

A CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS OF THE PHRASE STRUCTURE OF SOME NIGERIAN LANGUAGES

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Abstract

This paper examined the phrase structure of some Nigerian languages with a view to provide linguistic templates in language pedagogy to secure minority languages. The study makes use of the contrastive analysis theory to investigate the sameness of their verb heads and complements in contrast with the English Language. Domiciled in the domain of syntax, the descriptive research design was used to collate data from relevant sources on which twenty three structures were tested by descriptive analysis, out of which all Nigerian indigenous languages make use of verb initial structure with intermittent omission of definite articles, prepositions and the change of indefinite article in the English structure to number for convergence in the Nigerian indigenous languages. The findings show that although numerous typological classifications such as OSV design, OVS design, SVO design, SOV design, VSO design, VOS design and subject-only restriction design exist in parts of the world, this study has identified the Verb-Adjective-Object (VAO), Verb-Object-Determiner (VOD) and the Verb-Determiner-Object (VDO) in the internal structures of Nigerian indigenous languages; thereby introducing SVAO, SVOD and SVDO in modern language typology. The position of this paper is that the understanding of the existing language sameness and differences will help in sustaining the design of minority languages in order to reduce or possibly avert the extinction of indigenous languages in Nigeria and in West Africa.

Key words: Language Security, Typology, Lexical, Phrase Structure, Grammaticality

Introduction

A contrastive analysis of the phrase structure of some Nigerian languages to provide measures for indigenous language preservation focuses on the in-depth structural analysis in the design of natural languages. The analysis of structural design dates back to the early 19th century when numerous theories of language, especially the English based theories, introduced to ensure descriptive and explanatory adequacies following the works of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857 – 1913), a Swiss scholar who introduced the theory of structuralism and the Greenberg's hypothesis 1966 on Language Universals which states that "language variability was not limitless and that it was necessary to search for and explain common denominators or properties in language".

Explanation of common denominators or properties in language are done in the domain of morphology and syntax where the linguistic items of every string is usually tested and reviewed for adequacies and conventionality. It further looks into the relationships existing between the subject and predicate of a construction with an intention to bringing out the headedness concept in each domain, such as the subject that nominates the action, the verb which is the initiator of the predicate-domain and the object which exists at the accusative node of a given structure. The explained concept is an English language based structural type (SVO) which also exists in other languages of the world with some internal variables.

Conventionally, the study of headedness concept concentrates on the investigation of the head-elements of the constituents of clauses. Scholars argue that while other elements in a clause are mere complements, the head of a given constituent is recognised in the phrase structure and regarded the most important element, because the phrase is named by the head category. The phrase structures nomenclature exist in some categories such as: Noun Phrase (NP), Determiner Phrase (DP), Prepositional Phrase (PP), Verb Phrase (VP) among others (Chomsky, 1983; Abney, 1987; Ndimele, 1992 and Mba, 2006). This has been a simple method of explaining how

functional categories are given attention as a constituent head in language structures.

Furthermore, the subject-verb-object (henceforth, SVO) is a nomenclature in language typology used to represent a structural-type that is organised in the fashion that has subject, followed by verb category and an object in language pedagogy. As it were, in the task of lexical and structural learning, the parametric setting of languages is usually examined to ascertain the universality of natural languages and the uniqueness of individual languages in parts of the world. As a result, linguistic typology has become a distinct field of study in linguistics that investigates and classifies languages according to their structural traits. As a discipline, it relates to qualitative analysis which concentrates on the issue of comparing languages and within-language differences and deliberates on the distribution of structural patterns in the languages of the world; and further give attention to explaining the distributions in languages on word form, word order, word grammar, word choice and lexical typology which focuses on the learning of language vocabulary.

Investigating the internal parameters among languages of the subject-verb-object designs in Nigeria is a way to understand the existing language designs with a view to provide templates for language pedagogy that will help in sustaining the design of minority languages. Obviously, the threat on minority languages which is the hub of cultural and social phenomena in Nigeria is under linguistic security attack (endangerment). As a multilingual nation hosting 520 indigenous languages (with a little number variations from scholars), Nigerians make use of the English Language more than their respective indigenous languages that host their culture and world views (Bamgbose, 2000; Gilbert and Isaac, 2021).

