

## The Basic Clause Structure in Idoma

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### Abstract

This paper is a description of the structure of the basic clause in Idoma. Though not a contrastive study, the paper juxtaposes constituents of the basic clause in English and Idoma to ascertain those structures that will constitute difficulty for Idoma learners. Adopting the transformational generative grammar approach (Chomsky 1981) as adopted by Yusuf (1997) and Lamidi (2000) as its theoretical framework, it analyses data collated from native speakers and the intuition and introspection of the author. The paper describes the constituents of the basic clause in the two languages and predicts likely problem areas for Idoma learners of English. These include variable object position in Idoma clause structure, dual function of tense and agreement particles and other grammatical words. Though there is a rising interest in describing aspects of Idoma grammar, such studies are just emerging. Therefore, the significance of this paper lies in the fact that apart from contributing to the syntactic studies on African languages, it provides data from a language on which literature on her syntactic processes is quite scanty.

**Keywords:** *Idoma, English, basic clause*

### Introduction

In spite of the uniformities of universal scope among the languages of the world, there are differences in the organisation of their structural constituents. This, linguists believe interferes with the learning of a second language, as learners tend to perceive the second language which they are learning on the basis of their Mother Tongue or L<sub>1</sub> which they have already internalised. CA concentrates on the similarities or differences between learners' MT or L<sub>1</sub> and the L<sub>2</sub>. While similarities facilitate learning of the L<sub>2</sub>, differences impede it (Orjime 2000).

This paper adopts Chomsky's transformational generative grammar approach as its theoretical framework in line with Ore Yusuf (1997) and Lamidi (2000) that the rule for the expansion of the basic clause in the theory accounts for not only the structure of English but of every known human language. In this theory, a sentence is made up of three principal elements: the NP (Noun Phrase), INFL (traditionally called Aux) and the VP (Verb Phrase). The rewrite rule for each of these is given below:

NP → (Det) (Adj) N  
INFL → NS AGR M ASP  
VP → \* + [ \_ (NP)]

(Source: Ore Yusuf 1997: 9-39).

All the elements enclosed in parenthesis are optional while the others are obligatory and the sentence expands as:

S → NP INFL VP.

Idoma is a language in the Idomoid sub group of the West Benue - Congo phylum of African languages. The language is grouped along with Ukaan, Igede, Akweya, Yatye and Etulo. (Williamson and Blench 2000:31). The people and their language are called Idoma. Though clusters of them are found in Nasarawa State (Afu), Enugu (Ete) and Cross River (Yalla) (Ameh 1993:3, Okpe 2000:54), they are predominantly found in the south senatorial zone of Benue State, occupying seven local government areas in the state namely: Apa, Ado, Agatu, Okpokwu,

Ogbadibo, Ohimini and Otukpo respectively. They are the second largest ethnic group in the state next to Tiv and the language is the second major language in the state. The state news is broadcast in the language on both the radio and television networks.

Typologically, according to Greenberg in Hein and Nurse (2000), Idoma is an agglutinating language. Typological classification of languages according to Ndimele (2008), is a way of classifying languages into groups according to their common morphological and phonological structures. Languages are classified based on how they form words by combining sounds and morphemes as: agglutinating, inflectional, isolating and synthetic among others. Even though agglutinating, features of inflectional, isolating and synthetic languages are traceable in the language. The basic word order in Idoma is SVO. This is exemplified below:

1. *Ada' he'òdule'*  
S V O  
Ada cook food 'Ada cooked food'
2. *Onum gwa émkpo*  
S V O  
Onum drink water 'Onum drank water'

The sentences above are declarative sentences and the verbs are in their simple past forms exhibiting the SVO order. We note here that TENSE is not overtly marked on the verb. The above sentences could also be rendered as:

3. *Ada'òdule'he'*  
S O V  
Ada food cook 'Ada cooked food'
4. *Onum émkpo gwa'*  
S O V  
Onum water drink 'Onum drank water'

In this order, the actions of the verbs are understood to have been completed before the utterances, therefore, the verbs are in the past perfect tense. In addition, as transitive verbs, *gwa* and *he* require objects. But the object position is variable in Idoma thus giving the SOV order depending on the tense of the verb. Other verbs in this category include; *nmo'* (kill), *hi'* (cultivate/farm), *le'* (eat) and others. Every native speaker of Idoma knows that each of these verbs subcategorizes a noun. However, though verbs such as *gbo'*, *wotu*, *doka* and others subcategorize nouns (occur after verbs), they do not function as objects of the verbs since the subjects bear the impact of the actions. That is, the actions are not transferred to any objects. This argument is a major controversy among scholars of African linguistics. But that argument is outside the scope of this paper. In the subsequent sections, we attempt a descriptive analysis of the basic clause structure in Idoma.

