

DP MOVEMENT IN ENGLISH AND NAIJA

Akinyemi AKINMURELE & Olalekan Ayofe ADESINA

Department of English, University of Ibadan

Abstract

Determiner Phrase (DP) movement plays a crucial role in the description and learning of human languages such as English and an emergent language like Naija. Previous studies on syntax of Naija examined relativisation, phrase structure and question formation, with little attention paid to DP movement in Naija, which is important for understanding semantic interpretation in the language and may pose challenges to the learning of English among L1 speakers of Naija. This study, therefore, explores possible realisations of DP-movement in English and Naija, examining their areas of convergence and divergence in terms of the derivations that trigger DP movement, their syntactic features and patterns. Noam Chomsky's Minimalist Program served as the framework. Using a qualitative research approach, English data were drawn from selected English syntax textbooks authored by first language users of English, while Naija sentences were extracted from BBC-Naija articles. Data gathered were subjected to syntactic analysis. The findings reveal that DP movement in both languages is triggered by passivisation, DP-raising, ergativity and middle constructions. While clefting also triggers DP movement in English, such derivation is not permissible in Naija. As an alternative, Naija allows focusing, achieved through the focus marker 'na'. DP movement in both languages is constrained by Extended Projection Principle, case licensing, and locality conditions. While English permits DP raising, Naija employs periphrastic (e-be-like-say) structures. Passivisation is permissible in Naija through the application of non-Perf 'dey' as last resort. These findings contribute to the broader understanding of movement syntax in contact languages, reinforcing the role of economy and feature checking in syntactic derivation. Naija exhibits greater structural flexibility, often substituting movement with alternative strategies.

Keywords: DP movement, Syntax of Naija, Emergent language, Standardisation of Naija

Introduction

The spread in the use of Naija, an emergent indigenous language in Nigeria, has informed its advancement from a low prestige language to a high status one; this has also earned it a massive attraction from linguistic researchers. As described by Aziza (2015), Naija is an indo-exogenous language in Nigeria. This description is based on the view that Naija bridges between English (an exogenous language) and the numerous indigenous languages of Nigeria. Although its emergence is often correctly connected to the need to fulfill certain restricted communication needs among people who have no common language, it is recognised today as a Nigerian language (Agbo and Plag, 2020). Based on empirical data on Naija usage in Nigeria, Eluke (2021) posits that the language is distinct from any variety of English and that it has gloriously attained a status of a mother-tongue or first language in some cities in Nigeria. In his defence of Naija with respect to the national language question, Igboanusi (2008: 14) describes Nigerian Pidgin (another name for Naija) as 'the only truly neutral indigenous Nigerian language'. This thought is also shared by Balogun (2013) and Aboh (2025), as its usage now cuts across the social strata (regions, ethnicity, education, religion, age and the like (Bob & Obiukwu, 2022)). Today, Naija is used in Nigeria as principal language of commerce, mass media, and even as language of instruction in schools as well as public institutions in Sapele, Warri and other areas of Delta and River States of Nigeria (Liman & Usman, 2017). Commenting on its usage in many urban cities in Nigeria, Eluke (2021: 53) adds that Naija has continued to dominate the linguistic landscape of Nigeria alongside the English language. It is also becoming increasingly used in literary or creative writing (Balogun, 2013; Oyewusi, Adekanmbi & Akinsade, 2020).

The consideration of Naija as a mother tongue (as claimed in some parts of Nigeria) compels scholars to study the various aspects of the language such as its sociolinguistic features (Igboanusi, 2008; Deuber, 2005; Balogun, 2013; Iwuchukwu and Okafor, 2017; Eluke, 2021), aspects of its semantics (Oyewusi et al, 2020), lexico-semantic processes (Mowarin, 2010), phonology (Mafeni, 1971; Elugbe, 2020; Lawrence-Akah, Onuoha & Ubongobo, 2026),

morphology (Babalola, 2021) and syntax (Aziza, 2015; Motanya, Toro & Nasir, 2016; Ajenifunja, 2025). Studies on its syntax, particularly, have examined relativisation (Mowarin & Maledo, 2010; Okechukwu, 2012), phrase structure (Ajenifuja, 2025), number marking in nouns, number and gender marking in pronouns and question formation (Aziza, 2015, Mowarin, 2012), morphosyntactic features (Akande & Okesola, 2021), syntactic rules (Mowarin, 2004), tense, mood and aspect (Mowarin, 2008), internal structure of its noun phrase (Mowarin, 2010), determiners and adjectives (Mowarin, 2013). These studies seem to overlook DP-movement in Naija, which is important for understanding semantic interpretation in the language.

One of the universal features of human languages is movement. All human languages exhibit movement of constituents from one place to another, adhering to constraints that ensure grammaticality and interpretability. Among other syntactic frameworks that account for movement operation in languages, the Minimalist Program tends to proffer explanatory adequacy which improves learnability of human languages. Central to syntactic structure is DP-movement, as it allows elements, particularly DPs, to shift positions for case checking, agreement and interpretation. Some linguists (Longobardi, 2001; Ticio, 2003; Carnie, 2006) argue that DP-movement is not arbitrary but follows strict constraints, ensuring that only necessary elements are displaced. Chomsky (1995) suggests that movement of DPs is feature-driven, meaning that DPs move to satisfy requirements like the Extended Projection Principle (EPP) or to check case features. However, others suggest that movement should be minimised to maintain economy in derivations (Bošković & Messick, 2017). This ongoing debate highlights how DP movement shapes sentence structure while adhering to syntactic principles. In light of these postulations, this study examines movement of Determiner Phrase in English and Naija with a view to identifying possible realisations of DP movement; and comparing and contrasting movement operation in both languages. This research effort will not only enhance the learning of the syntax of English in second language context and Naija, an emergent language, but will also further strengthen the literature on the standardisation of Naija syntax.

Theoretical Framework

Noam Chomsky's Minimalist Program (MP), adopted as theoretical framework

for this study, seeks to explain syntactic structures using the most economical and computationally efficient principles. Central to MP is the concept of movement, where elements shift positions within a derivation to satisfy interface conditions. Key operations include Merge, which combines syntactic objects, and Move (or Internal Merge), which accounts for displacement phenomena (Chomsky, 1995; Carnie, 2006). Movement is constrained by principles such as Phase Theory, which posits that syntactic structures are built in phases, and Relativised Minimality, which restricts movement across intervening elements. The Copy Theory of Movement (Corver and Nune, 2007) maintains that moved elements leave copies rather than traces. Other constraints, such as the Minimal Link Condition (Heck & Muller, 2016; Yuya, 2021) and the Phase Impenetrability Condition (Witkoś, 2021) regulate movement to ensure grammaticality. These concepts form the analytical framework for investigating DP movement in Naija and English in this paper.

In the Minimalist Program, movement refers to the syntactic operation that repositions elements within a sentence to fulfill grammatical requirements, such as agreement, case checking, or feature checking. It involves moving constituents like subjects, objects, or wh-phrases from their original positions to new ones, often dictated by the needs of sentence structure and interpretation. Movement is driven by the need to satisfy formal features like EPP (Extended Projection Principle) and occurs in two forms: overt (visible in surface structure) and covert (operating at the level of logical form). This mechanism reflects the minimalist goal of deriving complex structures from simple, universal principles, reducing the complexity of syntactic operations.

Overt movement involves syntactic operations before Spell-Out, affecting the surface structure of a sentence, as seen in English wh-movement, where elements like “what” move to the sentence front (“What did you read?”). This type ensures compliance with grammatical rules affecting pronunciation and word order. Covert movement occurs post-Spell-Out, affecting logical form (LF) rather than surface structure crucial for semantic interpretation. An example is quantifier raising, where the scope of a quantifier is resolved without altering the surface structure, allowing sentences like “Everyone loves someone” to have multiple interpretations. Together, overt and covert movements illustrate syntax's role in fulfilling phonological and semantic needs, balancing syntax and meaning (Chomsky 1995, 1998).

Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive research design and qualitative method of analysis, ensuring that DP movements in English and Naija are thoroughly and systematically described. English data were sourced from recent and relevant English syntax published by first language (L1) users of English while the Naija data were sourced from BBC-Naija news articles. The choice of BBC Naija as primary data source was motivated by its unique position as a standardised and authoritative repository that bridges the gap between informal oral usage and formal written discourse, offering a consistent orthographic representation of Naija which can be revisited for revalidation. Books on English syntax authored by L1 speakers of English were preferred and considered suitable for this study because the sentences provide almost perfect representation of ideal/grammatical sentences in English. This gives some assurance that English in the second language context, which characterises the authors of this paper, does not influence or distort the accuracy of the data. Specifically, Luigi Burzio's *Italian syntax: A Government and Binding approach* (1986), Andrew Carnie's *Syntax: A generative introduction* (2006), and Andrew Radford's *Analysing English Sentence Structure* (2009) were selected. Sentences from BBC-Naija news were preferred because this method helped to mitigate the challenges associated with the orthography of Naija. Syntactic constructions involving DP structures were purposively selected from both sources. The data gathered were subjected to comparative syntactic analysis to account for similarities and discrepancies between English and Naija DPs.

DP movements in English and Naija

Previously, noun phrases (NPs) were viewed as being headed by nouns, with determiners serving as optional modifiers. However, within DP Hypothesis by Abney, determiners are analysed as the functional heads of nominal phrases, forming Determiner Phrases (DPs). DP movement operation can be motivated by syntactic processes such as passivisation, DP raising, ergativity, middle construction and cleft/focus.

DP movement in English passive structures

van Riemsdijk and Williams (1986) argue that DP movements in English can manifest in various ways as far as passive construction is concerned. In their claim, they highlight DP preposing and DP post-posing, verbal morphology

and case assignment as processes and components involved.

Sentences 1 and 2 below are further analysed to exemplify DP pre-posing in English syntax.

1a. The teachers were rewarded ~~the teachers~~.

2a. Ken will have been promoted ~~Ken~~.

In the structures above, the transitive verbs “rewarded” (1a) and “promoted” (1b) retain copies of moved items as their objects, observing the principle of Copy-Delete theory. The schema shows that the DPs, “the teachers” (1a) and “Ken” (2a) originated within VP (complement) and they are externally merged with Spec of CP, which is initially phonetically unrealised in the altered structure (structural change). While undergoing movement, both “the teachers” and “Ken” leave copies in their original position for semantic interpretation. In the active form, sentences 1a and 2a can be restructured as seen in 1b and 2b below, reflecting the origins of the patients in the sentence.

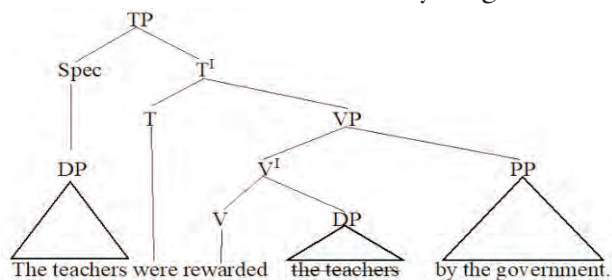
1b. * $\emptyset$ rewarded the teachers.

2b. * $\emptyset$ will have promoted Ken.

The external argument positions are phonetically null as the structures lack subjects. Nullifying the original subjects occurs as an attempt to emphasise the patient stylistically and the sentences become ungrammatical due to the violation of EPP (extended projection principle). EPP conditions every clause to have a subject. To resolve this ungrammaticality, the closest DPs (“the teachers” and “Ken”) are attracted and necessitated to occupy the position, satisfy EPP and Case licensing.

In English, movement of external argument rightward to the right periphery of the structure is permissible through insertion of “by-phrase”. The unexpressed agents in agentless passivisation will be re-introduced within “by-phrase”. Consider the following sentences.

1c. The teachers were rewarded by the government.



In passivisation, the agent can be moved to the VP complement position, through the activation of “by-insertion” as a last resort, which saves the structure from crashing. This reveals that DP movement in the English language observes last resort, Attract Closest and MLC principles.

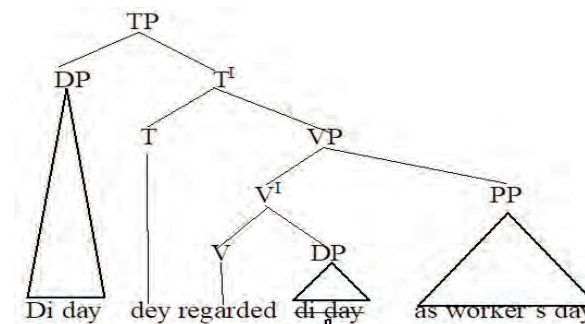
Passive constructions in Naija

Movement of DP from an argument position to A-bar position is realisable in Naija. Due to its simplicity, Naija speakers often subscribe to active structures to simply communicate their intention to one another. This does not imply that passivisation is impossible in Naija. Structures 3-5 below provide examples of passive constructions in Naija.

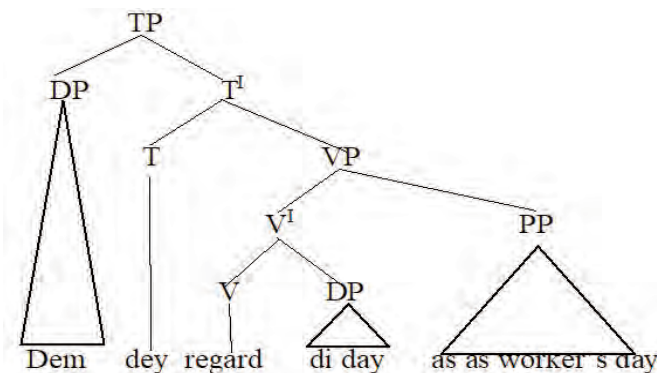
3a. Di day dey regarded as worker's day.

DET day ASP regard + en as worker's day

'The day is regarded as worker's day.'



3b. Dem dey regard di day as worker's day.



3c. * $\emptyset$ dey regarded di day as worker's day

4. [TP [DP Oda dey [VP maintain [AdvP across di nation.]]]]
 Order ASP maintain+en across DET nation
 Order was maintained across the nation.

5. [TP [DP Di protester dey [VP release [AdvP immediately]]]]
 DET protester ASP release+en immediately
 The protester was released immediately.

In sentence 3, DP movement triggered by passivisation is illustrated. While 3b reveals the original position of the patient “di day” in the VP complement position, sentence 3a explains the origin of “di day” in the external argument position. For stylistic effect, the agent is unexpressed in 3a, which makes the superficial subject position lexically empty as in 3c. Thus, 3c becomes ungrammatical because it violates EPP which conditions all clauses to have an overt subject (Carnie, 2006). This structure cannot pass at LF with the ungrammaticality unresolved. Hence, the closest DP is attracted to fill the empty external argument position to satisfy EPP and Case licence.

Requirement to check syntactic features and assignment of nominative Case in the Spec of TP triggers “di day” movement, satisfying the EPP by ensuring that the subject position in the clause is filled. In this transformation, “di day” moves to the Spec-TP position, leaving behind a copy in its original object position. The movement is also triggered by the need to shift the focus of the sentence from the agent to the patient, aligning with the discourse conditions typical of passivisation. This movement satisfies locality conditions such as shortest move, attract closest principle and MLC as there is no intervening element between the original position of “di day” and its target position in Spec-TP. Additionally, the structure raises questions about case assignment. In the active sentence, “di day” receives an accusative case from the verb “regard”. In the passive structure, this case is unavailable, and “di day” must instead receive a nominative case, which is reassigned in its new subject position. The auxiliary “dey” functions as a tense marker and contributes to the passive interpretation, but it does not fully inflect the verb, which is typical of Naija constructions.

