

A Contrastive Analysis of Tense in English and Iẓon

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Abstract

Tense can be considered a universal feature of most languages of the world which may constitute difficulties for a second language learner with respect to how it is used to mark time. This is true for Iẓon learners of English as a second language. Therefore, this study undertakes a contrastive analysis of Iẓon and English languages to identify the likely problems an Iẓon learner of English as a second language may encounter in English learning and to suggest how to overcome these problems. The data for the study was sourced from native speakers of Iẓon through participant observation method and the Mein dialect of Iẓon was used for the study. It adopts Chomsky's Minimalist Program as its analytical framework. The findings reveal that after applying the TP – Tense Phrase – as head to analyse the tense structure, both languages are structurally different in the positioning of the verb and its auxiliaries. It also discovers that the Iẓon past tense structure is morphologically and phonologically inflected just like English. It further observes that the similarities of both languages' grammar will facilitate learning of English by the Iẓon speaker while the syntactic and structural differences may pose a learning difficulty to the Iẓon speaker.

Keywords: Iẓon, Contrastive analysis, Minimalist Programme, Tense, Tense Phrase, Pedagogical.

Introduction

Languages around the world have common inherent features known as the linguistic universals. Linguistic universals are those linguistic features which are common to all languages of the world. This concept was captured in Noam Chomsky's theory of Universal Grammar. A linguistic universal, according to Chomsky, is a pattern that occurs systematically across natural languages, potentially true for all of them. All languages have nouns, verbs or if a language is spoken, it has consonants and vowels. To this end, every language has particular symbols and sounds that represent basic meaning differences. To Chomsky (1995) and Radford (1997), the existence of universal principles of language forms part of human nature. No matter the complexity of a language, there is always a pattern and parameters through which such language can be studied by a second language learner. However, the more the parametric differences between the two languages, the more the difficulties encountered by a second language learner.

On the other hand, the universal, principles which world languages share help to give learners the assurance of learning possibilities. These universal principles which may include tense, aspect and mood as they relate with others in the universal grammar form an aspect of a language grammar that gives learning difficulty to learners of a second language. The functional disposition of the parameters may be the same but may have structural differences. Thus, this work is centered on contrastive analysis of tense in Iẓon and English to identify likely differences that an Iẓon speaker may encounter in learning English as a second language and the likely

similarities that will facilitate learning of the language. Often times, Izon speakers learning English misplace the verbal structure as against grammatical rules of English, the problem most times could not be traced, as such this study is to undertake a contrastive analysis of tense in Izon and English to trace and identify the likely problem that is causing such. Therefore, this study is to identify tense and analyse the features to show the universal principles and the parametric variations in the derivation of tense in both languages.

Language moves with man. The movement of people from one location to another gives room for one's language to have contact with another. Language contact is the social and linguistic phenomenon by which speakers of different languages (or different dialects of the same language) interact with one another leading to transfer of linguistic features (Nordquist 2020). Language contact is not, of course, a special homogenous phenomenon. Contact may occur between languages which are genetically related or unrelated; speakers may have similar or vastly different social structures. Language contact is a major factor in language change (Stephan, 2012).

The English Language in Nigeria is a foreign language which has found its way to have contact with the indigenous languages. The use of English language in Nigeria dates back to the late 16th and early 17th centuries when British merchants and Christian missionaries settled in the coastal towns called Badagry in the present day Lagos State and Calabar, in the present day Cross River State. The primary aim of the Christian missionaries was not to make the local indigenes speak English; rather it was to make them literate enough to read the Bible in English and the possibility of reading the Bible in their indigenous languages. This was the major reason Samuel Ajayi Crowder translated the Holy Bible into the Yoruba language.

Elugbe and Omamor (1991) are of the view that Nigeria was already in contact with Europe as early 1469. According to them, the first contact situation between a Nigeria population and a European group was between the Portuguese and the Coastal people of the Niger Delta and that the English became the effective trading partner of Nigeria from the beginning of 17th Century (Banjo 1996, p. 2). The English introduced and implanted the English language through commerce and later through work and education.

