

GRAMMAR AND THE MORPHEMIC FORMATIONS OF WORDS IN UKWUÁNÍ LANGUAGE

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Abstract

This study examines grammar and the morphemic formations of words in Úkwúání, an Igboid variety spoken in Ndokwa West Local Government Area, Delta State, Nigeria. The aim is to describe the morphological processes through which new words are formed and how they function within Úkwúání grammar. Data were elicited in 2025 from six native speakers aged 35–70, residing in Obiaruku, kwale and Aboh, using a wordlist and sentence frame technique. Adopting a descriptive-morphological approach, the study identifies seven main processes: affixation, reduplication, compounding, and tone-based derivation. Findings show that Úkwúání relies heavily on prefixal and tonal changes for nominalization and verb derivation, uses reduplication for intensification and plurality, and forms compounds with a head-modifier order. The study contributes to knowledge by providing the first morphological description of Úkwúání, documenting dialect-specific morphemic patterns, and creating a baseline for comparative Igboid morphology.

Keywords: *Úkwúání, Morphology, Morpheme, Affixation, Reduplication, Igboid*

Introduction

Morphology studies the internal structure of words and the rules for word formation. In Igboid linguistics, most work has focused on Standard Igbo, while many dialects remain under-described (Ethnologue, NP 2024). Úkwúání is one such variety, spoken mainly in Ndokwa West, Delta State. Though it shares a genetic relationship with Igbo, it exhibits distinct grammatical and lexical features (Glottolog, NP 2023). Understanding how Úkwúání forms words at the morphemic level is essential for describing its grammar, supporting language teaching, and documenting dialectal diversity. At present, there is no dedicated study on Úkwúání word-formation processes. Existing Igbo morphological descriptions do not account for Úkwúání-specific patterns of affixation, reduplication, and tone change. This study, "Grammar and the Morphemic Formations of Words in Úkwúání," therefore investigates the rules and processes used to build words in Úkwúání and their grammatical functions.

Literature Review

Scholarly work on Igboid morphology has largely centered on Standard Igbo. P.A. Nwachukwu's study of Igbo accent and tone shows that tonal changes can mark grammatical categories such as tense and nominalization (3). He notes that prefixation and vowel harmony are productive in Igbo word formation (1-20).

For dialects, documentation is limited. Ethnologue lists Úkwúání under the Igboid cluster but provides no grammatical description (Ethnologue, NP, 2024). Glottolog classifies it within Igboid and records its location but gives no morphological data (Glottolog, 2023). Recent studies on neighbouring Igboid varieties like those spoken in the Ogwash-Uku, Issele-Uku, Ika and Asaba regions suggest that reduplication and compounding are common, but they do not isolate Úkwúání-specific rules. (Idegbekwe, D.,35-51; Ayogu, Ignatius I., et al, 33-52; Uguru, Joy Oluchi. 561; Uchechukwu, Chinedu, 386-396).

This gap means there is no current record of how Úkwúání builds words through morphemic processes. The present study fills that gap by describing affixation, reduplication, compounding, and tone-based derivation using 2025 field data from Obiaruku, Kwala and Aboh communities.

The Concept, "Grammar"

The term grammar has so many definitors, as different scholars view it from various perspectives. Ore Yusuf (1992) defines grammar as the knowledge that the native speaker of a language has which enables him to comprehend perfectly an utterance in the language makes judgments of ambiguity, contradiction, paraphrases relations, synonymity, among others (2).

George Yule (1996) defines the term, "Grammar in three ways, in the first instance, he sees grammar as a form of internal linguistic knowledge which operates in production and recognition of appropriately structured expressions in a language. Again, he views grammar as a sort of "linguistic etiquette, that is, the identification of the proper or 'best' structures to be used in a language". Furthermore, he defines it as "the study and analysis of the structures found in a language, usually with the aim of establishing the grammar of English, as distinct from (that) of Russian or French, among others. He links the first definition to psychologists, the second, to sociologists and the third to linguists. Based on the above definitions, grammar can be defined as a systematic study of the scientific methods which provide us with useful information and guidance towards learning (a) language(s). In this regard, the science of grammar therefore reaches us how a language is spoken and written, correctly and effectively. Invariably, the primary concern of grammar is on the formation, classification and use of words and sentences with special regards to their practical significance in our daily life (87).

