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Aspects of the Grammar of English and Okrika Noun Phrases

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Abstract

This paper addressed the study on an aspect of the syntax of English and Okrika (noun phrase). The study is necessitated by the challenges L2 speakers of Okrika face while constructing and using phrases in English and also because of limited works in the area of syntax in Okrika language. The methodology adopted was both contrastive and descriptive and data collected through primary and secondary sources. The data revealed that English and Okrika noun phrase can be found in the subject and object positions, although the difference is that where the English NP can perform dative movement, NP in Okrika cannot perform dative movement. Reason being that both languages have different sentence structure. English has a SVO while Okrika has a SOV sentence pattern. It was also revealed that the hidden verb governing the indirect object in a ditransitive verb construction is not hidden in Okrika in a ditransitive construction. It is therefore concluded that although there are areas of similarities in the position of the NP in both languages, there are still areas of differences.

Keywords: Grammar, English, Okrika, Noun Phrases, Syntax

Introduction

One of the priceless gifts given to man by God is language. Language is a very important asset to the human world. The human language differentiates humans as supposed animals to other animals. The name Okrika refers to the language and the people of Okrika. According to Williamson (1998), Okrika is a dialect under the Eastern Ijo in the Benue- Congo phylum. The language is spoken in two Local Government Areas: Okrika and Ogu/Bolo. Noun phrase is a syntactic category at the phrasal level and as a phrase it is made up of one or more modifiers and these modifiers can either pre or post modify the noun. The noun phrase according to Kari (2004) is a group of words that is headed by a noun or nominal.

Methodology

For this paper, data were collected based on both personal knowledge as an L2 speaker of English and as a competent native speaker of Okrika language and other competent native speakers and L2 speakers of English. Data collected for the study were analysed using descriptive data analysis.

Literature review

Related topics to the basic concept of the study are reviewed.

Noun

The concept of noun has received several definitions. According to Nwala (2016,p.6), the definitions of noun is legion and Tomori (1977) as quoted in Nwala, that most of the definitions of nouns are imprecise and relatively difficult to apply consistently in linguistic investigations.

Different scholars at different times have given some attention to the study of noun. For instance, Worukwo (2005), Ndimele (2003), Ken-Maduako (2004) and Eyisi (2006) have discussed about the noun in different ways and their discussions have made so much contribution to the study of nouns. Traditionally, nouns are defined as names of persons, animals, places or things (Worukwo 2005). This definition so to say appears to be incomplete and inadequate, This is because there are some words that are nouns but are not names of places, animals, place or thing. Nouns such as beauty, honesty, loyalty, joy etc. (Eyisi 2003). On the other hand, to accommodate such words, Ndimele (2003) define noun as anything with the exception of the pronoun that serves as the subject of the sentence or the object of the verb. Ken-Maduako (2004) goes on to say that nouns are major lexical category that can be found in any human language.

Phrase

Radford (1988) defines a phrase as a set of elements which forms a constituent with no restriction on the number of elements that the set may or must contain. This means that a phrase may just be a single word or more. Ndimele (1996) defines a phrase as a group of related words which is grammatically equivalent to a single word and which does not have its own subject and predicate. This means that no matter the number of words in the phrase they are seen as a single entity. This is in conformity with Nwala and Obisike (2004) that a phrase often consists of several words clustered around a particular head word. In the view of Huddleston and Pullum (2002) a phrase is a type of construction in which a head element is usually optionally accompanied by one or more dependents as this is in agreement with Ndimele (1996) who observes that every phrase must have a head which gives the phrase its essential character or which determines the nature of the phrase.

Noun phrase

Ndimele, O-M. (1996). *An advanced English grammar & usage*. Aba: National Institute for Nigerian Languages. Radford (1998) defines a noun phrase as an expression containing a head noun without any implication that a noun phrase must necessarily contain anything other than the head noun. By this he means that a single noun without modifier(s) can still be seen as a noun phrase. This is in agreement with Ndimele (1996) that modifier(s) in a noun phrase can occur either before or after the noun to either specify or limit the noun. To this he defines a noun phrase as a group of grammatically related words which has a noun as the head. Following the above definitions, Nwala and Obisike (2014) state that English noun phrase can be either simple or complex. Simple, when the head noun occurs alone and complex when the head noun occurs with modifier(s).

Syntactic Positions of the Noun Phrase

The noun phrase could be found in different positions within the sentence. As Taylor (1998) in Priye (2016) observes, that the noun phrase can be inserted in the prepositional phrases as complement of the phrase and in other noun phrases as modifiers or complements of the head element. Traditionally, the noun phrase syntactically functions as subject of the verb, it can also function as the direct object, indirect object, subject complement, and object complement. Working on the syntactic position of the noun phrase, Kari (2004) observes that an NP can serve a number of functions such as subject, object (direct and indirect), complement of subject, object, preposition and adverbial with respect to the position of the NP in the sentence construction. This is in line with Quirk and Greenbaum, (1972.p.122) describing the noun phrase in respect to their positions in the sentence that, the noun phrases function as subject, object and complement. But the most emphasised among them are the subject and object noun phrases (Nwala 2016). According to Nwala, these two noun phrases are usually indicated as the focus of attention which the remaining part of the sentence gives information about. Therefore, for this paper these two positions will be discussed.

