



Realisation of Existential Processes in Ekegusii Declarative Clauses

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Abstract

This study examines the intricate relationship between transitivity and existential thought within the context of Ekegusii, an indigenous language spoken by the Abagusii people of Western Kenya. The research sought to uncover how Ekegusii speakers conceptualize and express the existence and occurrence of entities using the language. Grounding itself on the experiential metafunction of Halliday and Mathiessen's (2014) Functional Grammar theory, the study specifically sought to find out how existential processes are realized in the various forms of Ekegusii declarative clauses, looking at the forms of the clauses in terms of polarity and voice. Methodologically, the study used qualitative analysis. The data, Ekegusii declarative clauses with verbs carrying existential processes, was drawn from Ekegusii Bible, Ekegusii storybooks, and the researcher's intuition as a native speaker of Ekegusii. The analysis involved an examination of the patterns of the transitivity structure in the selected clauses by looking at the various components of the clauses: the verbs realizing the existential Process, the Participants involved and the Circumstances, thereby allowing for a focused exploration of how existential thought is linguistically represented in Ekegusii. Besides implications for language teaching, translation, and cultural preservation efforts, the findings from this research will contribute to a deeper understanding of how indigenous languages and Ekegusii in particular, can serve to provide unique insights into human thought and perception.

Introduction

Transitivity refers to how processes that verbs realise relate to their participants in a clause (Halliday, 1994). It is a concern in Functional Grammar Theory as advanced by Halliday and Mathiessen (2014), a theory based on Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics. Therefore, Functional Grammar is a linguistic framework emphasising how language is used in social contexts to convey meaning. It posits that language is a resource for making meaning rather than merely a set of rules for constructing sentences (Halliday, 1994). One of the major tenets of Functional Grammar is that language is a tool for communication, shaped by the social contexts in which it is used, in which case the meaning is derived from the interaction between linguistic structures and their situational contexts (Halliday, 1994; Eggins, 2004; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). According to the theory, one of language functions is the ideational metafunction, in which language represents experiences in the form of Processes. In this way, language organises information in the clauses through transitivity structures, a configuration of Process type, Participant roles and Circumstances.



Transitivity categorises processes into various kinds, each interacting with participants differently, thereby influencing the overall meaning of a clause (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). These include: Material, mental, behavioural, verbal, relational, and existential processes. This study focused on existential Processes which indicate the existence and typically feature an *Existent* (that which exists or occurs) (Halliday & Mathessen, 2014).

The study investigates the realisation of existential processes in Ekegusii declarative clauses. Ekegusii is a Bantu language with two dialects, the *Rogoro* (Northern) and the *Maate* (Southern) dialects, spoken by the Abagusii community found in Western Kenya (Guthrie, 1971; Cammenga, 2002; Maho, 2008). This study is based on the *Rogoro* dialect, predominantly spoken in the two Gusii counties of Kisii and Nyamira in Kenya. The *Rogoro* dialect was selected as the basis for the study due to its status as the standard form of Ekegusii (Bosire, 1993; Mecha, 2004), and the sources of data utilised in this research were written in this dialect. By examining transitivity within declarative clauses in Ekegusii, this paper sought to shed light on how existential thought is expressed linguistically within these cultural and linguistic contexts.

Existential Processes

Existential Processes (henceforth ExiPs) are processes in Systemic Functional Linguistics that indicate the existence or occurrence of entities, events, or actions (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). This is crucial for establishing the context within which actions and entities are discussed (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). This means that existential processes construe the existence or occurrence of matters such as people, things, events, actions and moments, known as the *Existent* (henceforth Ex). In this respect, for instance, Eggins (2004) emphasises that ExiPs are crucial for establishing the presence of entities in narratives, allowing speakers to construct a shared reality with their audience (Eggins, 2004). Similarly, Thompson (2013) underscores the importance of ExiPs in framing discussions about events, noting that they help to contextualise actions within a temporal and spatial framework (Thompson, 2013).