### **The Basic Clause**

The basic clause according to Chomsky (1981) is a kernel sentence which corresponds to the simple, active, affirmative, declarative sentences of a language (Crystal 2007:251). Functionally, the basic clause consists of subject, verb, object, complement and adjunct (SVOCA). The subject of the Idoma basic clause or verb could be a noun, pronoun or derived nominal who performs the action described by the verb. It always precedes the verb. The object is the person or thing affected by the action of the subject and the complement completes the sentence. The

adjunct/adverbial is an adverb or group of words that function as the adverb showing the manner, time, degree, etc of the action described by the verb. Unlike the obligatory constituents of the sentence (subject, predicate and sometimes the complement), the adjunct is optional. Other structures of the basic clause in Idoma are presented below:

5. S                  V  
*Oko' kwu' ñya'*  
 3sg run run 'S/he ran'
6. S        V     O  
*Oko' nmo èwu*  
 ProPN kill goat 'Oko killed a goat'
7. S        V              O                              C  
*Àlọ' kwu Ubuhari chẹ ọchè' àjẹ'*  
 3pl take PropN put chief land 'We elected Buhari president'
8. S        V        O                              C                              A  
*Àlọ' kwu Ubuhari chẹ ọchè' àjẹ' éńẹ'*  
 3pl take PropN put chief land yesterday 'We elected Buhari president yesterday'

From the data in 1 – 8 above, we observe that the dominant word order in Idoma is SVO along with complement and adjunct which are optional constituents.

## Components of the Basic Clause

The basic clause has already been defined. Its components include the NP INFL and VP. We explore these constituents in Idoma to bring out their structures.

## The Noun Phrase (NP)

Carnie (2007: 66), Kroeger (2005: 52) and Yusuf (1997: 39) observe that the noun or pronoun is the keyword in the NP. It is headed by the noun or pronoun when it will not be modified. A phrase could consist of several words or just a single word which functions as the head and can stand for the entire phrase. E.g.

- 9.(i) man NP  $\rightarrow$  N (ii) the man NP  $\rightarrow$  (DET)  
(iii) the kind man NP  $\rightarrow$  (DET) (ADJ) N (iv) the kind rich man NP  $\rightarrow$  (DET) (ADJ) (ADJ) N  
(Adapted from Adejoh 2014)

In all the NPs above, the head word is *man* which can function as the whole phrase. While the constituents in parentheses are optional, the head is obligatory. Consider more data below:

10. N Det Adj  
*Ọlẹ́ a'lọ́ nwu'ne'*  
 House our big 'Our big house'
11. N Adj Det  
*Ẹwu nobí ọma'*  
 Goat black that 'That black goat'
12. N Det Adj  
*Ẹnẹ́ u'wa o'gèbòn'ẹnẹ́*  
 Mother their kind 'Their kind mother'

In 10 – 12 above, we observe that while English maintains the NP structure NP → Det Adj N, Idoma exhibits the NP structure NP → N Det Adj in 10 and 12 while the structure of the NP in 11 is NP → N Adj Det. While the N (the head) is phrase initial in all the Idoma NPs above, the DET precede the adjectives in 10 and 12 while the Adj comes immediately after the N in 11. Other constituents of the NP are discussed below:

### Determiners

These are words that belong to other parts of speech but function in noun phrases to identify or distinguish its referent which is usually a noun. Determiners include the definite and indefinite articles the, a/an, demonstratives this, that, these, those and others. We discuss these below.

**Articles:** The article is a grammatical term used in the classification of words; referring to a subclass of determiners which displays a primary role in differentiating the uses of nouns (Crystal 2003: 33). He opines further that some languages do not have the article system. It would appear that Idoma falls within this group because, while the definite article ‘the’, *a* in Idoma is clearly stated, the indefinite (*a/an*) is not. Rather, they are understood in context. Consider below

- 13.i. *okpa* – (a) book      ii. *umoto* –      iii. *alemu* – (an) orange  
 However, suffixing numerals to the nouns pluralises them. E.g.  
 14i. *Okpa epà* ‘two books’      ii. *Umoto`enhe`*      ‘four cars’

The definite article/determiner ‘the’ in Idoma is ‘*a*’ and occurs post nominally. E.g.

