



## **SYNTACTIC STRUCTURES IN IGBO AND ENGLISH: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC STUDY OF UNDERGRADUATE USAGE**

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**Abstract**

*This study investigates the comparative syntactic competence of bilingual undergraduate students in English and Igbo at Coal City University, Enugu. It examines students' understanding, usage, and grammatical comfort in constructing sentences in both languages, as well as their ability to switch between them in different communicative contexts. The research also explores sociolinguistic factors that influence students' syntactic choices, including educational background, social environment, and digital media exposure. Using a descriptive survey design, the study engaged all 87 first- and second-year students from five selected departments in the Faculty of Arts, Social and Management Sciences. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire validated by linguistics experts and analyzed using descriptive statistics for quantitative items and thematic analysis for qualitative responses. Findings indicate that students demonstrate moderate competence in English syntax but face challenges in Igbo sentence formation, particularly in formal settings. Syntactic comfort was higher in informal or social contexts, where students frequently switched between languages. The study concludes that English dominance is affecting students' fluency in Igbo and recommends enhanced Igbo instruction, deliberate promotion of bilingual competence, and the integration of sociolinguistic awareness into language education to strengthen grammatical performance in both languages.*

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### **Introduction**

Language, as a system of communication, is governed by rules that allow speakers to form

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meaningful expressions. One of the core aspects of this system is syntax, which refers to the arrangement of words and phrases to create well-formed sentences in a language (Yule, 2020). Syntax governs how subjects, verbs, and objects interact in sentence structures, and it plays a vital role in shaping communicative clarity and grammatical accuracy. In multilingual contexts like Nigeria, where both Igbo and English are widely spoken, examining how speakers construct syntactic structures in both languages provides valuable insights into linguistic competence, language preference, and communicative effectiveness.

Over the years, linguistic scholars have examined the syntactic structures of world languages, with a particular focus on language acquisition, competence, and performance. Notably, Ferdinand de Saussure, regarded as the father of modern linguistics, introduced the distinction between *langue* (the structural system of language) and *parole* (individual speech acts), laying the foundation for structural analysis (Crystal, 2021). His observation of native speakers revealed that they possess an intuitive sense of sentence formation, which inspired further research into the mechanics of syntactic rules. Building on this foundation, Noam

Chomsky introduced *Transformational Generative Grammar* (TGG), a model that captures the deep and surface structures of sentences and explains how transformations like movement, insertion, and deletion occur during

sentence generation (Chomsky, 1997; Ene, 2019).

Transformational grammar plays a crucial role in understanding how syntax operates in both Igbo and English. For instance, transformational rules can move sentence elements from active to passive voice: *Chika killed the goat* becomes *the goat was killed by Chika* in English, and *Chika gburu ewu* becomes *Ewu a gburu n'aka Chika* in Igbo. These syntactic operations also allow for reflexivization, as in *Ngozi killed herself* (English) or *Ngozi gburu onwe ya* (Igbo), and for question formation through inversion, such as *Barry is a police officer* transforming into *Is Barry a police officer?*, and its Igbo counterpart *Barry bu onye uwe ojii?* Becoming *Barry bu onye uwe ojii?*

Despite both Igbo and English adopting a Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) structure, differences abound in their syntactic constructions. While English often uses a single verb or verb phrase to express an action, Igbo frequently employs serial verb constructions, allowing multiple verbs to represent a continuous action (Nwachukwu, 2022). Moreover, tense and aspect systems differ significantly. English maintains a relatively linear tense system using auxiliary verbs, while Igbo exhibits a more morphologically rich tense-aspect system, employing markers such as *ga-* and *na-* to show future and progressive aspects respectively. For instance, *O ga-ala* (She will go) demonstrates a syntactic combination of

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tense and subject marking that differs from the English construction *she will go*.

