

A Morphological Study of Inflectional Features in English and Izon

By

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Abstract

This paper examines and contrasts inflectional morphemes in English and Izon languages. The research is based on Standard English and the Kolokuma dialect of Izon. The Kolokuma dialect is adopted in this study because it has assumed the status of a de facto standard variety since it is the variety used in the mass media, education and recognized nationally and internationally. Data on English are derived from standard textbooks written in English while data on Izon are collected from natural socio-cultural speech events in Kolokuma and Opokuma communities Bayelsa State of Nigeria where the dialect is spoken. The theoretical framework of this paper is based principles and parameters of universal grammar within the general concept of contrastive linguistics. The study sought to understand how each of the languages under study encoded agreement and number by inflection. The study reveals that inflections in both English and Izon are class-maintaining since there is no change of syntactic category of words to which affixes are attached. It further reveals that whereas the verb in English inflected to agree with the subject noun, the Izon verb this morphological and indeed, morphosyntactic property of number and does not make singular/plural distinction. However, generally, nouns in both languages possess number morpheme and verbs possess tense morphemes.

Keywords: *Inflectional morphemes, agreement, tense, morphology, universal grammar,*

1.0 Introduction

Morphology is the study of the internal structure of words, and of the rules by which words are formed. Morphology is one of the core levels of linguistics. Crystal (1997) defines it as “the branch of linguistics which studies the structure or forms of words primarily through the use of morphemes”. This paper examines and contrasts the inflectional morphemes of English and Izon languages in order to highlight the formational similarities and differences of the morphological features in the two languages. English and Izon languages belong to two divergent language families, namely: Indo-European and Niger-Congo respectively. The English language is an international, universal and global language. It is therefore a language of wider communication, used as first language and mother tongue in countries such as Britain, North America, Australia, New Zealand, etc. It is also used extensively as a second and official language in former British colonies. In Nigeria, the English language has taken the position of a national language. It performs all the functions of a national language,

official language and as a medium of instruction in our educational system from primary school to tertiary level.

Ịzọn is a language spoken in the South-South Geo-Political Zone of Nigeria. It is spoken mainly by the Ịzọn people who live in Bayelsa, Delta, Edo, Ondo and parts of Rivers State in the Niger Delta region. Williamson (1990) as cited in (Kwokwo 2012) classifies Ịzọn as belonging to the Ijoid sub-group of the Niger Congo family of languages. There are many dialects of Ịzọn which are linguistically related whereby speakers of different dialects communicate without much difficulty. The speakers of Ịzọn are divided into groups along major dialectal lines; the Eastern group, made up of the Kalabari, Okirika and Ibani which are mutually intelligible; the Nembe and Akassa people; Biseni, Okordia and Oruma group.

This work is based on the Kolokuma dialect. The researcher adopted the Kolokuma dialect because it has been used extensively in previous studies, especially by Kay Williamson and Egberipou to develop the Ịzọn orthography and phonology; the sound system and spelling of Ijo (1978), *A grammar of the Kolokuma dialect of Ijo*, and *Dictionary of Kolokuma Ịzọn*.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

An Ịzọn speaker learning the English language is bound to face so many difficulties. These problems generally arise out of interference of some form or the other on the part of the learner. Interference refers mostly to the negative effects of transferring the habits, elements or features associated with one's native language to the language being learnt (Lado, 1957). The differences in the two languages (English and Ịzọn) are the main sources of difficulty in learning the English language. Some of the difficulties encountered by learners are caused by the direct translation of words and expressions from the mother tongue to the target language; and also the identification of singular and plural in verbs poses problems to second language learners. This is because while nouns in English are naturally singular and take the morphemes **-s**, **-es** or **-ies** to make them plural, the base form of verbs are naturally plural and take **-s**, **-es**, or **-ies** to make them singular. Nouns take the **-s**, **-es** or **-ies** to indicate plurality in English. But there are invariable nouns that do not take an **-s** inflection to show plurality. Such nouns are unmarked and there is no difference between the singular and plural e.g. cattle – cattle; sheep – sheep; etc. There are no such irregular or invariable plural nouns in Ịzọn. The study is therefore aimed at identifying the similarities and differences of these problematic inflectional morphemes in the two languages.

