

Verb and Adverb Focus Construction in Idoma

Theresa Dora Idoko

Department of Languages and Linguistics

Benue State University, Makurdi.

Email: tdidoko@bsum.edu.ng Tel: 08034325367

Elizabeth Shiminenge Ugechi Ph.D

Department of Languages and Linguistics

Benue State University

Email: e.ugechi@bsum.edu.ng Tel 08038802670

Abstract

In the study of a language for development and preservation, all aspects of the language are important. Focus construction provide data for the analysis and typological classification of languages. There are no evidence of investigation of verb and adverb focus constructions in Idoma and therefore Idoma cannot be classified using this criterion. Focus construction is a syntactic transformation that is triggered by semantic emphasis. This paper explores focus construction of verbs and adverbs within the theoretical framework of the Movement Principle of the Principle and Parameters approach of syntactic analysis. Data was obtained through the use of questionnaires which required respondents to translate sentences to Idoma. The sentences were later analysed using clause types and tee diagrams. The study identified three types of verb focus movement in Idoma and each movement takes the verbal element from its position in the TP to SPEC position of the FocP. The focus operator in Idoma is 'na' and it comes immediately after the focused item. Focus construction is supported by a sentence final vocative 'a' in Idoma. Verb focus construction includes nominalisation of the verb through a morphophonemic process which affixes the doubled 'oo' to it. Adverb focus does not require any morphophonemic process. The study observed that tense is an important aspect of focus construction in Idoma and concludes that the documentation of verb and adverb focus construction promotes the development of curricular material for educational advancement of Idoma.

Journal of Policy and Development Studies (JPDS)

Vol. 18 Issue 1 (2025)

ISSN(p) 1597-9385

ISSN (e) 2814-1091

Home page:

<https://www.ajol.info/index.php/jpds>

ARTICLE INFO:

Keyword

Focus, Morphophonemic, Idoma, Semantics, Verbs.

Received:

8th December 2024

Accepted:

15th February 2025

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.4314/jpds.v18i1.6>

1. Introduction

Idoma is a language of the Benue-Congo subfamily of the Niger-Kordofanian language family spoken by a people whose ancestral homeland is in the Southern part of the Benue valley popularly referred to as Idoma land. Like most languages, Idoma has dialects which are syntactically similar (Umaru 2016). Idoma is an agglutinating language which is present in most forms of affixation in the language. Idoma has a mixed or complex basic word order as the clause structure is determined by tense/aspect which in turn determines the position of the verb in the sentence. The simple past tense has the SVO structure while the present perfect tense has the S-Aux-OV word order. Tense and aspect are fused together and represented auxiliary elements. This is because verbs in Idoma do not inflect for any reason. Idoma is a tonal language with three basic tones of low (marked with grave accent `), high (marked with acute accent ´) and mid (marked with a bar). All lexical or main verbs in Idoma starts with consonant sound, some are monosyllabic with a CV or CCV structure while other are disyllabic or trisyllabic. Adverbs are mostly multisyllabic and can be a CVCV or VCV syllable structure.

Language has been identified as one of the characteristics that sets humans ahead of other living species (Banga & Suri 2015, UNESCO). However, when conscious efforts are not made to promote and preserve language, languages die or get extinct. This is why the preservation of the earths linguistic diversity is one of the major projects of UNESCO backed by a special day for the celebration of ‘Mother tongue’ or ‘Mother language’ on February 21 yearly. In Africa and Nigeria in particular, there are several calls for policy development that would promote literacy and formal education development of indigenous languages for the overall development of her people and cultures (Nwankwere, 2020, Chukwukere & Ajileye, 2024). Notwithstanding how laudable their demands are, the implementation of it is faced with several challenges which the lack of teaching and learning material is one (UNESCO, 2025, Olagbaju & Akinsowon, 2014). This research on verbal focus construction aims at providing knowledge that can be used in developing curricular materials that will enhance the teaching and learning of Idoma language in formal educational institutions for effective documentation and preservation of the language.

The linguistic study of Idoma has in recent years attracted many language scholars including Adejoh (2016) and Apeh (2015). These studies cover various aspect of the language especially morphology and syntax. However, there is no study on verb focus movement known to the present researchers. The aim of this current study is to provide adequate description for the possible verb and adverb focus construction which are a result of movement transformation in Idoma. The findings illustrate the movement and landing sites for each identified focus construction. In addition, the study explores the constraint point for each movement and describe the focus movement parameter of Idoma verbs and adverbs.