In addition, negation, relativization, and interrogation exhibit syntactic divergence. In Igbo, negative markers such as *aghor naghị* are used (*O naghị agụ akwụkwọ*), whereas English uses “not” or contracted forms like “isn’t” (*She is not reading*). Relative clauses in Igbo are introduced with *nke* or *kedu*, compared to English’s *who*, *which*, or *that* (Okeke & Uche, 2020). Furthermore, while English question structures are often formed through auxiliary inversion or question words, Igbo speakers may use particles like *kwa* or *ka* to formulate inquiries.

In bilingual academic settings such as Coal City University, Enugu, where English is the official language of instruction and Igbo remains a dominant indigenous language, students’ ability to navigate syntactic structures in both languages is crucial for academic and social communication. However, many students experience varying degrees of syntactic comfort and fluency in both languages due to differences in early language exposure, medium of instruction, and societal attitudes toward indigenous languages (Eze & Okafor, 2023). This discrepancy raises important questions about language preference, sentence construction abilities, and communicative confidence among students.

Thus, this study seeks to comparatively investigate the syntactic structures of Igbo and

English as used by undergraduate students of Coal City University. By focusing on students’ comfort levels and syntactic choices in different communication settings, the study aims to provide a sociolinguistic lens into how these two languages function in parallel and how students navigate their structures in real-life scenarios. Through a structured survey, this research will highlight areas of syntactic ease and difficulty, the contexts in which each language dominates, and the implications for teaching and learning in multilingual environments.

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **Transformational Generative Grammar (TGG) Theory by Noam Chomsky (1997)**

Transformational Generative Grammar (TGG), developed by Noam Chomsky, is a theory that explains how human beings are biologically equipped with the mental capacity to generate grammatically correct sentences. Chomsky introduced the idea of *deep structure* and *surface structure*, where deep structure represents the underlying syntactic relationships of a sentence, and surface structure is the final form it takes when spoken or written (Chomsky, 1997). TGG provides transformational rules that explain how sentences can be restructured from one form to another — for example, from active to passive voice, or from declarative to interrogative forms. In the context of this study, TGG is useful in explaining the syntactic operations observed in both English and Igbo. For instance, transformations like reflexivization (*Ngozi saw*

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*herself* / *Ngozi hụrụ onwe ya*), passivization (*The book was read by Emeka / Akwụkwọ a gụrụ n'aka Emeka*), and deletion of repeated noun phrases are examples of the transformational rules described in Chomsky's framework. The theory helps in identifying how undergraduate students mentally process and restructure these forms as they alternate between the two languages.

TGG also introduces the concept of *grammatical competence* — the unconscious knowledge of rules that enables native speakers to generate infinite sentences. This idea aligns with how students may perform differently in their first language (Igbo) compared to a second language (English), particularly in syntactic comfort and fluency. It explains why certain syntactic structures in Igbo may appear intuitive to native speakers, while similar constructions in English require learned effort.

Moreover, TGG supports the design of syntactic comparisons in this research. It offers analytical tools to evaluate students' sentence constructions by identifying which transformations they apply correctly and where they encounter difficulty. This is critical for interpreting data on grammatical comfort, syntactic preference, and frequency of usage in both languages.

Recent applications of TGG in Nigerian linguistic studies (e.g., Ene, 2018; Akande & Salami, 2020) have demonstrated its usefulness in comparing the sentence structures of indigenous and

foreign languages. These studies affirm that the framework can be effectively used in bilingual contexts to analyze how language users manage multiple syntactic systems.

Therefore, Chomsky's Transformational Generative Grammar forms the structural basis of this research, guiding the syntactic analysis of student responses and supporting the comparative investigation of Igbo and English sentence patterns.

### **Interlanguage Theory**

Interlanguage Theory, proposed by Larry Selinker, focuses on the transitional linguistic system that second-language learners develop as they progress toward full fluency. Selinker (2019) argues that learners do not simply transfer structures from their first language (L1) to the second (L2); rather, they create an evolving linguistic system that combines elements of both. This interlanguage is influenced by native language habits, instruction, exposure, and internal learning strategies.

In the context of this study, Interlanguage Theory helps explain the syntactic errors, hybrid structures, and comfort levels observed among bilingual students switching between Igbo and English. For instance, when a student says, "*She is going market*" — omitting the definite article *the* — it may reflect Igbo syntactic influence where such articles are not used. These are not random mistakes but signs of an interlanguage system that reflects a developing internal grammar.

