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The Interface between Morphosyntax, Language Development and Its Sustainability: A Case Study of Bura Verbal Group

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Abstract

This paper studies the morphosyntactic verbal group of Bura language. The Bura language like other languages has different word classes (verb inclusive). Verbal group is a group of words with its head, and usually functions as the predicator element of a clause structure. Like the English verbal group, the Bura verbal head can be pre-modified or post-modified just as a morphological head (base) can be prefixed or suffixed to generate a new word. It is for this similarity that the study integrates morphology in the discussion, with the aim of studying how the components in a verbal and morphological structures can linguistically be analyzed as elements of a language. The objective of the study is to investigate the linguistic relationship that holds between the major areas of linguistic analysis with the view to understanding how the two (morphology and syntax) can be interwoven for sustainable development of the Bura language. Data for the study were obtained from thirty (30) English verbal group structures. The data were given to five (5) educated Bura native speakers to translate and gloss them into Bura. The Bura morphosyntactic verbal structures were determined from the translation and glossing of the English structures, as done by the respondents. The descriptive research method was adopted for data analysis, while Systemic Functional Grammar - SFG proposed by M.A.K Halliday in the 1960s was adopted as the theoretical framework. The unit – group, in SFG functions as a word or group of words that function as a whole, and is composed of a headword, modifier or qualifier. Following the application of this theory, the following issues were revealed: in Bura, the grammatical elements which pre-modify or post-modify a head word behave like affixes in the structures they appear. Also, many of the head words have the whole elements of the group compressed in the internal structure of the head, consequently; they are seamless. Some elements in the verbal group are from the class of nouns; therefore, they assume the subject position. Again, meanings of some elements in the verbal group are contextually determined. Lastly, Bura verbal group could be a complex group if classified according to SFG because of its composition.

Keywords: Bura language, Functional Systemic Grammar. Interface, Morphosyntax, Verbal group,

1.0 Introduction

This study sets out to examine how components in the verbal and morphological structures can linguistically be analyzed as elements of language for sustainable development of the Bura language. The verbal group is the life-wire of all utterances in clauses or sentences of every language. Communications are devoid of meaning without the verb or verbal group playing its role of assigning meaning to every utterance. It therefore becomes necessary for every language to develop its verbal structure to enable it stand the test of international intelligibility and acceptability. This is because, any language which does not grow or develop syntactically and morphologically is automatically on the track of being extinct, this stands the reason the study is perceived. It is therefore paramount for Bura speakers and those interested in learning the language to have more pedagogic data which will guide them to generate intelligible structures of Bura verbal group.

Morphology is the study of the structure of a word, its internal structure and how it is formed. In other words, morphology deals with formation

of a new word from an existing word. This is done by attaching some morphological elements (affixes) to the base to generate a new form of the same word but with a different meaning or word class.

The Bura language is endowed with rich lexicons. Like the English language, it has all the word - classes: noun, verb, adverb, adjective, pronoun, preposition, conjunction and interjection. A language may possess all the word - classes, but, may still need to be developed or expanded by regenerating its existing structures for the purpose of sustainability, otherwise, the language may go into extinction. As it is now, there are impulses that the Bura language is one of the endangered languages of the north-eastern Nigeria, (Mshelbwala, 2024). The Bura speakers are located in the southern part of Borno state. Ayuba (2014) records that Bura refers to the people, the language and the land they occupy. The people settled according to their clans which are referred to as *myabwa* which serves as their identities (Ndahi, 2016). Few among the clans include: *Mshelbwala and Mibwala,-Nkwarbwala; Ndahi,-Nkwarzoaka;*

Mshelia - Kwatamdia; *Mbaya*, - *Nkwarmbaya*; *Msheliza* - *Nkwariza*; *Balami* - *Nkwarjauni*; *Bassi* - *Nkwarzhawa*; *Mshelbara* - *Nkwarbara*; *Ngadda* and *Amaza* - *Nkwarhindi*; *Malgwi* - *Nkwarmalgwi*; and many others. *Nkwa(r)* in Bura refers to a (daughter) female figure (Ngada, 2017). The word -*Nkwar* has the semantic meaning of belonging to, because, the *r* in the structure functions as a possessive suffix. While the male figure, because of masculinity, carries the son ship of the clan, therefore is regarded as the *owner* of the clan; and the female, a belonging to the clan.