2. Review of Related Literature

Focus movement also known as topicalization, move linguistic units to clause initial position for the purpose of emphasis. Radford (2004) defines focus or topicalisation as a syntactic means of analysing semantic prominence in an utterance. Focus movement is highly dependent on discourse and pragmatics with the aim of highlighting information, not hitherto familiar to the hearer. The focused element is in a salient relationship with other elements as evoked by the discourse. Focus movement is sometimes referred to as fronting or prepositioning. This is due to the fact that most focus movements are to the sentence initial position. According to Van Valin (2005), the sentence initial position might be clause-external as in Left-detached position (LDP)

or clause-internal as in Precore slot position (PrCS). Nevertheless, analysis of focus construction constitutes a major factor in linguistic investigations and typological classification. In most languages, syntactic focus is triggered by the presence of a focus operator which might be expressed through morphology, phonological prosody, syntax or a combination of features that cuts across several aspects of linguistic analysis.

Hein (2017) defines verb focus as a movement operation that moves the main verb out of the VP to merge with the specifier (SPEC) in the SPEC position in front of the sentence. The specifier is usually a nominal item, which according Radford (2004) is a non-complement element within the maximal projection. The fronted verb therefore obtains the nominal feature of SPEC and becomes nominalised. Verb focus movement entails duplicating the verb, a copy of which moves to SPEC while the original copy remains within the VP, where it performs its predicate function in the sentence (Awobuluyi, 1987). In some languages like Twi (a Ghanaian language), the predicate position can also be filled by a dummy auxiliary. In verb focus constructions, only the fronted verb can serve as predicate in the sentence otherwise the structure will violate the focus/fronting rule. Available evidences show that in languages that allows verb fronting, all types of main verb can be involved in focus movement however, the conditions vary due to subcategorical features of the verb.

In some languages like Edo, Baker and Stewart (1999) opines that certain adverbial elements are involved in focus movements. This movement moves the adverb from the VP into SPEC position. Adverb focus movement however, does not duplicate the adverb, rather the movement site, which is clause final in the language, is deleted. Adverb fronting also relies on the use of focus marker and is triggered by semantics and pragmatics as in the case of all focus constructions.

Studies in African languages have shown that the landing site of a focused item may vary depending on other factors in the language. For Güldemann and Fiedler (2013), verb fronting in Bantu languages can be classified using ten (10) syntactic features. Ayodele et al (2015) showed that even languages of the same subgroups like Yoruba and Igbo operates focus constructions on different parameters with the focus marker coming before the focused item in Igbo and after the focused item in Yoruba. Tabe (2015) opines that the landing site of Kenyang adverbs is determined by the semantic information intended.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The principle and parameter (P&P) approach to linguistic analysis was propounded by Chomsky in 1981 as one of the propositions of the universal grammar theory. The approach looks at languages as been made up of several principles which apply to all-natural human languages. These principles represent the different characteristics exhibited by languages. Parameters on the other hand explores the different manifestations of different principles in languages. The movement principle of P&P approach opines that all-natural languages have the ability to move lexical items from one position to another within a given syntactic structure.

The movement principle applies to focus movement in Idoma by showing how the verbal item moves out of the VP or TP into SPEC position of FocP. The principle which serves as a framework for this research also explain the linguistic processes verbs or adverbs undergone before they can occupy the focus position, thereby, setting the focus movement parameter in Idoma.

