

Syntactic Structures of Ngamo and English Languages

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Abstract

This study investigates the syntactic structures of the Ngamo language, focusing on its constituent order and categorical analysis in comparison with English. By examining sentence patterns, the study identifies that Ngamo predominantly follows the Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) structure, similar to English, but also exhibits variations such as Verb-Object-Subject (VOS) and Verb-Subject-Verb (VSV). The analysis highlights the flexibility of Ngamo syntax, particularly, in the positioning of adjectives, which follow the nouns they qualify, and comparative markers, which can appear after the first noun phrase. Demonstrative pronouns in Ngamo demonstrate further syntactic richness by occurring both before and after the nouns they modify. These findings underscore Ngamo's rule-governed yet unique syntactic characteristics, emphasizing its differences from English. The study contributes to the broader understanding of Ngamo's linguistic structure, showcasing its complexity and the potential for further linguistic exploration.

Keywords: Syntactic structure, constituent order, comparative markers, demonstrative pronouns.

Introduction

Language is seen by linguist and non-linguist alike in different terms, as a social product and principal medium of communication. It is the finest asset of man and a specific human attribute. It is one of the most cherished gifts of nature and has elevated man above other animals. No human child is born with a language, language exists because human beings exist and it is what distinguishes man from other species as a means of expressing one's opinion, it is put to use differently in different context revealing individuals' uniqueness. Hence,

the ability to acquire and use complex systems of communication affords human a wider range of opportunities to manipulate the language properties and resources in order to convey an idea(s).

There are many aspects of a language, such as syntax among others which deals with the formation of sentences and it is the most important aspect of learning a language. Syntax in linguistics is the set of rules, principles and processes that govern the structure of sentences in a given language, usually including word order. The term syntax is also used to refer to the study of such principles and processes. It is the study of the rules governing the formation of linguistic units larger than the word. For instance, when we say that 'a good man' is made up of 'a', 'good', and 'man', and that the utterance 'a good man' is fully grammatical in English, we are making a syntactic statement. Through acquaintance with such syntactic rules, we know that 'man the good' is not an acceptable syntactic construction in English. It is the goal of many syntacticians to discover the syntactic rules common to all languages.

It is obvious that the syntactic differences in English and Ngamo languages create problems in the teaching and learning of English to Ngamo people due to the fact that the words arrangement of the two languages are slightly different in nature. This research is therefore set out to investigate and analyze the syntactic structures in Ngamo and English language with a view to identifying the principles of arranging words to convey meaning in the two languages within the framework of Transformational Generative Grammar and geared towards achieving the following objectives: to analyze the syntactic rules of Ngamo and English language, to examine the various syntactic dimensions in the languages and identify the similarities and differences that exist within the syntactic rules of the languages.

This paper therefore serve as a useful guide and reference material to subsequent researchers in syntax and other linguistics-related fields; as it provides basis for them to know the syntactic principles of Ngamo language in relation to English language and to the speakers of Ngamo languages.

The Ngamo Language, an Overview

The term 'Ngamo' in this work is restricted to its meaning referring to a language spoken by the Afro-asiatic splitter group of Chadic language family. Unlike the English language, it is principally spoken by the Ngamo people in Northeastern Nigeria and is a member of the Chadic family of language (Schuh Russell G. 2005). This includes Yobe, Bauchi and Gombe States of Nigeria. This language of the migrants from Egyptian is today spoken by well over 119,000 as the number as of 2023 reports by Joshua with their spiritual headquarters in Gadaka, Yobe State. Gashinge, Jibril A. (iii) states that there are two major dialect varieties of Ngamo language which are Ngamo Gudi and Ngamo Yaya and two minor ones, Ngamo Dokto and Ngamo Janga which according to Meek Charles Kingsley 1931 says the language is divided into four Dialects that is Ngamo Gudi, Ngamo Yaya and two minor ones Ngamo Dokto and Ngamo Janga which are nearly similar to Gudi dialect.

