

Igbo-English Bilinguals' Performance in Passive Constructions in English and Its Implications for National Development

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Abstract

This paper investigates Igbo English bilinguals' performance in passive constructions. Three hundred subjects drawn from three tertiary institutions in Abia and Imo States formed the population. Data were elicited from the subjects through a structured written test labelled 'Grammaticality Judgement' which required the subjects to identify passive sentences that best transformed given active voice sentences. The study adopted two theoretical approaches, namely Error Analysis (EA) and Chomsky's Minimalist Program (MP). Data collected were analysed at the two levels of computational system, as discussed in Minimalism, namely, Phonetic Form (PF) and Logical Form (LF). Findings from data analysis reveal that over 35% of the subjects were unable to identify passive sentences that best transformed the active voice sentences given as test questions. The research, therefore, concludes that greater percent of Igbo-English bilinguals are competent in the language of wider communication and consequently will be able to participate effectively in the national development programmes. The paper recommends that serious attention be paid to teaching of English tenses as findings reveal that the verb category posed serious syntactic difficulty for the subjects.

Keywords: passive constructions, Minimalist Program, movement, national development

Introduction

Development begins with language. Human beings as agents of development conceive exchange, enhance or change ideas using language hence language is seen as the vehicle for social change, social reconstruction or mobilization and/or national development (Uzoma, 2016). All the levels of development, be it economic development, agricultural development, technological development, human development, etc. – the totality of which is called national development – would not be possible without language. As different sectors of the economy pass through the process of adaptation, change, learning and action, language plays the vital role of educating both the agents of reconstruction and the beneficiaries in the form of explaining, describing, expressing both old and new concepts. It is language that helps people to understand and recognize what needs to be done and how it should be done.

In Nigeria, many languages play this crucial role ranging from majority languages through minority languages to the English language which is considered the nation's second language. Both the minority and majority languages though useful in every form of development, including teaching and learning of concepts, are limited by geographical boundaries and some level of linguistic underdevelopment. English language, therefore,

remains the language that meets the nation's development need. In addition to being the official language of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, it is the language for international communication as well the language of formal education, hence it is important that every Nigerian student should be able to use the language appropriately. Obiegbu (2015, p.84) notes:

a wide range of business categories in Nigeria including the banking industry, technology, the pharmaceutical industry, and even vocational workers such as carpenters and electricians see increased of English language skills.

In addition to the above, many studies have shown that employability of Nigeria graduates also depends on the ability to communicate effectively in the English language (Chukwu and Osuala, 2016; Ikoro, 2017). It is, therefore, highly impossible for the nation to experience any form of transformation, adaptation, reconstruction or social change without the English language. The English language will help the users interact nationally and internationally, learning from other developed countries their artifacts, technocrafts, and ideas from diverse fields. The language will also help development agents to explain what they have or need locally and/or internationally.

It is based on the above that this paper examines Igbo-English bilinguals' performance in one aspect of sentence construction in English as a way of testing their competence in the English language of which the result would signal their readiness to use the language to explore all the avenues that would enhance national development. Igbo-English bilinguals in 300 and 400 levels in two tertiary institutions in the South-east zone were selected for study because they form part of the agents and beneficiaries of national development.

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

- Does the English language permit transformation of active voice into passive voice?
- Are there pieces of evidence of ill-formed derivations or syntactic errors in the selected Igbo-English bilinguals' passive constructions?
- What is the implication of the result of the findings on national development?

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are to:

- Examine Igbo-English bilinguals' performance in passive constructions in English,
- Identify some syntactic errors found in the subjects output in passive constructions,
- State the implication of findings on national development.

Research Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The research was carried out in three tertiary institutions in Abia and Imo States, namely, the Abia State Polytechnic, Aba; Alvan Ikoku College of Education, Owerri and the Imo State University, Owerri. A total of three hundred subjects in 300 and 400 levels formed population the study. The research elicited data from the respondents through written tests labelled 'Grammaticality Judgement'. The tests comprised objective questions that required identifying sentences that best transformed selected declarative sentences into passive constructions. In order to identify and describe the errors found in the subjects' derivations, the study adopted two theoretical approaches: Error Analysis (EA) and the Minimalist Program (MP). EA is a branch of Applied Linguistics which provides a methodological process for accounting for deviations in second language acquisition. According to Corder (1981), every sentence produced by a second language acquirer is to be regarded as idiosyncratic (i.e. erroneous) until it is proved otherwise. The stages in applying EA, according to Corder (1981), include: recognition of errors by examining the language user's productions; accounting for the errors by the use of a descriptive tool; and explanation of why and how the errors occurred.

