

Comparative Syntactic Analysis of Èlòyì and English Noun Phrases

¹Ubaidallah Muhammad Bello PhD, ²Muhammad Sani Ahmad & ³Abdullahi Hassan

¹Department of English, Nasarawa State University, Keffi, Nigeria.

²Department of Languages and Linguistics, Nasarawa State University, Keffi, Nigeria.

³Department of Languages, Federal Polytechnic, Nasarawa, Nasarawa State, Nigeria.

ubaidallahmuhdbello@nsuk.ng.edu

ahmadmuhammadsani120@gmail.com

abdullahihassan1981@gmail.com

Abstract

This study presents a comparative syntactic analysis of Noun Phrase (NP) structures in Èlòyì, an under-documented Benue-Congo language of Nigeria, and English. Grounded in the framework of Contrastive Analysis, the research examined the structural configurations and distributional patterns of noun phrases in both languages with a view to identifying points of convergence and divergence. Data for the study were obtained through a combination of primary sources, including native speaker intuitions and interviews with language informants in Keffi Local Government Area of Nasarawa State, Nigeria and secondary sources from the existing literature. The analysis reveals that both Èlòyì and English share the basic NP structures in which a noun functions independently as a complete phrase (NP = N), as well as structures involving post-modification (NP = N + Modifier(s)). However, significant structural differences are observed. While English allows both pre-modification and post-modification of the head noun (e.g., NP = Pre-modifier(s) + N and NP = Pre-modifier(s) + N + Post-modifier(s)), Èlòyì strictly adheres to a post-modification pattern, with modifiers consistently following the head noun. This typological distinction highlights the rigid head-initial structure of Èlòyì noun phrases in contrast to the more flexible modification system in English. The findings contribute to the descriptive documentation of Èlòyì and underscore the relevance of contrastive syntactic analysis in understanding cross-linguistic variation. The study also has implications for second language learning and teaching, particularly for Èlòyì speakers acquiring English, as structural differences in noun phrase formation may present areas of difficulty. Overall, the research enriches the body of knowledge in comparative linguistics and supports ongoing efforts to document and analyze indigenous Nigerian languages.

Keywords: Comparative Syntactic Analysis, noun Phrases, Eloyi and English.

List of Abbreviations: Spec. (Specifier), N (Noun), NP (Noun Phrase), Adj. (Adjective), Pro. (Pronoun), Poss. (Possessive), Dem. (Demonstrative), V (Verb), Adv. (Adverb) PP (Prepositional Phrase), CAT (Comparative Analysis Theory).

I. Introduction

Language is central to human lives and is arguably the cultural tool that makes humans different from any other species. Language is the symbolic behaviour that allows human activities to occur. It helps humans to communicate with one another. Thus, in our everyday life, we produce and comprehend language with such apparent ease that we take it for granted. The study of language structure particularly syntax, reveals how languages organize

meaning through word arrangement and grammatical rules. Among the components of syntax, the noun phrase (NP) is especially significant because it expresses the performer(s) or rather doer(s), subject of discussion in a given clause/sentence. One of the focuses of this study is on the acceptable sentence patterning with regards to the phrasal structure – NP of the languages in under study, i.e. sentence formation in conformity with the rules of the languages. Sentence in any language is made up of string of words called phrases and clauses.

Noun phrase is one of the most important syntactic categories attested in all-natural languages of the world (Universal Grammar). It is therefore the basic structure in a sentence, which forms the largest projection of the nouns. The noun phrase is a universal part of speech (Chomsky, 1965).

The noun phrase is simply a word or group of words that functions as noun. Therefore, this research attempts to study the grammar of Èlòyì and English noun phrases. This is motivated by the need to identify the configuration of the noun phrase in the languages with a view to juxtaposing the phrase structure.

Brief Historical Backgrounds of Èlòyì and English

Èlòyì (also known as Afo, Afu, or Ejiri) is an indigenous Nigerian language spoken primarily in Nasarawa State, with smaller populations in Benue State. It is classified as a Benue-Congo sub-group of Niger-Congo language family. Armstrong as cited in Abubakar (2021) classifies Èlòyì language as Idomoid which was based on a single wordlist and he later expressed doubts. The language has two dialects; Èlòyì Mb'eki, and Èlòyì Mb'ambu. Traditionally, most of the Èlòyì lived in 15 miles (24 km) range of rocky hills in what today is Nasarawa State. Despite its sociocultural and linguistic importance, Èlòyì remains averagely under-described in linguistic scholarship.