Sentences 4 and 5 illustrate the same DP movement operation. In the sentences, “oda” (order) and “di protester” originated as the objects of the sentences but the focus on these patients rather than the agents renders the agents unexpressed. A sentence cannot be without a subject because the nominative case must be checked and interpreted within the spec of CP. Therefore, patients

“oda” and “di protester” are moved to fill this empty position and the principles such as EPP, shortest move, attract closest principle and MLC are satisfied.

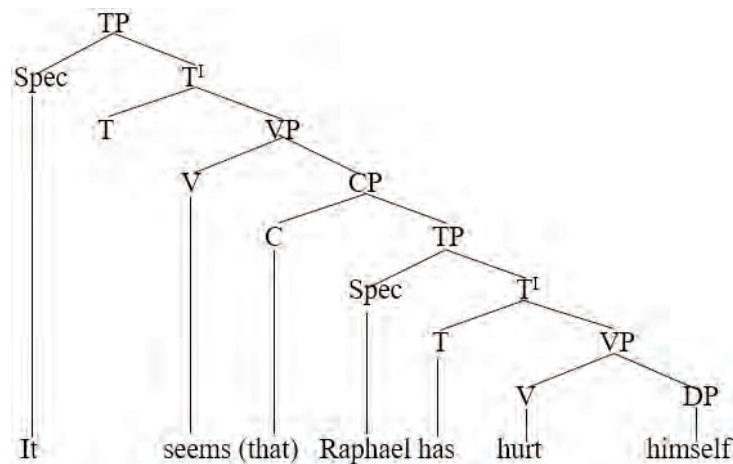
Both languages maintain MLC and shortest move conditions in passivisation. In passive constructions, elements that are moved are the closest to the empty superficial node which facilitates the movement and also makes the structure grammatically correct. Any attempt to violate these locality conditions might result in ungrammatical sentences. Passivisation in Naija necessitates insertion of the auxiliary verb “dey” to passivise the main verb, turning it to participle for grammaticality and last resort satisfaction.

Contrastive statement

In the English language, passivisation is a syntactic process where the internal argument is grammatically required to move to the spec of TP to satisfy EPP condition and receive nominative case, a process motivated by the absorption of the verb's external theta-role and accusative case-assigning properties. Conversely, data from BBC Naija demonstrates that Naija achieves similar semantic purpose without the “be + -en” inflectional feature. Instead, it requires utilising the aspectual marker “dey” which does not necessarily trigger the same forced movement to a subject position for case-checking. The implication of this contrast is that while English movement is mandatory due to its strict inflectional requirements for subject-verb agreement, Naija allows for a more flexible “pseudo-passive”, where the DP can remain or move based on discourse prominence rather than rigid morphological necessity. This suggests a parametric setting in Naija that favours lexical transparency over the complex, abstract feature-checking mechanisms that define English sentential architecture.

Raising in English

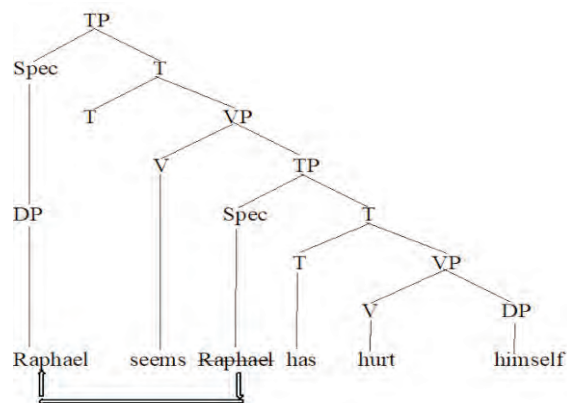
Raising, another important realisation of DP movements in English, is a movement operation that displaces an argument from a lower node, as a subject of embedded clause, to becoming a direct object of the matrix clause. Sichel (2007) defines raising as the extraction of the subject of a complement and making it the subject or direct object of the main verb. This movement is common in English, to align English clauses with the economy principle of MP. Alexiadou (2003) argues that raising can be achieved through raising verbs as illustrated in sentences 6a and 6b below.



6a. [_{TP} [_{DP} It [_{VP} seems [_{TP} Raphael has hurt himself.]]]]

6b. [_{TP} [_{DP} Raphael [_{VP} seems [_{TP} Raphael to have hurt himself.]]]]

Sentences 6 above illustrate the raising of the subject of the complement/embedded clause to the subject position of the matrix clause. In 6a, "It", the subject of the sentence, satisfies EPP. In 6b, DP "Raphael" is moved from embedded clause, where it functions as subject, to the superficial subject position of matrix clause. Its movement can be described as upward or leftward movement, which results in raising of the embedded subject to a higher node. This is further represented in the structure below.



Both sentences 6a and 6b communicate the same thought: while (a) reveals the origin of "Raphael" in the subject position of embedded clause, (b) displays the promotion of "Raphael" from a lower node in spec of TP within embedded clause to superficial subject position in the spec of TP within the matrix clause using the raising verb "seems". Minimalist principles ensure that structures are derived with minimal effort. In minimalist terms, both versions of the structure are not only grammatical, they are also acceptable. Although minimalism argues that a derivation should occur with minimal efforts, as well as the most efficient means possible, the structure in 6a above is an assumptive expression; it is longer but still claims the most minimal route possible to make the expression. Also, 6b exemplifies DP-raising whereby the subject of the original clause "Raphael" has undergone an upward movement from the lower node to the object position in the expletive clause, making the expression an assertion rather than an assumption. This is also the minimal means to achieve assertion from the assumption presented in 6a, in English DP-raising context.

DP Raising in Naija

In Naija, raising structures differs slightly from what obtains in English, primarily because Naija does not use expletive subjects like "it" in the same way, nor does it commonly use verbs like "seem" or "appear" as raising verbs. Instead, Naija expresses similar meanings with a different syntactic structure and without the movement associated with raising in English. For instance, "Raphael seems to have hurt himself" can be translated to Naija as in 9:

8a. [_{TP} [_{DP} E [_{VP} be like [_{CP} say [_{TP} Raphael don hurt himself.]]]]]

It is like COMP Raphael PERF hurt himself

'It seems Raphael has hurt himself.'

There is no movement of "Raphael" from an embedded clause into the main clause to retain the original meaning of the structure because Naija lacks the raising verbs to retain the assumptive expression. The phrase "E be like say Raphael don hurt himself" keeps "Raphael" in its original position as the subject of the embedded clause, without attempting to make "Raphael" the matrix subject. Any attempts to raise "Raphael" to the superficial subject position will disrupt the original meaning of the sentence. For example, "Raphael seems tired" in English and "Raphael don hurt himself" in Naija have different meanings. While the former is an assumption, the latter is an assertion. This structure reflects how Naija typically handles expressions of assumption or

likelihood. Instead of using verbs like “seems” with expletive subjects, Naija relies on the expression “be like say,” followed by the clause that describes the assumed or perceived state.

Since Naija does not use raising in the same syntactic manner, speakers tend to use one of the following alternative expressions to convey the same meaning:

9a. [_{TP} [_{DP} Raphael dey [_{VP} look like [_{CP} say [_{TP} e don hurt himself.]]]]]

Raphael PROG look like COMP 3.SNGL PERF hurt himself
'Raphael seems to have hurt himself.'

9b. [_{TP} [_{DP} E dey [_{VP} show [_{CP} say [_{TP} Raphael don hurt himself.]]]]]

3.SNGL PROG show COMP Raphael PERF hurt himself

It appears that Raphael has hurt himself.

In Naija, raising structures are not applied in the same way as in English due to differences in syntactic structure and the absence of expletive subjects and raising verbs like “seems.” Instead, Naija speakers rely on fixed expressions like “look like say” and “dey show say” to communicate perception or assumption, leaving the subject within the original clause as in sentence 9 above. These structures maintain the meaning without needing to apply syntactic movement as seen in English raising. Examples are presented in 10 below.