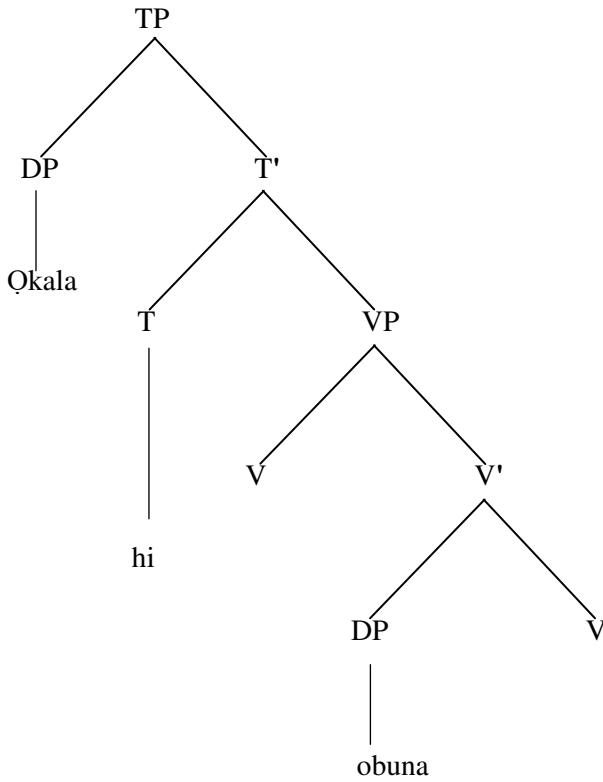
3. Methodology

The research employs a qualitative design approach in analysing data which was obtained from a focused group of ten (10) adult native speakers made of members of the Idoma Language Development Council and Ohimini Women Association, Makurdi branch. The members of the

In (1a-d), the verb occupies the position immediately after the subject NP in the SVO structure while in (1e), the verb ‘nmóla’ (fry) splits into two with the object now coming between the split. The position of the verbs in (1a-e) is adopted as base positions from which verb focus construction is permitted in Idoma. Example (2) shows focus movements of the verbs in (1) using the SVO or simple past tense clause structure.

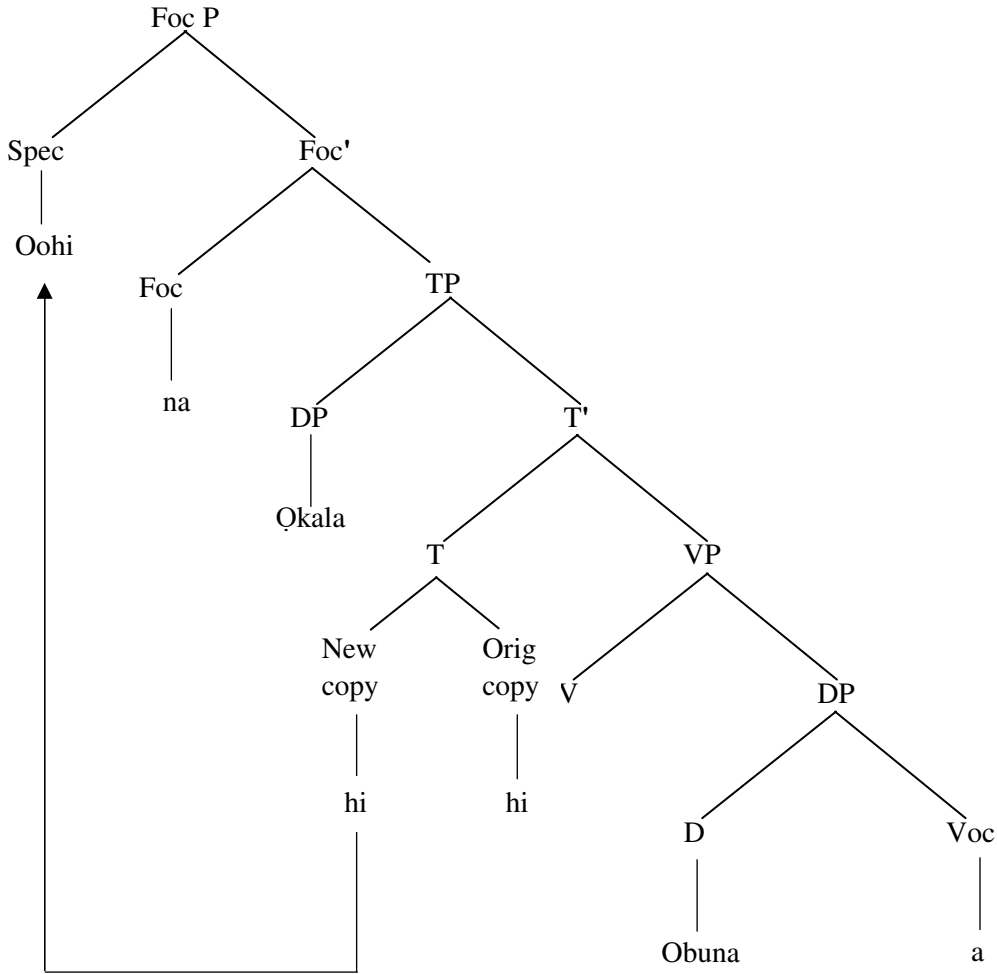
- (2) a. Oóhi na Ọkala hí òbúnà á Mono/Trans
 NMLZ Foc Okla farm water yam VOC
 ‘It is farmed that Okala farmed water yam.’
- b. Oóla na Ẹnuwa la angbo nma ójà á DOC
 NMLZ FOC Enuwa buy banana from market VOC
 ‘It is bought that Enuwa bought banana from the market.’ Compared to
- c. Oójije na Ijachi jije ẹn á COC
 NMLZ FOC Ijachi dance yesterday VOC
 ‘It is danced that Ijachi danced yesterday.’
- d. Oónu na ọjá a núr á Intransitive
 NMLZ FOC jar the leak VOC
 ‘It is leaked that the jar leaked.’
- e. Oónmóla na ọnya a nmo ihi ọla á
 NMLZ FOC woman the V.SY₁ yam V.SY₂ voc
 ‘It is fried that the woman fried yam.’