Literature Review

Syntax: An Overview

The word 'syntax' came originally from Greek and literally meant 'a setting out together' or 'arrangement'. If we concentrate on the structure and ordering of components within a sentence, we are studying what is technically known as the syntax of a language. Syntax is that part of linguistics that studies the structure and formation of sentences. It

explains how words and phrases are arranged to form correct sentences and also defines the meaning of sentences. Some sentences can be grammatically correct but make no sense; these sentences lack the correct use of syntax (Hana, 2011). Here is a classic example by Noam Chomsky, a linguist, which illustrates a case in which a sentence is correct but does not make sense:

"Colourless green ideas sleep furiously."

The sentence above makes no sense but it is grammatically correct although the word agreement is not right. However, some sentences make sense but are not grammatically correct, as in a sentence like; "My big ball I will play today". It shows that the person will play his or her big ball today but it is not grammatically correct. This is due to lack of word order in the sentence. It is therefore important to note that to create grammatically correct and acceptable English sentences and that of other language sentences, we have to follow the English rules for syntax and other languages rules of syntax.

Hana (2011) further argues that syntax is part of linguistics that is involved in the study of sentence structure. It is based on three elements of a sentence: word order, word agreement, and hierarchical structure of a sentence. Just like the English language has its structure, Ngamo language also has its own unique structure that may be similar or different from English language. Learners of a language must know how to arrange words which they know to make a sentence. They should also ensure that there is word agreement in a sentence; subject and verb, determiner and noun, and other words have to agree with each other.

Yule (2000) sees syntax as an aspect of linguistics that gives meaning to a sentence. Most sentences are ambiguous when they lack syntax properties. One may construct a sentence like, 'John had a walking stick, and he bumped into an old man with

it', and another person may construct a sentence like 'John bumped into an old man, and the old man happened to be carrying a walking stick'. These two sentences would have the same meaning as the one initially constructed as 'John bumped into an old man with a walking stick'. It creates structural ambiguity; it is open to diverse interpretations by the reader or the listener. The message could be intended for various listeners and differential understanding of the sentence leads to confusion. This implies that sentences that are not well structured could lead to misunderstanding of the message. Therefore, the main purpose of syntax in a sentence is to show the structural distinction between the parties represented in a sentence. He further asserts that syntax enables learners to construct sentences that show recursion which is important in the construction of grammatically correct sentences. In other words, it enables the construction of one sentence from many phrases that relate to one subject or object. For example, a description of the location of an object; the sweet is on the floor, the sweet is near the door, and the sweet is in the kitchen. These phrases should be combined to construct a complex sentence that the reader or listener should understand. In order to achieve this, the prepositional phrase has to be repeated in the complex sentence and the words must be well arranged to make sense. Recursion and proper arrangement of the words will change the sentence to; 'The sweet is on the floor, near the door and in the kitchen'. Thus, the insertion of a sentence within another sentence also requires proper arrangement of the words to make a grammatically correct and logical sentence.

It is important to note that there are many rules involved in the study of syntax but the easiest way to understand it is through tree diagrams formed using the syntax rules. Many people have used this method to learn a different language and they

have proved that it is successful (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). Learners have to understand syntax rules to draw the tree. Without knowledge of the rules, it can be difficult to understand them but the rules help to make the construction of sentences an easy task.

Also, in the study of language, syntax skills are very important since they help the learners to understand the structure of the language in a systematic and structural way. A learner who does not understand the syntax aspects of a language finds it difficult to understand the sentences written or spoken in the particular language. It is essential that students learn syntactic properties of the language before moving to the next stages (Kim & Sells, 2008, p. 27). With proper understanding of the syntax aspects of a language, the students can move on to the linguistic analysis of complex language phenomena. The understanding of syntax elements of a language makes it easy to understand the essential elements within a sentence and their relationships. A good example is when dealing with a sentence that has more than one noun; the most important one in such a sentence is the noun that gives its character to the phrase and it is the head noun. If the head noun is singular or plural, the phrase will follow the orientation of the head noun. Also, the head noun must be in good agreement with the verb associated with it for the sentence to make sense. A learner has to know syntax properties to construct correct sentences. Therefore, it is evident that syntax is the most important aspect of learning a language. This is due to the fact that syntax properties of a sentence enable the learners to understand the patterns of a language effectively and clearly.