Philip (2010) asserts that English is a West Germanic language that originated from the dialects brought to Britain in the 5th century by Germanic tribes such as the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes. Over time, it evolved through several historical stages - Old English (450 - 1100), Middle English (1100 - 1500), and Modern English (from 1500 to present). Old English was heavily inflected and syntactically flexible, but the Norman Conquest of 1066 significantly influenced its development, introducing a large number of Norman French and Latin loanwords into the lexicon. During the Middle English period, the language underwent substantial simplification in its inflectional system, leading to a more fixed word order. The Early Modern English period witnessed further standardization, aided by the introduction of the printing press in the late 15th century, as well as the works of influential writers such as William Shakespeare. Contemporary English, often referred to as Present-Day English, has become a global lingua franca due to historical factors such as British colonial expansion and the subsequent economic and cultural influence of the United States. Structurally, English is characterized by relatively fixed word order, limited inflection, and a rich system of noun phrase modification, making it a useful point of comparison in cross-linguistic studies such as the analysis of noun phrase constructions in Èlòyì.

Syntax: A Conceptual Review

The word 'Syntax' emanates from "Syn" a Latin word formed from the Greek preposition "Sum" meaning together, and "tax" derived from a Greek which means to put in order. Thus, syntax means putting things together in an orderly manner (Mu`azu 2017). Syntax is a traditional term for the study of the rules governing the way words are combined to form sentences according to the rules of a given language. This means every language has a way of

putting words together to form sentences. Generative linguists defined syntax as comprising different organizational units such as phrases, clauses and sentences of various types. According to Omachonu (2011) “syntax is the study of the interrelationships between elements (words) of sentence structure and of the rules governing the arrangement of the sentences in sequence”. This is why O’Grady as cited in Omachonu (2011) simply defines syntax as the system of rules and categories that underlies sentence formation in human languages.

Finch (2000) defines syntax as “the term used for the study of the rules governing the way words are combined to form sentences. For instance, if we observe any English sentence, the words are arranged in specific order. In the sentence, “The cat chases the mouse”, the words in the sentence are arranged in an order, but when the words in the sentence are not ordered, we will have a meaningless expression not even sentence. For instance: “cat the mouse the chases”. This shows that words are not arranged in sentence haphazardly.

Householder, as cited in Mu`azu (2017), posits that the choice of definition is conditioned by whether or not one is trying to distinguish the domain of syntax from that of semantics. He defines syntax as a description of structure, independent meaning consideration “the study of rules for combining words into sentences. On the other hand, Agbedo, in Mu`azu (2017), sees syntax as the branch of linguistics that studies internal structure of sentence as part of the internalized linguistic knowledge which enables the native speaker to produce, as well as recognize acceptable stretches of utterances in that language”. In a similar vein, White in Mu`azu (2017) characterizes syntax as a “form of grammar”. It is concerned primarily with word order in a sentence and with the agreement of words when they are used together. The study of syntax addresses the structural and functional relationships within a sentence. The syntactic component of language is both creative and systematic. Speakers of a language are able to combine words in novel ways forming sentences they have never heard before. However, not just combinations of words as earlier mentioned give a grammatical structure. For example, in English, the sentence: “John car bought” is not well-formed sentence, although the same words can be re-arranged to form an acceptable sentence as in: “John bought a car”. A sentence is grammatical if speakers judge it as a possible sentence of their language (O’Grady 1996, cited in Bello, 2017). Therefore, syntax can be defined as “the grammar of a language”.

Phrase: A Review

In English grammar, a phrase can be a word or a group of two or more words functioning as a meaningful unit within a sentence or clause. A phrase is commonly characterized as a grammatical unit at a level between a word and a clause. For instance,

‘Sani is a boy’

In the sentence above, ‘Sani’ which occupies the subject (nominative) position of the sentence, is a phrase. This depicts the claim that phrase can be a word.