In focus construction in Idoma, the vocative ‘á’ modifies the focused item. Starting from (2a) to (2e), the nominalised copy of the verb occupies sentence initial position of the Focus construction (Foc P). Specifically, in (2e), the disyllabic verb takes its original form before it is nominalised and moved to SPEC of FocP. The diagrams in (3) and (4) are illustrations of (1a) and (2a) respectively.



(3): Tree diagram of simple past tense in Idoma

In (3) the verb is part of the TP where it occupies the tense position in the absence of an auxiliary and no emphasis is laid on it. The structure in (4) however, shows the verb as it has moved to SPEC after a nominalisation process.



(4): Verb fronting in simple past tense in Idoma

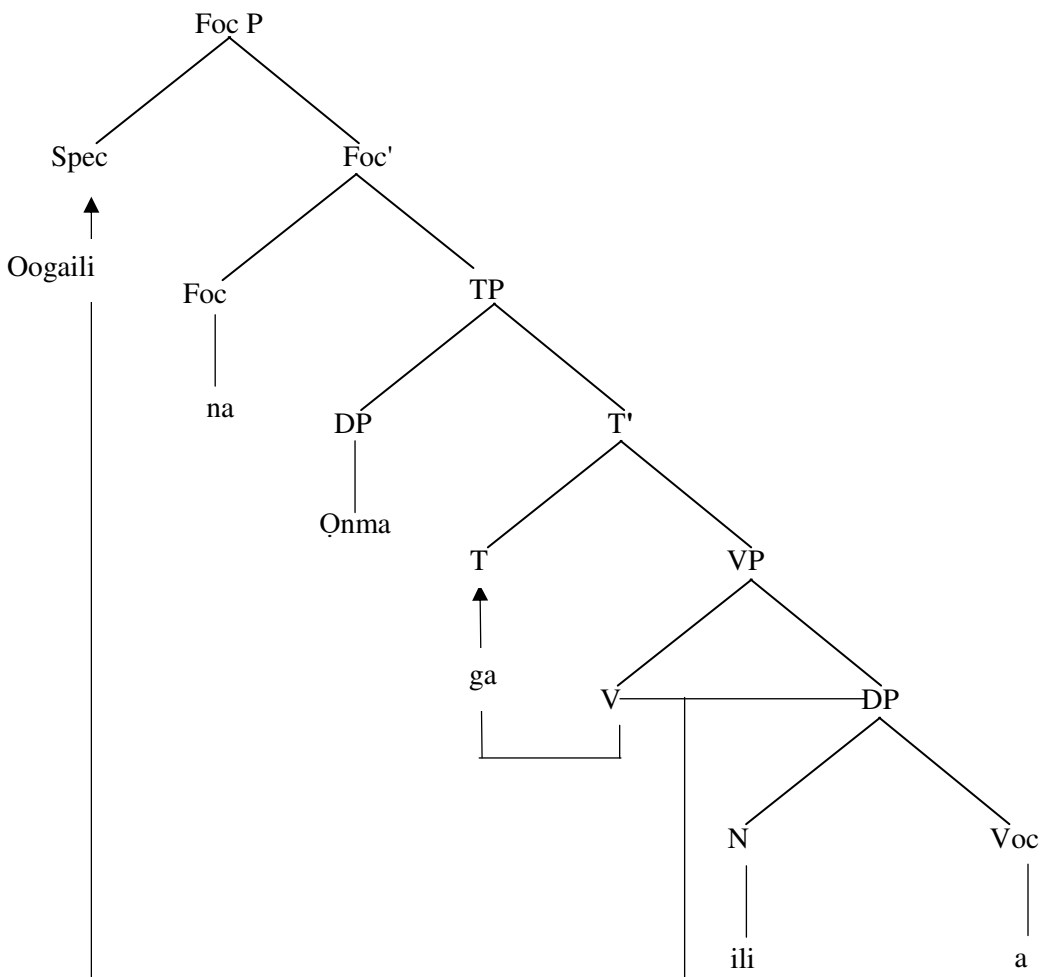
SPEC position is the highest position in a basic clause structure in Idoma. Verb fronting in Idoma, moves the verb from VP through tense in the TP where it creates a copy of itself. The copy of verb undergoes a nominalisation process and moves further into SPEC while the original copy of the verb remains in the tense position. The movement from T to SPEC is possible because, the verb has undergone nominalisation and the phi feature that needs to be valued is no longer tense but case. The fronted verb is assigned inherent case and the theta role of theme.