The Izon language is recognised as having been present in the Southern region of Nigeria many millennia before the 15th century when the Portuguese arrived at the Nigerian coasts. The name of Izon is preferred in this study to Ijaw or Ijo. This is because it is the original spelling historically. Also the reason is not farfetched from the fact that the Izon phonetics does not have the voiced post alveolar affricate /dʒ/ nor is the letter "j" found in the orthography. The word "Ijaw" is an anglicised version of the original spelling of the word "Izon". Williamson (1969) unsuccessfully used "Ijo" but Williamson and Egberipou (1994) in a later study successfully adopted Izon. However, the anglicized form "Ijaw" is still used to refer to the people in many circles in spite of the fact that Izon refers to both the language as in Izon Beli (Izon language) and the people as Izon otu (Izon people).

The Izon speaking people are predominantly found in Bayelsa, Edo, Delta, Rivers, Ondo states of Nigeria (Kwokwo 2012). Kekai (2012) states that the Izon speaking people are found in Bayelsa, Delta, Edo, Ondo, Rivers, and Akwa-Ibom States respectively. Based on the 2006 National Population Census figures (as

contained in the Federal Republic of Nigeria official Gazette, 2009), the Iẓon people are approximately 2.3 million. This is deduced from across fifteen (15) local government areas of the four states mentioned above by Kwokwo (2012). However, Kekai (2012) in his expounded study, states that the Iẓon speakers are about 4 million with about twenty-eight (28) dialects. The dialects are said to be mutually intelligible. The differences in these dialects are mostly noticeable in the “tense”, tone and lexicons.

Williamson (1969) classifies Iẓon language as belonging to the Ijoid sub-group of the Niger-Congo family of languages. Williamson and Blench (2000) further restate this classification. Derefaka (2003) lists the twenty-eight (28) dialects and Kekai (2012) confirms this classification. Kekai (2012:8) asserts that the Ijoid group of languages includes Nembe, Akassa, Kalabari, Ibari, Nkoro, Okirika, Biseni, Olodiana, Oruama, Okordia and Defaka. The dialects of the Iẓon language include:

(i) Mein	(ii) Tarakiri	(iii) Kumbo	(iv) Kabo
(v) Seimbiri	(vi) Tuomo	(vii) Operemo	(viii) Iduwini
(ix) Ogulagha	(x) Oporoza	(xi) Arogbo	(xii) Egbama
(xiii) Olodiana west	(xiv) Furupagha	(xv) Ekpetiama	(xvi) Kolokuma
(xvii) Gbarain	(xviii) Apoi	(xix) Bassan	(xx) Olodiana East
(xxi) Oporoma	(xxii) Boma	(xxiii) Obiakiri	(xxiv) Ogbein
(xxv) Tarakiri west	(xxvi) Ikibiri	(xxvii) Bumo	(xxviii) Tobu

Iẓon language is an understudied language. There is limited number of books and works on the language. The language is classified as a minority language by which research works are very scarce on it. Although, there is a paucity of literature on the language as compared to other languages, a few general works exist. One of these is *Iẓon – English Dictionary* (based on the Mein dialect) by Agbegha (1996). Maledo and Igbomene (2019) using the Chomsky’s principles and parameters theory of Transformational Generative Grammar look at Sentential Negation in English and Iẓon languages, where the structural differences that exist in both languages are identified. The parametric differences in the derivation of negation and focalisation in Iẓon and English languages are made explicit in this work. Okwokwo (2012) using the Minimalist Program of Chomsky’s Transformational Generative Grammar, is a study of null subject parameter in English and juxtapose its occurrence or non-occurrence in Iẓon language. The aim of the work is to characterise the parametric choices in English and Iẓon languages in the derivation of grammatically convergent sentences with null subject constituent. Competent native speakers became the source of data for this study. This work, however, was basically silent in the area of tense.

Literature Review

Williamson and Blench (2000) discuss Iẓon verbal extension. They state that the Ijoid languages can have suffixed verbal extension which are constructed out of very limited segmented materials, but do not allow seriated extension. It concludes by stating that there are no transparent segmental cognates suggesting that Iẓon language system may be innovative. This work also did not touch on how tense functions in Iẓon language.

