as the “weak” and “strong” futures. We interpret his “present tense”, “present (simultaneous) tense”, “past anterior tense” as aspects: progressive, progressive (subordinate), and perfect, respectively. The “present” can hardly be a present as it translates as both present and past, so on the evidence of the one sentence available we see it as a progressive:

- (4) **owu o-ga-ki-télé íkpá** 'You are leaving a letter', or 'You were leaving ...when..'

The “present (simultaneous)” can likewise refer to past or present situations but has an additional component which, judging from Faraclas' few examples, appears to be a dependent status: it appears only in subordinate clauses, and indicates an action ongoing at the same time as the main verb. (These are the only examples):

- (5) a **ń-ke-bí-gé íkpá, n-kâ-gwén owu**  
1s-PRESSIMUL-write letter, 1s-NEG-call you  
'As I am writing a letter, I didn't call you.'
- b **owu ó-ke-bí-télé íkpá, n-kâ-gwén owu**  
2s 2s-PRESSIMUL-leave letter, 1s-NEG-call you  
'As you were leaving a letter, I didn't call you.'

- c **íkpa é-ké-bí-bòkó míwá** ‘The letters that we are receiving are many.’

There also appears to be what is best described an habitual, illustrated but not formally recognized by Faraclas:

- (6) **n-kê-kí-gé íkpá** ‘I am/was always writing letters, used to write letters.’

Finally, although Faraclas has a tense called “past anterior”, the four examples given are translated by the English perfect, which inclines us to regard this as perfect (aspect):

- (7) a **ń-ra-í-gé íkpá** ‘I have written a letter (already).’  
b **owu ó-ba-í-télé íkpá** ‘You have left a letter.’  
c **î-ra-bí-fuk íkpá** ‘3s has read a letter.’  
d **ji mâ-ba-bí-bòkó íkpá** ‘We have received a letter.’

It is possible that eastern varieties of Obolo have a real past tense. Faraclas gives a number of eastern examples that involve **ka** (variants **ko, ke**) and are translated by English pasts, not perfects (p.78):

- (8) a **ń-kâ-gé íkpá** ‘I wrote a letter.’ (cf (2), above)  
b **ogwú o-kô-ge íkpá** ‘Person who wrote books...’ (cf (16), below)  
c **íkpa n-kâ-ki-gé..** ‘Letter that I was writing...’ (cf (16), below)

In summary, we see Obolo as a language with aspects and moods, but no tense contrasts. Thus it has a basic FAC : IPFV distinction, plus two modal “futures”, two progressives (one used in main clause, one in subordinate), an habitual, and a perfect. There is (possibly), a conditional (see §18.5.5).

## 18.5 Other categories

### 18.5.1 Imperative

Singular imperatives are morphologically unmarked and have their root tone (except if said in isolation, where stress intervenes to produce an extra high tone). Plural imperatives add the plural prefix **i-**. The negative formative is **-ka-**, and the root takes a H. The basic imperative is Factative but can be made imperfective in the usual way, by adding **kí**.

(9)	FAC	NEG	IPFV	NEG
Singular	<b>gé íkpá</b> ‘Write a letter!’	<b>ka-gé íkpá</b>	<b>kí-gé íkpá</b> ‘Be writing a letter!’	<b>ka-kí-gé íkpá</b>
Plural	<b>i-fuk íkpá</b> ‘Read a letter!’	<b>í-ka-fúk íkpá</b>	<b>i-ki-fúk íkpá</b> ‘Be reading letters!’ <sup>8</sup>	<b>í-ka-kí-fúk íkpá</b>

### 18.5.2 Subjunctive

Subjunctives, focus forms, and relativized verbs mainly differ tonally from corresponding indicative, neutral focus, and absolutive forms, respectively<sup>9</sup>. The tone differences affect SMs and/or stems, the latter having a consistent high-low surface pattern in the subjunctive. The “relative conjunction” **ke** may also occur before a “subjunctive”, in which case the tones are sometimes not those typical of the subjunctive. Examples:

(10) Indicative **í-fuk íkpá** ‘He reads/read a letter.’

Subjunctive **mô-rɔ omɔ fûk íkpá**  
 3s.M-make 3s 3s-read.SBJ letter  
 ‘He will make him read a letter.’

SBJ + verb focus **mô-rɔ omɔ í-fófûk íkpá** ‘He will make him read a letter.’