ExiPs are usually realised by the various forms of the verb 'to be' (such as *is*, *was*, *are* and *were*), which function as linking verbs that connect the *Existent* to the process of existence. Notably, ExiPs are usually introduced by two types of empty subjects (henceforth ES) - 'there' and 'it'. Whereas ExiPs that employ empty subjects, "**there**" introduce clauses that assert the existence of something, such as "There is a book on the table," the empty subject "**It**" introduces clauses that indicate the occurrence of an event or action, as in "It seems that the meeting was cancelled." It is worth mentioning that ExiP clauses may also include circumstantial elements whose role is to provide additional information regarding the existence or occurrence, typically expressed through prepositional or adverbial phrases (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

Previous studies on transitivity include Sahabil's (2014) study on chapters of the English textbook *Bahasa Inggris When English Rings the Bell*, focusing on process types, participant functions, and circumstantial elements of transitivity that characterise English texts. The research discovered that relational processes were found to have the highest frequency of occurrence, followed by material, verbal, mental, existential and behavioural processes, respectively. Similarly, Darani (2014) evaluated and confirmed the realisation of persuasive style through existential and other processes in the literary text: 'Animal Farm,' by George Orwell (1945). On their part, Katawazai et al. (2021) evaluated processes in sports texts of the Postgraduate Students at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia" and established that material processes were the most frequently used, constituting approximately 53.40% of the total processes identified, with limited use of existential, behavioural, and verbal processes.



Regarding existential processes, Suherman (2018) investigated Ideational Metaphor in Political Texts from the perspective of Systemic Functional Linguistics and realised that though existential processes are one of the six processes commonly found in clauses, they are less frequently used in some contexts, as in the case of political texts, where material, mental, verbal and relational processes are prevalent and thus dominant. On the other hand, Afrianto and Inayati (2016) studied the use of existential processes in the novel *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. Just like this study, Afrianto and Inayati confirmed that clauses realising existential processes consist of an empty subject signalled by the dummy 'there', one participant- the *Existent*, with the linking verb realising the process, and circumstances of place, and circumstances of time manner. From another perspective, Nhat (2021) studied existential processes in children's stories and established that existential processes are usually used to introduce characters at the very beginning of the stories.

Wakarindi (2010), looking at emphatic structures in Gikuyu, labels clauses indicating existence as existential structures and those indicating occurrence as occurrential structures. According to Wakarindi, these structures occur in both the affirmative and negative polarity, whereby whilst the affirmative existential structures indicate the existence of something, the negative structures indicate the non-existence of something. On the other hand, occurrential structures in Gikuyu are used to indicate that something occurred or will occur.

As far as Ekegusii is concerned, linguistic researchers have mainly focused on matters such as the consonantal processes in Ekegusii, drawing on theoretical assumptions and descriptive strategies of Natural Generative Grammar to show that phonological changes in the language result from different factors (Osinde, 1988); the nature of homonymous and polysemous Relations in Ekegusii, using the Sense Relations Theory (Aunga, 2011); the structure and role of the Determiner Phrase (DP) on Ekegusii using the Minimalist Programme (MP) (Mose, 2012); Forms of Politeness in Ekegusii, using Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness Theory (Maisiba, 2015). Therefore, past studies on Ekegusii have largely ignored the realisation of existential processes in Ekegusii declarative clauses, which were the focus of this study.

Research Methodology

This research utilises a qualitative methodology that analyses transitivity within Ekegusii declarative clause, given that clauses are the foundational units in Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). The study sought to describe the manifestation of existential processes in Ekegusii. In this context, the study was conducted in the natural context without experimental intervention by utilising content analysis of existing written documents, which included selected Ekegusii storybooks, Ekegusii Bible, and the researcher's intuition. In particular, the study selected two storybooks: *Emegano Yaito* (Our Stories) by the National Centre for Early Childhood Education (henceforth NACECE) (1987); and *Ninyanchete Omonwa Oito* (I Like Our Language) by Ngoko (1979), and the Bible book - *Ogokora kwa Abatomwa* (Acts of the Apostles), from Ekegusii Bible, translated by The Bible Society of Kenya (1990). In this context, purposive sampling was used to gather data, including affirmative and negative Ekegusii declarative clauses expressing existence and occurrence. A total of six declarative clauses were selected and analysed thematically, categorised by their affirmative and negative forms, and further distinguished by their type as existential processes. This number of clauses was considered adequate for the study based on the awareness that a single text could generate large volumes of data after a linguistic analysis (Aberi, 2009).