Williamson and Egberipou (1994) is another book of elementary Iẓon language study. It is prepared for Nigerian university students and members of the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) who are not native speakers of Iẓon to learn the basics of the foundational knowledge of the language.

Kekai (2012) deals with the organs of speech in Iẓon which include: the active articulators, the passive articulators and the tongue, the speech production – consonants: state of the glottis, place of articulation, manner of articulation; the vowel; the nasal vowels, double vowels, vowel harmony, Iẓon syllable structure, the verb – tense, future tense and the factitive. The book also deals with perfective, the imperative and the determinant phrase noun pluralisation, nominalisation, zero nominalisation, derived nominalization, the pronoun, the adjective, the adverb and conjunction. However, it is still silent on contrasting the tense of Iẓon and English languages to bring out the levels of difficulty that the Iẓon learner will have while learning English.

Izon language is a tonal language different from English which is stress based. Tone refers to the pitch with which a sound is produced. Williamson and Egberipou (1994) identify three tones in Iẓon language which include high, low and mid tones. Tone is referred to as “poun” in Iẓon language. Welmers (1973) sees a tone language as that in which both pitch phonemes and segmental phonemes enter into the composition of at least some morphemes.

Onduku (2015:118) sees tone as the rise and fall of the voice especially as it affects the meaning of what is said. To him, Iẓon words fall into two major classes: low and high. These tones are indicated by tone (poun) marks by downward stroke (˘) and upward stroke (/). Meaning and word class placement in Iẓon language is based on tonal differences. Thus the meaning of two words with similar phonemes or sounds can be differentiated only by their tonal distinction.

Tense is a grammatical term and feature that points to explain how verbs are used in a context to mark time. Tense in English language is a concept in the universal principles of the grammar of a language. Tense refers to the time at which an action happens. The verb in this regard conforms with the tense form as used. Time is a universal, non-linguistic concept with three divisions namely, present, past and future. Using different linguistic forms, all known peoples recognise the distinctions between past, present and future times. There, therefore, exists a universal primitive calendar, but no universal tense in linguistics (Adejare and Adejare 1996).

Tense in contrast is the linguistic feature for handling time relations in speech and it differs from language to language. As a linguistic feature, it is characterised by abstraction, which is language specific rather than universal. Tense in English, according to Adejare and Adejare (1996), because of complexity, is one area of descriptive linguistics characterised by major controversies. The controversies center around three issues. How many tense forms exist in English, two (past and present) or three (past, present, and future)?

However, the traditional grammar assumes that, since there exists three time frames, there must be three tenses to refer to the three frames. Greek and Latin grammars which served as models for early English grammar have three tenses and provide a justification for the description imposed on English. Traditional grammar therefore recognises past, present and future tenses for English. The present tense is the same as the base form of the verb ($x + 0$) and the past tense is formed with the

addition of the – d morpheme to the base to yield x + d. The future tense is lexically, rather than morphologically, marked. The auxiliaries **will** or **shall** precede the base form to yield aux + x.

The above indicates that the English language has a well spelt out structure of tense that is well explained. However, Iẓon language has very limited work on its grammar. Onduku (2015) helps to highlight basic Iẓon words and how they are used in making simple sentences in Iẓon. More so, existing studies have looked at some aspects of the language. Kwokwo (2012) adopts a contrastive approach for the Iẓon and English languages. Maledo and Igbomene (2020) specifically deal with the identification of how sentential negations are formed in both languages. Kekai (2012) reveals the aspects of language study namely; phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics. Ganagana and Ogboru (2019) also unravel the morphological differences that are embedded in English, Isoko and Iẓon languages. Prezi (2015) seeks to provide a solution for the curriculum deficit of Iẓon language contents in the curriculum of the primary school.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework adopted for this work is Minimalist Program (MP). The Minimalist Program pays attention to categorical and functional features such as Tense (T) Agreement (AGR) merger and movement operations, as well as levels of projections of a head. It also shows how the computation component works by building up piece by piece the phrasal structures from the lexical resources by the operations of merge and move (MC Gilvray, 2000, p. 216).