SBJ + IPFV **mô-rɔ omɔ í-kí-fûk íkpá**  
 3s.M-make 3s 3s-IPFV-read.SBJ letter  
 ‘He will make him to be reading...’

but **ń-gé íkpá** ‘I write/wrote a letter’, and **ke ń-gé íkpá** ‘I should have written a letter’<sup>10</sup>

### 18.5.3 Focus

Verbs may be focus neutral, that is, no particular part of the utterance is emphasized, as in the pair in (2), repeated here as (11):

(11) a. **ń-ge íkpá** ‘I write/wrote a letter.’ (FAC)

b. **n-kí-ge íkpá** ‘I am/was writing a letter.’ (IPFV)

Verbs may also have “prefocus, postfocus, verb focus, or auxiliary = aspect focus”. The differences are mainly tonal: a few cases may involve the use of pronouns: verb focus also involves reduplicating the initial consonant and vowel of the root: and aspect focus may also reduplicate what Faraclas calls the auxiliary, which we label AM

<sup>8</sup>Faraclas translates this and its negative equivalent with “letters”, not “a letter”.

<sup>9</sup>The 3s has **i-**, for indicative **o-**.

<sup>10</sup>Faraclas labels this as “subjunctive”, but his reason is not clear.

(Aspect-Mood). Pre- may not co-occur with post-focus, nor verb with aspect focus, but prefocus or postfocus may co-occur with verb or aspect focus.

Prefocus “puts emphasis on elements occurring in the same sentence, but preceding the verb”. Faraclas’ prefocus examples put emphasis on the subject or are relative clauses where the nominal object precedes the verb. Prefocus is usually marked by emphasis, resulting in a high or extra-high tone, on the SM. When the subject is emphasized, an independent pronoun is often used as well<sup>11</sup>. Examples, with emphasis underlined:

- (12) a **owu ó-kí-télé íkpá**  
 2s 2s-IPFV-leave letter  
 ‘You were leaving a letter.’
- b **íkpá (bé) o-télé míwá**  
 letters (REL) 2s-leave many  
 ‘The letters (that) you left are many.’

Postfocus puts emphasis on elements following the verb in the same sentence. Faraclas’ examples put emphasis on the object or the complement in relative clauses whose nominal subject precedes the verb. The tonal patterns of postfocus forms differ from those in focus neutral forms but the details are not clear to us. Examples:

- (13) a **n-gê íkpá iyákwut**  
 1s-write letter yesterday  
 ‘I wrote the letter yesterday.’, or ‘I wrote the letter yesterday.’
- b **ogwú o-gê íkpá** ‘Person who writes books...’

Verb focus is marked in all cases by reduplicating the verb stem. Whether verb focus forms share tonal properties is unclear to us. Examples:

- (14) a **n-gêge íkpá** ‘I wrote a letter.’
- b **íkpá î-fofuk i-kâ-má** ‘The letter he read he didn’t like.’
- c **i-bóbóko íkpá** ‘Receive the letter!’

Auxiliary/aspect focus most often has a compound or double morpheme at AM. Sometimes this involves reduplication, in other cases an apparent sequence of morphemes. Faraclas regards the “strong future” as [+ auxiliary focus]. Examples:

- (15) a. **n-kê-kí-gé íkpá** ‘I am/was always writing letters’ (HAB, reduplicated **kí**)
- b. **n-gâ-kí-gé íkpá** ‘I am writing a letter’ (PRG)

<sup>11</sup> In this case the 3s SM is **o-**, not **i-**.

- c. **m-bâ-ge íkpá** ‘I will write a letter’ (stronger than **mâ-gé íkpá**)

#### 18.5.4 Relatives

Relative clauses are have three formal characteristics: 1. they differ tonally from absolutes, 2. they have different SMs in some cases from those in absolutes, and 3. they optionally involve the use of “relative conjunctions” (such as **ké**, **bé**) or demonstratives pronouns (such as **eyí**). We ignore 3. in the display in (16). (16) presents examples of absolutes (2nd column), object relatives (where the head noun and the object of the relative clause have the same referent: 3rd column), and subject relatives (where head noun and subject of the relative clause have the same referent: 4th column).

#### (16) Relatives

	Absolute	Object relative	Subject relative
Factative Neutral focus	<b>î-fuk íkpá</b> ‘3s-reads/read letter.’ <b>ń-gé íkpá</b> ‘I-write/wrote letter.’	<b>Íkpá î-fuk</b> ‘letter 3s-read’ <b>íkpá ń-gé</b> ‘letter I-wrote’	<b>ogwú o-gê íkpá</b> ‘person who-writes letters’
Factative Verb focus	<b>n-gêge íkpá</b> ‘I- <u>wrote</u> letter.’ <b>i-fôfuk íkpá</b> ‘3s- <u>read</u> letter.’	<b>Íkpá î-fofuk</b> ‘book 3s- <u>read</u> ’	<b>ogwú o-gêge íkpá</b> ‘person who- <u>writes</u> letters’
Imperfective Neutral focus	<b>n-kí-ge íkpá</b> ‘I am/was writing letter.’ <b>i-kí-fuk íkpá</b> ‘3s is/was reading letter.’	<b>Íkpá ń-kí-gé</b> ‘letters I was writing’ <b>íkpá î-kí-fuk</b> ‘letters 3s was reading’	<b>ogwú o-kí-ge íkpá</b> ‘person who-is/was- writing letter’
“Weak future”	<b>mâ-gé íkpá</b> ‘I.will-write letter.’ <b>omô mô-fuk íkpá</b> ‘3s.will-read letter.’	<b>Íkpá mâ-gê</b> ‘letters I.will-write’	
“Strong future”	<b>m-bâ-ge íkpá</b> ‘I-will-write letter.’ <b>i-bô-fuk íkpá</b> ‘I-will-read letter.’	<b>Íkpá ń-ba-ge</b> ‘letters I-will-write’ <b>íkpá î-bo-fuk</b> ‘letters 3s-will-read’	