10a. [_{TP} [_{DP} Market dey [_{VP} open market [_{PP} for Enugu State]]]]]

Market ASP open+en LOC Enugu State

Market places are opened in Enugu State.

DP raising that involves movement of an argument from a lower node to the spec of TP is possible but infrequent in Naija. DP raising can be achieved through passivisation in Naija as analysed previously in this study. Sentences 10a and 10b above tend to emphasise the original VP internal argument “market place” instead of whoever performs the action “open”. This renders the agent “dem” unnecessary to feature in the structure and gets omitted. Suppression of the agent makes the sentence violate EPP and the violation triggers “market place” raising to the spec of TP to receive nominative case and satisfy EPP. Following attract closest principles and shortest move claim that the

closest component is required to fit in.

Therefore, DP raising by raising verbs are not applicable in Naija but speakers of the language deploy equivalent expressions to communicate their assumptions, which is different to DP raising in some other languages, especially the English language because Naija lacks assumptive verbs that allow such DP raising. Similarly, DP raising is possible in Naija passive structures as exemplified in sentences 10a and 10b, “market place” is moved from object position in 10b to the subject position in 10a.

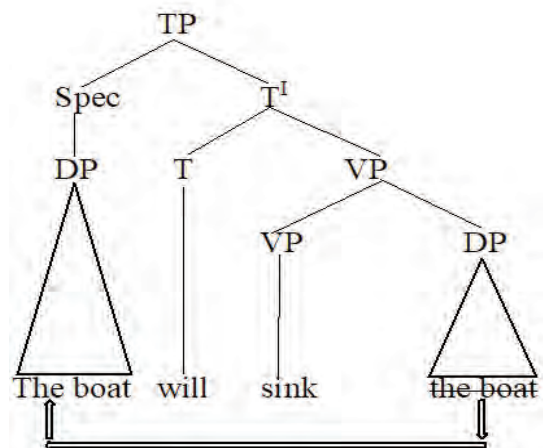
Contrastive statement

The syntactic operation of DP raising reveals a fundamental divide; English possesses a specific class of Raising Verbs including “seem” and “appear” that lack an external theta-role, thereby forcing the subject of an embedded clause to move to the spec of CP to check its case features, as seen in the example “Raphael seems to have injured himself.” In contrast, Naija, as evidenced by the BBC Naija structure “E be like say Raphael don injure himself”, lacks these specific verbal triggers and instead employs a base-generated expletive “E”, which satisfies the EPP, allowing the DP “Raphael” to stay within its original lower clause. This implies that Naija resists DP-raising because its functional heads do not possess the specific uninterpretable features that mandate cross-clausal movement. This proves that Naija operates as a “non-raising” language, relying on paratactic structures (placing clauses side-by-side), rather than the integrated hierarchical movement found in English, which fundamentally changes how “assumption” versus assertion is encoded syntactically.

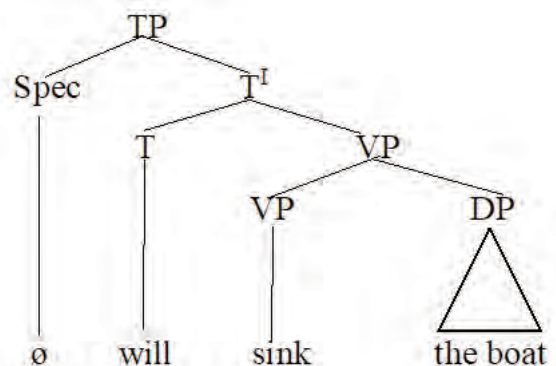
Ergative constructions in English

In English, ergative derivation is very common and instrumental in writing to achieve stylistic, pragmatic and discourse effects. Burzio (1986) characterises an ergative structure as one of the realisations of DP-movement in which the superficial subject DP originates as the underlying object of a transitive counterpart. This implies that an intransitive clause features as a transitive one with the transitive object corresponding to the ergative subject. The DP subject is moved into the superficial object position by a rule of DP movement. Sentences 11a and 11b below exemplify English Ergative structures.

11a.

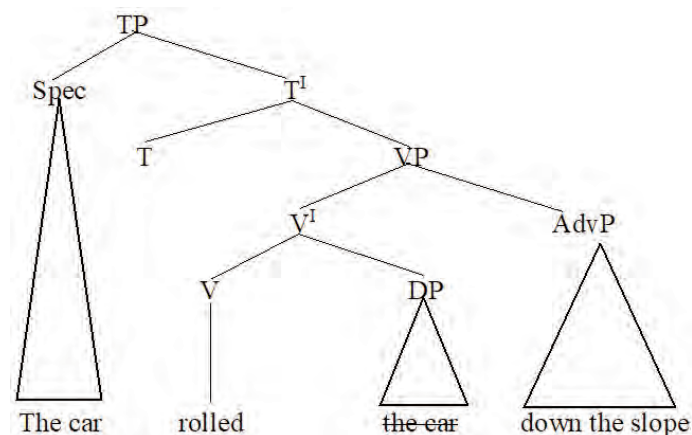


11b.

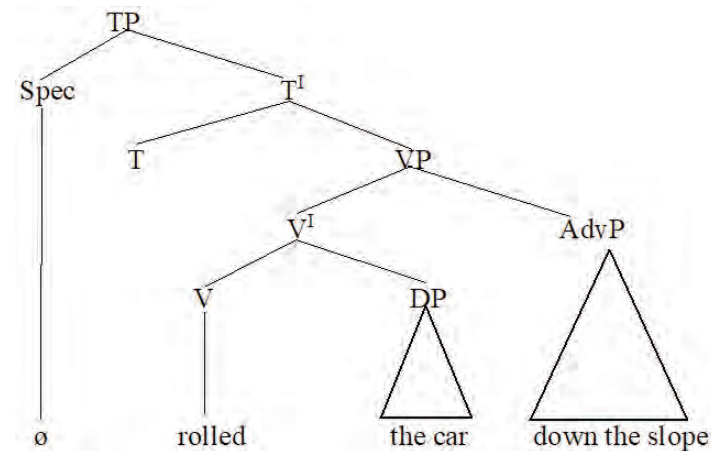


The structures above explain DP movement in English ergative construction. The transitive version of this sentence in 11b has "the boat" as the object while the superficial subject position remains unfilled. It is grammatically required to fill the empty spec of TP. This requirement triggers "the boat" to move out of the VP internal argument position for feature checking. This is not the same as passivisation because passivisation moves "the boat" to spec of TP, while its interpretation remains intact as the patient, ergative construction, moves the object of transitive version to the superficial subject position in the intransitive counterpart. Examples 11a and 12a can be realised as transitive as in 11b and 12b.

12a.



12b.



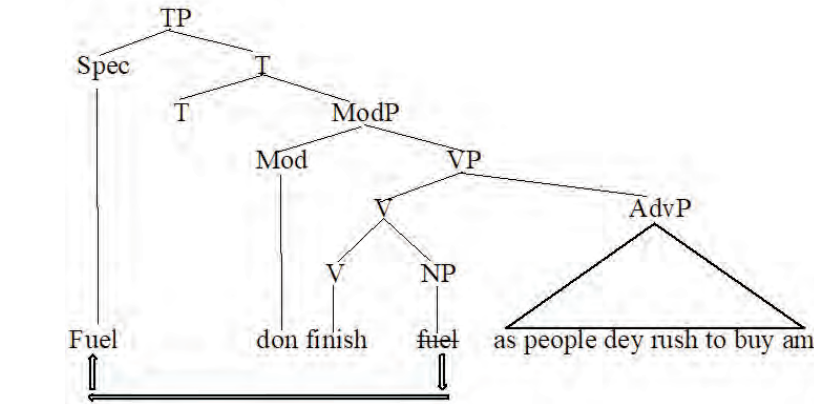
Burzio (1986), Radford (2009) and Woolford (2013) corroborate the fact that ergative construction is a type of DP movement operation, the same way passivisation is. The difference between these two operations is the scope of their result. When a clause is passivised, the object takes subject position and the subject can be partially or permanently neglected while the negligence does not affect the syntactic and semantic properties of the sentence. Ergative construction operates distinctly from this. The first step in ergativity changes the structure from transitive clauses such as 11b and 12b to intransitive in 11a

and 12a. During this process, superficial subjects are nullified; objects take the positions and act as doers rather than being recipients. The objects 'boat' and 'car' (in 11 and 12) can actually go through the actions independently. This, however, does not suggest that there could not have been agents for the events (verbs) expressed in the sentences.