A phrase is made up of a head (or head word) which determines the grammatical nature of the unit and one or more optional modifiers. Phrases may contain other phrases inside them.

Sentences can be divided into groups of words that belong together. For instance, in “The nice unicorn ate a delicious meal.” ‘The’, ‘nice’ and ‘unicorn’ form one such group, and ‘a’, ‘delicious’, and ‘meal’ form another (We all know this intuitively). The group of words is called a phrase. If the most important part of the phrase, i.e. the head, is an adjective, the phrase is an adjectival phrase, and if the most important part of the phrase is a noun, the phrase therefore becomes a noun phrase, and so on.

According to Bello (2017), the concept ‘phrase’ has been defined in a variety of ways over time. For Mathews, as cited in Mustapha (2017), it is any syntactic unit that is not a clause but has a function as a whole within a larger construction. Jespersen (1949) defines it as a combination of words put together in order to form a sense unit. It is also described as “a sequence for words that can function as a constituent in the structure of a sentence” (Burton-Roberts, 1986). Collup, as cited in Mustapha (2017), asserts that a phrase is simply a group of words without a verb. Therefore, what qualifies a group of words as a phrase is the absence of a verb. It is also the verb that differentiates a phrase from a clause as the syntactic unit next to it as a phrase is lower on the grammatical hierarchy than a clause (Kroegar: 35, quoted in Bello 2017). Tomori (1977) refers to a phrase as a well-ordered linguistic form of two or more words that has no grammatical coherence. In his definition, he also suggests that it is the verb that gives coherence to a group of words, such that without coherence, the group of words will lack collective meanings. It is in this light that Leech et al (2005) posit that phrases are units intermediate between clause and word. They buttress this claim with an example thus:

“My uncle Olaf was munching his peach with relish”.

They argue that the above sentence is made up of nine (9) words, but these words are grouped into four (4) phrases; as such, like words, phrases belong to a number of different classes: ‘my uncle Olaf’ is a noun phrase ‘was munching’ is a verb phrase, ‘his peach’ is a noun phrase and ‘with relish’ is a prepositional phrase. Therefore, they conclude that a phrase is simply a group of words.

Declerk et al, as quoted in Bello (2017), define a phrase as a group of words forming a unit and consisting of a head or nucleus together with other words or group of words clustering around it. They argue that if the headword of a phrase is a noun, it becomes a noun phrase (NP), e.g. ‘All those beautiful houses built in the sixties; that tall Hausa girl with a red head tie covering her hair. If the headword is a verb, it is described as a verb phrase (VP), e.g. was going; will have gone; shall see. If the headword is preposition, it is considered as a Prepositional Phrase (PP), e.g. from the house; at that corner; under the table; in the building, etc.

Richard, in Mu`azu (2017), describes a phrase as any small group of words within a sentence or a clause. For Crystal (2008), phrases are traditionally seen as part of the structural hierarchy, falling between a clause and a word. Ndimele, cited in Mu`azu (2017), on the other hand, avers that a phrase is the resultant construction from the combination of other language words to expand a major level. Furthermore, a phrase may refer to any group of words in a language. It may also be a group of words, (sometimes a word) that form a constituent and functions as a unit in the syntax of a sentence. A phrase is lower on the grammatical hierarchy than a clause. Observe the examples below:

The man (NP)

Have been waiting (VP)

Beautiful lady (Adj P)

Phrases can be grouped together into different types according to their internal structures. In the words of McGregor as cited in Mustapha (2017), there are two (2) important phrase types that are found in many languages: noun phrases and verb phrases. A few other phrase types are less prominent across languages. Given that nouns and verbs are not separate parts of speech in all languages, it is possible that noun phrases and verb phrases might not be distinct in all languages.

Noun Phrase

As earlier mentioned, every group of words called a phrase is headed by an element to which the function(s) it performs. That is, noun phrase has noun as the headword, verb phrase headed by a verb, adjectival phrase by an adjective and so on. Therefore, noun phrase is a word or group of words headed by a noun and can function as subject, object, complement in a sentence.