5b. VP fronting in Idoma

An entire VP can be fronted in Idoma. That is, a verb and its complement can undergo the fronting process. This kind of focus construction is only derived when the object noun is the direct complement of the verb as in the simple past tense. This enables the verb to move along with its complement. The fronted VP is then followed by the focus marker ‘na’ and the sentence ends with the vocative ‘a.’ In VP fronting, it is the entire VP that gets nominalised as the morphological and phonological changes that appears on the verb applies to the entire VP. The examples in (5) shows VP fronting of the simple past tense structures in Idoma.

- (5) a. Oóga ílí ná Ọnma ga ílí a Mono/Transitive
 NMLZ.VP FOC Onma sew cloth VOC.
 ‘*It is sewing cloth that Ọnma sewed cloth.’
- b. Oójè inè na ugomenti jè inè lẹ achẹ a
 NMLZ.VP FOC government give law to people VOC
 ‘*It is giving laws that government gave laws to the people.’

VP fronting is possible in any kind of construction that allows the verb appear to the right of the object NP and irrespective of the syllabic structure of the verb. As in the case of verb fronting, VP fronting requires that the fronted phrase leaves a copy of itself in the TP where it serves as the predicate of the clause. The diagram in (6) describes how the entire VP can move to SPEC of FocP from the TP using (5a).



(6): Tree diagram showing entire VP fronting in Idoma

VP fronting is here categorised as a form of verb focus construction because it gives semantic prominence to not just the verb but its object complement too. In VP fronting, the fronted syntactic category is uttered in a quick succession observing prosody and word boundary break

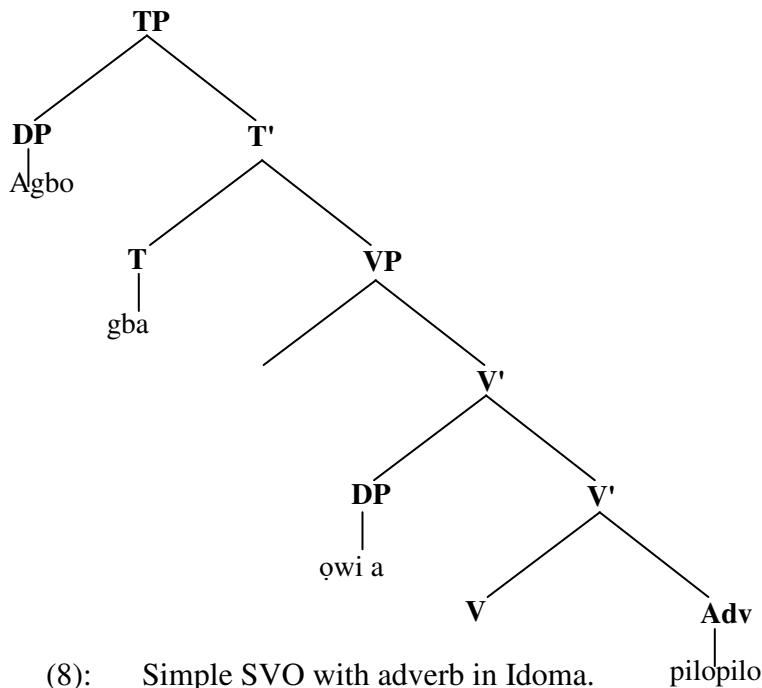
at the end of the fronted unit. The VP fills SPEC node of the FocP and is followed by the focus marker.