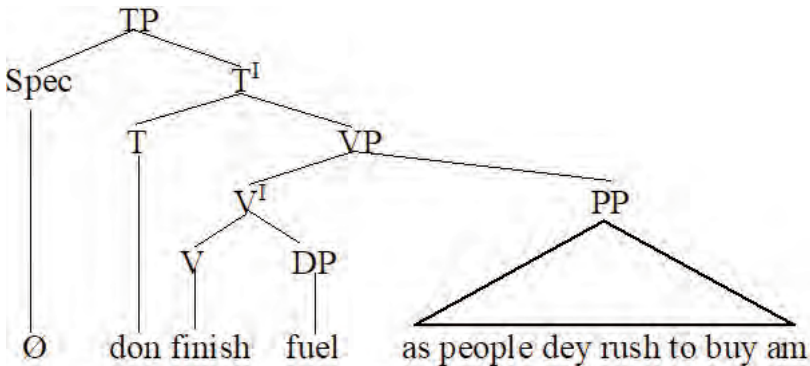
Ergative construction in Nigerian Pidgin

This type of operation is very common in Naija, compared to its English counterpart because of the simplicity of Naija syntax. For instance,

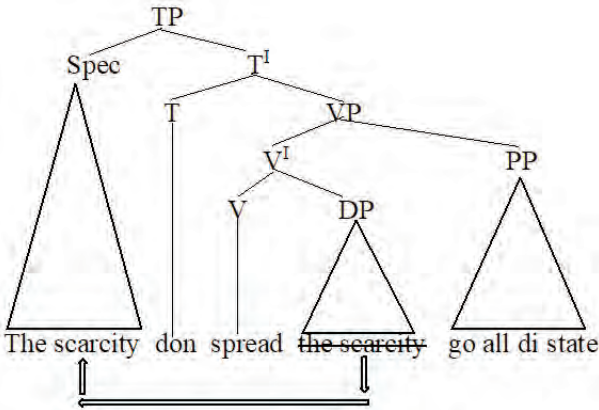
- 13a. Fuel don finish as people dey rush to buy am.
Fuel PERF finish because people PROG rush to buy it.
Fuel has finished because people are rushing to buy it.



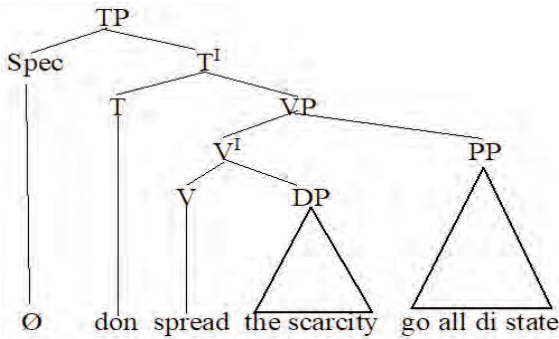
13b.



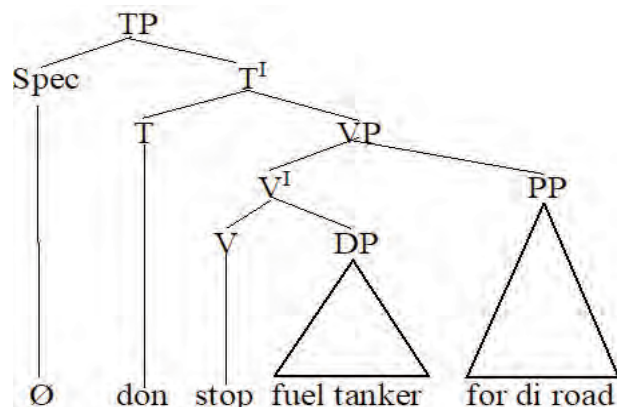
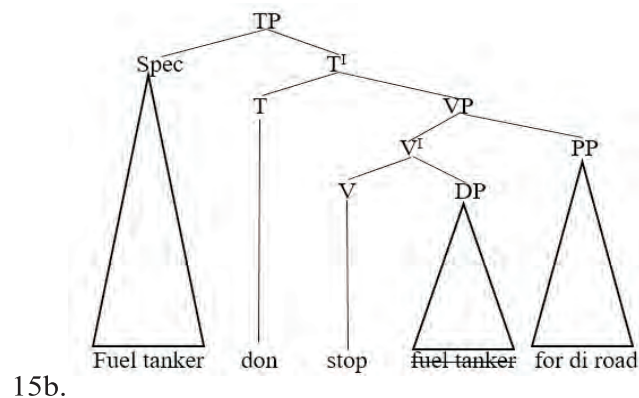
- 14a. Di scarcity don spread go all di states.
DET scarcity PERF spread LOC all DET states
The scarcity has spread to all di states.



14b.



- 15a. Fuel tanker don stop for di road
Fuel tanker PERF stop LOC DET road
Fuel tanker has stopped on the road



The structures above illustrate DP movement of ergativity. In 13a, the external argument “fuel” is claimed to originate in the VP internal argument position. The semantic features of the verb “finish” suggests that the action is not initiated by “fuel” but by an undeclared actor. The movement of “fuel” to the spec of TP is triggered by the need to satisfy EPP and case licensing. In ergative construction, the superficial subject position is lexically unrealised. The lexically absent spec of TP must be filled to satisfy EPP which states that all clauses must have an overt subject, and nominative case must be assigned in the external argument position. To satisfy this condition, fuel, originated in the VP complement position, is triggered to check and receive a nominative case in the spec of TP, satisfying EPP simultaneously.

Sentence 13b presents a distinct version of the structure in 13a. It includes a possible actor to initiate the action “finish” and return the DP “fuel” to its

original position to validate the analysis that “fuel” in 13a has undergone movement operation. Originally, “fuel” serves as object of the verb “finish” where it is assigned accusative Case, in ergativity construction, the subject position in 13b is lexically unrealised and the sentence lacks subject. The structure will crash at LF if case feature is not properly checked and EPP is not satisfied. The need to save the structure from crashing necessitates the movement of the object “fuel” to the superficial subject position and the sentence becomes ergative in which the object in transitive clause in 13b becomes subject in its intransitive counterpart of the same structure, as in 13a.

Equally, sentences 14a and 15a exemplify ergativity in Naija. “Scarcity” and “Fuel tanker” are actioned upon by certain undeclared subjects. These subjects are unexpressed and the nullifications render the structures ungrammatical because they violate EPP feature checking and case filter. To redeem the sentences and save them from crashing at spell-out, the original VP objects are necessitated to move to the lexically empty superficial subject position to check case feature and also satisfy EPP. The moved items leave copies of themselves in their original position pending the time the movement is processed as principle of Copy-Deletion theory demands. Structures 14b and 15b consolidate the analysis by presenting possible action initiators in the intransitive forms of the structures to show the original position of the displaced items.

Ogbulogo (1995: 86) claims that there are certain categories of verbs which enable movement operation that can derive ergative sentence in English. They include break, sink, capsize, scatter, tear, split, drown, thaw, melt, roll, hang, etc. Languages that have lexemes similar to the verbs highlighted by Ogbulogo above can easily demonstrate ergative transformation and this is revealed as one of the strengths of Naija in ergativity because its lexical verbs are mainly inherited from English. Therefore, it follows the same step to derive ergative sentences as exemplified above.