Noun phrases are very common in all languages. They are the most frequently occurring phrase type in all languages. They are also known as nominal phrases or nominal groups and are often abbreviated as NP or NG respectively. According to Aremo, as cited in Mustapha (2017), a noun phrase is a sequence of words consisting of a noun and its modifiers in which the noun is regarded as the head or central word.

According to Quirk and Greenbaum, the following are palpable about noun phrase:

Noun phrase at its simplest is a pronoun such as ‘he, she, they’ or a noun such as ‘David, John’. But a noun phrase may be an indeterminately long and complex structure having a noun as head or preceded by other words such as articles, adjectives, or another noun and followed by a prepositional phrase or relative clause (cited in Mustapha, 2017).

Kirkpatrick (2007) also posits that a noun phrase, also called a nominal phrase, is a group of related words in which the main word is a noun and which functions like a noun in a sentence or clause. For instance:

The most dreadful road accident has happened
A terrible storm is forecast.

The underlined parts above are noun phrases. They function as nouns in the sentences. Noun phrase can also be a word. For instance, in the above sentences, pronouns can be used to substitute the noun phrases thus: It has happened and It is forecast, respectively.

II. Theoretical Framework

Comparative linguistic enquiry came as an approach to language study in 1930 when writers became concerned of other languages (Olufunke, 2008). Comparative linguistic analysis, especially in the area of syntax, takes two different languages and examines their similarities and differences (Wallwork, 1985). Similarly, Yusuf (2007) observes that comparative analysis involves a comparison of words to ascertain whether the words compared are related. In his view, comparative analysis was introduced by Joseph Greenberg as “mass comparison” to signify taking a large number of languages to find out whether they are related.

Relative to language teaching, Lado (1957) has the overall objective of aiding language teaching. Lado’s system of comparative analysis is based on vigorous step by step comparison of the first and second language. This comparison may cover any aspect of the language. Individuals tend to transfer the forms and meaning of their native language and culture into the target language. Lado’s theory is also a model for language learning, often referred to as Contrastive Analysis (CA), a foundation he laid down in his hypothesis (CAH). He sees speech as a system of habits. He maintains that these habits are based on the grammar of the language. Lado makes it obvious that most difficulties in L2 are due to the differences between L1 and the Target Language (TL). He rightly puts it that those areas that are similar to the native language are the easiest to learn. Therefore, learners should concentrate on the points of differences and not similarities between the two languages. Lado’s descriptive framework is based on the fact that patterns responsible for the difficulty in the learning can be predicted and described by making a systematic comparison of two languages. The basic assumption of Lado’s theory is that language learning will be easier

when two languages happen to be similar. His postulation in CAH is adjudged to the strong version of the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) while Oler and Ziahosseni's version of the CAH is called the moderate version, and the Ronald Wardhaugh's version is called the weak version.

Therefore, using the above assumption of comparative analysis theory, this research makes a comparison of two languages; thus, Èlòyì and English – their noun phrases in order to examine their structural similarities and/or differences.

III. Methodology

This research, being a comparative syntactic study of Èlòyì and English noun phrases, is detailed in a few basic areas of research. Areas such as NP structure, functions and the universals of NP in natural languages; citing copious examples from Èlòyì and English respectively. The area for this study is Keffi Local Government Area of Nasarawa State which has a majority of English and Èlòyì speaking area.

In this research work, the researchers employed the primary and secondary methods of data collection as well as introspective means. The primary method employed for this work includes language helpers (informants), interviews from elderly persons (from both languages).

The secondary method used in data collection is the use of library where different works were consulted and other sources like the internet were also consulted to gather enough data for the research. The study sought for data mostly through primary source and about 70% of the information presented in this study owe to native information.

Data Presentation and Analysis

This section of the study presents data from the chosen languages which are presented and analysed separately; tagged as Data A and B in order to ease its readership.