1.2. Objectives and Significance of the Study

The main objective of the paper is to contrast the inflectional affixes of English and Ịzọn languages, in order to highlight the formational similarities and difference of

morphological inflections in the two languages. The comparison will further highlight likely areas of difficulties such as wrong pluralization of nouns in the English language, agreement of subject and verb, exposure of irregular verb inflections etc. Knowledge of the above objectives will facilitate the learning of the second language by Iẓon language speakers; since knowing a language includes knowing the morphemes of that language which are the elemental units that comprise words (Fromkin and Rodman, 2007).

Inflectional morphology depicts import aspects of the grammar of a language. Inflections, indeed, could be characterized as morphosyntactic features of grammar because determine the grammaticality or otherwise of a sentence. There can be hardly any natural language that could function optimally without morphological inflections. This study is a comparative study of inflectional features in English and Iẓon languages. It is hoped that study will expand the scope of knowledge in terms of data beyond existing information.

1.3. Methodology of the Study

Data on the Iẓon language for this paper were collected from native speakers of Iẓon, particularly in communities in Kolokuma and Opokuma clans of Bayelsa State, namely, Okoloba, Seibokorogha, Igbedi, Kaiama, Akaranbiri, Gbaranama, where the Kolokuma dialect is spoken. This was done through observations and complemented with the researcher's native speaker's introspective data. Data on the English language were collected from Standard English textbooks and the internet. The method of data analysis was by comparison, that is by comparing and contrasting the inflectional affixes in English and Iẓon through lexical items and syntactic constructions. In carrying out this research, the researcher lived with the people and collected data. Method of data analysis was descriptive and analytical.

1.4. Scope of the Study

The paper focuses on comparison of inflectional morphemes in English and Iẓon languages. The scope is thus limited to agreement and tense morphemes in English and Iẓon, e.g. the eight bound English inflectional affixes: **-s**: simple present; **-ed**: past tense; **-ing**: progressive; **-en**: past participle; **-s**: plural; **'s**: possessive; **-er**: comparative; **-est**: superlative and the following Iẓon tense, article and gender markers: **-yemi**, **-mi**, **-dọ**, **-ngimi**, **-bi**, **-ma**, **-mọ**, **-ama**, **-otu**,

1.5. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this paper is based on the 'contrastive analysis theory'. Contrastive analysis is the systematic study of a pair of languages with a view to identifying their structural differences and similarities, (Kwokwo, 2012). Put differently, contrastive

analysis is the study and comparison of two languages, learners' native language or first language and learners' target language or second language.

According to Lado (1957), who is also considered as one of the forerunners of modern contrastive analysis "those elements which are similar to (the learners') native language will be simple for him, and those elements that are different will be difficult". According to him, second language learners tend to transfer forms and meanings of their native language and culture to the foreign language and culture. This transfer is said to be positive when it facilitates the learning of the target language but negative when it hinders the learning of the target language, in this case it is referred to as interference.

2.0. Review of Related Works

Kwokwo (2012), in his study of morphosyntactic analysis of functional categories in English and Iẓọn languages, focused on identifying and describing functional categories in English and Iẓọn languages. Functional categories, according to him, consist of function words which carry grammatical information, and morphological features of content words; all of which contribute to the derivation of grammatically acceptable sentences in the two languages. His work concentrates on the interface between morphology and syntax which is beyond the scope of the present paper.

Apeli and Ugwu (2013) examined the phonological interference in the spoken English performance of the Iẓọn speaker. Their work emphasized that, the level of interference is not just as a result of the systematic differences that exist between English and Iẓọn languages but also as a result of the interlanguage factors such as the individual's level of education and access to oral English lessons while in school. They concentrated mostly on the phonological interference in the spoken English of the Iẓọn speaker. The present study focuses on the morphological inflections in English and Iẓọn languages.

3.0 Data Analysis

Inflections are usually related to declension of nouns and verbs and they are motivated by the requirements of grammaticality. This means that the inflection of a noun is a response to the demands of grammar to make a sentence grammatical. In fact, the grammatical categories that motivate nominal and verbal inflections are agreement and tense respectively. Nouns have number as a grammatical property which reflects in morphological inflections as in singular and plural number distinction. Similarly, verbs have the grammatical properties of tense and aspect in relation to time reference. Therefore, the data analysis in this section is on the inflection of nouns and verbs which is a demonstration of morphological reflection of grammar.