The current study therefore assays to make use of word-order to compare selected Nigerian languages to identify existing language designs in Nigeria with a view to provide designs that will serve as templates/codes for pedagogical purposes of minority languages to reduce or possibly avert language extinction in the nation. This is

done with the objectives of identifying typological classification of languages, finding out how typological designs are used to study languages, explaining typology in Nigerian languages and hypothesizing how language typology can preserve language structures.

Review of related literature

From the introduction of the theory of structuralism by the Swiss scholar, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857 – 1913) and Greenberg's (1966) hypothesis on Language Universals, a vital role in the field of linguistics in the last few decades has developed into major areas of research and professional organization such as the 'Association for Linguistic Typology' (ALT). Since then, numerous typological classification of languages have emerged ranging from object-subject-verb (OSV) design, object-verb-subject (OVS) design, subject-verb-object (SVO) design, subject-object-verb (SOV) design, verb-subject-object (VSO) design, verb-object-subject (VOS) design and subject-only restriction design. Actually, typology is an aspect of syntax that concentrates on identifying language designs and set templates for the study of language types in parts of the world.

In their separate texts on language typology, Chomsky (1957), Ndimele (1999), Radford (2009), Obiamalu (2015) and Nwala (2015) held that the subject of a sentence structure is usually the agent of the sentence; recognising the verb as the kingpin in the determination of the state of being, state of feeling and action of the sentence while the object is the accusative or receiver of the action of the verb set in motion by the agent of the sentence. In this order, it is safe to posit that the movement of the agent linguistic item from one node to another in language design is what creates differences in language typology.

Greenberg (1966), Derbyshire and Geoffrey (1979) and Meyer (2010) in their different publications described the OSV design, OVS design, SOV design, VSO design, VOS and the SVO design, to reflect what is analysed below, using English language as a guide.

(1) OSV

In the English language, an OSV design would be:

1. Biscuits Mercy ate
O S V

This design is rarely used in unmarked sentences. However, languages that make use of OSV as their default word-order are traceable to the Amazon basin (Xavante, Jamamadi, Apurina, Kavabi and Nadeb). Again, in Modern Hebrew, the OSV is used to emphasise the object instead of SVO, for example:

2. אוהב אני אותה would mean "I love her", while "אוהב אותה אני" would mean "It is *she* whom I love".

(2) OVS

Again, the OVS as a design in the English language would unmarked expressions:

3. Biscuits ate Mercy
O V S
4. Trees have fruits
O V S

English language makes use of OVS typology in poetic hyperbaton, for example:

5. Answer gave he none
6. What say you?

Some Norwegian examples of using this word order for object emphasis:

7. Mercy så jeg i går
[Mercy saw I yesterday]
I saw Mercy yesterday

In Turkish language also, OVS is normally used to emphasize the verb, for example:

8. Bardağı kırdı Jill
[The glass broke Jill]
 Jill broke the glass

(3) SOV

The SOV language design could appear as example 9 in English structure:

9. Mercy biscuits ate
 S O V

Another example of SOV design is in German, for example:

10. Ich sage, dass Jill einen Gürtel gekauft hat
[I say that Jill a belt bought has]
 I said that Jill has bought a belt

Another example of SOV is in English religious marriage sentence:

11. “With this ring, I thee wed”
 S O V

(4) VSO

The VSO language design in English would appear as:

12. Ate Mercy biscuit

However, linguistic families include: the Irish, Spanish, Welsh, Arabic, Biblical Hebrew, Scottish, Assvrian, Manx, etc. For example of VSO in Spanish:

13. Me devolvió Mercy el libro que le presté.
[To-me returned Mercy the book that to-her]
 Mercy returned to me the book that I lent her

(5) VOS

In language typology, the VOS in English is equated to:

14. Ate biscuit Mercy
 V O S

Languages or language structures within the VOS design is usually referred to as verb-initial languages or structure. Some verb-initial languages that exhibit flexible word order are St'at'imcets, Tongan and Chamorro.

(6) Subject-Only Restriction

The SOR design exists in most Austronesian languages and it follows from the VP-Raising account of VOS order.

(7) SVO

The SVO language design is a sentence structure classified according to the dominant sequence of these elements in unmarked sentences. In English language, the structural design of SVO appears as:

15. Mercy ate biscuits
 S V O

Linguistically, the SVO is judged the second-most common order by a number of known languages after SOV. Obviously, most Creole languages are commonly developed in SVO-order which suggests that it may be abstractly internalized in human psychology.