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Selinker emphasizes that interlanguage is dynamic and continually revised as learners receive more input and feedback. This aligns with the university setting, where students are exposed to both formal instruction in English and everyday interactions in Igbo. Their syntactic competence evolves over time depending on the language of dominance, context of use, and personal motivation (Bassey & Okon, 2021).

The theory also explains the syntactic transfer observed in student responses. When students apply Igbo sentence patterns to English — such as using serial verbs or placing verbs in a sequence without auxiliaries — they are operating within an interlanguage zone. Conversely, interference can also occur when English syntax disrupts traditional Igbo sentence formations, especially among students who are more exposed to English through digital media and schooling.

Interlanguage Theory provides a useful framework for analyzing how students navigate syntactic rules during language use. It recognizes that students are not simply failing or succeeding at grammatical accuracy, but are instead constructing their own intermediate systems, which reflect both competence and limitations.

This theory is particularly relevant to the questionnaire-based design of this study, which seeks to capture students' self-assessed comfort and actual usage of syntactic structures in both languages. By interpreting results through the lens of interlanguage, the researcher can better

understand why certain syntactic forms are more confidently used in one language over the other. In sum, Interlanguage Theory supports the sociolinguistic aspect of this research by framing syntactic comfort not as a binary (competent/incompetent), but as a spectrum of evolving bilingual proficiency. It complements the structural focus of Transformational Grammar by adding a learner-centered, psychological dimension to syntactic analysis.

### **Empirical Review**

Although much has been written on syntax in individual languages, especially English, there is a growing body of research focusing on comparative syntactic studies and bilingualism in African contexts. These studies explore how learners navigate multiple grammatical systems, with attention to interlanguage development, syntactic transfer, and sociolinguistic usage patterns. This section reviews selected empirical studies conducted between 2019 and 2024 that align with the current investigation.

In a recent study, Eze and Okafor (2023) examined the syntactic preferences of Igbo-English bilingual students in southeastern Nigerian universities. Using a mixed-methods design, they administered questionnaires to 300 undergraduates and conducted interviews with 20 language instructors. Their findings revealed that while most students were confident in using English syntax in formal academic writing, many struggled with equivalent structures in Igbo, particularly in areas such as reflexivization, passivization, and negation. The researchers

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observed that this disparity often resulted from inadequate exposure to formal Igbo instruction beyond primary school, leading to syntactic imbalance.

Similarly, Nwachukwu (2022) conducted a comparative syntactic analysis of Igbo and English clauses, focusing on university students in Anambra State. The study employed a textual analysis approach alongside student-written essays in both languages. The research revealed significant syntactic divergences, especially in verb serialization and tense/aspect marking. English constructions were generally more rigid and rule-based, whereas Igbo allowed more fluidity in verb sequence and tone-dependent interpretation. Students frequently transferred syntactic patterns across languages, occasionally producing hybrid or deviant sentence forms.

A sociolinguistic study by Chukwuemeka and Ogonna (2022) explored language usage among bilingual students at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The researchers used structured questionnaires and classroom observation to investigate language choice and syntactic confidence in various communicative contexts. Findings showed that while students preferred English for academic purposes, they expressed greater grammatical comfort using Igbo during informal discussions. The study also noted that students who early education in Igbo-medium environments had showed stronger syntactic control in both languages, suggesting that foundational exposure influences long-term syntactic competence.

Akande and Salami (2020) examined syntactic errors among Yoruba-English bilinguals at the University of Ibadan, offering insights relevant to the current study. Through error analysis of 200 student essays, they discovered that many students transferred native syntactic rules into English writing. For instance, students often omitted auxiliary verbs or misused tense markers. These errors were not random but reflected systematic transfer, reinforcing the Interlanguage Theory's assertion that second-language learners form a unique linguistic system influenced by both L1 and L2.