- 15i. *Oyipè à*      (ii) *Àipe à*  
 child the ‘The child’      children the ‘The children’

**Demonstratives:** In Idoma, they include *enya/nya* ‘(this)’, *oma* (that) *nobaà* (that are here/ these), *nobaabòà* (that are there/ those). *Enya/nya* and *nobaà* are used to specify close objects while *oma* and *no`ba abò`a* are used for distal objects e.g

- 16i. *èwo nya* ‘This dog’      ii. *òchibu`oma`* That plate  
 iii. *àipè no`baa* ‘These children’      iv. *Anyà no`ba abò`a`* Those women

**Possessives:** In English, there are ways of marking possession such as the use of the preposition ‘of’ or the clitic ‘s or possessive adjective such as ‘my, his/her, your, etc’. For instance:

- 17i. The dog’s leg is broken      ii. The gang’s reputation is worrisome  
 iii. The name of the dog is bingo      iv. The reputation of the gang is worrisome  
 v. Your pen is in my bag      vi. This is my book

Nos i-iv show the use of the clitic ‘s’ and the preposition ‘of’ to show possession while v and vi show the use of adjectives to indicate possession. In i and ii, the emphasis is on the possessor, while in iii and iv, the emphasis is on quality or attribute.

In Idoma, possessive NPs are two nouns occurring as NP with the genitive marker occurring after the noun i.e. NP      N + Gen .      E.g

18. —→ (i) *Uwé k`Ené*      Ene’s dress  
 (ii) *Umotò k`úwa*      Their car  
 (iii) *Ugbé k`éwo*      Dog’s tail

‘K’ functions as the possessive clitic indicating a genitive relationship and attaches to the possessor NP. It is the shortened form of ‘ku’ a preposition (of). It can be omitted in some dialects (western), but the utterance is still acceptable (see Adejoh 2014: 128-129).

In the data 13 – 16 we observe that the indefinite article is not specified in Idoma basic clause. Rather number (singular) is understood in context and plurals are realised by prefixing ‘a’ or suffixing a numeral to the noun (nos 14 ).

### The INFL

The INFL is traditionally called auxiliary (Aux). It is the constituent intervening the subject NP and the VP (Yusuf 1997:39). In modern linguistic studies, the term Aux has been replaced by inflection (INFL or I). This is because according to Ndimele (2004:15), Aux does not participate in the x<sup>1</sup> convention, neither does it account for all the inflectional properties of all languages. Though there are claims that there are types of INFL i.e. the [+ Tense] and [- Tense] types, this paper adopts the INFL node that consists of the following: Agreement, Tense, Modal and Aspect as constituents of the INFL node in Idoma.

**Agreement:** This is the correspondence of the verb with its subject in terms of person and number. When the subject is singular, the verb must also be singular and in the first, second or third person as the case may be to agree. This comprises person, no and gender. E.g.

19. Ó lẹ̀ ìjé gwó  
 3sg Tns (past) sing ‘S/he sang a song’
20. Àípe’ à lẹ̀ òdúlé lé ẹ̀ẹ’  
 Nom Det Tns (past) food eat PERF ‘The children have eaten the food’
21. Èwo lẹ̀ Ẹ̀nẹ́ kwu àínú  
 Dog Tns(past) PropN catch teeth ‘A Dog bit Ene’

In Idoma, the plural morpheme for nouns is à. It is always a prefix and attaches to the noun as exemplified in no 20. Other forms of marking plural in the language have already been discussed. See no 14. But in English, the plural marker is ‘-s’, ‘es’ with varying phonetic realizations as /s/ /z/ or /iz/ in varying environments and is always a suffix. Also cases of irregular nouns exist in English, in which case the plural forms are realised differently. E.g

man	men	ox	oxen	child	children
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In Idoma, cases of irregular nouns have not been attested. Even borrowed nouns from other languages are pluralised by prefixing ‘a’ morpheme to them. Also, Idoma does not distinguish gender. Therefore, ‘O’ in (19) could be she, he or it.

### Tense and Aspect

22. M gé yawù simple present  
 1sg AGR walk ‘I walk’
23. À gé yawú (simple present)  
 2sg agr yawu ‘You walk’
24. M yoi yawu (Progressive)  
 1sg AgrAsp walk ‘I am walking’

25. *Uwa bai yawu*  
 3pl AgrAsp walk n 'They are walking' (Progressive)
26. *M yawu*  
 I walk 'I walked'
27. *M iyawu yẹ'*  
 1sg walk walk Tns(past) 'I walked' (Simple past)
28. *M lẹ iyawù yẹ'ẹ'*  
 1sg have walk Tns Perf 'I have walked' (Past perfective)

Unlike English where the past tense morpheme –ed are attached to verbs and realized as /d/ or /t/ as the case may be, in Idoma, past tense is not clearly defined. This is because the past tense morpheme can be used optionally in NPs and the utterance will still be grammatical. This is as exemplified in nos 26 – 27. In addition, adverbs of time are usually introduced to realise the simple past tense.