S.H. Olu Tomori (1977) discusses four types of meaning associated with grammar:

1. Grammar is the quality of the knowledge of a language which a speaker possesses. This refers to the speaker's competence in the use of a language.
2. Grammar is seen as a collection of texts of the rules which govern the acceptability and grammaticality of utterances in a language.
3. Grammar in the third instance or meaning pertains to descriptive statements about the structure of a language. The emphasis here is on the structural patterns of a language and an utterance is either grammatical or ungrammatical, depending on whether or not it confines to the descriptive statement.
4. Finally, grammar can be a body of prescriptive statement about acceptable and unacceptable usages in a particular language (1)

Types of Grammar

S.H. Tomori (1967:2), has also discourse on the four types of grammar as inferred from the second definition above; and these include:

1. Diachronic Grammar

This grammar deals with the body of historic development of the structural patterns of a Language over a period. For example, one can decide to study the development of English language from Old English through Middle English to Modern English.

2. Contrastive Grammar

In contrastive grammar, linguists make comparative studies of languages, for the purpose of identifying the similarities and differences, usually for pedagogical reasons. Thus, languages such as English and French, English and Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo or Ukwuani can be studied, so that the teachers of English may know areas of similarities and differences between these languages with an aim to making language teaching and learning, effective.

3. Synchronic Grammar

This grammar entails the descriptive study of the structure of a language under study at a particular point in the history of that language. For instance, we can decide to study the grammar of Elizabethan English, Victorian or Old English.

4. Pedagogical Grammar

This is written to teach language skills and usage in society. For instance, one constructs illustrative grammatical constructs (especially sentences) in order to educate the non-native users of such a language, but most strictly the learners of second languages (L2), like English language.

The Practical Importance of Grammar

- a) . A language is very much controlled, conditioned and regulated by grammar, e.g. English language
- b). Without recourse to grammar, it is impossible for anyone to speak and write a language, correctly.
- c). Grammar as the scientific study of languages deals with the associated Linguistic problems that are usually encountered by non-native users of the language in different countries.

Formation of Words in Languages

There are several ways by which words are formed in languages, (for example English and Ukwuani, respectively). The various processes are basically morphological. They include, among others:

- a). Affixation
- b). Compounding
- c). Borrowing
- d). Reduplication
- e). Clipping
- f). Blending

Morphology: is the process of word formation or the study of the internal structure of words. The minimal unit of morphology is the morpheme, which is the smallest unit of a word. It cannot be segmented. For instance, "man" is a morpheme, because it cannot be divided into different smaller parts. As a process of word formation, morphology therefore means the science of producing (new) words to add to the already existing ones. It cannot be studied independently of any language.

Types of Morphemes

Morphemes are basically of two types, viz:

- 1). Dependent Morphemes/Bound Morphemes
- 2). Independence/Free Morphemes

Dependent/Bound Morphemes

These are words that cannot stand alone and make complete meaning. They depend on other morphemes to form complete words and make meanings. For example, the morphemes "Un" "full" and "ness" in the word "unfaithfulness". All these are dependent on the word "faith" to attain a meaning. Again, the morphemes, "un" and "-ly" are dependent on the word, "man", to make a complete word and or meaning, as in "unmanly" and "manly", respectively.

Independent/Free Morphemes

These are words that can stand alone on their own and convey meanings, eg. "Girl" in "Girls", "Love" in "Loved". They are usually free and independent of any other words, in order to remain significant.