Syntactic Structures

Syntax is said to be the rules governing the arrangement of words to form phrases, clauses and sentences in a language.

The major concern of syntax is with the structures of a sentence and how well they conform to the laid down rules of such language.

According to Tomori (1982), the sentence is one of the most difficult linguistic terms to define; this is partly due to the fact that an all-inclusive definition of any concept is almost impossible to achieve and partly because it is virtually impossible to combine the distinctive features of a written and spoken sentence in the same definition. Lowth (1763) defines a sentence based on a notional criterion. He defines a sentence as an assemblage of words, expressed in proper form and ranged in proper order, and concurring to make a complete sense. From this definition, the idea of complete sense still lingers; the main problem is the determination of 'complete sense'. For example, if a question was asked, what are you?, and I answered 'a teacher' or 'the teacher', would the answer make complete sense or would it not?

Cobbett (1868) uses a formal (though orthographical) criterion to define a sentence. A sentence, used as a term in Grammar, means one of those portions of words which are divided from the rest by a single dot, which is called a period or full point. In this definition, Cobbett obviously has written sentence in mind and he most probably assumes a well punctuated piece of writing. This does not cover spoken sentences or sentences ended with terminal punctuation marks other than the full stop. Cobbett and Lowth rightly realized that the part of speech of a word depends not just on its form but also on its function.

Therefore, a sentence is a group of words that are put together to mean something. A sentence is a basic unit of language which expresses a complete thought. It does this by following the grammatical rules of syntax. For example, "Bimbo is the most beautiful girl in class." A complete sentence has at least a subject and a main verb to state a complete thought. A subject

is the noun that is doing the main verb. The main verb is the verb that the subject is doing. In English and many other languages, the first word of a written sentence has a capital letter. At the end of the sentence, there is a full stop or full point. Learners have to understand syntax rules to draw the tree. Without knowledge of the rules, it can be difficult to understand them but the rules help to make the construction of sentences an easy task.

A phrase, on the other hand, is a group of two or more words, usually related in meaning but with no subject/verb combination. As long as it is lacking both a subject and verb, a phrase cannot turn into a sentence no matter what one might add to it. A group (Halliday, 1961) is used to refer to one or more words that occupy a distinctive grammatical slot (Elson & Pickett, 1976) in a stretch of linguistic signals. The word 'group' is used in this study in preference to 'phrase' because it suggests syntactic coherence and what is more, it leaves the word phrase available for use for a linguistic form of more than one word that lacks coherence. For example, in the group 'in the room', the form 'in the' is a phrase. Any well-ordered linguistic form of two or more words that has no grammatical coherence may be referred to as a phrase. The types of phrases are noun phrase, verb phrase, adjectival phrase, adverbial phrase, prepositional phrase, gerundial phrase, participial phrase and infinitive phrase.

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Theoretical Framework

The relevance and usefulness of theory in academic work cannot be over-emphasized. Hence, the theory of Transformational Generative Grammar is applied here as a tool for analytical purpose; this work shall adopt the yardstick proposed by Noam Chomsky's linguistic analysis published in his *Syntactic Structures* (1957). Following this, in its analytic ambience, the work shall assume for sentence and phrases analysis using phrase structure rule.

The theory of Transformational Generative Grammar (TGG) is a product of Noam Chomsky's linguistic analysis published in his *Syntactic Structures* (1957) as a revolutionary model of sentence analysis which is said to consist of the following three parts: the Phrases Structural Rule, the Transformational Rules (TR), and the Morphophonemic Rules. In TGG, the basic unit of syntactic analysis is the sentence. Each sentence is said to contain a phrase structure and transformation part.