The principles and parameters of languages using techniques of Minimalist Program such as determining overt and covert movement and the interpretability of morphological features forms the bane of MP. This theory therefore, is suitable for our analysis. This work is conducted with the aim of determining how much of the universal features or principles of human language propagated by Chomsky in Universal Grammar are common particularly as regards to tense in both English and Iẓon languages. Moreover, being a work in contrastive analysis, it seeks to establish what syntactic differences exist as regards tense between the two languages. Some parameters are the head parameters, and WH-parameter, the [+] interpretable and [-] interpretable Agreement parameter, which in other words could be equated to a distinction between strong and weak features. Therefore, the MP is a suitable tool for the contrastive analysis of tense in English and Iẓon. The level of projection that will be used for the analysis is the TP – Tense Phrase as the head.

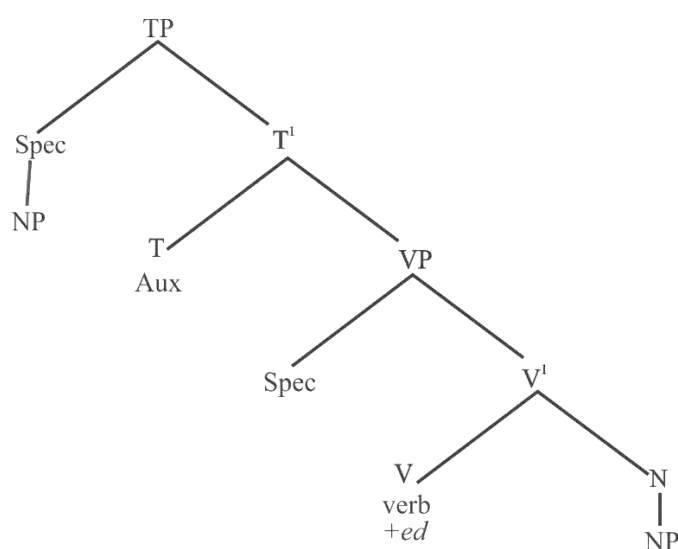
Methodology

The data for the study is sourced from native speakers of the Mein dialect of Iẓon. Collection of the data was done without the speakers knowing that they were engaged for such purpose. The statements were recorded and transcribed and instances of the use of tense in the sentence constructions were identified and analysed. The formation of tense in Iẓon was then contrasted with that of the established tense structures in the English Language. The procedure of data analysis is based on the Minimalist Program structure as established by Chomsky (1995). Basic interpretations were made to show contrastive features of both languages.

Data Analysis

Tense

Tense is a linguistic universal, so it is part of the principles of universal grammar. However, there are parametric differences in how they manifest in different languages. The way tense manifests in one language differs from the other. In the Minimalist Program adopted for this study, tense is also referred to TP as the minimalised phrase head of analysis: as $[[TP \Rightarrow T \Rightarrow VP \Rightarrow V \dots]]$. Below is a diagram of Tense structure.



Tense in English

The English verb has three distinct morphological forms, namely the -s, -ing and -ed tense markers. These markers are used basically to state the tense classifications in making the sentence in English. In English we have the present, past and future tenses. These tense classifications are marked morphologically as seen above.

For instance:

1. He calls you.
[Spec-TP He [T \emptyset [V *calls* [N *You*]] Simple present tense
2. He called you.
Spec – TP He [T \emptyset [V *called* [N *you*]] Simple past tense
3. He will call you
Spec – TP He [T Aux *will* [V *call* [N *you*]] Simple future tense

From the above examples, the English tense varies its expression in simple present, past and future forms in the verb.