Inflection is a process of adding inflectional morphemes i.e. bound morphemes to words to show their different grammatical forms without changing their lexical meaning or word class. In other words, inflection is a process of adding bound morphemes to nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc. to signal their grammatical variants. For example: the inflectional morpheme **–s** at the end of boys indicates that the word is plural; the inflectional morpheme **–s** at the end of the word ‘plays indicates that the verb is third person singular in agreement with a subject, so that we say **he plays, I play, they play**. The inflectional suffix **–ed** at the end of the base verb ‘play’ changes it from present to past (play/played).

The process of inflecting a noun, pronoun, adjective, article or determiner is known as declension while conjugation is the process of inflecting a verb. e.g. ‘**to like**’

I like	We like
You like	You like
He likes	They like
She likes	They like

According to Robertson (1954) as cited in (Agbedo,2003), inflection is the process of varying the form of a word to differentiate related meanings or uses. This suggests that there are certain stable elements in the verbs as shown in the above examples. The verb is inflected to agree in person and number with the subject (pronouns) as illustrated by the verb to like.

Inflectional morphemes are therefore, bound morphemes that play strictly grammatical functions or relations in sentences. They do not change the syntactic category of the word they are attached to. They are used to mark, for instance, distinctions such as singular and plural contrasts in nouns (girl, girls) the present and past tense differences in verbs (kick and kicked), the positive, comparative, and superlative contrast in adjectives (big, bigger and biggest) etc. Inflectional affixes come last in the morphological structure of words in English (Longe and Ofuani, 1996). In other words, no other morpheme can be added after an inflectional morpheme.

3.1. Noun Inflection

A grammatical property of the noun class is number. In English, nouns are inflected to show number in terms of singularity and plurality. Regular nouns in English form their plural by simply adding **–s**, **–es** or **–ies** as in boy/boys; class/classes. These are allomorphs. Irregular nouns however do not follow the grammatical rules of an **–s** or **–es** or **–ies** plural formation. Therefore, they are not predictable in their pluralization. Some of them derive their plural by internal vowel changes as in foot/feet, goose/geese and toothteeth. Some of them use the

irregular inflection of **-(r)en** as in oxen and children. Yet, some others do not change their forms at all. Such nouns include sheep, cattle, deer, news, etc.

The preceding indicates that the English language has a very complex and complicated noun inflection. This is as a result of so many borrowed words from other languages such as French, German, Latin, Greek, Arabic etc; and many of these foreign words do not add **-s** or **-es** plural inflection common to English words. They have their own plural formations, thus contributing to the irregular noun inflections in the English language.

3.2. Noun Inflections in Izon

Nouns in Izon inflect for number. This is to say that Izon morphology has number morphemes because nouns can be singular or plural. These number markers are **-mọ**, **-ama** and **-otu or itu**. **-mọ** as a plural number marker has the grammatical features of number and definite reference. On the other hand, **-ama** is an indefinite plural marker. The morpheme ‘out’ or ‘itu’ are use to refer to a group (of persons, things or referents). Table 1 below illustrates these features

Table 1: Number and Gender Marker in Izon Articles

Word root	Gloss	Suffix	Derived form	Gloss	Function of affix
wári	house	-mọ	wárimọ	the houses	def. pl. marker
wári	house	-ama	wáriama	houses	indef. pl. marker
firi	work	-otu	firiotu	workers	irreg. pl. marker (for group of people)
daụ	father	-otu	daụ-otu	father	
bina	relation	-otu	binaotu	relations	
eré	woman	-amini	eréamini	women	irreg pl. marker (for group of women)

Source: Authors' compilation (2017)

3.2.1. The article and plurality

In Izon, the singular number equivalent of the plural inflection **-mo** is bifurcated into two, one masculine and another, feminine. They are the masculine ‘bì’ and the feminine ‘ma’. These two are not just inflectional morphemes but are definite articles which possess number gender features respectively. Put differently, in Izon, the definite article (**the**) is realized as two different free morphemes. This is to say that the gender and number of the person or noun determine the form of the definite article to be used. For instance, the definite article has the

form **-bi** if the noun is masculine singular and the form **-ma** if it is feminine singular. While a plural noun requires the selection of **-mɔ**. The gender distinctions are neutralized in the article in the plural form.