"There is a rule for all human languages that says that a sentence is made up of NP, Aux and VP. These notations are called re-write rules, which mean that, these can be re-written as:"

S → NP Aux VP
 (The man) (Past) (kill the goat)

S → NP Aux VP

The rule that says S NP Aux VP is called the Phrase Structure Rule because it labels the phrases in the sentence. In other words, a phrase structure rule or grammar analyzes utterances in terms of their syntactic constituents. It specifies the constituency of syntactic categories in the language (Tomori, 2011, p. 67; Ndimele Ozo, 2014, p. 174; Fromkin & Rodman, 2020, p. 513).

2. *James cleaned his shoes* has the structure;

NP + VP

Pine cleaned his shoes.

The phrase structure rule can break the sentence down further whereby the NP will be headed by a noun and the VP will be headed by a verb. This means a noun will have satellites making it to become a group called NP. For instance:

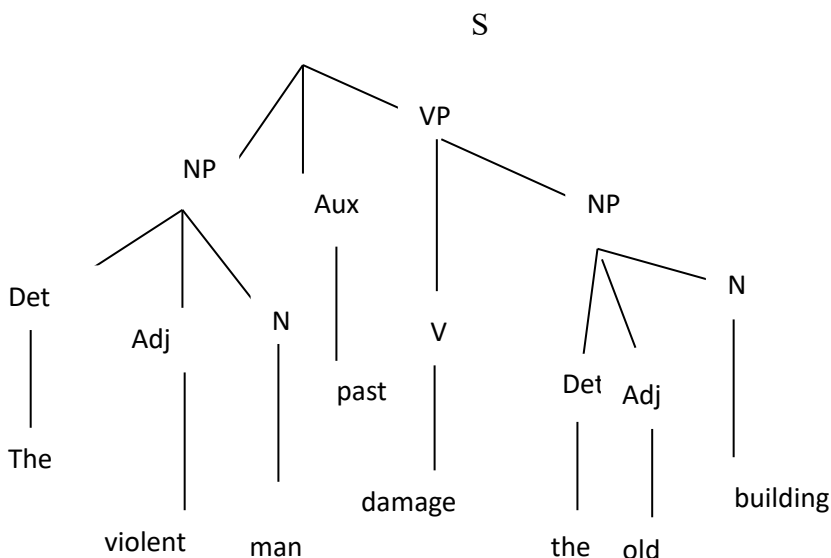
3. (The Violent Man) (damaged the old building)

NP VP

NP → Det Adj N

VP → Vt Det Adj N

In TGG, Phrase structure rules are illustrated by means of diagrams called ‘phrase markers’ which show the hierarchical structure of the sentence.



The last strings in the above phrase marker are called “terminal string” because they cannot be re-written further. This means

that notations used in the phrase structure rules are divided into two different sets, viz: non-terminal and terminal (Ndimele 2014). The basic rule in (7) may be summarized as follows:

- (i) S \longrightarrow NP Aux VP
- (ii) NP \longrightarrow Det Adj NN
- (iii) VP \longrightarrow Vt NP
- (iv) Aux \longrightarrow T (Past)
- (v) N \longrightarrow man, building
- (vi) V \longrightarrow damage
- (vii) Det \longrightarrow the
- (viii) Adj \longrightarrow violent, old

From the above, non-terminal strings are (i) – (iv) while (v) – (viii) are terminal. Each of the above lines is called a “string”. The pointed arrow means re-write, that is S NP Aux VP means re-write (or generate) sentence as NP Aux VP. The PS can be simply interpreted as follows using the form:

- 4. (a) S \longrightarrow NP + Aux + VP
- (b) NP \longrightarrow Det + N
- (c) VP \longrightarrow V + NP
- (d) PP \longrightarrow Prep + NP

However, we could generate an infinite long sentence by joining one simple sentence to another by expanding the NP or the VP. For instance:

- 5. (a) The girl *escaped*.
- (b) The slim girl *escaped narrowly*.
- (c) The slim girl *narrowly escaped and did not care to visit us again*.
- (d) The slim girl *who escaped yesterday is here again*.

This simple (kernel) sentence can be expanded infinitely as there is no grammatical limit. The possibility of being able to

repeat or expand structures is known as *the recursion property of language*. This is where PS rule failed to operate.