MP, on the other hand, is the latest version of Chomsky's Transformational Generative Grammar (TGG). In MP sentences are built by operation Merge and move. Merge is "an operation which takes two elements and joins them in a single structure ... (Cook and Newson, 2007, p.262). There are two types of Merge: External Merge (E-Merge) which joins two independent elements into a single structure, and Internal Merge (I-Merge) which also joins two elements, one element included in the other, into a single structure. I-Merge results in movement. MP is used in this paper as a descriptive tool for accounting and explaining of errors observed in the subjects' sentences.

Conceptual Clarifications

Passive Construction

Passive construction is one the means of directing the listener's/reader's attention to the object of the verb. Although passivization performs a semantic function, its goal is achieved by applying a kind of syntactic operations known as movement operation in Chomsky's Transformational Generative Grammar (TGG) (Tomori, 2004). According to Tellerman (2011), movement as used in syntax refers to the process of moving some grammatical elements around within a clause without changing their grammatical meaning. In Chomsky's Generative Grammar, Adger (2003) observes that movement is a kind of transformation which involves the process of moving certain sequences of words in a sentence with minimal change in meaning. Movement as a kind of transformation helps language users perform different language functions such as asking questions, making assertions or refocusing the theme of discussion. For instance, changing an active voice sentence to passive voice helps the language user to draw the attention of the audience to the beneficiary, an object of the verb or the goal of the clause.

Movement involves application of some syntactic principles and/or conditions (Radford, 2004; Carnie, 2011). Violation of such principles or conditions usually results in the sentences crashing either at the Phonetic Form (i.e. level of pronunciation/structure) or Logical Form (i.e. level of meaning) which are the two levels of syntactic evaluation in the MP. The conditions required for active-to-passive transformation also known as Determiner Phrase movement (DP-movement) in English include, first, the presence of a BE auxiliary such as is, was, were, etc; second, the main verb in the active construction changes to the passive participle form. Third, the grammatical subject expresses the theme or patient of the main verb. Fourth, “the expression which serves as the complement of an active verb resurfaces as the subject in the corresponding passive structure (Radford, 2004, p.199).

National Development

Radzinky (nd) cited in Onukaogu, Okpara, Anyanwu and Onyerionwu (2011, pp.32-33) defines national development as a “complex, integrated, participatory process, involving stakeholders and beneficiaries and aimed at improving the overall quality of human life through improvements in a range of social sectors in an environmentally responsible manner in a particular sovereign geographical entity.” Discussing further on the issue, Onukaogu, et al (2011, p.36) add that national development is all inclusive; it should start with individuals who make up the nation before it can extend to the nation. What the above citations mean is that national development is a participatory scheme which involves not only all the sectors of the economy but also the government and the governed, all the ethnic groups that make up Nigeria of which Igbo-English bilinguals are a fraction.

Data Presentation

Table 1 below presents the subjects’ results in Grammaticality judgement test in passive construction in English. Column A on the table shows results of respondents from the Abia State Polytechnic, column B represents those from Alvan Ikoku College of Education while column C displays results of respondents drawn from the Imo State University, Owerri. The Table also shows the questions administered to the subjects and their expected response. Codes are used to number the items in the table for ease of reference.

Table 1: The Respondents’ Performance in Grammaticality Judgement in Passive Constructions in English

Codes	Test Questions	Expected Response	A		B		C	
			Able %	Not Able %	Able %	Not Able %	Able %	Not Able %
DP1	They are destroying the books.	The books are being destroyed.	64.4	36.6	47.5	52.5	60.4	39.6
DP2	They saw him.	He was seen by them.	59.4	40.6	72.3	27.7	72.3	27.7