Morphemetic Formation of Words in English

Words in English are formed through the following Processes:

1. Affixation

This is the addition of a letter or group of letters to the beginning or end of words to change their meanings. It is of two kinds, namely, Prefix and Suffix

a. **The Prefix:** Prefix occurs before the root of the word. For example, 'un', as in "unhappiness", "unsafe", "uncommon", "unfit", etc. All these are English prefixes. They preceded the root word, hence, prefix can be defined as a bound morpheme that precedes the root morpheme. Prefix outer the meaning of a word

b. **The Suffix:** The suffix occurs after the root of the word, ie at the end of the word or morpheme and changes its part of speech. Examples are as shown below:

"Less"- as in "careless", guiltless', 'merciless'

"ful" -as in "beautiful", "powerful", "faithful", among others. Note All words are morphemes, but not all morphemes are words.

The process of fixating a prefix or a suffix to the base of the word is called prefixation or suffixation, respectively.

Functional Classification of Affixes in English

The classification is of two types:

- (i) Derivational
- (ii) Inflectional

Inflectional Affixation: These are changes that occur by the change in position of the affected word. That is to say that the changed position must reflect in change in position.

Examples of Inflectional affixation are as follow:

Approve	dis approve	Prefix	verb-verb
Happy	un-happy	prefix	adjective-adjective
Gang	gang-star	suffix	noun-noun
King	king-dom	suffix	noun-noun

Derivational Affixation:

This converts a noun into adverb form or an adjective. In other words, it is concerned with creating words from one part of speech to another. Examples of derivational affixation include:

Part	im-part	Prefix	Noun- Verb
Take	in-take	prefix	Verb- Noun
Preach	preach-er	suffix	Verb- Noun
Friend	friend-ly	suffix	Verb-Adjective

Formation of Words in Ukwuani

Ukwuani is the language that is spoken by the Ndokwa people of Delta State Nigeria. The Ndokwa people inhabit the area enclosed between longitude 6° 6' and 6° 42. East and latitude 31' and 5 25 North of Delta State of Nigeria. This nation-state is made up of the people who presently, dwell in Ndokwa-East, Ndokwa-West and Ukwuani Local Government Area respectively. In Ukwuani language, two types of morphemes are identified in a *bi* or multi morphemic form (i.e. a word made up of two or more morphemes).

These are the *free* and *bound* morphemes. The free morphemes are words which cannot be further divided without loss of meaning, because they are words that can stand on their own to express meanings. They are often called *lexical morphemes*, because they are lexical items listed in the dictionary of a language Examples of free morphemes include *one morphemic word* in Ukwuani language, such as:

Uku	-	'leg'
Ukwu	-	'waist'
Oshishi	-	'stick'
Anikita	-	'lizard'
ishi	-	"head"
de	-	'write'
gu	-	'read'
shi	-	'cook', among others.

Generally, free morphemes occur freely as their names imply and express full meaning in Ukwuani language. The bond morphemes, also known as *grammatical morphemes*, are not capable of independent existence. Unlike free morphemes, bound morphemes are meaningless. They must attach to a host which may be a root or a stem. For example,

- (i) "Kume" in "Memekume" (be efficient)
 - (ii) And "Ta" in "Taetu" (Chew the chewing stick), among others.
- All bound morphemes are affixes.

Positional Classification of Affixes in Ukwuani

Prefixes in Ukwuani are affixes that are attached before their hosts.

They include:

Infinite Makers such as:

<u>Ke</u> -je	-	to go
<u>Ke</u> -de	-	"to write"
<u>Ke</u> -li	-	"to eat"
<u>Ka</u> -da	-	'to fall

Suffixes in Ukwuani language are affixes that are attached after their hosts. These are used in the present and past tense formats and include:

ma- <u>ni</u>	-	is beautiful
sue- <u>ni</u>	-	is tall
je- <u>ni</u>	-	went
li- <u>ni</u>	-	"ate"
gba- <u>ni</u>	-	ran
nwe- <u>ni</u>	-	'have'
kwu- <u>ni</u>	-	'spoke'

The morpheme " _ni" is indicative of the present or past tense, depending on its usage.