Apart from international languages such as the Greeks, French, Russian, Chinese, and Portuguese among others, Nigerian domestic languages, such as Edo, Efik, Hausa, Ibibio, Igala, Igbo, Izon, Kanuri, Nupe, Ogba, Tiv, Urhobo, Yoruba and others also make use of the SVO. Following the Greenberg's hypothesis of 1966 on language universal and the arguments of Ndimele (1999), Nwala (2015) and Gilbert (2021) that no two languages from different ancestry can maintain the same structure without variables at some point, led to the internal assessment of SVO structure of the Ibibio, Igbo and Yoruba languages in Nigeria to ascertain their internal typological similarities and differences in Verb phrase (VP) structures.

Theoretical Framework: Contrastive Analysis

This study utilises and adopts the contrastive analysis theory as its framework. Contrastive analysis (henceforth, CA) was introduced by Lado in 1966 as the plan that can be used to predict and describe samples of areas that will be complex in learning other languages apart from the L1. It also helps to identify those that will not cause complexity by measuring up systematically to the language and culture of the L2 with the indigenous language and culture of the learner. In Lado's idea, the comparison between a foreign language and mother-tongue is the key word that will determine the lightness and difficulty in the leaning of a foreign language lesson.

CA holds that the behavioural approach to a second language acquisition is marred by the habits of the first language. This view was from the lectures of Charles Fries which was developed and published by Robert Lado in the 1950s. They were linguists who subscribed to the behaviourist approach of linguistic studies prevalent in their time. Fries, (1945) and Lado, (1957) believed that language learning is a type of habit and that the old ideas from ones native language usually rubs off on the new language of study. They hold that the most efficient materials are based upon a scientific description of the language to be learnt and a careful comparison with a parallel description of the native language. Again, Prawono (1996) made a proposition that CA hypothesis assume that complexity in learning language is essentially caused by the disparity between learner's L1 systems with L2 that is studied. As a result, CA attempts to contrast the L2 system to uncover the similarity and the dissimilarity. The parts of same elements in both languages will facilitate the learner, while different elements will pose some hindrances in learning of the L2 which will form the focus of the L2 learner in order to attain a near native speaker's competence.

Beyond his advocacy for linguistic tolerance, Lado (1957) noted that second language learners find some aspect of the target language easy and others very difficult, noting that to make the learners' work easier, it is essential to make a comparison of both

languages in order to identify the areas of difficulty for the learner to concentrate and improve upon. He further argues that not only the comparison of the languages and their structures, but also the culture of the users of the languages since culture is an integral part of the language.

On that note, CA makes explicit the differences between languages under consideration. Once more, Tarigan (1992) further affirmed that disparities between languages that were got and produced by CA usually serve a fundamental purpose in language study as a basic to predict difficulties that are faced by bilinguals. CA in the view of these linguists considers learning as a cumulative process making the researcher adopt the theory for this study because it is linguistically whole and relevant for contrasting the typologies of selected Nigerian languages. It will also allow comparing or placing side by side of the language structures with a view to finding out their syntactic differences in both languages in order to provide linguistic templates in language pedagogy to secure minority languages.

Methodology

Considering the use of word-order to compare languages within-language, the qualitative research method is more suitable as it relates to social phenomena. By making use of the qualitative research method, vital information was got from various publications and documents of many organizations and scholars, arranged according to the researcher's intuitive knowledge in linguistic interactions conversant with modern scholarship as it relates to language typology investigation.

In the view of scholars, qualitative research shares these characteristics and seeks to understand a given research problem or topic from the perspectives of the local population it engages. Qualitative research is especially effective in obtaining culturally specific information about the opinions, values, behaviour and social contexts of particular population (Bernard, 1995; Denzin, 2000; Osuji (2012). As a result, the use of the qualitative research method in

identifying the internal parameters among the phrase structure of some Nigerian languages is appropriate.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The analysis considers the highlighted VPs in the following sentences:

- a. Obi **bought a house**
- b. Bassey **is a handsome boy**
- c. My mother **went to the market**

Ibibio language

16. Adep ufok kiet
[Bought house one]
Bought a house

The descriptive investigation of the VP structure 16 shows verb-object-determine (VOD) design in Ibibio language.