The Bura people are predominantly farmers, blacksmiths and fishermen, especially those who settled around the riverine areas. Traditional religion was practiced, with each village/clan having her settlement shrine called *Milim*; *Haptu* and *Jusuku*. The common family deities are used as intermediary to communicate with God Almighty which they call *Hyel- Mthaku dlamparam- ka mpika* before the emergence of Christianity and Islam (Ndahi, 2016).

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Morphosyntax

Morphosyntax is the study of how words and sentences are constructed in a language. It is a branch of linguistics that examines the relationship between word structures and

sentence structures. It is a linguistic field that combines morphological and syntactic components, focusing on word structure and sentence construction.

(<https://www.studysmarter.co.uk> > m ...).

Furthermore, morphosyntax performs a crucial function, as it helps speech and language experts to synthesize and address language irregularities and constraints arising from the combination of morphology and syntax as a unit of linguistics. The purpose is to achieve the following:

1. Improve morphological awareness: enhancing an individual's ability to identify and manipulate morphemes within words, such as prefixes, suffixes and roots or base words.

2. Increase understanding of inflections and derivations: fostering knowledge of how inflections can mark the grammatical relationships between words and how derivations create new words by altering their meanings and forms.

3. Enhancing syntactic skills: strengthening an individuals' ability to combine words into phrases and sentences following the rules of their language.

4. Promoting correct word order: Encouraging appropriate word arrangement within sentences to improve intelligibility and coherence.

5. Developing agreement skills: Increasing proficiency in using the correct tense, number, gender, and person features to maintain consistency and clarity within sentences.

Tackling these will go a long way to handle a range of morphosyntactic issues, leading to improved language and communication abilities. Also, the issue on morphosyntactic errors can be minimized. In dealing with morphosyntactic errors, identifying the errors is important, as it can help resolve inconsistencies and inaccuracies in sentences and examine spoken or written language structures. Few of the errors common to identify as presented in <https://www.studysmarte.co.uk> include:

1. Omission of inflectional morphemes, such as leaving out the “-s” for plural formation or “-ed” for past tense.
2. Using inappropriate derivational morphemes, for example, substituting “-ing” for “-ed” in the past tense.
3. Incorrect word order within sentences, potentially leading to confusion and limited comprehension.
4. Disagreements in tense, number, gender, or person between sentence elements.
5. Difficulties in using function words, such as prepositions, conjunctions, articles, and auxiliaries.

2.2 The Verbal Group

Verbal group (VG) is typically a group with a verb as head which is likely to be modified either before the verb (pre-modification) with auxiliary verbs or after the verb (post-modification) or both, (Hanaa & Al-Majren 2019). It is also one of the groups in English usually with the lexical verb as a headword and a structure that is dynamic (Jayz, 2017). Knowledge about the verbal group is key in learning grammar, it offers explanation on the fact that it can be used in any text, clause or sentence in written communication. Most especially, it challenges the commonsense view that verbs are only action words (Joane & Kathy 2010).

A verbal group comprises of a lexical verb or a lexical verb preceded by an auxiliary verb. There are other types of verbs that can function in the verbal group, but the lexical verb is the obligatory element while other forms could be optional (Jayz, 2017). The verbal group is one that occurs under the predicator; that is, everything under the predictor is verbal in nature. The structure is auxiliary verb first and then is followed by the lexical verb. It is possible to have more than one auxiliary in a verbal structure, but it is not possible to have more than one lexical verb in a sentence. For example;

should have been done. Done here is the lexical verb and all the other elements in the structure are auxiliaries.

Apart from the nominal group, the verbal group is another essential group in any language, and also the most essential part of speech (Jayz, 2017). Like the nominal group, the verbal group also comprises of three components known as: the auxiliary, the verb and the extension. Although these three occur in an order in the group, the verb remains the most essential part. This can be traced back from the history of the verb in English consisting of only two tenses: the present and the past and is either indicative or subjunctive in mood. It was the falloff of the subjunctive which facilitated the development of auxiliaries (Blake, 1983). Hence, if there is a nominal group, such as *the man*, it can be followed by a verbal group such as *should get out*, in which *should* is the auxiliary, *get* is the verb, and *out* is the extension. Unlike the nominal group, the verbal group cannot be indefinitely expanded (Blake, 1983). Derewianka (1998) also says that verbal group can likewise include an adverb or modal verb; whereby adverbs are those words which improve further accuracy to the verb and can offer both details and thoughts. Modal verbs and adverbs are used to indicate the

degree of: probability - It will *probably* rain; obligation - You *must* be on time; certainty - I'm *sure* this is the best one; or usually - I *often* do this (Derewianka, 1998).