Contrastive statement

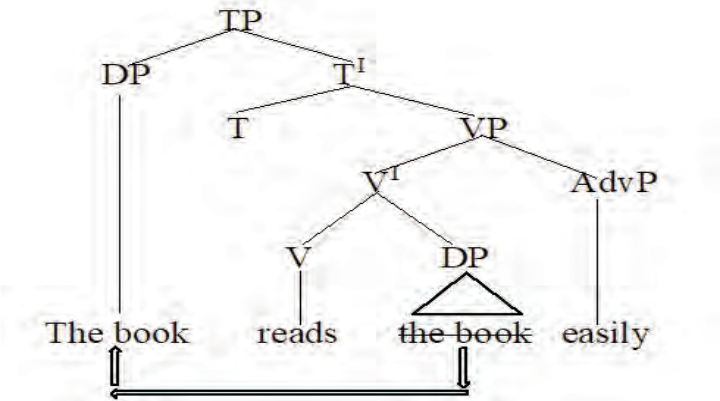
In English ergative constructions, the movement of the internal argument to the subject position is necessary to satisfy EPP. While Naija displays a similar surface structure in BBC Naija examples like “The scarcity don spread go oda states,” the movement is often motivated by serial verb constructions or directional

particles like “go” that provide the semantic “path” for the DP. The implication of this contrast is that English movement is purely a “structural fix” for an empty subject slot, whereas in Naija, the movement of the DP is part of a larger “event-building” strategy where the verb and its particles work together to license the DP.

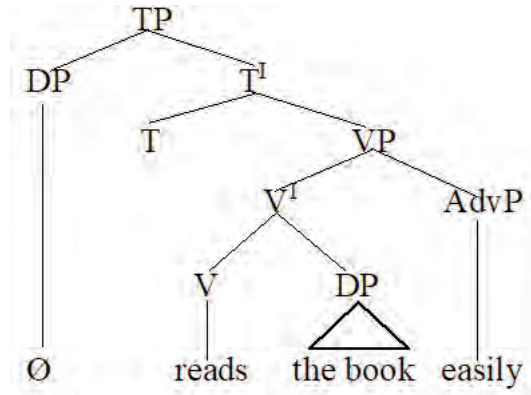
Middle construction in English

Middle constructions are syntactic structures derived from DP movement where the subject appears to both perform/experience and suffers/benefits an action or idea in sentence, with the agent being unexpressed or absent. In English, such constructions allow the subject to be interpreted as the experiencer or undergoer of the action, without specifying an external agent. To Keyser and Roeper (1984), middle constructions entail the interpretation of the subjects of sentences as their direct objects. The Minimalist Program framework helps to explain these constructions, where the subject is moved to a syntactic position typically occupied by an external argument, and the agent is either implied or absent.

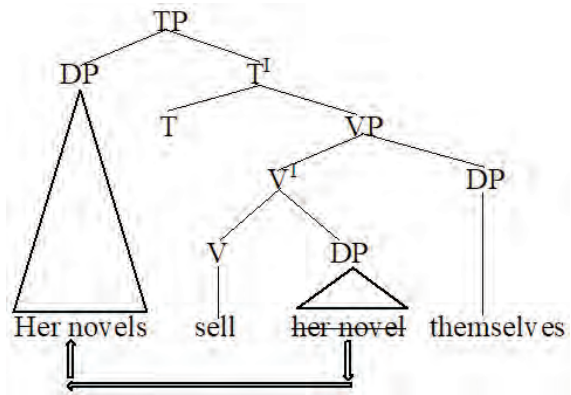
16a.



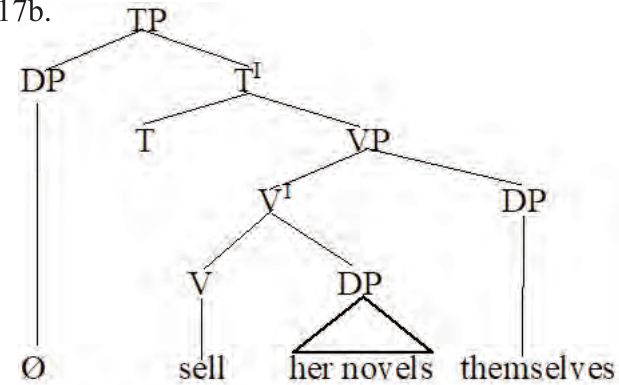
16b.



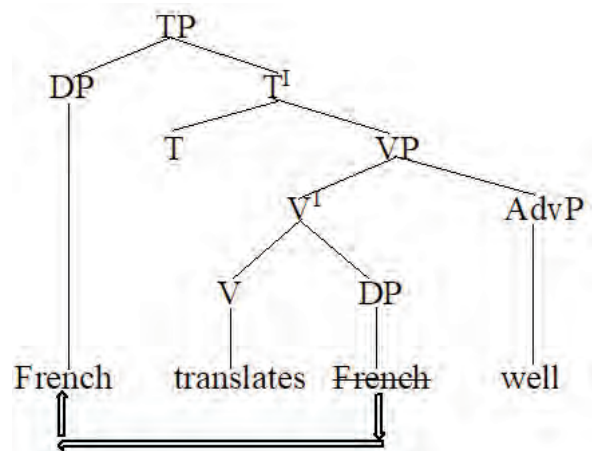
17a.



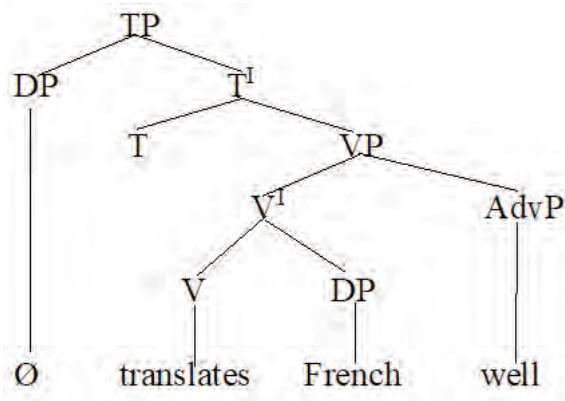
17b.



18a.



18b.



In sentence 16 above, the subject “the book” seems to be the one performing the action of reading, even though no external agent is involved. However, the semantic features of the DP “the book”, and those of the verb “reads” signal that the DP cannot undergo the process of reading. Movement or promotion of “the book” to the subject position demonstrates the relationship that different realisations of DP movement share. Supposed internal argument is externally merged with the lexically null spec of TP. This movement is triggered by the need to satisfy EPP and case conditions. In sentence 16a, the verb “reads” reveals that there is an implied actor that initiates the action while being omitted in the middle construction. As shown in 16b, the actor is omitted in middle

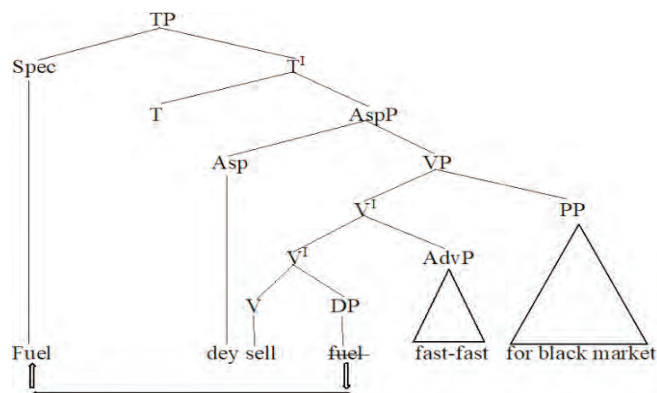
construction. The omission could lead to ungrammatical structure. To save the structure from crashing at LF as a result of actor deletion, patient/object is moved from the internal argument position to the external argument position, satisfying EPP and case filter.