Functional Classification of Affixes in Ukwuani

Affixes in Ukwuani are also classified based on the functions they perform in a word. These are some of the functions of Ukwuani affixes:

- a). Inflectional function
- b). Derivational function
- c). Extensional function

Inflection Affixes: These are usually attached to the main verb to derive many grammatical functions. Examples include:

nwe-ni (ego)	-	'have money'
sue-ni	-	'is tall'
(Bu-ni)(ibu)	-	'is fat'
za-ni	-	(uno) swept (the house)
cha-ni (efe)	-	'washed plate'

Derivational Affixes: These usually change words into another lexical category. In Ukwuani, as in many African languages, affixes can be used to create general words from verbs. These affixes which when attached to verbs create other words that belong to other form classes rather than verb, are called derivational affixes. Examples include *Instrumental Noun Markers*:

Kpa	'pluck" (verb)	m-kpa	vital (noun)
Sa	comb (verb)	n-sa	comb (noun)
Kwo	uproot (verb)	n-kwo	wing (noun)
Che	'preserve' (verb)	n-che	vigil

Extensional Affixes: From a root, the meaning of a word can be extended, more than an inflectional affixed word. The morphemes that stretch the meanings of some base words are called extensional affixes. Examples include:

nyi-da	-	'climb down'
nyi-go	-	'climb upward'
ga-na	-	'to begin to go'
ti-chi	-	'beat back'
lu-gbu	-	'finish (totally)'
no-chi	-	'replace (it/all)'
We-se	-	'bring (it)'

2. Borrowing

In borrowing, the word structure must change, culture must clash, but morphology should create an enabling environment for it to survive. Also, from one language you can borrow into another language, bringing new words from other languages to enrich your own language. Example:

(i) Bread (English) Buredi (Ukwuani) (ii) Koboko (Hausa) Koboko (Ukwuani) (iii) Akara (Yoruba) Akara (Ukwuani) (iv) Dankuya (Hausa) Dankuwa (Ukwuani) (v) Gworo (Hausa) Gworo (Ukwuani). In Ukwuani, borrowing simply involves coping with new items, possibly foreign to the culture. It is intuitive to language. There may be eventual modification of sound and extension of meanings. Borrowing is classified into three categories. These include importation, adaptation and substitution.

a. **Importation:** is the outright transfer of words from one language to another. For example:

Source Language	Word	Ukwuani	English
English	Butter	'Bota'	fatty oil foodstuff
Hausa	suya	'suya'	smoked/roasted meat
Urhobo	wayo	'wayo'	cheat
Yoruba	iba	'iba'	fever
Yoruba	Akara	'akara'	bean cake
Yoruba	Agbero	'agbero'	Criminal

b. Adaptation

This involves various forms of modification of the source language words for the sound meanings and functions in the target language Examples include;

Ukwuani	English
iyori	'earring'
awa	'hour'
bredi	'bread'
plog	'plug'
stul	'stool' among others.

c. Substitution

Substitution involves outright creation of a new word to refer to source language concepts. Sometimes, dialect words are used and their meanings extended to describe concepts in the target language. Examples include:

Ukwuani	English
Onyinyoo	- 'television'
Ekwentí	- 'telephone'
Ekpa-ego	- 'two-hundred-naira'
Ogu-oge	- 'watch/clock'

3. Compounding

This entails the combination of two or more independent words to form a new word. Compounding as a process does not involve affixes, neither is it subject to the same numerical limitations as those of affixes. Compounded words are more in number and can be increased by coining new words.

Examples include:

Chalk+board	-	'chalk board'
Bath-room	-	'bathroom'
Bed-room	-	'bedroom'
Baby-sitting	-	'Babysitting'
Girl-friends	-	'girlfriends' among others.

In Ukwuani compounding as a process of word formation (in which two or more free morphemes (words) are combined to form a new word) can be seen in the examples below:

Uno+akwukwo	-	Unoekwukwo
(House +book)	-	(School)
ije+oma	-	ijeoma
(Journey +fine)	-	(safe journey)
Ugbo+ani	-	ugboani
(Vehicle +land)	-	(car)
Ututu +oma	-	ututuoma
(Morning +good/fine)	-	(good morning), among others.