5c. Adverb fronting in Idoma

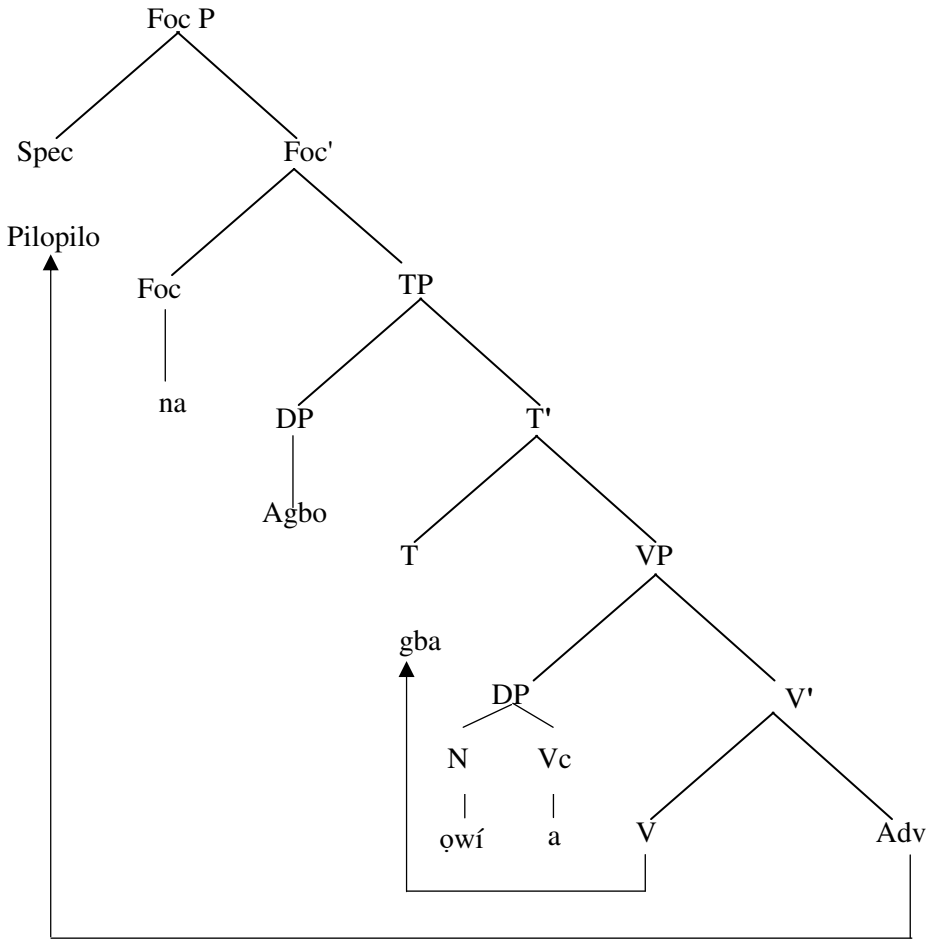
Adverbs are sentence final in all types of tense structures in Idoma. Nevertheless, there are situations where adverbs move to the sentence initial position because of emphasis. This is similar to verb fronting that is triggered by semantic emphasis. In Idoma adverb focus construction, the fronted adverb, do not leave a copy behind and neither is a dummy auxiliary or particle inserted in its place. For Idoma adverb front, the focused adverb it retains its adverbial structure and function in the sentence. Adverb fronting is considered a form of verb movement because the adverb rises out of the VP into the SPEC node of the FocP. The movement site of the adverb is deleted before spell-out while the vocative ‘a’ which qualifies the adverb becomes clause final element. Adverb fronting also relies on the use of focus marker ‘na’ in Idoma. In (7), the study shows adverb before and after focus movement in SVO clause structure.