The pairs of sentences in 17 and 18 similarly exemplify middle construction in English. In 17a, the DP “her novels” originated in the VP argument position where it has a copy present, but later deleted after the movement operation. The process of selling in the action has a semantic [+animate] feature which the DP “her novels” does not have. This corroborates the analysis that there is an unexpressed actor which initiates the action. The movement of the original external argument to the accusative case position is a requirement to satisfy grammatical constraints that might render the sentence ungrammatical at LF. When a sentence neither contains an overt actor, nor moves another DP to the position, the sentence violates EPP. Accusative case in the external argument must be checked at LF, otherwise, the merging would crash. To avoid crashing at LF, the VP internal argument is moved to satisfy the constraints and the merging operation converges. The same analytical procedure is applicable to sentence 18.

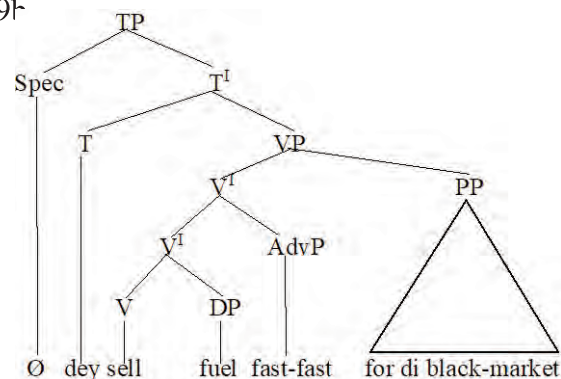
Middle construction in Naija

In Naija middle construction, a patient is expressed as an agent because the focus is on the action rather than actor or agent. In middle construction, once the emphasis is shifted from agent, it is rendered unneeded and then deleted. This gives the patient a promotion to superficial subject position and experience what it logically benefits or suffers from. Sentences 19 below exemplify middle construction in Naija.

- 19a. Fuel dey sell fast-fast for black market.
 Fuel PROG sell very-well LOC black market
 Fuel is selling very well in black market.



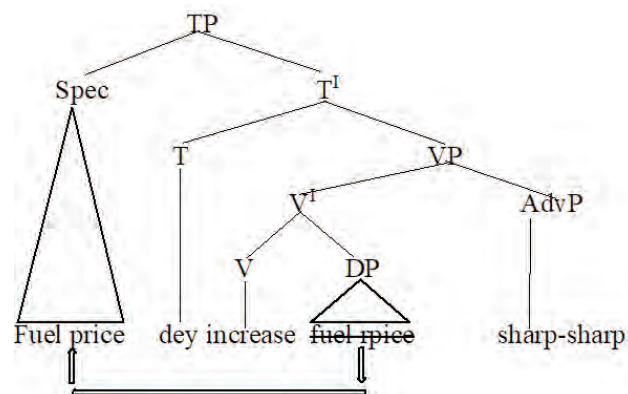
19b



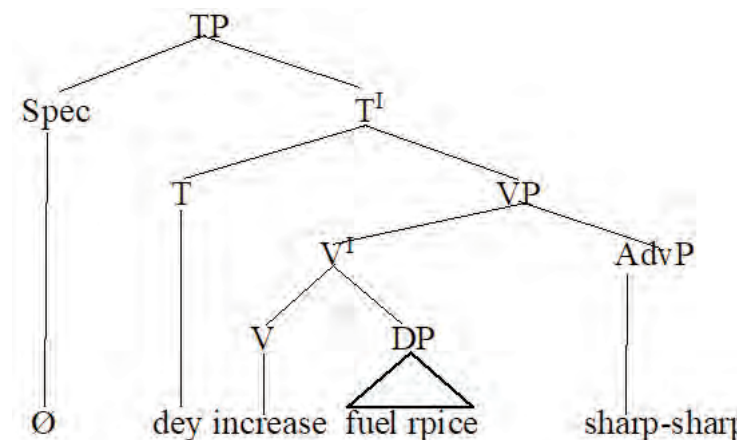
20a. Fuel price dey rise sharp-sharp

Fuel price PROG increase very fast

Fuel price is increasing very fast.



20b.



Sentence 19 above illustrates DP movement of middle construction in Naija. The semantic features of the DP “fuel” in the external argument position such as [-animate] and that of the verb “sell” [+animate] reveal that “fuel” cannot perform the action of selling while the sentence interprets “fuel” as the recipient. This shows that there is an implied actor that initiates the action of selling. The actor is omitted and the superficial subject position becomes lexically empty as presented in 19b. The structure becomes ungrammatical and it cannot succeed at LF because it lacks external argument to receive a nominative case. It also violates EPP. To solve the ungrammaticality and pass the structure at spell-out, as diagrammatised above, the VP internal argument “fuel” is triggered to move in to the empty superficial subject position to satisfy EPP and also receive nominative case in its landing site as against the accusative case it is assigned in its extraction site. In the minimalist program, the extraction site cannot be left empty during the movement process. Therefore, operation copy duplicates the word, while the word is being moved, the copy remains in the extraction site, pending the completion of the operation before it is deleted by operation delete. The movement process applies equally to “fuel price” in sentence 20. The increase in the fuel price is understood to be initiated by actors while the patient occupies the external argument position in middle construction.

Contrastive statement

In English, the middle construction is a restrictive movement operation where an internal argument moves to spec of TP to satisfy the EPP triggered by a

in Naija as analysed above lies in the claim that clefts are some kind of focusing, but they differ in structure. Plain cleft (Melčuk, 2025) is what exists in English where there are always matrix and embedded clauses, and the subject of the matrix clause is always the expletive “it”, and the verbal element is often 'was', which brings about its consideration as “it+was” clause. Such movement is guided by locality principles such as shortest move, attract closest and minimal link conditions. These principles condition syntactic movement to occur over the shortest possible distance, confining displacement to minimal domains.

Contrastive statement

Clefting in English involves a complex movement to a higher object position in “it-is” clause, creating a bi-clausal structure to highlight a specific DP, whereas Naija utilises a dedicated focus marker “na” to trigger immediate displacement to the left periphery. In the BBC Naija example “Na di day dem regard as worker's day,” the focus marker “na” acts as a functional head that attracts the DP directly to its specifier position, unlike the English “It was the day..”, which requires an expletive and a relative pronoun. The implication is that Naija has a much more direct “mapping” between focus and syntax, allowing for a “Low-to-High” movement that is more efficient than the English cleft. This suggests that the “Left Periphery” (the start of the sentence) in Naija is more active and accessible for DP movement than in English, providing a streamlined mechanism for emphasis that avoids the heavy clausal embedding characteristic of English focus strategies.

Conclusion

This study focused on analysing DP-movement in English and Naija through the lens of minimalist program, with emphasis on identifying possible DP-movement operation and its different realisations. Unarguably, Naija derives the bulk of its vocabulary from English, while its structure and function are closely affiliated to Nigeria's indigenous languages; this is evident in the data for this paper. In terms of movement operation and conformity with minimalist principles, these languages share certain syntactic phenomena. While they similarly compute structures the same way, they also have areas of dissimilarities concerning DP-movement. Although the analysis revealed that both English and Naija similarly exhibit DP-movement, there are areas of difference in computation and configuration. Among derivatives commonly featured in

these languages as a result of DP movement are passive structures, raising, ergativity and middle constructions. However, the difference in DP movement in both languages are in relation to cleft in English, as opposed to focus in Naija. In DP raising, while English conveys assumptions by raising from subject position of the embedded clause to the subject position in matrix clause, Naija lacks the raising verbs that enables such DP promotion, leading to the users of Naija adopting DP-raising equivalents when the needs arise. This process retains the interpretation of the sentence as an assumption before and after movement operation. In contrast, Naija does not allow DP raising because the language lacks raising verbs such as 'seem' or 'appear', which drive DP movement in English. Any attempts to undergo DP raising in Naija results in an assertive rather than assumptive expression.