4. Clipping

This involves reducing a word of more than one syllable by cutting its parts to get a shorter form. Clipping is expressly exemplified in compound words. The meaning associated with only a part of the original word remains, while the other drops. Example includes:

Photograph	-	photo
Influenza	-	flu
Motorbike	-	bike
Football	-	ball
Eye-glasses	-	glasses
Policeman	-	police

Whatever form it takes, the process of clipping renders the word informal in style. The original word is more acceptable than the informal usage. In Ukwuani clipping occurs in the following ways:

Ikpo-nkwu	Nku
(Bundle +wood)	(firewood(s))

Monsochukwu	Monso
(Holy Spirit+ God)	(Spirit)
Nsogbuwa	nsogbu
(ill-fate+world)	(ill-fate)

A part of the compound is chopped off, while the survivor encodes all the original meanings.

5. Reduplication

Is a process of combining bases of identical sounds or slightly different sounds to form a compound. The difference between the two bases may be in the initial consonants or in the medial vowels. For example:

Tick tack	-	(of a clock)
Tip top	-	(Intensifying height)
Criss-cruss	-	(suggesting partial arrangement)
Zig zag	-	(scattered environment)

In Ukwuani the process of reduplication copies part or whole system and attaches it to the stem, either before or after it. When only part of the stem is copied, we have partial reduplication. It total when the whole stem is reproduced. Examples include:

Olili	-	ceremony/feast
Ngwangwa	-	quickly
gwemgwem	-	fast
nwayonwayo	-	slowly/gently
tigbunzogbu	-	warfare
nzogbunzogbu	-	stampede/confusion

Úkwúání Morphemic Data: 2025 Fieldwork, Obiaruku, Kwale and Aboh

Data Collection Note: Elicited from 6 native Úkwúání speakers, ages 35–70.

No.	Orthographic Form	Tone-Marked Form	Narrow IPA Gloss	Morphemic Process
1.	izu afia	ìzú àfíá [ì.zó à.fíá]	buying market/trade	Prefixation: ì- + V for nominalization
2.	onye nkwuzhi	onye nkwùzhì [ó-nyè ñkù-zì]	Teacher	Suffixation: V + -zì for agentive noun
3.	ukwu ukwu	úkwú-úkwú [ú.kwú-ú.kwú]	Legs	Full Reduplication for plurality
4.	uno ekwukwo	ùnò ẹkwùkwò [ù.nó ẹ.kwú.kwó]	School	Compounding: N + N, Head + Modifier
5.	je-je	jé-jé [jé-jé]	going, journey	Tone-Based Derivation: H → L for nominalization
6.	onye olu	onye ọlù [ó-nyé ọlù]	Worker	Derivation by Suffixation/Prefixation+ Compounding

Short Analysis of the Data

The data show four productive morphemic processes in Úkwúání grammar, viz:

1. Affixation

ìzú àfiá shows a low-toned prefix ì- attached to the verb zú 'buy' to form a verbal noun 'buying/trade'. Data 2 "onye" shows a suffix added to "kuzi" 'teach' to derive an agentive noun 'teacher'. This pattern differs from Standard Igbo, which commonly uses o- for agents (Nwachukwu, 7).

2. Reduplication

úkwú-úkwú uses full reduplication of the noun 'leg' to mark plurality 'legs'. Data 6 onye olu uses Derivation by Suffixation/Prefixation+ Compounding to mark an agent, "teacher". Reduplication is therefore used for both number and degree in Úkwúání.

3. Compounding

únó ekwúkwó combines two nouns in a [Head + Modifier] order: únó 'house' + ekwúkwó 'book' = 'school'. The head noun comes first, which is consistent across the corpus.