Data A: Èlòyì Noun Phrases

Èlòyì, noun phrase constituents could be a noun or a string which can be post-modified by words such as determiners and adjectives. In other words, noun phrase in Èlòyì can be a word or a potential sequence of two or more words which interrelate with each other in such a way that they function as a single unit to fill clause level slots. In other words, noun phrase in Èlòyì can be a word or group of words which express partial or no meaning and do not have verb in it (in the case of group of words). When a single word functions as the noun phrase in an Èlòyì sentence, it is referred to as Simple Noun Phrase, when it is a group of two or more words, it is referred to as a Complex/Compound Noun Phrase. Also, it should be noted that the noun phrases of Èlòyì are always headed by a noun. This will be demonstrated alongside picturing the structures:

Osani ē kà m`ùtū. "Sani went to the farm"
3SG V PP
Òmusa ángbé kīyán g`írà. 'Musa killed a snake'
3SG V NP

Previously in this study, it was stated that an NP could be a word or a string of words serving as a noun phrase and when such is realized, it is called a Simple Noun Phrase. Data i and ii clearly demonstrate that.

The subsequent data in iii-viii exemplify a Complex Noun Phrase structures in Èlòyì as they constitute two or more words. Thus:

Ókō -úfō [ók`úfō] "One woman"
3SG Spec.

NP → N + Spec.
 Úmé-ùgì [úm`ùgì] “Black boy”
 3SG Adj.
 NP → N + Adj.
 Úmé ùgì ùfō [úm`ùg`ùfō] “One black boy”
 3SG Adj. Spec.
 NP → N + Adj. + Spec.
 Úmé ēlē [úm`élē] “This boy”
 3SG Dem.
 NP → N + Dem.
 Ume mi [umemi] “My boy”
 3SG Poss.
 NP → N + Poss.
 Úmé ùgì ēlē [úm`ùgì`élē] “This black boy”
 3SG Adj. Dem.
 NP → N + Adj. + Dem.

The NP structure in Èlòyì pinpoints that the headword is only post-modified by different elements (adjectival phrase, prepositional phrase and other kinds of phrases within the NP structure) within the language as can be seen in data iii-viii above.

Data B: English Noun Phrases

Earlier, a phrase has been defined by varying scholars in their reputable scholaristic works. Generally, a phrase in any given language of the world can be regarded as ‘a word or a related words/headed construction functioning as a part of speech – noun. Semantically, it could be a word or a group of words that lacks a finite or main verb, and which does not make a complete sense or meaning.

A Noun Phrase (NP) is seen variously as headed by or having the same roles in syntax like those of a noun. It is a construction with a noun as its head (Matthews, 2007: 269; Crystal, 1994: 273).

The main word in a noun phrase is a noun or pronoun. We can schematically represent the structure of the noun phrase as follows, where the parentheses indicate elements of the structure that are not obligatory i.e. they can be absent from the structure and with no effects: NP +(determiner(s)) → (pre-modifier(s)) noun → (post-modifier(s)).

Determiners are words that introduce or delimit noun phrases; this, that, those, the, a, an, my, any, some etc. Modifiers are words that depend on the main word which are not necessarily obligatory, they can be omitted. Modifiers are given names with respect to the positions within the noun phrase(s) they occupy in relation to the main word. When they precede the noun, we call them ‘pre-modifiers’ where they come after the main word, we call the ‘post-modifiers’. Modifiers can be nouns, pronouns (as adjectives) or adjectives. Consider the below examples:

<i>Noun (N)</i>	<i>students</i>
<i>Determiner + noun (Det + N)</i>	<i>some students</i>
<i>Pre-modifier + noun (Adj. + N)</i>	<i>brilliant students</i>
<i>Determiner + pre-modifier + noun (Det. + Adj. + N)</i>	<i>some brilliant students</i>
<i>Noun + post-modifier (N + PP)</i>	<i>students of linguistics</i>
<i>Pre-modifier + noun + post modifier (Adj. + N + PP)</i>	<i>brilliant students of linguistics</i>
<i>Determiner + pre-modifier + noun + post –modifier (Det. + Adj. + N + PP)</i>	<i>some brilliant students of linguistics</i>

All of these structures can fit into the blank space in the sentence below:

Dr. Ubaidallah and Mr. Sani often interact with....

The English noun phrase structures configure to the fact that they could be a single word or a string of words.

IV. Discussion of Findings

NP Structures in Èlòyì and English

NP = N

The above NP structure is realized in Èlòyì and English respectively. This is the structure that is neither pre-modified nor post-modified by any element. It is a single word (noun) that functions as the noun phrase in such structure. Therefore, the above NP structure is found in both languages.