- (7) a. Agbo gbá ọwí a pílópíló
 Agbo sharp arrow the point.point
 ‘Agbo sharpen the arrow in a pointed fashion.’
- b. Pílópíló na Agbo gbá ọwí a
 Point.point FOC Agbo sharp arrow the
 ‘It is pointedly that Agbo sharpen the arrow.’

The tree diagram in (8) is a display of the data in (7a).



The clause final position of adverb in Idoma is exemplified in (8) where the adverb is a part of the lowest V'. The structure in (9) presents a fronted adverb as in (7b).



(9): Fronted adverb in Idoma

In (9) above, the adverb moved to the SPEC node of the FocP before the subject of sentence. The fronted adverb becomes the sentence initial lexical item in the focused or fronted structure. The focus marker follows the adverb and ‘a’ vocative at the end of the clause modifies the movement. Adverb focus transformation movement is possible with few adverbs in Idoma.

5d. Verb focus construction and tense in Idoma

Apeh (2012) asserts that tense and aspects are fused together and represented by single auxiliary elements in Idoma. A particular auxiliary represents a particular tense/aspect in the language. The current study observed that aside the simple present tense which is marked by the absence of auxiliary item, verb focus construction can be extracted from the present progressive tense, the habitual tense and the future tense in Idoma. The present progressive tense is marked by the auxiliary ‘høi’, the habitual tense is marked by the auxiliary ‘ge’ while the future tense is marked by the auxiliary ‘geé.’ The extraction is possible whether the verb is monosyllabic or disyllabic and irrespective of valency. The examples in (10), (11) and (12) presents verb focus in the above-mentioned tenses in Idoma.

(10) Verb focus construction of present progressive tense

a. Oópí na Ebo hoi pí ílǐ a a
NMLZ FOC Ebo PRS.PROG squeeze cloth the VOC
'It is squeezing that Ebo is squeezing the cloth.'

b. Oóplánye na Egbe hoi plà ẹnwúr nye a
NMLZ FOC Egbe PRS.PROG V.SY₁ honey V.SY₂ VOC
'It is licking that Egbe is licking the honey.'

(11). Verb focus construction of habitual tense

a. Oówi na ùwi ge wi ije a
NMLZ FOC thief HAB steal money VOC
'It is stealing that the thief steals money.'

b. Oóyì na epu a ge yì eko doodu a
NMLZ FOC leaf the HAB burn time every VOC
'It is burning that the leaf burns every time.'

(12) Verb focus construction of future tense

a. Oótá na ng gaá tá uleta óochí a
NMLZ FOC I FUT write letter tomorrow VOC
'It is writing that I will write a letter tomorrow.'

b. Oójèla na Ode gaá jè òhì a la óochí a
NMLZ FOC Ode FUT V.SY₁ goods the V.SY₂ tomorrow VOC
'It is selling that Ode will sell the goods tomorrow.'

One difference observed from (12) is that the future tense marker is 'gaá' instead of 'geé' as expected. The change in auxiliary item for future tense is a result of the focus construction. This applies to all focus constructions involving future tense, that is whether predicate or constituent focus construction.

5. Constraints to Verb Focus Movement in Idoma

For all syntactic movement, the constrain point refers to a structural position that regulates movement to ensure that only grammatically acceptable structures are derived. This is also the position where the required value or feature that necessitate movement is satisfied. The position of constraint according to Hosono (2018) is called criterial position (CriP). All heads are constraint and no head can move over another head once they are in the same syntactic domain (Carstens, Hornstein & Seely, 2016). The constraint position is usually higher up the tree than the movement site. Richard (2016) opines that grammatical constraint can also be imposed by phonology and semantics.

Verb focus construction in Idoma has been observed to be restricted syntactically and morphophonemically. The syntactic restriction position for all verb focus movement in Idoma is SPEC position of the FocP. This is the position where the verb is given the necessary semantic emphasis which triggered the movement. Another syntactic restriction to verb focus movement is the present perfect tense which is indicated by the auxiliary 'lẹ' in Idoma. No verbal element is allowed to move over the present perfect tense auxiliary element in Idoma language. In the area

of morphophonemic constraint to verb focus movement, only nominalised verbs or VPs can move to SPEC of FocP because only nominal elements occupy clause initial position in Idoma.