The study confirms that while some minimalist principles such as feature-checking, attract closest, minimal link condition and the like apply to both languages, their implementation differs significantly, reflecting the typological differences between an inflectionally rich language like English and a creole language like Naija. These findings contribute to the broader understanding of movement operations in creole-influenced languages and provide further evidence of the distinct syntactic properties of Naija within the minimalist framework. English enforces movement through syntactic principles such as EPP, case theory, and minimal link condition, whereas Naija allows for more flexible structures where movement is often replaced by alternative strategies.

References

- Aboh, S.C. 2025. Attitudes towards Nigerian Englishes: Ethnic categorisation and underlying reasons for categorisation. *World Englishes*, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1111/weng.12728>
- Agbo, O.E and Plag, I. 2020. The relationship of Nigerian English and Nigerian Pidgin in Nigeria: Evidence from copula constructions in ICE-Nigeria. *Journal of Language Contact* 13. 351-388.
- Ajenifunja, M.O. 2025. Syntactic analysis of Pidgin English: Focus on the phrase structure. Project. Department of English, Arts, Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto. viii+77.
- Akande, T.A. and Okesola, S.O. 2021. Morpho-syntactic features of Nigerian Pidgin on radio programmes rendered in Naija. *Current Trends in*

- Nigerian Pidgin English A Sociolinguistic Perspective*: A.T. Akande & O. Salami (Eds.). Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter Mouton. 201–220.
- Alexiadou, A. 2003. Adjective syntax and (the absence of) noun raising in the DP. *Proceedings of the Workshop on Head Movement. UCLA 2003* pp. 1–39.
- Aziza, R.O. 2015. Aspects of the syntax of modern Nigerian Pidgin. *Selected Proceedings of the 44th Annual Conference on African Linguistics*. Ruth Kramer et al. (Eds). Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Proceedings Project. 11–16.
- Babalola, A. 2021. Morphological features of Nigerian Pidgin in the football commentary. *Journal of Universal Language* 22, 1. 27–64.
- Balogun, T.A. 2013. In defence of Nigerian Pidgin. *Journal of Languages and Culture* 4, 5. 90–98.
- Bob, P.O. and Obiukwu, E.N. 2022. Exploring the linguistic status of the Nigerian Pidgin. *Preorajah* 7. 173–186.
- Bošković, Z. and Messick, T. 2017. Derivational economy in syntax and semantics. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Linguistics*. M. Aronoff (Ed.) Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Burzio, L. 1986. *Italian syntax: A Government and Binding approach*. Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Carnie, A. 2006. *Syntax: A generative introduction*. 3rd ed. Blackwell Publishers.
- Chomsky, N. 1995. *The Minimalist Program*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Chomsky, N. 1998. *Minimalist inquiries: MIT Occasional Papers in Linguistics*. Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
- Corver, N.F.M and Nunes, J. 2007. *The copy theory of movement*. John Benjamins
- Deuber, D. 2005. *Nigerian Pidgin in Lagos: Language Contact, Variation and Change in an African Urban Setting*. London: Battlebridge.
- Elugbe, B. 2020. *Nigerian Pidgin English phonology. A handbook of varieties of English*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter. 831–842.
- Eluke, D.H. 2021. Naija Pidgin as an indispensable linguistic orphan. *International Journal of Strategic Research in Education, Technology and Humanities* 9, 1. 52–58.
- Heck, F and Muller, G. 2016 Deriving locality constraints in the Minimalist Program. <https://home.uni-leipzig.de/muellerg/c12.pdf>
- Igboanusi, H. 2008. Empowering Nigerian Pidgin: A challenge for status

- planning? *World Englishes*, 27, 1. 68–82, 2008
- Iwuchukwu, G.C.S and Okafor, M. 2017. Nigerian Pidgin in the 21st century: Any hope of surviving the opposition from English, Nigerian Languages and Foreign Languages? *Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal* 4, 11. 107–118.
- Keyser, J. and Roeper, T. 1984 On the middle constructions and ergative constructions in English. *Linguistic Inquiry*, 15. 381–516.
- Lamidi, M. T. and Akinmurele, A.T. 2015. The relative construction and the wh-question in Edo: Implications for the ESL learner. O. Ndimele (Ed). *Language endangerment: Globalisation and the fate of minority languages in Nigeria. A festschrift for Appolonia Uzoaku Okwudishu* (491–503). Port Harcourt: Grand Orbit Communication. Ltd.
- Lawrence-Akah, N.C., Onuoha, E.U. and Ubongobo, O.C. 2026. Phonological reorganisation and orthographic uniformity in Nigerian Pidgin: A review of administrative discourse. *Akasa Multidisciplinary Journal* 3, 2. 184–194.
- Liman, A.T. and Usman, B. 2017. Linguistics diversity and Nigerian languages dynamism. *Education and Science Journal of Policy Review and Curriculum Development* 7, 1. 66–74
- Longobardi, G. 2001. The structure of DPs: Some principles, parameters and problems. *The handbook of contemporary syntactic theory*. Malden, MS: Blackwell. 562–603.
- Mafeni, B. 1971 Nigerian Pidgin. *The English Language in West Africa*. J. Spenser (ed). London: Longman. Pp. 95–112.
- Mel'čuk, I. 2025. The cleft construction: A formal definition. *Russian Journal of Linguistics* 29, 2. 218–249. doi.org/10.22363/2687-0088-41329.
- Motanya, C.C., Toro, M.G. and Nasir, A.M. 2016. A study of syntax of Nigerian Pidgin and Creole. *Interdisciplinary Journal of African and Asian Studies* 1, 2, 14–25.
- Mowarin, M. 2004. *A contrastive analysis of some syntactic rules in English and Nigerian Pidgin*. Ph.D Thesis. Department of English, Arts University of Ibadan.
- Mowarin, M. 2008. Tense, mood and aspect in Nigerian pidgin. *Language Forum* 34, 2, 71–86
- Mowarin, M. 2010. Some lexico-semantic processes in Nigeria. *Proceedings of the Conference on Nigerian Pidgin, 2009*.

- Mowarin, M. 2012. Question formation in Nigerian Pidgin. *Journal of the Linguistic Association of Nigeria* 15. 95-109
- Mowarin, M. 2013. Determiners and adjectives in English and Nigerian Pidgin- A contrastive inquiry. *English Linguistics Research* 2, 2. 160-171.
- Mowarin, M and Maledo, R. 2010. Relativisation in English and Nigerian Pidgin: A Contrastive inquiry. *Abraka Humanities Review* 3, 1. 44 – 59.
- Ogbulogo, C.U. 1995. A comparative study of movement rules in English and Igbo Syntax. PhD Thesis. Arts, University of Lagos. vii+174
- Okechukwu, O.C. 2012, Relativisation in Nigerian Pidgin English. *Journal of Arts and Contemporary Society* 4. 51-56.
- Oyewusi, W.F., Adekanmbi, O. and Akinsade, O. 2020. Semantic enrichment of Nigerian Pidgin English for contextual sentiment classification. *Proceedings of the 8th International Conference on Learning Representations*. Accessed on 20 January, 2026 at https://iclr.cc/virtual_2020/
- Radford, A. 2009. *An introduction to English sentence structure*. Cambridge University Press.
- Sichel, I. 2007. Raising in DP revisited. *New horizons in the analysis of control and raising*. S. Dubinsky & W. Davies (Eds.). New York: Springer. 15-34.
- Ticio, E.M. 2003. On the structure of DPs. PhD Thesis. University of Connecticut. Accessible at <https://digitalcommons.lib.uconn.edu/dissertations/AAI3095847>
- van Riemsdijk, H. and Williams E. 1986 *Introduction to the theory of grammar*. MIT Press.
- Witkoś, J. (2021) Agree, move and the scope of the Phase Impenetrability Condition. *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia*, 56. 489-510. <https://doi.org/10.2478/stap-2021-0011>
- Woolford, E. 2013. Ergativity and transitivity. *Linguistic Inquiry* 46, 3. 489-531.
- Yuya, S. 2021. On the Minimal Link Condition in comparison to the Phase Impenetrability Condition. <https://doi.org/10.15017/4377734>