Table 2

tɔbɔ	boy	-bi	tɔbɔbi	the boy	masc. sing. marker
tɔbɔ	girl	-ma	tɔbɔma	the girl	fem. sing. marker

Source: Authors' compilation (2017)

The inflectional suffixes **-mɔ**, **-ama**, **-amini**, **-otu**, are attached to the noun to mark gender, number and definiteness. These are bound morphemes and have no independent meaning except when they are attached to a root or a free morpheme.

- mɔ** is the definite plural form of 'the' in Izon and it is used with all nouns in the plural form, whether masculine or feminine. Examples;

fun mɔ	the books	angam mɔ	the eggs
owɔ mɔ	the children	agbakam mɔ	the shoes
eréwɔ mɔ	the girls	oweiwɔ mɔ	the boys

- amini** is an irregular inflectional suffix that marks (indefinite) plurality and it is restricted to humans only. Other nouns form a regular plural by adding **-ama**, the definite plural marker which is the plural **-s** or **-es**, in English. Examples;

Izon	English	Izon	English
fun	'a book'	fun-ama	'books'
obiri	'a dog'	obiri-ama	'dogs'
eré	'a woman'	eréamini	'women'
oweii	'a man'	oweiamini	'men'
eréma	'the woman'	ereamini mɔ	'the women'
oweibi	'the man'	oweiamini mɔ	'the men'

The indefinite singular article is not overtly marked in Izon. Whenever a noun is written without the definite article marker, it automatically takes the unrealized covert indefinite marker.

4.0. Tense inflections

Tense is an indicator of time of action or event. It is commonly expressed with the help of morphological affixes or bound tense morphemes. The primary tenses are present and past, but future also exists and is expressed through the use of modal auxiliaries in English. In this section, tense morphemes in English and Izoṅ are analysed.

4.1. The simple present

The simple present is marked in English with the inflectional morphemes: **-s** or **-es**, while in Izoṅ, it is marked with the inflectional morpheme **-yémi**.

English	Izoṅ
I play	Árí zoruyémi
We play	Woni zoruyémi
You play	Árì zoruyémi
You play	Ọmínì zoruyémi
He/She plays	Éri/Árau zoruyémi
They play	Ọminí zoruyémi

i. Éri ereinmose ko sukulu gho zoruyémi.

He everyday *fo*c school at plays.

“He plays at school everyday”.

ii. Ọminí ereinmose ko sukulu gho zoruyémi.

They everyday *fo*c school in plays

They play in school everyday.

In the above data in English, an **-s** or **-es** is added to the base word of the verb in the third person singular to mark concord or agreement between the third person and the verb. In other words, in English, the verb agrees with the subject in number. Hence, we have the difference between ‘**he plays** ***he play**’ and ‘**they play** ***they plays**’. The suffix **-s** at the end of the verb is an agreement marker; it signifies that the subject of the verb is third person, is singular and that the verb is in the present tense. In Izoṅ, the same inflectional morpheme is used to mark all the persons in the present simple, and the verb does not show subject/verb agreement. In Izoṅ, the morpheme **-yémi** does not mark concord between the third person singular and the verb as it is in English.

Table 3: Tense markers in Iẓon

Verb root	Gloss	Suffix	Derived form	Gloss	Function of affix
bo	come	-yemi	boyemi	coming	prog/habitual marker
bo	come	-mị	bomị	came	past tense marker
mu	go	-dọu	mudọu	has gone	perfective aspect marker
bo	come	-tịimi	botịimi	was coming	imperfect aspect marker
bo	come	-ngimi	bongimi	will come	future reference marker

Source: Authors' compilation

4.2. The Past Tense

In English, regular verbs mark their past tense with the inflectional morpheme **-d** or **-ed** added to the base form of the verb. However, there are irregular verbs that do not take any endings to realize their past forms; instead one or two vowels in their present root verb forms are changed to yield the past form, as shown in the examples below. While some of these irregular verb forms do not bear any resemblance with their past forms (go/went) others do not change their forms; instead, they have the same forms of both present and past (put/put).