DP3	They burnt down the house.	The house was burnt down.	48.5	51.5	61.4	38.8	69.3	30.7
DP4	The tower destroyed the building.	The building was destroyed by the tower.	58.4	41.6	71.3	28.7	62.4	37.6
DP5	They stole the books.	The books were stolen by them.	53.4	46.6	69.3	30.7	59.4	40.6
DP6	Agnes is sweeping the compound.	The compound is being swept.	24.6	75.4	58.4	41.6	48.5	51.5
DP7	God has tested the woman's faith.	The woman's faith has been tested by God	49.5	50.5	55.5	41.6	49.5	50.5
DP8	John should eat the remaining food.	The remaining food should be eaten by John.	57.2	42.8	52.5	47.5	60.4	39.6
DP9	The man has killed two rams.	Two rams have been killed	60.1	39.9	61.4	38.6	50.5	40.5
DP10	Chidi was teaching the class.	The class was being taught by Chidi.	50.2	49.1	60.7	39.3	68.3	31.7

Source: Field research

Note: Some of the by-phrases that contain subjects of the active construction are deliberately omitted in the Expected Response column because they are optional. See carnie (2007) for further reading.

Discussion of Results in Table 1

Table 1 presents summation of the respondents' results in Grammaticality Judgement in transformation from active to passive sentences also known as DP (passive) movement. The 'Able' column of Group A recorded between 24.6% and 64.4% while 'Not Able' column recorded between 36.5% and 75.4%. Out of nine questions, Group A recorded above 50% in six questions in their 'Able' column result. Still in Group A's results, DP1 recorded the highest grade. It was also observed that DP6 which had similar structure with DP1 (both having [+present continuous tense] feature) recorded the lowest result in Group A's 'Able' column results. The remarkable difference between DP1 and DP6 is that DP1 contains an auxiliary marked [+plural] while the auxiliary in DP6 is marked [+singular]. For Group A to record 64.4% in DP6 and 24.6% in DP1 shows that there was confusion in the minds of the respondents as to what constituted conditions and principles required for transforming active sentences into passive forms.

Group B, following from Table 1 recorded between 47.5% and 72.3% in the 'Able' column and between 27.7% and 52.5% in the 'Not Able' column. Group B recorded in their 'Able' column below 50% in one question only and above 60% in six questions. Still in Group B's results in Table 1, DP2 recorded the highest grade in their 'Able' column results while DP1 recorded 47.5% which was the lowest grade they had in their results.

In comparing Group B's results in Table 1 with those of Group A in the same table, Group B recorded better grades in their 'Able' column than Group A. For instance, Group A recorded below 50% in three questions in their 'Able' column while Group B recorded below

50% in one question only. Also, Group A recorded above 60% against two questions in their ‘Able’ column while Group B recorded above 60% against five questions in the ‘Able’ column.

Group C in Table 1 recorded between 48.5% and 72.3% in the ‘Able’ column and between 27.7% and 51.5% in the ‘Not Able’ column. Out of ten questions in the test, the group recorded above 50% in seven questions in the ‘Able’ column of Table 1 and above 60% in five questions. Again, the question that recorded the highest grade in Group C’s ‘Able’ column is DP2 followed by DP3. Group C recorded the lowest grade in DP6 followed by DP5.

In comparing Group C’s results with other results, it was observed that Group C recorded better results than Group A. For instance, Group A recorded less than 50% in three questions in the ‘Able’ column and above 60% in two questions only, whereas Group C recorded less than 50% in two questions in the ‘Able’ column and above 60% in five questions. On the other hand, Group B recorded better results than Group C. Group B recorded less than 50% in one question in their ‘Able’ column and above 60% in six questions. Group C in the same result recorded less than 50% in two questions in their ‘Able’ result and above 60% in five questions.

Mean Value of the Results in Table 1

Table 2 presents mean value of the subjects’ results in Table 1. For ease of reference and calculation, the sentences that formed the test questions administered to the subjects were grouped into two as shown in the second column of Table 2 below.

Table 2: Features of Test Questions in Grammaticality Judgment in Passive Constructions and their Mean

S/N	Features of Test Questions	Mean					
		A		B		C	
		Able	Not able	Able	Not able	Able	Not able
1	Sentences marked [+past]: DP2, DP3, DP4, DP5 and DP10	54.0	46.0	67.0	33.0	66.3	33.7
2	Sentences marked [+present] DP1, DP6, DP7, DP8, DP9	51.2	48.8	55.1	44.9	53.9	46.1

Source: Field research

Discussion of Results in Table 2

In Table 2 above, Group B recorded the highest mean point of 67.0 in sentences marked with [+past] closely followed by Group C with the mean point of 66.3. Group A recorded the lowest mean point of 54.0 in the ‘Able’ column of sentences marked [+past].