İzən Tenses

The İzən tenses are written as single words also with certain morphological additions to the base. Below is the İzən tense (verbs)

Present	Past	Future
Bo (come)	bode (came)	bomın (shall come, will come)
mię (do)	miede (did)	Miemin (shall do, will do)
are (see)	are de (saw)	aremin (shall see, will see)
tın (call)	tın de (called)	tınmin (shall, will call)

(Onduku 2012)

- (1b) He calls you – English
O ę tınę – İzən
Spec – TP O [N ę [TØ [V tınę]]] – simple present

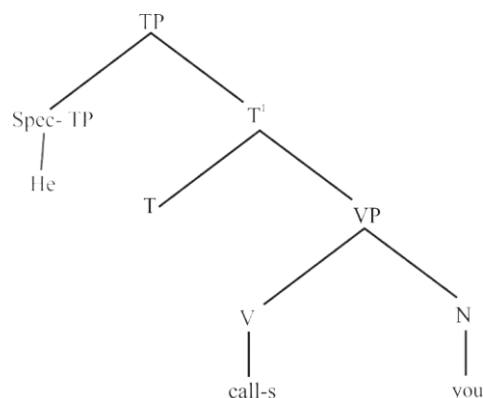
- (2b) He called you – English
O ę tındę – İzən
Spec – TP O [N ę [V tın-de]] simple past

- (3b) He will call you – English
O ę tınmin – İzən
Spec – TP O [N ę [V tın Aux min]]

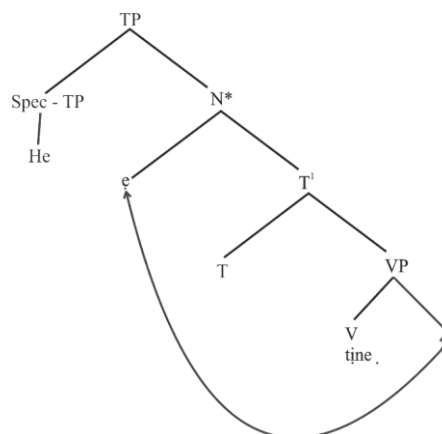
From the data (1ab -3ab) it is clear that the categorical features which apply cross linguistically (that is to the two languages) are mainly syntactic rather than morphological. To establish equivalence of distribution (that is, the syntactic position/s occupied by the English lexical items and their İzən translation equivalent), recourse is made to systematic changes introduced into the Source Language (SL) text in orders to determine what changes occur in the Target Language (TL) text as a consequence.

It is clear that the verbal – tense placement patterns in İzən is quite different to that of the English language from the above analysis. Thus, the expressions (1a/b) – (3a/b) may be schematically represented as 4a/b – 6a/b respectively.

- 4a. He calls you – Simple Present
Spec – TP He [T Ø [V calls [N you]]]

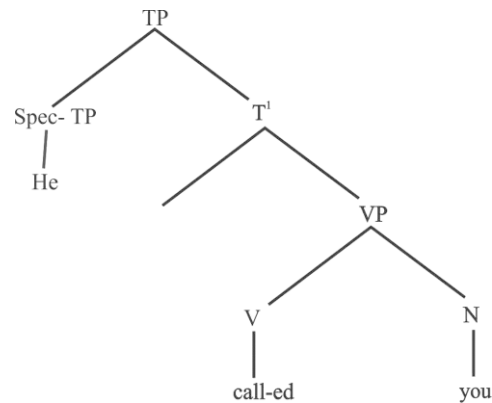


- 4b. O ɛ tɪnɛ
Spec – TP O [N ɛ [T Ø [V tɪnɛ]]]

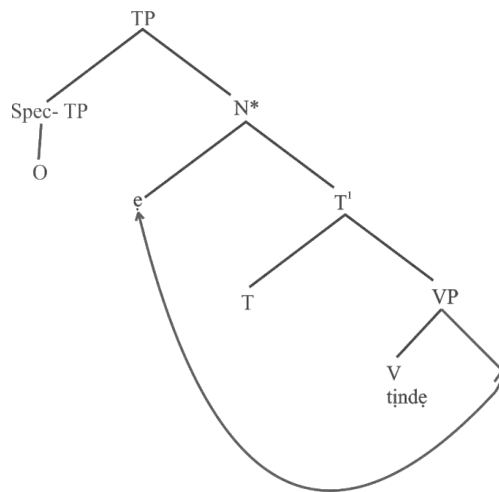


From the above analyses (4a & 4b), it is observed that in the Izon present tense, there is a movement of the object 'e' (you) from the object position to directly after the subject 'O' (He), while the English structure in (4a) places 'you' in the object position after the verb. This movement ascribes a structure difference in the construction of the simple present tense in Izon to that of English.