The literature review outlined why the study of morphosyntax, especially of the verbal group is crucial in language study. The errors identified, if worked on, will minimize grammatical inadequacies and inaccuracies in the use of the verbal structures not only of the English language, but also of the Bura language.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

The framework adopted for the study is the Systemic Functional Grammar – SFG. Systemic functional grammar - SFG or Systemic Functional Linguistics – SFL. It is a model of grammar developed by M. A. K. Halliday in the 1960s. Halliday & Hasan, (1985) discuss a functional approach to grammar, by analyzing language as a social-semiotic of communication where language structures are defined by context. This framework seeks to study how context in the different units of language is expressed in grammar. Systemic in SFG implies grammar which consists of a series of choices that can be made in order to express ideas. In other words, language represents a system of network within which language choices

are meaningful in relation to other choices that are suppressed. It is functional because the system perform certain function which is realized in the lexico-grammatical rank scale. Groups are made up of words, and phrases are made up of groups. That is, it discusses the fundamental categories of unit, structure, class and system as key components in SFG.

The unit - group in SFG means a word or group of words that function as a whole, and is composed of a headword, modifier or qualifier. It is a unit of words that is ranked between a word and clause. In other words, a group is formed around a head word, or a main word, while other words in the clause give more information. It is in this sense that the study adopts the framework to study the morphosyntax of the Bura language as it has a similar insertions with morphology. In morphology, a word is generated by building up other grammatical units (affixes), around the head word or main (base) word, just as the verbal group is built up by other elements in the lexicon around the head word.

2.4 Methodology

A questionnaire was used to collect data for the study. It

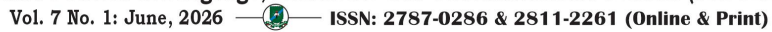
was made up of thirty (30) English verbal group structures which were generated by the researcher. Five (5) educated Bura native speakers translated by glossing the English verbal clauses into Bura. The Bura morphosyntactic verbal structures were determined from the translation and glossing of the English structures. Finally, the discussion research method was adopted for data analysis and interpretation of the findings.

2.5 Significance of the Study

Significantly, the study will serve as a pedagogic material for researchers and learners who are interested in the Bura language. But, most importantly, it will guide the young (educated) Bura native speakers who do not understand the language well to learner more about the verb and verbal

3.0 Data Presentation and Analysis

The data in each item is presented in three (3) phases as follows: the group of words in - *a* is the English verbal group and its Bura glossing. The one tagged -*b* is the Bura meaning of the verbal structure in *a* and its English translation, while the one tagged -*c* is the interpretation of the verbal group.



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c. Some morphological insertions occur in the structure of the groups where new words are introduced in the glossing as in 8b above. *Lukwa* - *enter* in the structure represents *shall be* in English, but the glossing entails another main verb in the same structure. Also, there is introduction of pronouns 'he/she' which, in the English version of the structure, was absent.

9a. would have been enrolled 9b. *tsa* nil nil
lukwa

Nil	nil	nil	<i>lukwa</i>		he/she		would have

been enrolled

c. *Would have been* in Bura verbal group relates to time and not auxiliary elements in the group. They do not have related words in Bura but perform grammatical functions in the structure.

10a. has been flooded away b. *akwa* *huyimta*

Nil	nil	<i>huyimta</i>		inside	flooding

c. The morphological role played here is the manipulation of the structure without affixation, but the meaning of the structure is changed from the latter. *Akwa* in Bura may mean *inside or is about to*, functioning as an auxiliary verb to be attached but to main verbs such as: *si* - come, *tira* - go, *nzi-nzi* - sit/sitting, *hyni* - sleep/sleeping.