In a broader comparative study, Okeke and Uche (2020) investigated bilingual syntax development among secondary and university-level learners. Using quantitative surveys and syntactic tests across five Nigerian universities, the researchers found that syntactic comfort varied by context. Students reported higher confidence using English for academic writing but greater fluency and expressiveness in indigenous languages during emotional or cultural conversations. The study concluded that language policy must account for functional bilingualism by integrating indigenous syntactic instruction into the curriculum.

Bassey and Okon (2021) investigated the psychological aspects of syntactic preference among undergraduates in Cross River State. Their qualitative study, involving 150 students through focus group discussions, found that students often avoided using syntactic forms they perceived as complex or high-stakes,

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especially in English. This avoidance behavior was linked to performance anxiety and fear of making grammatical errors. However, in Igbo or Efik, students were more willing to experiment with syntax, viewing indigenous language use as less judgmental and more expressive.

Odumuh (2021) conducted a syntactic structure comparison of Hausa and English in northern Nigerian universities. Although not directly related to Igbo, the study offers valuable insights into how indigenous syntax compares with English in SVO languages. The findings revealed structural similarities in sentence order but significant differences in clause linkage and reflexivization. Students often imposed Hausa patterns on English, such as omitting articles and simplifying verb phrases. The study emphasized the need for explicit syntactic teaching in both L1 and L2 to develop balanced bilingual competence.

Eme and Adegbite (2022) evaluated language preference and syntactic usage among polytechnic students in the southwest of Nigeria. Using survey instruments and grammatical performance tests, they found that students who had consistent exposure to their mother tongue in both home and school demonstrated higher syntactic flexibility. Conversely, students whose education had been entirely English-medium displayed more rigid syntactic control in English but lower fluency in constructing equivalent indigenous structures.

Finally, Uzochukwu and Iwueze (2021) explored syntactic blending on social media among

bilingual Nigerian youth. Analyzing 1,000 social media posts, they observed frequent code-switching and hybrid syntax, including the combination of English sentence frames with Igbo verbs or expressions. This informal domain allowed students to play creatively with syntactic rules, often displaying more grammatical innovation than in academic writing. The study suggested that digital platforms could be harnessed for syntactic awareness and bilingual development.

These studies demonstrate the richness of bilingual syntactic behavior in Nigerian academic settings. They collectively affirm that syntactic comfort and preference are shaped by multiple factors, including exposure, educational background, context of use, and emotional associations. While most studies agree that English remains dominant in formal settings, they also emphasize the syntactic competence many students possess in their native languages — often unacknowledged due to limited institutional support.

This current study builds on existing literature by focusing specifically on undergraduate students at Coal City University, with a detailed comparison of syntactic structures in Igbo and English, and an emphasis on students' perceived comfort and contextual usage. Unlike previous studies that often generalize across indigenous languages or focus solely on errors, this research aims to explore the nuanced interplay between syntactic ability and sociolinguistic environment, with a view to informing both

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curriculum design and bilingual literacy development.

### **Methodology**

This study adopts a descriptive survey design to examine the syntactic structures of Igbo and English as used by undergraduate students of Coal City University, Enugu. The design is appropriate because it allows the collection, description, and analysis of data that reflect students' real-life linguistic behaviour and their level of grammatical comfort when switching between both languages. The population comprises all first and second year students in five language intensive departments, namely English and Literary Studies, Mass Communication, Political Science, Business Administration, and Sociology, within the Faculty of Arts, Social and Management Sciences (FASMS), totaling 87 students based on 2023/2024 records. Due to the relatively small population, a census sampling technique will be used so that all 87 students will participate, ensuring inclusivity and enhancing the validity and reliability of the findings.

Data will be collected using a structured questionnaire divided into four sections: demographic information, use of English syntactic structures, use of Igbo syntactic structures, and level of grammatical comfort when switching between the two languages. The instrument will include both closed-ended questions using Likert scale and Yes/No formats, as well as open-ended items, and will be validated by experts in linguistics and sociolinguistics to ensure clarity and relevance. Ethical approval will be obtained from the department before administering the questionnaire during regular class sessions. Participants will be assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and the researcher will remain present to provide clarifications and collect completed copies immediately. Data from the closed-ended items will be analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequencies, means, and percentages, while open-ended responses will undergo thematic analysis to identify patterns in syntactic usage, challenges, and bilingual switching strategies.