- 5a. He called you
Spec – TP He [T Ø [V call-ed [N you]]]

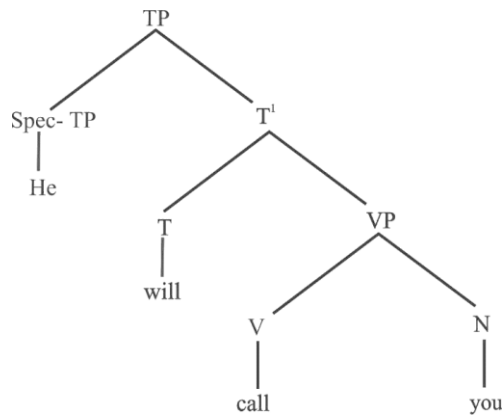


- 5b. O e t̃inde
Spec – TP O [N e [T Ø [V t̃inde]]]

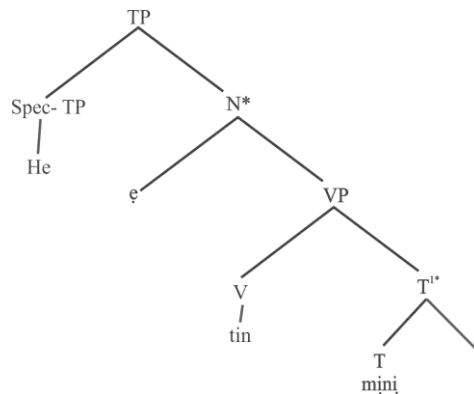


From the above (5a & 5b), it is seen that the movement of the object 'e' (You) also occurs in the construction of past tense in Izo language. However, the verb phrase 't̃inde' (called) morphologically changes from 'teine' to 'teinde'. This change is linguistically similar to that of English as it also changes its present tense (calls) to that of past (called).

- 6a. He will call you
Spec – TP He [T Aux will [V call [N you]]]



- 6b. O e tɪnmɪɲi
Spec TP O [N e [V tin – Aux mɪɲi]]



From the above (6a & 6b), the Izon future tense is also lexically influenced as that of English. The structural difference is seen as; while English auxiliary verb 'will' comes before the lexical verb, the Izon auxiliary 'mini' comes after the lexical verb. This structural difference is a unique feature in the Izon grammar as compared to English.

Discussion of Findings

The fact that the schematic representations of the MP tree diagrams are based on categories allows us to make principled conclusions about derived structures. There is a distortion of order in the Izon syntactic structure from the above. While the specifier – He has its structural equivalent as 'O' in Izon, the verb – call-s, -ed is structurally placed differently in Izon syntactic structure. It comes after the N – 'you' which equivalent is 'e' in Izon. Also, the auxiliary – will, which equivalent – mini occupies a post verb while the English equivalent is often pre-verb modification.

In essence, the tense of the Izon language, though has its own specific disposition of present, past and future but the structural and syntactic manipulations differ compared to the English Language. There is known absence of syntactic element(s)

as compared to English in Iẓon language. The findings point to the affirmation that, while the English syntactic structure is SVOAC, the Iẓon syntactic structure SOV . . .

The past tense in (5) is phonologically and morphologically inflected in English as ‘-ed’, so also it is in Iẓon as ‘-de’. While the future tense is indicated in English with addition of the auxiliary ‘-will’ to the verb (before the verb) to specifically indicate the future intent, the Iẓon in this regard also lexically adds an auxiliary ‘-m̩ni’ to the verb. Unlike English, its auxiliary comes after the verb.

Conclusion

The study has shown that in order for an Iẓon speaker to learn English language successfully, the hurdle of verb placement needs to be carefully learnt as there is a structural disparity in both languages. As for the tense, it becomes a facilitator to the learner of English from Iẓon because the tense formation processes are similar to those of English language. However, it is seen that both languages are distinct from each other. The Minimalist Program adopted for the study has helped to show the structural differences of tense/syntax in both languages. Therefore, it will generate interest of syntax teaching to students on these similarities and differences among Iẓon speakers.

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