11a. could have been done b. *sakan* *mda*
ku kuri

Nil	nil	nil	<i>kuhara</i>		by this time,		someone

nil finished

c. The null item - *ku* in *b* represents the whole of *could have been* in English although it does not have directly related equivalent in English.



12a. shall grow quickly

b. *ata kila taktar*

| | |

| | |

Nil *kila taktar*

on top grow quickly

c. In this group, the verbal elements do not appear orthographically; but, literarily; *ata* semantically denotes continuous tense, to represent – *shall* in this structure.

13a. would have been lengthened

b. *ku ndira mta dzi*

| | | |

| | |

Nil nil nil *ndiramta* have been stretched/lengthened

c. The main verb *ndira* - in this structure has two suffixes: *mta* and *dzi* to express, the –ed past tense morpheme in *lengthened*.

14a. can be smaller

b. *ata nzi rakka*

| | |

| | |

Nil nil *rakka*

let it be smaller

c. In Bura, *ata* means *will be* or *shall be*. Also, a word can be inflected by attaching lexical word to a base e.g *ata* means *on top of* acting as an attachment to *rakka*. *Rakkata* also entails a comparison, meaning that *ata* has the ability in this construction to act as a suffix as well as a preposition.

15a. would have been merged

b. *ma dlata/pakta*

| | | |

| |

Nil nil nil *dlata/pakta*

if merged

c. In the Bura language, - the elliptical omission of elements of the verbal group is evident. There is a total omission of *would have been* in the glossing as seen in *b*, meaning that the language does not



acknowledge the verbal elements that made up a verbal group in some cases..

16a. shall be found
wutari/paktari

b. *mda a*

| | | | |

Nil nil *wuta/pakta*
found it

someone nil

c. *Someone* in *b* above is a pronoun in English, but in Bura, it functions as an element in the verbal group – *shall be*. Also, *wutari/paktari* has the suffix *ri* as an attachment, which means *ri* is a lexical word in Bura functioning to question a possibility.

17a. have been reading

b. *akwa karata*

| | | | |

Nil nil *karata*

inside reading

c. The Bura language has many affixes, particularly, suffixes. However, it does have the -ing morpheme to denote continuous tense. Therefore, in this construction, the main verb *karata* – *read* is a bare infinitive.

18a. should not have been given
hamta wa

b. *mda adiya*

| | | | | | | | |

Nil nil nil nil *hamta*
given nil

someone is it available?

c. A suffix *wa* appears in this group as an attachment to *hamta*. *Wa* in this structure denotes *not*, to reconstruct the group - *should not have been given*.

19a. would be monitored
cha

b. *mda'a putu*



Nil nil <i>ptucha</i>	someone nil	close
monitoring/		

Watch

closely

c. The analysis shows that the auxiliary verbs *should, shall, would, will* etc semantically denote a pronoun – someone. The morpheme *a* similarly represents someone in this construction.

20a. could not have finished	b. <i>sakan a kur</i>
<i>wa</i>	

Nil nil nil <i>kuri</i>	it will finish
nil (-ed)	

c. This is another formation where *wa* acts as an –ed past tense morpheme. In this construction, *it* also means the negative – *not*, and *a* has the semantic interpretation of *will*.

21a. will be coming	b. <i>tsa a si</i>
Nil nil <i>si</i>	he/she will come

c. *a* in this formation, *si*, is a suffix representing both the main verb *come* and its –*ing* form. In English, an affix does not have an independent meaning except as an attachment to a word. However, in Bura, a suffix may have an independent meaning as demonstrated in *si*. Also, it can stand for a continuous action represented by *a*.

22a. having the idea	b. <i>tu mda ka</i>
<i>sindari</i>	

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Nil nil *fori*
nil

nil forget/forgotten

c. In the structure *had been forgotten*, the only recognized element in Bura is *forgotten* because the verbal elements – *had been* is not acknowledged, but they semantically take to their function in the word -*ku* although not orthographically seen in the structure. This means that, in the study of morphosyntax of Bura, semantics forms part of its verbal structures' analysis.

26a. haven't been cooked
dziwa

b. *adi ti*

Nil	nil	<i>ti</i>	nil	cook	nil

c. *wa* functions in this structure as a suffix to represent the -ed past tense morpheme in *-cooked*. It also means *not*, and the elements -*haven't been* is compressed in the word *adi* which literarily means -available.