Introspection was also employed to supplement the data where necessary, leveraging the researcher's native grammatical competence (Chomsky, 2015) in Ekegusii. The analysis aimed to fulfil the study's objectives by exploring the syntactic distinctions among various forms of Ekegusii declarative clauses. More significantly, an analysis of the transitivity of existential processes within



the SFL framework established by Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) was conducted, with the clausal elements (ES, ExiP and Ex) being identified. Moreover, ExiPs were realised based on the polarity of the verbs in Ekegusii declaratives.

Results and Discussion

The study confirmed that existential processes indeed exist in Ekegusii clauses and are expressed through two types of verbs: those talking about the *existence* of something or not, such as ‘-o’ (was), and ‘-aa’ (is), and those talking about the *occurrence/happening* of something or not, such as ‘-beire’ (is) and ‘-raba’ (is). On the same note, it was discovered that Ekegusii verbs realising existential processes related to *existence* (such as ‘-o’ (was), and ‘-aa’ (is)) appear as suffixes which are attached to words denoting empty subjects (ES), such as Narengo (there) and Nare (there). Realised also, is the fact that existential clauses are usually introduced by two types of dummy/empty subjects (henceforth ES)- ‘there’ and ‘it’. In this case, the ExiPs that talk about the existence or not are introduced by ‘there’ as in *Narengo omonto oyomo ore korokwa Nyoteyo* (There was one person called Nyoteyo), whereby *Narengo* (There) is the ES; those that talk about something occurring or not are introduced by ‘it’ as in *Bwabeire botuko gati* (It is midnight), with *Bwa* (it) being the ES.

Evident also, was the fact that the ExiPs in Ekegusii occur in the two forms of polarity, affirmative and negative. Whilst the existential processes realised in the affirmative declaratives were found not to bear negative particles, as in *Narengo omonto oyomo ore korokwa Nyoteyo* (There was one person called Nyoteyo), their negative counterparts bore negative markers (in the form of affixes such as ‘**ta-**’ (not) and ‘**ti-**’ (not), which are attached to the main verbs to signal negation. Examples include *Monto ore buna Omonene Nyasae oito taiyo* (There is no person who is like our Lord God) and *Tichiraba chinsa inye* (It is not ten o’clock). Notice that the negative signals are highlighted in bold.

Additionally, the data revealed that the negative ExiP clauses of occurrence have the negative particles embedded at the beginning of the ES, and the verb realizing the ExiP embedded at the end of the ES to form one word, which occupies the initial position of the clause followed by the Ex. This is seen in *Tichiraba chinsa inye* (It is not ten o’clock), in which *Ti-* (Not) is the negative marker, *-chi-* (it), is the ES, whereas *chinsa inye* (ten o’clock), is the Ex.

Furthermore, it was revealed that ExiPs are never realised in either the active and passive forms in Ekegusii declaratives. This is due to the fact that the verbs representing ExiPs are the corpus type, (forms of the verb ‘To Be’- such as *is, was, are* and *were*), whose role is to connect the elements of the clause in which they occur.

The study further confirmed that Ekegusii existential declaratives, whether affirmative or negative, containing ExiPs contain two obligatory elements: the participant, *Existent* (Ex), and the process (ExiP) attached to the empty subject (ES). In addition to the obligatory elements, Ekegusii existential declaratives contained Circumstances (Cirs), albeit optional. Besides, whereas the existential processes were found to be realised in both the affirmative and negative polarity in Ekegusii declaratives, they (ExiPs) are never realised in either the active or passive clause voice.

As discussed above, existential Processes (ExiPs) are usually realized by the various forms of the verb ‘To Be’, and are mostly introduced by two types of dummy/empty subjects (henceforth ES)- ‘there’ and ‘it’. In this context, whereas the ExiPs that talk about the existence or not are introduced by ‘there’, those that talk about something happening or not are introduced by ‘it’. Moreover, ExiP clauses comprise one participant, the *Existent* (henceforth Ex), realised by the nominal group, the process itself, Existential Process (henceforth ExiP), realised by the linking verb, and sometimes the Cirs.



As shown in the ensuing discussion, Ekegusii clauses tend to be realised by the two forms of verbs: those talking about the *existence* of something or not and those talking about *something happening* or not. In this regard, Ekegusii verbs used to represent ExiPs talking about the existence of something or not occur in the form of suffixes, such as ‘-o’ (was), ‘-aa’ (is), and ‘-iyo’ (no), which are attached to the words representing the empty subjects (ES), such as; *Narenge* (there) and *Nare* (there).