NP = N + Post-modifier

This structure is the type that the headword (noun) always precedes its modifiers, and these modifiers can be determiners, specifiers, adjectives (quantifiers or qualifiers), noun, adjectival complex, unitary adjective, diminutive, possessive, demonstrative and even adverbs in some instances. This structure is found in the two languages. In Èlòyì, this is the most or even the predominant NP structure. In Èlòyì again, the noun, which is the headword in NP constructions, always precedes its modifiers.

NP = Pre-modifier(s) + N

This structure is only realized in English i.e. it is peculiar to English not Èlòyì. These pre-modifier(s) can be adjectives, demonstratives and in some cases nouns serving as adjectives. For example: “Ubaidallah, the Departmental Examination Officer, is a benevolent being.” This structure is found only in English and not in Èlòyì.

NP = Pre-modifier(s) + N + Post-modifier(s)

This structure is the kind that the head noun is pre-modified and post-modified by other elements within the structure. However, this cannot be equated in the noun phrase structure of the Èlòyì because the head-word is only post-modified.

Therefore, these are the basic NP structures found in these languages and the elements that constitute the structures. It should be noted that Èlòyì has its modifiers at post-head positions unlike what is realizable in English.

V. Conclusion

The analysed data reveal that Eloyi and English are similar in some of their NP structures and also dissimilar in some. Thus, this is the major motivation for this study. The study has also revealed that the two languages under study have the common structure of the NP as a single word (NP = N) and where the head noun is post modified by other elements (NP = N + Post modifier(s)). This is their area of convergence (similarities). But in the areas of divergence, English has the NP structure as: NP = Pre-modifier(s) + N and NP = Pre-modifier(s) + N + Post-modifier(s) which is not tenable in Èlòyì.

Therefore, the basic structures in English NPs are:

NP = N

NP = Pre-modifier(s) + N

NP = Pre-modifier(s) + N + Post-modifier(s)

and, the basic structures in Èlòyì NPs are:

NP = N

NP = N + Modifier(s)

References

Abdulmumin, S. H (2019). Analysis of Eloyi Segmental Phonemes. Diss-Seminar Paper.

Federal University of Lafia, Nasarawa State.

- Bello, M. U (2017). A Contrastive Study of the Aspects of Lexical and Syntactic Rules between English and Hausa Language. Diss-Seminar Paper. Nasarawa State University, Keffi, Nigeria.
- Chomsky N. (1965). Aspect of the Theory of Syntax. London: Cambridge, MIT Press.
- Crystal D. (2008). A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Finch G. (2000). Linguistic Terms and Concepts. New York: St. Martins Press.
- Galadanci, M.K.M. (1976). An Introduction to Hausa Grammar. Lagos: Longman Nigeria
- Kirkpatrick, B. (2007). Better English. Scotland: Geddes and Grosset Publishers.
- Lado, R. (1957). Linguistics across Cultures. London: University of Michigan.
- Leech, G. et al. (2006). English Grammar for Today: A New Introduction. London: Macmillan.
- Mu`azu, M.B. (2017). A Descriptive Analysis of Eloyi Noun Phrase. An Unpublished B.A Project, Nasarawa State University, Keffi.
- Mustapha, M. (2017). Understanding English Grammar: An Introductory Course. Nasarawa: NIRPRI Publishers, Keffi.
- Olufunke, H. (2008). The Phonological Features of the Owe Speakers of English Language. An Unpublished B.A Project, Nasarawa State University, Keffi.
- Omachonu, G.S. (2011 Ed.). NSUK Text in General Linguistics. Rossen Publication Ltd., Enugu, Nigeria.
- Philip A. (2010). Introduction to Linguistics. Rossen Publication Ltd., Enugu, Nigeria.
- Tomori, O. S. H. (1977). The Morphology and Syntax of Present-day English: An Introduction. Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd.
- Wallwork, I.F (1985). Languages and Linguistics: An Introduction to the Study of Language. London: Heineman Education Books.
- Yusuf, O. (2007). Basic Linguistics for Nigerian Languages Teachers. Port Harcourt: M & J. Grand Orbit Communication.