Table 4: Past Tensed Inflection in Iẓon

ENGLISH		IZON	
Base	Past Tense	Base	Past Tense
wash	washed	suru	surumị
greet	greeted	kule	kulemi
go	went	mu	mumi
come	came	bo	bomi
kill	killed	baa	baamị
put	put	tua	tuumị

In Iẓon, the simple past is formed by attaching the suffix **-mị** to the end of the verb root. There are no irregular verbs in Iẓon, therefore, the Iẓon speaker must identify these irregular verbs in English and pay special attention while learning them.

4.3 The simple future

In Iẓon, verbs inflect for future tense with the suffix **-nghimi** to the posterior of the verb, in English, future tense is not expressed by verb inflection but with the help of modal verbs as shown below.

English	Iẓon
I shall come	Àrì bonghimi
We shall come	Wónì bonghimi
You will come (sg)	Árì bongimi
You will come (pl)	Ómínì bonghimi
He/she/it will come	Érì/Áraṣ bonghimi
They will come	Òminí bonghimi

4.4. The Present Progressive or Progressive Aspect

In English, the present progressive is composed of two parts, the present tense of the verb “**to be**” plus the present participle of a main verb which ends with the inflectional morpheme –**ing**. Some examples are given below.

English	Iẓon
I am playing	Arí zoruyémi
We are playing	Wónì zoruyémi
You are playing (sg)	Árì zoruyémi
You are playing (pl)	Ómínì zoruyémi
He/she is playing	Érì/áraṣ zoruyémi
They are playing	Òminí zoruyémi

The auxiliary verb ‘**to be**’ agrees with the subject to mark concord in the third person singular. Hence, we have the difference between ‘he is or she is’ and ‘they are’. Therefore, present progressive in English will be ungrammatical or meaningless without the auxiliary verb that goes with it. Thus, the following expressions are meaningless and ungrammatical, e.g. *I playing, *he sleeping. In contrast, the progressive aspect in Iẓon is marked or expressed by suffixing the inflectional morpheme **-yémi** to the root verb. From the abovedata, we can see that English uses a verb phrase to express the progressive aspect. Put differently, English forms the progressive aspect by conjugating the verb ‘**to be**’ in the present tense, as an auxiliary or helping verb plus the main verb that ends in-**ing** attached to the main verb (e.g.

the boy is playing) whereas Izon language simply attaches the inflectional affix to the base form of the verb to mark the progressive aspect. These are illustrated in the data below.

- | | |
|--|---|
| <p>i. Àrí sukulu duó boyémi.
I school from coming
I am coming from school.</p> | <p>ii. Árì wári ghọ muyémi.
You home to going
You are going home.</p> |
| <p>iii. Òmínì áru koruyémi.
They vehicle waiting.
“They are waiting for a vehicle.”</p> | <p>iv. Òminí fún goóyémi.
They book reading
They are reading a book.</p> |

From the above data, Izon expressions are composed of single verbs with their progressive inflectional markers suffixed to them. They do not need the auxiliary verb ‘to be’ to be grammatical, whereas their English counterparts do.

The Izon language like most Nigerian or African languages is a tonal language in which words are composed of vowels, consonants, and tones. It is these tones that distinguish the meanings of two or more homographic words. According to Nwala (2015), tone is a part of the grammar of a tonal language and that native speakers unconsciously internalize it as part of their linguistic competence. In the data, English does not make a distinction between the second person singular (pronoun) “you” and second person plural “you” whereas in Izon, there are different forms of the second person singular **árì** (you singular) and second person plural **òmínì** (you plural). It is the tone marks that distinguish between the pronouns **arí** (I) and **árì** (you), **òmínì** (you) and **òminí** (they). It is also observed that the verb “to be” is not morphologically realized in Izon but native speakers possess a tacit knowledge of it and understand it in any given context.