It is not easy to generalize about the tonal patterns in (16), partly because in any row or column several factors are at play (focus, aspect, person, etc), partly because the tones shown above, taken from Faraclas’ paradigms, sometimes differ from the same or similar forms shown elsewhere in his text in a sentence context, partly because the tonal generalizations he himself makes, while mostly accurate, do not always seem to correspond to the forms he shows.

Nevertheless, starting from the assumption that the absolute column represents a relatively unmarked set of forms, it seems to be true that: what characterizes the object

relative is an extra high or an additional high tone, mostly on the SM, occasionally displaced on to the first stem syllable; what characterizes the subject relative is that the SM always has a low tone, and that some SM differ from those in the absolutive.

### 18.5.5 Conditionals/Subjunctive?

Faraclas has three forms translated by English conditionals:

- (17) a **ke ń-gé íkpá** ‘I could (should, will) have written a letter.’  
(neutral focus)
- b **ke ń-gégê íkpá**  
(as preceding but verb (written) focus)
- c **ke omô ó-fofûk íkpá** ‘3s could (should, will) have written a letter.’  
(verb focus)
- d **ke má-gégê íkpá** ‘I could (should, will) have written a letter.’  
(also with verb focus)

While he translates these by English conditionals, he labels them “subjunctives”. It is not clear to us why they are so labeled, for several reasons: Their tones do not correspond to the tones of any other subjunctives shown in the book; if all persons, not just the first person as illustrated, are compared to all other structures and tones shown in the book, they correspond to none (subjunctive or indicative); the 3s for the first two has anomalous **o-**, not the **i-** that occurs in other subjunctives. Finally, he says that this **ke** can occur with other subjunctives, and refers to it (p.58) as the “relative conjunction”, but its tone is low, while that of the relative conjunction is high. While we are therefore not sure that these are subjunctives, we are not sure of their status because none appears in context, so we prefer to call them conditionals.

## 18.6 Negation

Faraclas shows twenty-two contrastive verbal negatives, roughly half the number of positives, which means that some positive forms are neutralized in the negative. There are three morphological patterns in verbal negation<sup>12</sup>. 1. The commonest involves **-ka-**, which occurs in the singulars of all non-“futures” and also in the plurals of the subjunctive, imperative, perfect, and “present simultaneous”. 2. With the exceptions just listed, all plural persons, including those in the “future”, are marked by **kpe-**, and preceded not by a SM but by the independent pronoun. 3. In both “futures”, singulars are marked by one of /-kaba-, -kpa, -kpaba-/. The result is an interlocking pattern illustrated in (18), with the negative morphemes underlined:

<sup>12</sup> All three patterns have [a] in 1s, [o] in 2s and 3s, and [e] in plural forms. It is tempting to posit that [kpa] is related to or derived from [ka] but it is not clear how. The “future” formatives [kaba] and [kpaba] seem to consist of [ka, kpa] plus [ba], which latter also occurs in some positive “future” forms. There does not appear to be a single tone associated with /ka/ or /kpa/.

## (18) Negatives

Positive (s)	Negative (s)	Positive (p)	Negative (p)
<b>ń-gé íkpá</b> 'I wrote a letter.'	<b>n-ká-gé íkpá</b>	<b>eji mí-fuk íkpá</b> 'We read a letter.'	<b>eji kpê-fuk íkpá</b>
<b>o-gêgê íkpá</b> 'You wrote a letter.'	<b>o-ká-gêgê íkpá</b>	<b>eji é-bòbòkò íkpá</b> 'We received a letter.'	<b>eji kpé-bòbòkò íkpá</b>
<b>gé íkpá</b> 'Write a letter!'	<b>ka-gé íkpá</b>	<b>i-fuk íkpá</b> 'Read a letter!'	<b>í-ka-fúk íkpá</b>
<b>n-gêgê íkpá</b> 'Let me write (SBJ).'	<b>ń-ka-gêgê íkpá</b>	<b>eji é-bòkò íkpá</b> 'Let us receive a letter.'	<b>eji é-ka-bòkò íkpá</b>
<b>mâ-gé íkpá</b> 'I'll write a letter.'	<b>n-ká-ba-ge íkpá,</b> or <b>kpâ-gê íkpá</b>	<b>eji mē-bòkò íkpá</b> 'We will receive a letter.'	<b>eji kpê-bòkò íkpá</b>