On the basis of polarity, the study found that Exip clauses in the affirmative were found to have their grammatical subject positions occupied by the *ES* such as *Narenge* (there) and *Nare* (there), followed by the processes (ExiPs), such as ‘-o’ (was) and ‘-aa’ (is) which are in turn followed by *Existents*. This is illustrated by excerpts I and II below.

Excerpt I

Narengo omonto oyomo ore korokwa Nyoteyo (Ngoko, 1979) - **Existence.**

There was person one called Nyoteyo

There was one person called Nyoteyo.

Narenge /-o / omonto oyomo ore korokwa Nyoteyo.

ES ExiP Ex

Excerpt II

Nareaa omonto oyomo omosibwa omosibwa otigetwe na Feliki. (Ekegusii Bible, 1990- Acts 25:14) - **Existence.**

Person one prison who was left by Felix

There is one prisoner who was left by Felix.

Nare /aa / omosibwa oyomo omosibwa otigetwe na Feliki.

ES ExiP Ex

These clauses are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Ekegusii Affirmative Existential Processes of Existence Clauses

| No | ES | ExiP | Ex |
|----|-------------------------|-----------|--|
| I | <i>Narenge</i> There | -o was | <i>omonto oyomo ore korokwa Nyoteyo</i> one person called Nyoteyo |
| II | <i>Nare</i> There | -aa is | <i>omonto oyomo omosibwa otigetwe na Feliki</i> one prisoner who was left by Felix. |

Conversely, the Ekegusii negative clauses realising existential processes were found to have their grammatical subject positions occupied by *Existents*. Moreover, the empty subjects (*ESs*) onto which the verbs representing the processes are embedded to form *ES/ExiP* were found to follow the *Existents* (*Exs*). This is evidenced in excerpts III and IV below, where *Monto ore buna Omonene Nyasae oito* (person who is like our Lord God), in excerpt III, and *Mong’ina* (old woman), in excerpt IV, are the *Existents* occupying the grammatical subject positions in the clauses.

Excerpt III

Monto ore buna Omonene Nyasae oito taiyo (Ekegusii Bible, 1990- Acts) - **Existence.**

Person like Lord God our there is no.

There is no person who is like our Lord God.

Monto ore buna Omonene Nyasae oito/taiyo.

Ex ES/Exip



Excerpt IV

Mong'ina taiyo maate agwo (NACECE, 1987) - **Existence.**

Old woman there is no down there.

There is no old woman down there.

Mong'ina /taiyo /maate agwo.

Ex ES/Exip Cir

These clauses are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Ekegusii Negative Existential Processes of Existence Clauses

| No | Ex | ES/Exip | Cir |
|-----|--|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| III | <i>Monto ore buna Omonene Nyasae oito</i> Person who is like our Lord | <i>taiyo</i> there is no | - |
| IV | <i>Mong'ina</i> old woman | <i>taiyo</i> there is no | <i>maate agwo</i> down there |

On the contrary, the ExiP clauses talking about something occurring or not have their initial positions occupied by the empty subjects (ESs), followed by the verbs realising the processes (ExiPs), which are in turn followed by *Existents* (Exs). This is seen in excerpt V below, where *Bwa-* (It), is the ES, *-beire* (is), is the *Exip*, while *botuko gati* (midnight), is the *Ex*.

Excerpt V

Bwabeire botuko gati (Researcher's Intuition) - **Occurrence.**

It has become night mid

It is midnight.

Bwa/beire /botuko gati.

ES/Exip Ex

However, it is evident that the negative ExiP clauses of happening have the negative particle embedded at the beginning of the empty subject (ES), and the verb realising the process (ExiP) embedded at the end of the ES to form one word, which occupies the initial position of the clause followed by the *Existent*. This is seen in example VI below - *Tichiraba chinsa inye* (It is not ten o'clock), whereby *Ti-* (Not) is the negative particle, *-chi-* (it), is the ES, *-raba* (is), is the *Exip*, while *chinsa inye* (ten o'clock), is the *Ex*.