In summary, Nwala and Obisike (2014) state that, based on the syntactic positions occupied by a noun phrase in a sentence, two basic functions are carried out by the noun phrase: instigation or initiation of the actions (agentive function) and also serves as the sufferer or the action receiver (patient function). They further add that, for nouns to perform these functions, they must appear at both the subject (nominative) position and object (accusative) position. And that any noun that appears at the accusative position, receives the action of the verb set in motion by the noun or its substitute at the nominative position.

Syntactic Positions of the Noun Phrase**English examples:****The Noun Phrase in the Subject and Object Positions**

S ———> NP +VP +NP

- (1) *The wicked man killed the innocent woman.*
- (2) *He killed her.*
- (3) *The cruel man pushed the children*
- (4) *John called Mary*
- (5) *The teacher taught the lesson*

Noun Phrases in the Dative Form

Structural Index: S → NP1 + VP + NP2 + PP + NP3

Structural Change: S → NP1 + VP + NP3 + NP2 + (PP)

English examples:

(6a) [The man] sold [a goat] to [the farmer]

NP1 VP NP2 P NP3

(6b) [The man] sold [the farmer] [a goat]

NP1 VP NP3 NP2

(7a) [John] bought [a book] for [Mary]

NP1 NP2 NP3

(7b) [John] bought [Mary] [a book]

NP1 NP3 NP2

(8a) [The bank manager] loaned [money] to [the trader]

NP1 NP2 NP3

(8b) [The bank manager] loaned [the trader] [money]

NP1 NP3 NP2

(9a) [The businessman] borrowed [some items] for [the bank]

NP1 NP2 NP3

(9b) [The businessman] borrowed [the bank] [some items]

NP1 NP3 NP2

(10a) [The nice woman] gave [some money] to [her husband]

NP1 NP2 NP3

(10b) [The nice woman] gave [her husband] [some money]

NP1 NP3 NP2

Syntactic positions of the NP in Okrika language

Subject and Object position

(11) *Owubobe eremboma bame*
 Subj obj
 Man the woman the kill
 [The man killed the woman]

- (12) (a) Ori a fomme
 Subj obj
 He her beat
 [He beat her]
- (b) Ari o fomme
 Subj obj
 She him beat
 [She beat him]
- (13) Eremboma owubobe bame
 Subj obj
 Woman the man the kill
 [The woman killed the man]

NPs in Dative Form

Structural Index: S \longrightarrow NP1 + NP2+ VP + (PP) + NP3 + VP

Structural Change: S \longrightarrow NP2 + NP1 + VP 1+ NP3 + VP2 or NP3 + NP1 +NP3 +VP +PRO + VP

Okrika example:

- (14a) [Ibi eremboma] [fiyemi] fe se [awominima] pirime
 NP1 NP2 VP1 PP NP3 VP2
 Good woman the food the bought for children the give
 [The good woman bought the food for the children]
- (14b) [Fiyemi] [ibi eremboma] fe [awominima] pirime
 NP2 NP1 VP1 NP3 VP2
 Food the good woman the bought children the give
 [The food was bought for the children by the woman]
- (14c) [Awominima] [ibi eremboma] [fiyemi] [fe] [ini] [pirime]
 NP3 NP1 NP2 VP1 PRO VP2
 Children the good woman the food the cook them give
 [the good woman cooked the food for the children]

From the data presented above, NPs in both languages can occupy both subject and object positions in a sentence. In examples 1-5 and 11-13, ‘The wicked man’, ‘He’, ‘The cruel man’, ‘John’, and ‘The teacher’, and ‘Owubobe’, ‘Ori’, and ‘Ari’ in English and in Okrika respectively are in the subject position. In the same examples 1-5 and 11-13, ‘the innocent woman’, ‘her’, ‘the children’, ‘Mary’ and ‘the lesson’, and ‘eremboma’, ‘a’, ‘owubobe’ in English and Okrika respectively are in the object position. In the case of dative construction, where there are two NPs in the object positions (di-transitive verb) especially with verbs of exchange: sell, buy, borrow, loan, bring etc., the NP3 moves backward but before the verb and then takes the position of the NP2 and also leaves the preposition marooned, This is seen in examples 6-10 but in Okrika language as observed in examples 14a-c, the movement is not like the dative in English. All the NPs can move depending on the point of emphasis of the speaker. In fact, the NP2 as shown in the examples 14a-c, is the most mobile. It can move to the initial, medial and final positions before the verb. This points to the fact that, unlike English language there is no dative construction in Okrika language.

Conclusion

This work has been able to describe the syntactic positions of English and Okrika noun phrases (an aspect of the syntax of English and Okrika). The two most emphasised syntactic positions of the English noun phrase are considered- the subject and object positions. NPs in both languages can occupy both subject positions using either nouns or personal pronouns. In NP movement, English has a dative movement while in Okrika, there is no dative movement. Movement is based on speaker’s interest. Although movements do not disrupt the semantics of the construction. In the presence of two objects- ditransitive verb, there are two overt verbs governing the two objects in Okrika NPs while in English, the verb governing the second object is understood but not overt..

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