6. Conclusion

Syntax is one of the key components of linguistics and acts as the bridge between form and meaning. Therefore, any investigation into the syntactic behaviour of linguistic elements constitute an important feature for providing descriptive adequacy for such a language for the development of the language and promotion of the culture of the society the uses it. The movement of verbs and adverbs into focus position in Idoma is supported by the focus marker 'na' which comes immediately after the focused item. Predicate focus construction semantically implies that the action in focus is being isolated from other possible actions that maybe described by the sentence and it is parameterized in varying ways in across languages. Verb focus movement makes Idoma one of the languages that allow such movement universally with the movement parameter of 'verb rising' and the verb or adverb rises out of the TP into the FocP. Therefore, Idoma can be typologically classified as one of the languages that verbs and adverbs can move into SPEC. Verb focus movement is a prepositioning movement in Idoma.

References

- Adejoh, M.O. (2016). The basic clause structure in Idoma. *JOLAN (Journal of linguistics association of Nigeria), Supplement 1: Juxtapositions in Nigerian languages*.
- Agbo, O. O. (2009). *Introduction to Idoma language*. Amazing Grace Publishers.
- Ape, G. O. (2015). Morpho – phonemic hindrances to standard Idoma orthography. *Journal of literature, languages and linguistics* Vol. 13. www.ijster.org
- Awobuluyi, O. (1987). Towards a typology of coalescence. *Journal of West African languages* 17. 5-22
- Ayodele, S.C., Nwarunta, N.F. and Oguntuase, M.B. (2018). A comparative syntactic analysis of focus construction: A case study of Igbo and Yourba languages. *KIU journal of humanities*. <https://ijhumas.com/ojs/index.php/niuhumas/article/view/417>
- Baker, M. C. and Steward O. T. (1999). Verb movement, object and serialization. *North east linguistics societ.*, Vol 29. Article 3. <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/nels/vol29/iss1/3>
- Banga, C. L. and Suri, J. (2015). The role of language in human life. *International journal of English, Language, Literature and Humanities*. Vol 3 (7): 180-197.
- Carstens, V., Hornstein N & Seely, T. D. (2016). Head-Head relations in Problems of projection. *The Linguistic Review*: 67-86. <https://doi.org/10.1515/tlr-2015-0014>
- Chomsky, N. (1981). *Lectures on government and binding*. Foris.
- Chukwukere, F. N. and Ajileye, M. O (2024). The national language policy and the demand for indigenous language literacy in Nigeria. *International Journal of Humanities, Social Sciences and Management*. Vol 4(40): 301-312.
- Güldemann, T. and Fiedler, I. (2013). Verb fronting in Bantu in typological perspective. Unpublished ms. Humboldt University Berlin.

- Hein, J. (2017). Doubling and do-support in verbal fronting: Towards a typology of repair operation. *Glossa: a journal of general linguistics* 2(1). <https://doi.org/10.5334/gjgl.161>
- Hosono, M. (2018). Constraints on movement. In *Working papers in Scandinavian syntax* 100. <https://lingbuzz/004261>
- Nwankwere, A. U. N. (2020). The need to teach and learn indigenous languages as general courses in Nigerian tertiary institution for national cohesion. *JOLAN* Vol 23(1): 121-138.
- Olagbaju, O. O. and Akinsowon, F. I. (2014). The use of Nigerian languages in formal education: challenges and solutions. *Journal of Education and Practice*. Vol 5 (9): 123-127.
- Radford, A. (2004). *Minimalist syntax: exploring the structures of English*. CUP.
- Richards, N. (2016). *Contiguity theory*. MIT Press.
- Tabe, F. (2015). Adverbs in Kenyang. *International journal for linguistics and communication*, Vol 3:1. 112-133 <https://10.15640/ijlc.v3n1a13>
- Umaru, J. Y. (2016). The syntax of relative clause construction in Idoma. A thesis submitted to Nasarawa State University, Keffi.
- UNESCO. unesco.org
- Van Valin, R. D. Jr. (2005). *Exploring the syntax-semantic interface*. CUP

Appendix 1

Abbreviations used

SPEC – Specifier	AUX - Auxiliary	ADV – Adverb
NMLZ – Nominalised	FUT – Future tense	HAB – Habitual aspect
FOC – Focus	PST – Past tense	VP – Verb phrase
INF – Infinitive verb	PRS – Present tense	