In the sentences marked [+present], Group B respondents also recorded the highest mean point of 55.1 and was closely followed by Group C with 53.9. Group A also recorded the least mean point in the category of sentences marked [+present]. This shows that Group B respondents presented better results followed by Group C. However, it was observed that all the groups recorded above 50 mean points in the ‘Able’ column of their results but none of them recorded up to 70 mean points. The results show that over 30% of the respondents from the university and College of Education were unable to identify well-constructed passive sentences from the answer options given to the test questions while over 40% of the subjects from the polytechnic posted poor grades in the passive construction test. The above result can be viewed in the chart below.

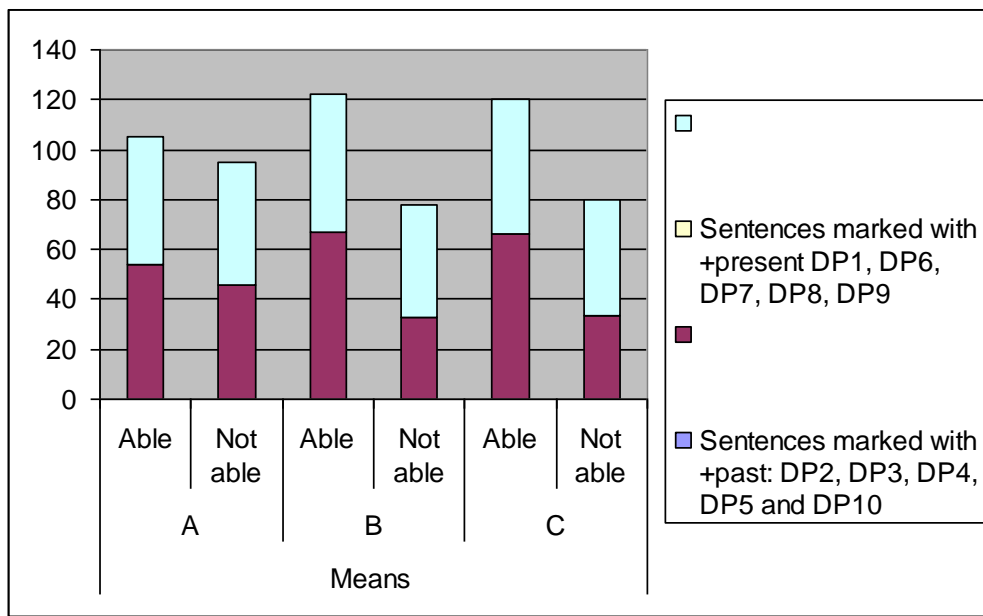


Fig.1: Summary of results in Table 2

Data Analysis

The data analysed in this section were elicited from the subjects’ productions in the tests given to them on transforming active sentences into passive constructions. Some of the test excerpts are described on tree diagrams for ease of reference.

Evaluation of the Respondents’ Output in Grammaticality Judgement in Passive Constructions in English

From the results in Table 1, it was observed that Groups B and C recorded the highest grade of 72.3% each in DP2. It would be recalled from Table 2 that Group B and C recorded 72.2% and 63.4% respectively in the same question while Group A recorded 40.2% in it. The sentence in DP2 belongs to the category of active voice sentences marked [+past] tense. In the test questions as displayed in Table 1, DP2 had the following options:

- (1) DP2: They saw him (Active voice)
- Options (a) He saw them.
- (b) He was seen.
- (c) He is being seen.