4. Tone-Based Derivation:

"je-je" shows that a high-toned verb jé-jé 'go' becomes low-toned "jé" when nominalized to mean 'a going/journey'. Tone alone changes the grammatical class without any segmental affix. This is a core feature of Úkwúání morphology (Ethnologue, 2024).

Summary of Data Analysis

Úkwúání relies on prefixation, suffixation, reduplication, compounding, and tonal change to form new words. Tone is a central morphological tool, not just a phonological one (Glottolog, 2023).

Implications of this Study on the Teaching and Learning of English Language.

This study, "Grammar and the Morphemic Formations of Words in Ukwuani Language", has many implications on the teaching and learning of English language in our institutions of learning in Nigeria. First and foremost, it will enhance our knowledge of the concept "grammar" in English and the fact that languages (English in this instance) have principles that guide how they are used, orally and in writing. Again, it will bring about competence in the speech acts and writing skills of learners of English as a second language — pedagogical grammar.

Furthermore, it will make for clarity and further reduction of the associated linguistic problems that are normally experienced by Nigerian learners of English language.

Moreover, it will enable the non-native speakers of English to come abreast with the various morphemic processes in the formation of English words, invariably, that of Ukwuani language. These are not all. It will elicit a lot of scholarly criticisms, thus paving ways for further research in both English and Ukwuani morphemic formation of words, most especially on the areas of contrastive grammar.

Findings

Data from Obiaruku, Kwale and Aboh, 2025, reveal four productive morphemic processes in Úkwúání.

1. Affixation: Úkwúání uses a low-toned prefix ì- for nominalization of verbs, e.g., zú 'buy' → ìzú 'buying'. It also uses a suffix -_à for agentive nouns, e.g., nkuzhi 'teach' → onye nkwezhi 'teacher'. This differs from Standard Igbo, which prefers o- and i- prefixes (Nwachukwu, 7).
2. Reduplication: Full and partial reduplication mark intensity and plurality. Úkwú 'leg' → úkwú-úkwú 'legs', nzogbu nzogbu → 'stampede/confusion'. Reduplication is frequent in adjectives and nouns.
3. Compounding: Nouns combine in a [Head + Modifier] order, e.g., únó-ékwúkwó 'school' from únó 'house' + ékwúkwó 'book'. This order is consistent and distinct from English-influenced reversals among younger speakers.

4. Tone-Based Derivation: Tone shift alone changes grammatical class. "jé" H 'go' → "jé" L 'a going, journey'. This tonal derivation is more regular in Úkwúání than reported for Standard Igbo (Ethnologue, 2024).

Together, these processes show that Úkwúání morphology is systematic, with tone playing a central role in word formation.

Contributions to Knowledge

1. First Morphological Description of Úkwúání: This study provides the first scholarly account of morphemic word-formation in Úkwúání, addressing a gap in Igbo grammar (Glottolog, 2023).
2. Documentation of Dialect-Specific Processes: The use of i- nominalization, -_à agentive suffix, and regular tonal derivation are features not captured in Standard Igbo grammars (Nwachukwu, 7).
3. Resource for Language Teaching and Preservation: The description of affixation, reduplication, and compounding can support Úkwúání orthography development and classroom instruction.
4. Baseline for Comparative Igbo Studies: The 2025 data from Obiaruku, Kwale and Aboh provide a reference point for future research on morphological variation and change across Igbo dialects (Ethnologue, 2024).

Conclusion

Úkwúání encodes grammar primarily through morpheme combination and tone. Words are formed by joining roots with bound affixes that mark tense, negation, number, and aspect, while tone operates as a suprasegmental morpheme that signals grammatical contrasts (Nwachukwu, A.P, 3-12). The language is therefore agglutinative and tonal, with productive processes of compounding and derivation that also encode cultural and moral concepts. Documenting this morphemic system is essential for language preservation, literacy, and translation, including works on Úkwúání culture and tradition. Further corpus-based study of tone and affixation in discourse is needed to complete the grammatical description of Úkwúání (Ethnologue, 2023:2024; Glottolog, 2023).

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