Excerpt VI

Tichiraba chinsa inye (Researcher's Intuition)- **Occurrence.**

Not it is ten o'clock

It is not ten o'clock.

Ti/chi/raba /chinsa inye

ES/Exip Ex

These analyses are illustrated in Table 3.



Table 3: Ekegusii Existential Processes of Occurrence Clauses

| No. | Negative marker | ES | ExiP | Ex | Polarity |
|-----|-------------------|--------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------|
| V | - | <i>Bwa-</i> It | <i>-beire</i> is | <i>botuko gati</i> midnight | Affirmative |
| V1 | <i>Ti-</i> Not | <i>-chi-</i> it | <i>-raba</i> is | <i>chinsa inye</i> ten o'clock | Negative |

Most importantly, the data revealed that the verb types used in the realisation of existential processes Ekegusii declaratives, in both the affirmative and negative categories, are the copula/linking, whose role is to link the components in the clauses, the *ES* and the *Ex*, for that matter. In addition to the mandatory components (Existents and Processes), Ekegusii ExiP clauses were also found to contain *Circumstances* (Cirs), albeit optional, which complement the processes involved. *Maate agwo* (down there), in excerpt IV, is an example of a *Circumstance* identified in Ekegusii ExiP clauses.

Finally, it is worth noting that ExiPs are never realised in the active and passive forms in Ekegusii active declaratives. This is because the verbs used in the realisation of ExiPs are the linking type (forms of the verb 'To Be' - such as *is*, *was*, *are* and *were*), which do not imply any actions in the clauses, but rather connect the elements of the clause in which they occur.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the analysis of Ekegusii Existential Processes (ExiPs) reveals distinct structural patterns in both affirmative and negative clauses, highlighting the roles of empty subjects (ESs), processes (ExiPs), and Existents (Exs). Affirmative ExiPs consistently position the ES before the process and the Existent, as seen in examples I- *Narengoo omonto oyomo ore korokwa Nyoteyo* (There was one person called Nyoteyo), while negative ExiPs invert this order, placing the Existent first, as demonstrated excerpt III- *Monto ore buna Omonene Nyasae oito taiyo* (There is no person who is like our Lord God) (see section 5). The study also identifies that ExiPs expressing occurrences follow a similar pattern, with the ES occupying the initial position, followed by the *Existent*. This is despite the fact that negative clauses incorporate a negative particle at the beginning of the clauses. Besides, the findings emphasise the use of linking verbs, forms of the verb 'be' (such as *is*, *was*, *are* and *were*) in these constructions (existential clauses), which serve to connect the various components of the clauses (ESs and Exs), while also noting that Ekegusii ExiPs do not manifest in active or passive forms due to the nature of the linking verbs employed.

Furthermore, the study confirmed that the transformations in Ekegusii's deep and surface structures, particularly the positioning of empty subjects, processes, and existents, significantly impact the functional purposes and contextual meanings when translated into English. For instance, the Ekegusii affirmative existential process, where the empty subject precedes the process and the existent, translates into a straightforward English sentence like "There was one person called Nyoteyo." Conversely, the negative existential process, with the existent followed by the empty subject/process combination, requires a more complex English translation, such as "There is no person who is like our Lord God." These transformations highlight the distinct ways Ekegusii conceptualises existence, which can be challenging to convey in English directly. Understanding these structural differences is crucial for accurate and culturally sensitive translations, preserving the nuances of Ekegusii thought and expression. Overall, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of Ekegusii's syntactic structures and realisation of existential processes.

This study makes significant contributions to the understanding of Ekegusii language and its speakers' conceptualisation of existence. By linking transitivity to existential thought, the study



reveals how the grammatical structures of Ekegusii reflect the speakers' perceptions of existence and relationships between entities, an interplay that has been largely overlooked in previous studies. Furthermore, the findings demonstrate distinct syntactic patterns in Ekegusii ExiPs, particularly the consistent positioning of empty subjects (ESs), processes (ExiPs), and existents (Exs) in both affirmative and negative clauses. This structural analysis contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the realisation of existential processes in Ekegusii declarative clauses. More significantly, the study elucidates how Indigenous languages like Ekegusii can provide unique insights into human thought and perception, thereby demonstrating the usefulness of Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) theory of SFL as a methodological framework for analysing language in context.

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