The option that best transforms the active voice in (1) above is option (b) as shown in Fig 2 below:

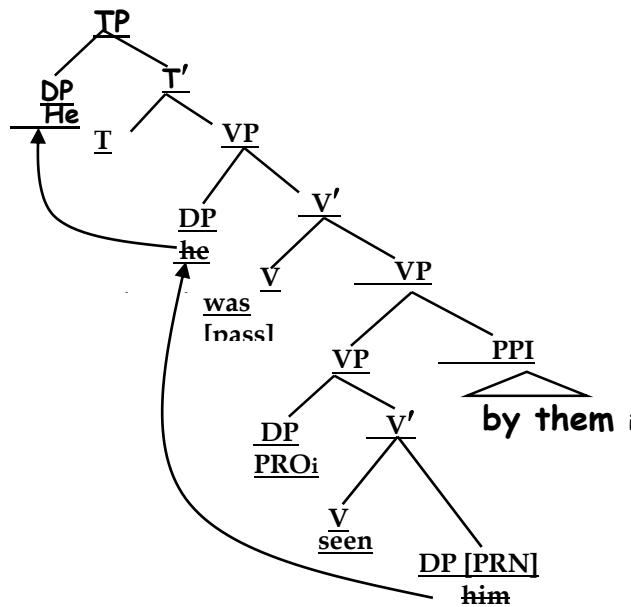


Figure 2: Transformation of DP2 in to passive voice

It would be seen from Fig.2 that ‘him’ which serves as the patient of the verb ‘saw’ had to change its [+Accusative] feature to [+Nominative] feature as it moved to function as the subject of the Tense Phrase (TP). In Generative syntax, it is believed that T is a case assignor hence DPs (both pronouns and nouns) move to spec-TP to check their Case features (Radford, 2004; Carnie, 2007). Recall also from the same tree the presence of the passive auxiliary ‘was’ and the change of the morphological feature of the verb ‘saw’ to its participle form ‘seen’. This shows that option (1b) appropriately transforms DP2 into a passive sentence. However, it was observed from the data received from the respondents’ performance that about 23% of Groups B and C respondents and about 36% of Group A respondents selected option (1a) as the passive form of DP2.

Option (1a) yielded acceptable English sentence yet it crashed at Logical Form (LF) because it did not yield acceptable passive sentence in English. Option (1a) above displayed subject-object inversion as a result of not including the passive auxiliary and the change of the verb to its participle form. Consequently, the sentence yielded another active voice form with a different meaning.

In DP4, it was also observed that about 32% of Group A and 20% of Groups B and C selected option (a) which also displays subject-object inversion (Please see illustration (2) below). This shows that a good number of the respondents – though not the majority – did not understand the syntactic requirements for constructing passive sentences.

- (2) DP4: The tower destroyed the building
(a) The building destroyed the tower
(b) The building is being destroyed by the tower
(c) The tower was destroyed by the building
(d) The building was destroyed by the tower.

In the category of sentences that were marked [+present] (continuous) tense, the results in Table 1 show that about 35% of the respondents could not transform the Active voice sentences into passive ones. For instance, Table 2 shows that none of the groups recorded up to 60 mean points. From data isolated from the respondents' performance in this category of active voice sentences, it was discovered that the subjects their passive constructions failed either at PF or LF probably found it difficult to select options with appropriate passive auxiliaries. For instance, in DP6, over 30% of the respondents selected option (3b):

- (3) DP6: Agnes is sweeping the compound. (Active voice)
Options (a) The compound is being swept by Agnes
(b) The compound was swept by Agnes.
(c) Agnes will sweep the compound.

Option (3a) as shown in Figure 3 appropriately transforms DP6 into a passive sentence because the passive auxiliary 'is' and the [be+ing] auxiliary captures the present continuous feature of the sentence in the active form. Option (b) on the other hand is a valid passive structure in English yet but it did not transform the given active into passive. Option (3b) crashed because it displayed [+past tense] feature.

Similar observation was made in the respondents' performance in DP2. Group A for instance recorded 40.2% in DP2 which shows that they lacked sufficient knowledge of the requirements for transforming simple active voice sentence into passives. Figure.3 illustrates the passive version of DP6.

(4) The compound is being swept by Agnes.