It has to be noted that English language is not only made up of simple sentence structure. As it is phenomenal with other languages, Ngamo too has the property of recursion which will render the use of phrase structure rule alone ineffective. However, the instrument of phrase structure is applicable here to count for the kernel sentences in the language because it provides the categorical (noun, noun phrase, verb, verb phrase, and adjective, adjectival phrase) and functional information (subject, verb, object) about strings for easy interpretation of the syntactic constructions (Agbedo, 2015, p. 110).

Methodology

The data for this paper were collected through listening to natural flow of Friday sermon in Ngamo language by the native speakers of the language under study in their domain, using phone-recorder. The recorded voice were then transcribed and translated into English for analysis. Consequently, the analysis was done by classifying the syntactic features of the two languages using phrase structure tree diagram of the Transformational Generative Grammar Approach.

Analysis and Discussion

Functional Analysis

The basic sentence structure of Ngamo and English languages is Subject-Verb-Object (SVO), though some transformation can modify this canonical structure. In fact, the subject comes at the sentence initial position, while the finite verb comes at the second position. The objects (direct or indirect) come at the sentence final position. Syntactic structure looks at sentences

in terms of the patterns formed by combining different constituents.

The following examples examine Ngamo and English languages sentence structures with reference to their constituent order where most of the Ngamo sentences fall into either one of the sentence patterns of SVO, VOS, VSV as shown in the examples given below but the dominant order is the SVO. Hence, Ngamo can be said to be an SVO language. In the identification of the Ngamo and English clause patterns, the following element are identified and discussed:

S= Subject V= Verb O=Object

. The following examples demonstrate constituent order in Ngamo language.

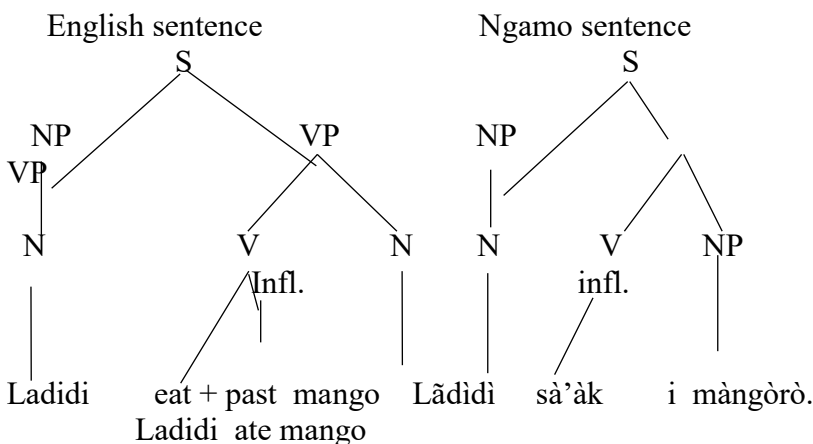
1. Lādidì sà'àkì màngòrò.

S V O

Ladidi ate mango.

Ladidi ate mango.

The above sentences can be represented on the tree diagrams as follows:



In (1) above, the sentences structures are SVO, where Lādidì” (proper noun) is the subject, sà'à kì (ate) the verb, and

màngòrò” (mango) the direct object. This aligns with the SVO pattern.

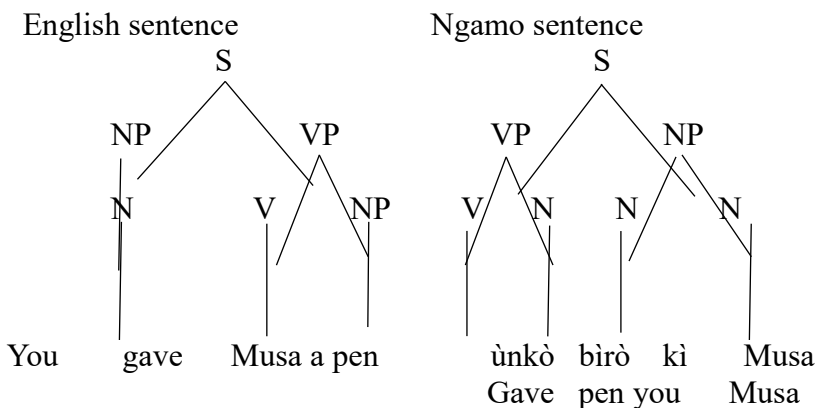
2. ùnkò bìrò kì Musa.