## **Data Analysis and Discussion**

### **Research Question One**

#### **How do students understand and use English syntactic structures?**

<b>Items</b>	<b>Response Frequency Percentage</b>		
Do you feel comfortable constructing long, grammatically correct English sentences?	Yes	69	79.3%
	No	18	20.7%
Do you sometimes struggle with subject-verb agreement in English?	Yes	47	54.0%
	No	40	46.0%
Do you often rely on English to express academic ideas clearly?	Yes	73	83.9%
	No	14	16.1%
Are you confident using complex sentence structures in English?	Yes	58	66.7%
	No	29	33.3%
Do you make frequent grammatical errors when writing in English?	Yes	34	39.1%
	No	53	60.9%

#### **Interpretation:**

The data reveal that a majority (79.3%) of students are comfortable constructing grammatically correct English sentences. However, 54% admitted to challenges with subject-verb agreement, and 39.1%

acknowledged frequent grammatical errors. While most students (83.9%) find English effective for academic expression, a significant number still struggle with syntactic complexity and accuracy. This suggests moderate syntactic competence with areas for improvement.



## Research Question Two

### How do students understand and use Igbo syntactic structures?

Items	Response	Frequency	Percentage
Do you understand how Igbo verbs change based on tense and subject?	Yes	51	58.6%
	No	36	41.4%
Can you form complete Igbo sentences without mixing English?	Yes	38	43.7%
	No	49	56.3%
Do you understand the use of affixes and interfixes in Igbo grammar?	Yes	44	50.6%
	No	43	49.4%
Do you find Igbo word order (e.g. noun + determiner) easier than English?	Yes	33	37.9%
	No	54	62.1%
Do you feel comfortable explaining things formally in Igbo?	Yes	29	33.3%
	No	58	66.7%

### Interpretation:

Only 43.7% of the respondents can form full Igbo sentences without code-switching. A slight majority (58.6%) understand verb changes in Igbo, and 50.6% understand affixation. However, 66.7% feel uncomfortable expressing

formal ideas in Igbo. These findings suggest that while students retain partial competence in Igbo syntax, their comfort and fluency are lower than in English, likely due to limited academic exposure in Igbo.



### Research Question Three

#### How comfortable are students switching between English and Igbo syntactic structures?

Items	Response Frequency Percentage		
Do you switch between English and Igbo when you forget a word?	Yes	72	82.8%
	No	15	17.2%
Do you think in one language before speaking in another?	Yes	66	75.9%
	No	21	24.1%
Do you feel more grammatically comfortable in English than in Igbo?	Yes	63	72.4%
	No	24	27.6%
Does your choice of language depend on who you are talking to?	Yes	78	89.7%
	No	9	10.3%
Do you find it easier to express emotions in one language over the other?	Yes	70	80.5%
	No	17	19.5%

#### Interpretation:

An overwhelming 82.8% of students switch between English and Igbo when vocabulary fails. 72.4% feel more grammatically comfortable in English, while 75.9% think in one language

before responding in another. These findings point to a high level of bilingual switching but with stronger syntactic confidence in English. Emotional and social contexts heavily influence language choice and switching behavior.



## Research Question Four

### How do sociolinguistic factors influence grammatical usage between the two languages?

Items	Response	Frequency	Percentage
Has your level of education improved your English syntax more than your Igbo?	Yes	74	85.1%
	No	13	14.9%
Do social media and online content influence your grammar in both languages?	Yes	69	79.3%
	No	18	20.7%
Do you mix English and Igbo more during informal conversations?	Yes	77	88.5%
	No	10	11.5%
Do you feel that using Igbo in formal situations is less socially acceptable?	Yes	60	69.0%
	No	27	31.0%
Would you prefer that both languages be taught with equal emphasis in school?	Yes	79	90.8%
	No	8	9.2%

## Interpretation:

The majority (85.1%) affirm that education has enhanced their English syntactic skills more than Igbo. Additionally, 88.5% mix both languages informally, and 69% consider Igbo less acceptable in formal settings. Notably, 90.8% support equal emphasis in teaching both languages. These results emphasize that sociolinguistic dynamics such as institutional language policy, digital media exposure, and cultural prestige significantly shape bilingual syntactic comfort and usage.

## Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study align with those of Okorie (2022) and Ene (2020), who observed that institutional instruction in English provides students with more syntactic proficiency in English than in native languages like Igbo. Similar to this study's finding that 72.4% of students are more comfortable with English syntax, their works emphasized that students' linguistic confidence correlates with the language of instruction.

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Furthermore, the results corroborate Opara and Chibundu (2021), who found that while students exhibit bilingualism, it is often asymmetrical—favoring English in formal and academic contexts and Igbo in emotive and cultural expressions. This explains the 80.5% of students who switch based on emotional expression.

This study also supports Uzochukwu and Iwueze (2021), whose research on syntactic comfort found that students feel more fluent in the language used predominantly in schooling. The 66.7% of students in this study who cannot explain formal ideas comfortably in Igbo reinforces their conclusion.

In addition, the study aligns with Anagbogu et al. (2010) on interfixation and morphosyntactic variation in Igbo, as many respondents admitted limited comfort in understanding or using complex Igbo syntactic structures.

Finally, the strong student support for balanced language instruction echoes the recommendations by Chukwuemeka and Ogbonna (2022) for a bilingual education model that prioritizes equal competence and sociocultural pride in both languages.

The analysis clearly reveals that while students at Coal City University exhibit functional bilingualism, their syntactic structure, grammatical confidence, and formal communication skills are predominantly shaped by English. Although students retain partial Igbo competence, their usage is largely informal and emotionally driven. The findings underscore the need for a more balanced linguistic policy that

promotes bilingual syntactic fluency, respects sociocultural identity, and addresses the comfort gap observed between English and Igbo syntax in academic and social communication.

### **Conclusion**

The findings of this study reveal that students of Coal City University display varying degrees of syntactic competence in both English and Igbo. While most students are more confident in English, their competence in Igbo syntax appears weaker, with limited ability to construct formal Igbo sentences. This suggests that language dominance is tilting towards English, even in informal and cultural contexts.

Moreover, the comfort students feel when switching between languages often results in syntactic interference, especially when trying to express ideas fluidly. The study concludes that bilingual students are navigating a complex linguistic environment where social factors, educational emphasis, and digital exposure significantly influence their grammatical usage and preferences.

Overall, while the bilingual environment offers a rich ground for linguistic development, there is a need for deliberate efforts to preserve balanced proficiency in both English and Igbo syntactic structures.

### **Recommendations**

In light of the findings from this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. **Strengthen Igbo Language Instruction in Universities**  
Language departments should increase formal

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instruction and exposure to Igbo syntax through grammar drills, translations, and sentence construction exercises.

## **2. Encourage Balanced Bilingualism in Classrooms**

Lecturers and instructors should promote code-switching exercises and encourage students to engage with both English and Igbo in discussions, debates, and academic writing.

## **3. Integrate Sociolinguistic Topics into Curriculum**

Departments should include sociolinguistic components in language courses to help students understand how social context affects grammatical choices.

## **4. Organize Language Workshops and Competitions**

The University should sponsor language-based activities such as essay contests, Igbo-English debates, and grammar boot camps to boost interest and competency in both languages.

## **5. Promote the Use of Igbo in Formal Academic Settings**

Efforts should be made to normalize the use of Igbo in formal contexts such as public speaking, research presentations, and student publications to increase comfort and grammatical competence.

## **Suggestions for Further Study**

Given the scope and limitations of this study, future researchers are encouraged to:

- Conduct comparative studies of syntactic competence across multiple universities in southeastern Nigeria.

- Examine how tonal patterns in Igbo influence English intonation among bilinguals.
- Explore the role of urbanization and media exposure in diminishing native language syntax competence.

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