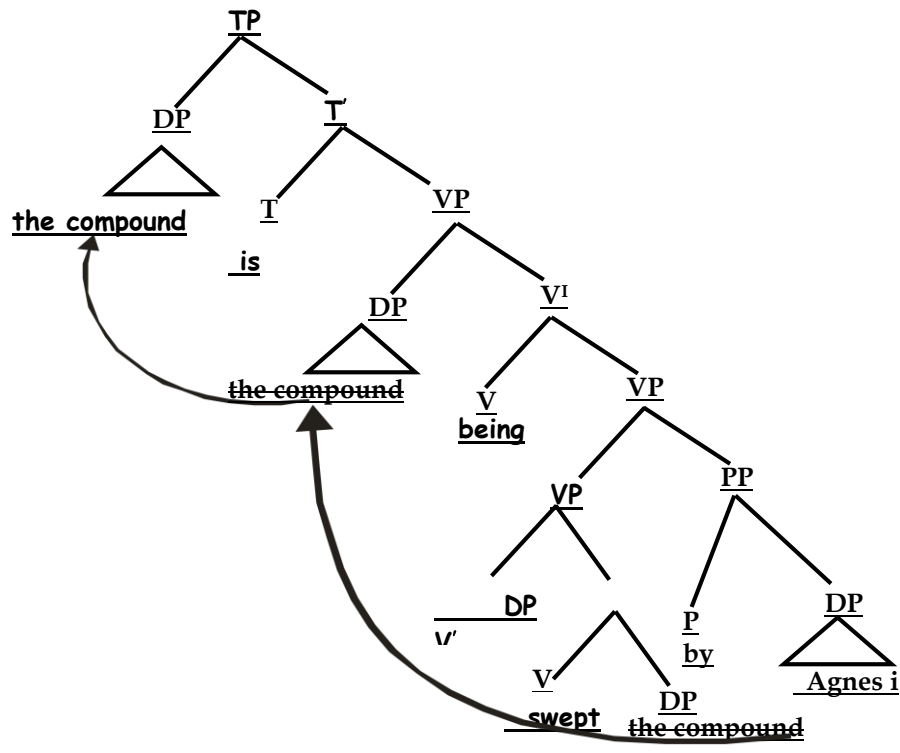


Figure 3: Transformation of DP6 into passive voice

What the above analysis proves is that some of the respondents did not understand the syntactic operation required in transforming active sentences marked [+present continuous tense] and [+present perfect tense]. This goes further to confirm that the verb phrase posed serious syntactic difficulty for the subjects in the transformation of active voice sentences into passive constructions.

Implication for National Development

National development as earlier observed is participatory, and all inclusive. Every section, individual, both the government and the governed have some measure of involvements in nation building and reformation. What the above analysis has done is to examine the level of the respondents' competence in the English language, the language that would enable them interact with people from other ethnic groups and international communities which would in turn help them access diverse information in the form of teaching and learning, employability, or other interactive modes. From the analysis on the subjects' performance in passive constructions, it is obvious that majority of Nigerian graduates are fit to harness information encoded in English while a significant few, about 35% of the subjects studied, are not competent to use the English language effectively and consequently would not participate effectively in the task of national development. As national development is

participatory and all inclusive, it means the very few who are lagging behind should not be ignored. Efforts should be made to find a teaching method that would help them understand English subjects.

Conclusion

The work has examined selected Igbo-English bilinguals' performance in passive constructions in English which involves transforming active sentences into passive voice. Findings from the results have shown that the subjects from the university and college of education posted better grades in the tests given than the subjects from the polytechnic. Based on the above, this study concludes that a significant number of Igbo-English bilinguals are not yet fit to harness the opportunities the English language offers which will enable them participate effectively in the ongoing national development programme. The work also concludes that polytechnic education is not giving their students sufficient training in the use of English in spite of the fact that the curricular specify teaching of Use of English at all levels of study. And as polytechnic graduates are products for middle manpower, there is likely to be a gap in that section of human capital because many of them may not be employable on graduation.

Recommendations

Based on the findings made above, the work recommends as follows:

- Efforts should be made to redirect students' attention to the grammar of the English language. From the data analysed it was observed that the subjects' major problem stemmed from being incompetent in the English grammar, especially in the use of verbs and auxiliary categories. Serious attention should be given to teaching and learning of tenses of the English language.
- This paper also recommends the study of other aspects of sentence constructions in English such as question formation, concord, etc. to ascertain Nigerian students' ability to use sentences to perform different communication functions.
- It is also important that teaching and learning of English from secondary to tertiary should be handled by teaching staff who have studied English if several anomalies associated with the English language learning will be corrected.

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