V O S

Gave pen you Musa.

You gave Musa a pen.

The above structure can be captured on the tree diagrams as follows:



In (2) above, the sentence structure in English language is SVO while in Ngamo, the structure is VSO. In fact, in Ngamo language, the use of the cleft copula is applicable where in the sentence above initiated subject inversion with the verb” ùnkò (gave) precedes the subject” kì (you).

3. Dòlè sì'ì nkòdikò bònò.

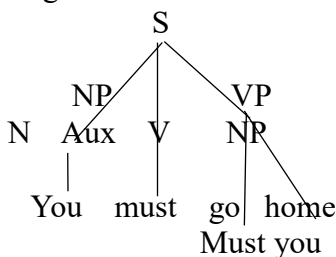
V S V

Must you go home.

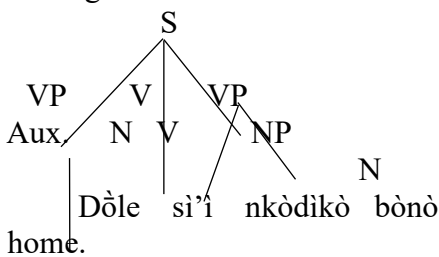
You must go home.

These tree diagrams below depict the appearance of the above sentences.

English sentence



Ngamo sentence



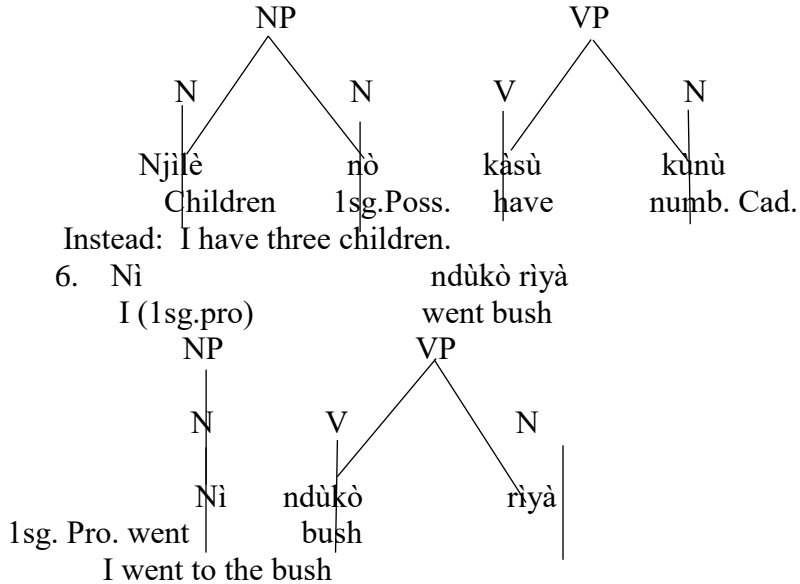
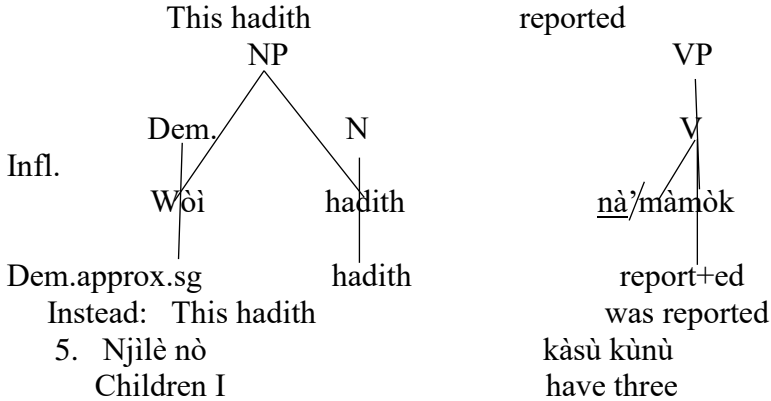
In (3) above, the sentence structure in English language is SVO while in Ngamo language, the sentence structure is VSV. Also, in the above sentence too there is subject inversion, where the auxiliary verb "dòle" (must) precedes the subject "si'i" (you) followed by the main verb "nkòdikò" (go).