The differences in these patterns do not seem really significant to us because they do not correspond to differences in aspect or mood, as they do in other languages examined. They either reflect singular versus plural (1. versus 2., above) or, in the case of [k] versus [kp] or [ka-ba] versus [kpa], possibly result from vowel loss and consonant assimilation. The vowel alternations seen in singular [ka] versus plural [kpe], and 1s [kaba] versus 2/3s [kobo] also occur in other morphemes at AM, e.g. in both modal "futures", so again do not seem significant.

## 18.7 'Be', auxiliaries

Faraclas (55-6) suggests that five verbs correspond in some way to English 'be': **-wá** '(there) is/are'; **-ré** equational/copula 'be', also 'arrive'; **-kúp/-kwéek** 'sit, sit down, be, be located temporarily'; **-lùk** 'be located (permanently)'; 3s postfocus form of **-bét** 'be like' plus **lék** 'body' renders 'seem, appear, be like'. Examples, all Factative<sup>13</sup>:

- (19) a **ogwú íjêjeen omô ó-wá**  
 person teacher (=INF+ verb focus) 3s.PRO 3s-be.FAC  
 'There is a teacher (there).'
- b **Áyija i-re ogwú íjêjeen**  
 Ayija 3s-be.FAC person teacher  
 'Ayija is a teacher.'
- c **Ntíja í-kup me Átábá**  
 Ntíja 3s-sit.FAC in Ataba  
 'Ntíja is staying in/is visiting Ataba.'

<sup>13</sup> They are Factative simply because none contains the Imperfective marker /kí/. We note in passing that 'be' in other Niger-Congo languages examined does not always behave as other verbs in terms of FAC versus IPFV.

- d **Ntíja í-lúk me Átábá**  
 Ntija 3s-be.FAC in Ataba  
 ‘Ntija lives in Ataba.’
- e **í-bét lék mâ-ge íkpá**  
 3s-be.like.FAC body 1s.M-write letter  
 ‘It seems that I will write a/the letter.’

Neither auxiliary nor modal verbs seem to play any central role in Obolo. Obolo has many serial verb constructions, in which the first verb inflects and all others are infinitives, as in:

- (20) **îm-fuk í-gé í-kwééŋ í-sibí**  
 1s-read INF-write INF-study INF-go.out  
 ‘I read, wrote, studied, and went out.’

‘Go, come, do first, do repeatedly, do again, bring together, begin’ often occur as the first verb in such constructions ((21a-d)), and ‘finish, do more than, do most, do a lot, do fully, be many’ often follow other verbs ((21e-g)). Verbs corresponding in meaning to English modal meanings often occur followed by one infinitive: ‘know, be able, want, must, begin’ ((21h-j)).

- (21) a **ń-sí í-gé íkpá**  
 1s-go INF-write letter  
 ‘I went (and) wrote a letter.’
- b **ń-ní<sup>14</sup>-gé íkpá**  
 1s-come.INF-write letter  
 ‘I came (and) write a letter.’ (it came to pass that...)
- c. **m-kpókpkók í-kí-gé íkpá**  
 1s.RED.repeat INF-IPFV-write letter  
 ‘I kept on writing the letter.’
- d **m-kpókpkók í-yá í-kí-gé<sup>15</sup> íkpá**  
 1s.RED.repeat INF-do.again INF-IPFV-write letter  
 ‘I rewrote the letter.’
- e **ń-gé íkpá í-sáŋá**  
 1s.write letter INF-finish  
 ‘I finished writing the letter.’

<sup>14</sup> **Nú** ‘come’ + **í** INF > [ní].

<sup>15</sup> As (21d, i) show, the infinitive can be IPFV (**kí**) or verb focus (RED).

- f **ń-gé íkpá í-gak ogót**  
 1s.write letters INF-surpass 3s  
 ‘I wrote more letters than 3s did.’
- g **ń-gé íkpá í-wá**  
 1s-write letters INF-be.many  
 ‘I wrote many letters.’
- h **n-ryṅ í-gé íkpá**  
 1s-know INF-write letters  
 ‘I can/know how to write letters.’
- i **ń-week í-gêge íkpá**  
 1s-want INF-RED.write letter  
 ‘I want to write a letter.’
- j **ń-béné í-gé íkpá**  
 1s.begin INF-write letter  
 ‘I began to write a letter.’

## References

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