27a. should be on the farm
kwa faku

b. *sakan tsa*

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Nil nil atakir nil *faku*
he/she in (side) farm

by this time

c. The verbal auxiliaries *should be* signify *time* in the Bura language. Invariably, the auxiliary verbal elements in English are not considered as separate words with independent functions. However, the expected meaning in English is achieved just as is obtained in Bura. Although the article *the* does not appear in the structure, it functions invisibly in the word *kwa* as a determiner to the noun *farm*.



28a. wouldn't have been better

b. *a**tiramta wa*

Nil nil nil *tiramta*
 passed nil

nil

c. *a* in this structure encompasses the verbal auxiliary elements – *wouldn't have been*, and *wa* which signifies that a question serves as a suffix. In some other constructions, *wa* means - *who*?

29a. couldn't have the way

b. *tsa**wuta**lakw'awa*

Nil nil nil *laku*
 opportunity

he/she found

c. The auxiliary verbal elements *couldn't have* in this structure is encompassed in the words *wuta lakw'awa*. Where *wa* stands for the negative *not* and *wuta laku* - *the opportunity*. Another issue is syntactic conversion without morphological manipulations.

30a. would be closed

b. *a hartidzi*

Nil nil *hartidzi*

nil closed

c. The verbal elements *would be* in this construction are ignored, they are either encompassed into a word or acknowledged as entities of grammatical function. The main verb *harta* + the suffix *ti* (where *a* is changed to *i*) and *dzi*, represent the whole verbal group.

Summary of the data presentation show that in Bura, the verbal group does not have an independent existence, but verbal elements are compressed into the main verbs or the affixes.



4.1 Findings

Following the preceding data analysis, the following findings were derived:

- a. The study shows that words and their meanings change without interfering with the internal structure of the verbal elements which make up the verbal group in Bura. This is typical with Bura structures where auxiliaries are not overtly acknowledged orthographically but only functionally.
- b. *Ku* in Bura represents *been* or *have been*. It denotes past tense or past participle.
- c. The verbal group in Bura mainly consists of the main verbs and some sentence parts which are not structurally visible but perform grammatical functions. That is, they are compressed into the main verb.
- d. The head of Bura verbal group like in the English language is also a verb, with the other elements in the group having contrary meaning with that of the English language.
- e. The English verbal elements when glossed into Bura do not have direct meanings. It is only the main verbs that can be glossed to be meaningful.
- f. *Would have been*, *should have been* etc., in Bura refer to time and not auxiliary elements in a verbal group. The language does not acknowledge the verbal elements that made up a verbal group, they only exist by performing certain grammatical functions in the language.
- g. The auxiliary verbs: *should*, *shall*, *would*, *will* etc., semantically denote a pronoun –

someone, *mda* in Bura.

- h. Some words which, in English function as nouns, take the place of the elements of the verbal group in Bura. This implies that some nouns in Bura do not only function as subjects, but assume other functions in the language.

The data show that in Bura, the verbal group does not have an independent existence, but verbal elements are compressed into the main verb or the affixes. Bura is a unique language whose sentence structures appear different from other Chadic languages in the region. Although it acknowledges all the English words classes, it is uniquely structured to serve the linguistic understanding of the speakers and to meet the linguistic patterns of the language.

5.1 Conclusion

The study of Bura morphosyntactic verbal group unveils the relationship which holds between morphology and syntax in the Bura language. The glossing and analyses of the data show that the two major units of language have an interface which

is seamless. Semantics plays a vital role in assigning meanings to words although meanings may not be directly same in the English and Bura languages.

In Bura, words and their meanings change without interfering with the internal structure of the verbal elements because auxiliaries are not overtly acknowledged orthographically but only functionally. Also, the verbal group in Bura mainly consists of the main verbs and some sentence parts which are not structurally visible but perform grammatical functions. That is, they are compressed into the main verb. For the purpose of sustainability of the Bura language in particular, the English syntactic structures and patterns of words formation must not be imposed on the young Bura generation, but efforts should be geared towards developing the Bura linguistic structures such that when compared to others languages' structures, it can be accepted as intelligible by the international community as worthy of world's recognition.



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