17. Ado uyai etokeyen wooden
[is handsome small boy]
Is a handsome boy

The descriptive investigation of the VP structure 17 shows verb-null determiner-adjective-object (VAO) design in Ibibio language.

18. Ama adaka udua ado
[go+tense market the]
Went to the market

The descriptive investigation of the VP structure 18 shows verb-object (VO) with a missing preposition “to” and movement of determiner “the” to the bottom node in Ibibio language.

Igbo language

19. Zuru ulọ
[buy+past house]
Bought a house

The descriptive investigation of the VP structure 19 shows verb-object (VO) design in Igbo language with the omission of indefinite article “a”.

20. Bū nwata nwoke mara mma
 [is small boy fine + pres fine]
 Is a handsome boy

The descriptive investigation of the VP structure 20 shows verb-adjective-object (VAO) design in Igbo language with the omission of indefinite article “a”.

21. Gara ahịa
 [go+past market]
 Went to the market

The descriptive investigation of the VP structure 21 shows verb-object (VO) design in Igbo language with the omission of preposition and the definite article “the”.

Yoruba language

22. Ra ile
 [buy house]
 Bought a house

The descriptive investigation of the VP structure 22 shows verb-object (VO) design in Yoruba language with the omission of indefinite article “a”.

23. je arewa omo-okunrin
 [is handsome boy]
 Is a handsome boy

The investigation of the Yoruba VP structure 23 shows that Yoruba language makes use of verb-object (VO) design with the omission of indefinite article ‘a’.

24. Lo si oja
 [go the market]
 Went to the market

The descriptive investigation of the VP structure 24 shows verb-determiner-object (VDO) design in Yoruba language with the omission of preposition “to”.

Findings

The study of the phrase structure of some Nigerian languages investigated the Ibibio language in structure 16, 17 and 18; the Igbo language in structures 19, 20 and 21; and the Yoruba language in structures 22, 23 and 24.

In Ibibio language, the VPs structures 16, 17 and 18 show verb-object-determiner design. The insertion of the determiner at the bottom node of the structure changes the shape of the determiner when it is an indefinite article “a” or “an” to a numeral (number). Subsequently, structure 16 shows that Ibibio language has verb-object-determiner (VOD) design; when the structure contains an adjective, it becomes verb-adjective-object (VAO) with constant omission of preposition.

Again, Igbo language has the verb-object (VO) structure design in structure 19 with omission of indefinite article ‘a’ and verb-adjective-object (VAO) designs in structure 20 with omission of indefinite article ‘a’, structure 21 has verb-object (VO) design with omission of preposition and indefinite article ‘the’, showing that Igbo language structures has constant omission of articles.

Similarly, the Yoruba language has verb-object (VO) design with omission of indefinite article ‘a’ in structure 22 and 23; structure 24 shows verb-determiner-object (VDO) design with omission of preposition.

In principles, Nigerian indigenous languages make use of verb initial in the VP structure, similar to the English language structure, but the parametric variables are found in the characteristics of omission of definite articles, prepositions and the changing of indefinite article ‘a’ to a number and recognises SVAO, SVOD and SVDO structural designs.

Contribution to Knowledge

The current study has shown that every language has a fashion. The different fashions in the tested languages have brought out new concepts in language syntactic design. The understanding of the existing language sameness and differences will help in sustaining the design of languages especially the minority languages as a contribution to reduce or possibly avert language extinction in Nigerian and in parts of the world.

More so, the study has linked syntax with applied linguistics, linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics in comparative grammar which will guide their experts in the choice of language typology.

Conclusion

Available evidences from this research have shown that Nigerian language structures can be preserved via the identified designs and the accelerated rate of structural deviation and wearing-away of indigenous languages can be checked. Subsequently, the visibility of the determiner and adjective in the internal assessment of SVO structures in Nigerian languages has introduced SVAO, SVOD and SVDO in language structural designs; its classifications will guide language scholarship in Nigeria and parts of the world. Furthermore, the typological designs are suitable to study the relationship existing between languages. Again, this study exposes the designs of the internal structure of Nigerian indigenous languages and the identified designs are useful as a guide to assist in the revitalization of dead languages and languages that are near-extinction in Nigeria.

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