The progressive and perfective aspectual markers in Idoma are *yoi/bai* and *ẹẹ'* respectively. While *yoi* is singular *bai* is plural (nos 24-25). They both function as the agreement and aspectual markers. The past perfective marker is *ẹẹ'* and occurs clause final while the progressive markers occur before the verbs. All these markers occur as free morphemes without any affixes. In English however, aspectual particles such as *have*, *be* and perfective morphemes –en are affixes and are bound morphemes.

### Modal

29. *Ẹnẹ' gee bi ebenyi'wa'*  
 PropN Mod. bring fish come 'Ene will bring (some) fish'
30. *M gee nyọ' inọkpa*  
 1sg Mod. go school 'I will go to school'

This constituent of the INFL is attested in both English and Idoma. In Idoma it is *gee* –will. In both languages, the modal auxiliaries are free morphemes.

### The Verb Phrase

The verb phrase is traditionally called the predicate because it has the sentence predicator, namely, the verb. The verb phrase is headed by the verb which reveals what the participatory roles of the other nominals in the sentence are (Yusuf 1997:20). Structurally, the verb phrase contains a main verb (the head) and optionally could be preceded by a maximum of four auxiliary verbs. While the other constituents may be optional, the main verb, the head is obligatory. It may or may not take objects which are its complements. When it takes object NPs, it is transitive and when it does not, it is intransitive. In Idoma, the verb phrase (VP) consists of an obligatory verb [+ V] in association with other optional constituents (VP V +(complement) + (Adjunct). The head inflects tense, aspect and modality. It has already been said that verbal inflections in the language is peculiar to it and the morphemes also function as tense markers (see nos 22-28).

E.g.



31. *M lẹ' ùmótò la*  
 1sg Aux car buy 'I bought a car'
32. *Ó lẹ' ọlẹ' gwó*  
 3sg Aux house build 'S/he built a house'
33. *Àdà lẹ' ọyí mà ẹnẹ*  
 PropN Aux child born yesterday 'Ada gave birth yesterday'
34. *Èwo à gè kwu*  
 Dog Det die 'The dog died'
35. *Íkpém à kwu chà*  
 Nom Det take break 'The bottle broke'

In nos. 32 and 33, *lẹ* functions as the auxiliary verb while the main verbs are *lá* and *gwó* respectively. It is noteworthy that the auxiliaries and the main verbs split to accommodate the objects which are their complements. It is worthy of note also, that *lẹ* is a very versatile word in Idoma as its functions and interpretations vary according to its environment. It can be present or past depending on its use. While it is a tense and agreement marker in 19 and 21, it is an auxiliary in 31 and 32. In 34 and 35, *gèkwu* and *chà* function as intransitive verbs since they have no complements.

### Conclusion

The paper has contrasted the structure of the basic clause in English and Idoma and concludes that while both languages share the SVO pattern, the SOV pattern is also attested in Idoma. Still on structure, while the English NPs retain the structure NP → Det Adj N, those in Idoma have the structures NP → N Det Adj and N Adj Det. This is because the position of adjectives in Idoma NPs is not static. The prediction is that learners will have difficulty placing the modifiers in their proper positions during utterances. The possessive marker in Idoma is 'k' which can even be omitted in some dialects. The prediction is that Idoma learners of English may omit the possessive marker –s and say 'Peter car' which is ungrammatical. Another prediction is that the plural marker 's' will be applied to every noun, even irregular nouns for pluralisation. This is because the plural marker in Idoma is 'a' and can be applied to every noun. Moreover, cases of irregular nouns have not been attested in Idoma. Idoma does not distinguish gender. 'O' could be masculine, feminine or neuter gender. Therefore, Idoma learners will have difficulty differentiating between the genders in English. Also, *lẹ* in the language represents have, has and had. In addition, while it functions as agreement and tense marker in certain environments, it functions as auxiliary verb in others. A situation where a single lexical item means two or more forms will definitely constitute problems for the Idoma learner of English. Another problem area predicted for Idoma learners of English are the tenses especially the simple past tense. This is because tenses in Idoma are usually realized by adverbials. Moreover, the dual function of tense and agreement particles as well as the variable position of objects in clauses are also predicted as potential problem areas for Idoma learners of English.

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