Categorical Analysis

The structures can also be analyzed with reference to its syntactic categories; noun phrase (NP), verb phrase (VP), adjectival phrase (AdjP) among others. Categories can also be used to represent the structures of constructions. Consider the following phrases taken from the data:

a. Noun Phrase and Verb Phrase

4. Wòi hadith nà'màmòk

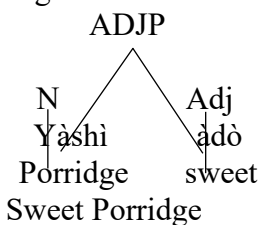


The functional subject position is occupied by the noun phrase, in some cases consisting of only one word as in example 6, usually a proper noun or pronoun and in others consisting of a longer phrasal group, usually consisting of the head noun and the object as in example 5. It is clear based on the analysis above that the NP position can be occupied by various NP types- it shows the different forms that might constitute the NP position in Ngamo language like Pronouns and Nouns. In the same manner, verb phrase position is occupied by main verbs and auxiliaries.

b. Adjectival Phrase

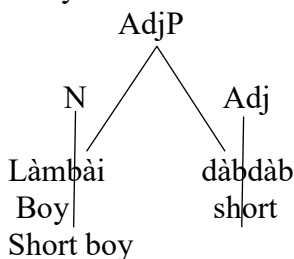
7. Yàshì àdò

Porridge sweet



8. Làmbài dàbdàb

Boy short



In examples 7 and 8 above, unlike English language, adjectives appear after nouns in the phrasal categories of adjective as demonstrated in the above example where yàshì- porridge comes before àdò-sweet this is also demonstrated in the

subsequent example with similar feature of following words that ends with vowel sounds. This also demonstrates the uniqueness of Ngamo when compared to English language.

Positioning of Comparative Markers in Ngamo

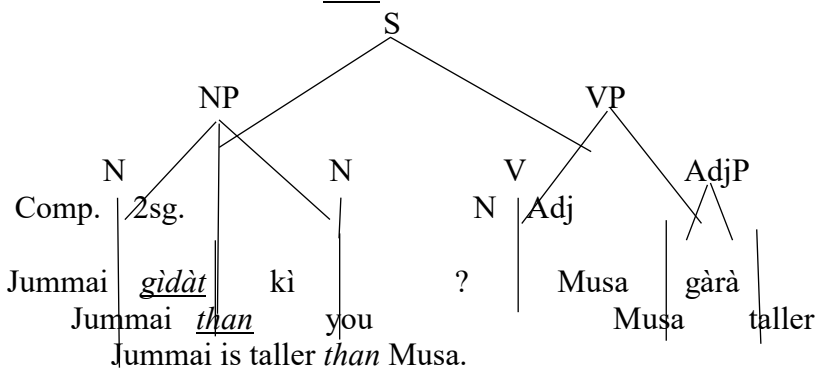
A comparative is a construction in which two items are compared according to some qualities. Ngamo language expresses comparison by simply juxtaposing two clauses expressing the degree to which the compared entities exhibit the quality in question. The study reveals that Ngamo has two comparison markers *kutini'* (most), and *gidàt'* (than). This claim is illustrated in the following example:

9. Jummai gidàt kì Musa gàrà.

Jummai than him musa taller.

N Comp.3rd sg.N Adj.

Jummai is taller than Musa.