English	Izon
I am	Àrì
We are	Wónì
You are (sg)	Árì
You are (pl)	Òmínì
He/she is	Éri/árau
They are	Òminí

4.5. The Past Participle or Perfective Aspect

In English, the past participle is formed by the present form of the verb ‘**have** or **has**’ (depending on the subject of the sentence) plus the past participle of a main verb ending in –**en** or –**ed**. In Izoṅ, However, the past participle is formed by adding the suffix –**doṅ** to the end of the verb root.

tuṅdoṅ	has/have cooked
m̄jedoṅ	has/have prepared/done
feṅdoṅ	has/have bought
páadoṅ	has/have gone

- | | |
|---|---|
| i. Mary biredi bi feṅdoṅ
Mary bread the bought
“Mary has brought the bread.” | ii. Ebi fuṅo tuṅdoṅ
Ebi soup cooked
“Ebi has cooked soup.” |
| iii. Tari garri m̄jedoṅ
Tari garri prepared
“Tari has prepared garri.” | iv. John aya aru feṅdoṅ
John new car bought
“John has bought a new car.” |

5.0. Findings

In the course of this research, it was found out that inflectional morphemes in both English and Izoṅ languages do not lead to a change in the syntactic category of words to which they are attached. Whereas, the verb in English is inflected to agree in person and number with the subject, the Izoṅ verb does not inflect for agreement with the subject noun. Whereas in English, the present progressive is formed with the auxiliary ‘**to be**’ conjugated in the present plus the main verb which hosts the **-ing** inflectional suffix; the progressive in Izoṅ is marked simply by suffixing **yémi** to the base of the verb.

Moreover, verbs in Izoṅ mark the past and past participle with the morphemes **-mi** and **-doṅ** respectively. However, in English, only regular verbs form these by suffixing **-ed** to form the simple past and **-ed** or **-en** for the past participle. There are irregular verbs which mark their past participles differently. In English, the auxiliary verb serves as host for the negative marker and not the main verb, whereas in Izoṅ, the negative morpheme is suffixed to the main verb.

Whereas in Izoṅ, the future tense is marked with **-nghimi** suffixed to the verb, the future tense is not marked by verb inflection in the English language. There is no inflectional verb form that shows future tense in English. Future is indicated by **shall** and **will** as well as “**going to**” plus a base form or a main verb. Whereas, the English language has a single form

of the definite article that it uses for both plural and singular nouns (the boy/the boys) and masculine and feminine nouns (the girl/the boy); in Izon, the definite article inflects. In others words, the definite article changes its form according to the number and gender of the noun it is suffixed to.

5.1. Recommendations

There are more differences than similarities in the two languages based on the scope of the present study. In fact, the only similarity is that, inflectional morphemes in both English and Izon languages do not lead to a change in the syntactic category of words to which they are attached. One of the major differences is the word order. According to Ndimele (2004:5), 'different languages have different word orders in specific types of construction.' Whereas English is an SVO language, the word order in Izon is SOV. It is therefore recommended that the language teacher should explain these differences to the Izon speakers learning the English language at the early stage of teaching and learning.

5.2 Conclusions

This paper has with substantial amount of data described and analyzed inflectional morphemes (that fell under the scope of this work) in the English and Izon languages. This investigation was done systematically by placing elements of the two languages side by side and contrasting them; since no two languages are the same structurally, many differences were found. For instance, the subject-verb (concord) agreement problems arise because of difficulty or ignorance of singular and plural realizations of verbs by the second language learner. Most Izon speakers are ignorant about concord because it is not realized in our verb inflection. There is no subject-verb agreement of any sort; in Izon, the same morpheme **-yemi** marks the inflection for all persons in the simple present as well as present progressive. Learners of English as a second language over-generalize the addition of plural formation rule, i.e. the **-s**, **-es**, **-ies**, to a noun to mark its plural to verbs; not knowing that the **-s**, **-es**, and **-ies** are plural markers in nouns, but they are single markers in verbs. Rules in past tense verb formations are also over-generalized. The second language learner often adds **-ed** to all verbs, forgetting that irregular verbs do not take **-ed** inflection e.g. 'I have *binded* my project' instead of 'I have bound my project'. 'I have grinded the pepper' instead of 'I have ground the pepper'.

These are some of the major areas of divergence between the two languages which cause problems to Izon speakers learning English; therefore, the learner as well as the teacher has to concentrate and focus more on these problematic areas while learning or teaching the English language. These findings will later be developed into a comprehensive document for the use by Izon language speakers learning English, because for people to learn a language there must be written or documented materials for them to use.

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