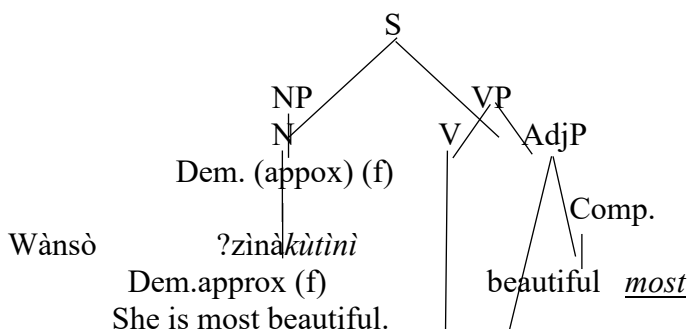


10. Wànsò zìnàkùtìni.

This beautiful most.

Pro. Dem. Approx.sg (f) adj comp.

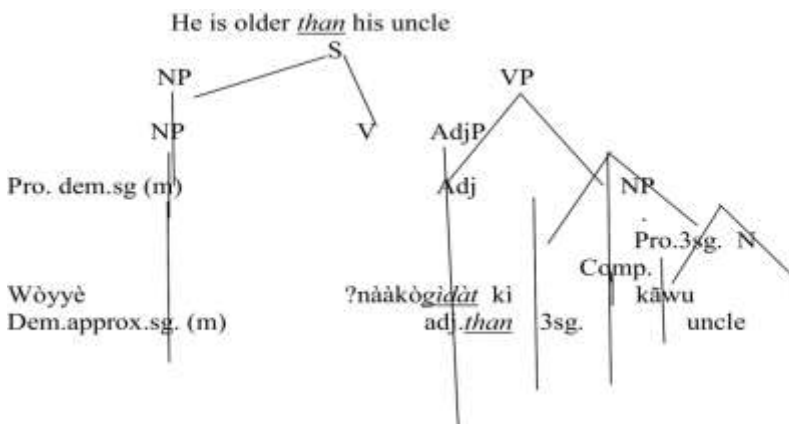
She is most beautiful.



11. Wöyyè nààkò gidàt kì kāwu

This (he) older than his uncle

Dem. Approx..sg (m) older (adj) Comp. 3rd.Pro. N



The above data demonstrate comparison markers in Ngamo. In example (9), *gidàt* (than) compares the quality of tallness between Jummai and Musa. Worthy of mention in the example in view is the position of the comparison marker and the quality it compares. Unlike English language, Ngamo allows

the comparison marker to occur after the first NP1, being the subject of the sentence, the second NP2 and adjective ‘gàrà’ being the quality compared. Example (10), ‘kùtini’ (most) compares the beauty of the subject of the sentence with others. As observed in example 10, the comparison maker here does not occur before the quality it compares but immediately after it. Unlike English where we have the comparison marker- *most* preceding the quality it compares. In example 11, we have gìdàt’ coming after the quality ‘nààkò’ compared. It therefore following the position of the comparison marker and the quality is not static and it is determined by the context of usage in Ngamo.

Positioning of Demonstrative Pronouns in Ngamo

English language has one way of using demonstrative pronouns, it is quite unique in pointing at the nouns they modify by appearing before the nouns they qualify, and this is also common in Ngamo language and can also appear after nouns they qualify. This is peculiar to indigenous language and demonstrates the richness of Ngamo language. For instance:

- (i) Wànsò màn nò
 This wife my
 This is my wife
- (ii) Littafi wòi zìnà.
Book this beautiful.
 This is a good book.

Discussion of Findings

Ngamo, an agglutinating language, displays a syntactically rich structure that is rule-governed, similar to English. Both languages primarily use the SVO word order, but Ngamo exhibits variations such as VOS and VSV. Notably, adjectives in Ngamo follow the nouns they qualify, and comparison

markers can appear after the first noun phrase. Demonstrative pronouns in Ngamo can precede or follow the nouns they modify, reflecting the language's unique syntactic characteristics.

Conclusion

The analysis of Ngamo language syntax reveals distinct syntactic features. Despite its similarities to English in employing the SVO word order, Ngamo's flexibility in adjective positioning, comparative markers, and demonstrative pronouns showcases its unique linguistic structure. This demonstrates the syntactic richness and rule-governed nature of Ngamo, underscoring its differences from English.

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