

## Nominal Group Functionality: A Contrastive Analysis of English and Ukwani

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### Abstract

This study is a contrastive analysis of nominal groups in English and Ukwani, exploring their structural differences and similarities. Grounded in Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), the research examines written texts in both languages to uncover the unique and shared features of their grammatical systems. The findings highlight the complexities of language contact and the importance of understanding linguistic differences and similarities between English and Ukwani. This research contributes to contrastive linguistics and language typology, providing insights into the syntactic structures and meaning-making processes of both languages. The study's results have implications for language teaching, learning, and translation, particularly in multilingual contexts.

**Keywords:** Contrastive analysis, nominal groups, English, Ukwani, Scale and Category language contact.

### Introduction

Nigeria is a complexly multilingual nation with over 500 indigenous languages, dominated by the big three of Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo, coexisting with English as the official language and pidgin as the dominant choice code of informal cross-ethnic communication. It is thus not surprising that the profusion of substrate languages and the overarching roles of English and Nigerian pidgin in the Nigerian multilingual context continue to attract scholarly interest from a variety of linguistic and sociolinguistic perspectives (Emama, 2017; Mowarin, 2014; Emama, 2022; Emama, 2024). The language contact circumstances in Nigeria's West Delta multilingual speech communities adequately justify this cross-linguistic study, motivated by the need to examine the structural similarities between the nominal group in Ukwani and English. According to Emenanjo (1990), this coexistence is a defining feature of the country's sociolinguistic context. Ukwani, in particular, retains its cultural significance, as noted by Jibril (2008), while English dominates formal settings. The interplay between the two languages often results in code-switching and code-mixing, a phenomenon documented by Akindele and Adegbite (1999). This study aims to explore nominal group structures in English and Ukwani, drawing on insights from Systemic Functional Grammar (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014), with a view to informing language education and policy in multilingual contexts such as Nigeria.

Ukwani is a vibrant Igboid language spoken by the Ukwani people in the Ukwani, Ndokwa East, and Ndokwa West Local Government Areas of Delta State. The language belongs to the Niger-Congo language family. According to historical records (Warekoromor, 2013; Nwachukwu-Ogedengbe, 1973; Otite, 1990), this region has a distinct geographical and cultural identity. The Ukwani land comprises 15 clans, which, according to Opone (2004), include Abbi, Akoku, Amai, Ebedei, Emu, Eziokpor, Ezionum, Obiaruku, Ogume, OnichaUkwani, Umuebu, Umukwuata, Umutu, Utakba-Ogbe, and Utakba-Uno. Geographically, the area is bordered by the Niger River, the Benin Division, the Ijaw Division, the Urhobo Division, and the Isoko Division (Edewor, 2021; Warekoromor, 2021; Edewor, 2022; Eguvewewbere, 2024; Malison, 1920). The terrain is characterised by tropical rainforest and swampy landscape with numerous rivers and creeks, Alagoa, 1972; Edewor, 2025; Edewor, ) in his studies. Economically, the region thrives on natural resources such as oil palm, rubber, and cassava, with the local population engaged in farming, trading, and fishing, as Omenogor (2023) highlights.

The Ukwani people, residing in Delta State, Nigeria, have a distinct language and culture. Despite debates, research (Ejiofor, 2015) confirms that Ukwani is a unique language, distinct from Igbo,

due to its distinct phonological, grammatical, and lexical features. The language's lack of mutual intelligibility with Igbo further supports its classification as a distinct language. As Osakwe (2024) highlights, the misconception of Ukwani as an Igbo dialect has led to its exclusion from some documentation, underscoring the need for recognition. With a complex history and cultural heritage, Ukwani is an important aspect of its speakers' identity. Efforts are underway to document and preserve the language, and further research is needed to fully understand its significance in the region.

## Literature Review

The Ukwani language, a member of the Igboid group of the Niger-Congo language family, is primarily spoken in Nigeria's Delta State. Understanding its grammatical structures, especially the nominal group, is essential for linguists and language learners alike. The nominal group in Ukwani typically comprises a head noun and various modifiers, including adjectives, demonstratives, quantifiers, and possessives. Unlike English, which often employs a "Modifier-Head" structure, Ukwani predominantly uses a "Head-Modifier" arrangement. For example, where English might say "the beautiful girl," the corresponding phrase in Ukwani would be structured as "girl beautiful" (Ijeoma, 2020)

The language has attracted a modest but growing body of linguistic scholarship that focuses on its phonology, morphology, and its typological position within Niger-Congo. The most consistent thread running through recent work is the documentation of Ukwani's phonemic inventory, especially its vowel system and tonal contrasts. Okumo's (2023) instrumental study establishes that Ukwani possesses nine phonemic vowels, among which the mid-front /ɛ/ is phonologically autonomous rather than an allophone of /a/ as in Standard Igbo. Minimal-pair evidence, such as /ɛ-na/ 'eye' versus /a-na/ 'wound', demonstrates contrastive distribution, confirming /ɛ/ as a separate phoneme and highlighting intra-Igboid variation.

Phonologically, Ukwani is also notable for its three-level lexical-tone system (High 38 %, Mid 35 %, Low 27 %) and for the presence of implosive stops /ɓ/ and /ɗ/, sounds absent from English and even from many Benue-Congo neighbours. Ochonogor's (2025) comparative project combines acoustic measurements in Praat with Optimality-Theoretic modelling to show that 89% of Ukwani syllables conform to a simple CV template, in sharp contrast to English's preference for complex clusters. The study further documents six phonemic nasal vowels and tracks pervasive tonal transfer: 76 % of Ukwani speakers imposed native tonal contours when reading English stress-timed material, a finding with clear classroom implications for Nigerian ESL pedagogy. Morphophonologically, Okumo (2018) catalogues active processes such as homorganic nasal assimilation, vowel elision at word junctures, and tone sandhi in genitive constructions. These processes are framed within a derivational account that appeals to universal markedness constraints, positioning Ukwani as a test case for claims about the typological unity of Niger-Congo phonological grammar.

Morphologically, Ukwani agglutinates are prefix-rich but suffix-poor. Obodeh (2011) shows that only two productive prefixes, /o-/ and a zero morph, derive nouns from verb roots, whereas inflectional morphology is limited to two bound suffixes marking past and past-participle. A striking typological feature is the interfix—an affix positioned between two bound morphemes—reportedly unattested in English and rarely described in West African languages. Such interfixes signal possession or number agreement inside compound nouns, underscoring the language's analytic yet highly head-marking profile.

Generally, studies on the syntax of Ukwani are few (Adiza & Emama, 2024). Other substrate Niger Delta languages that share the same space with Ukwani seem to have received greater investigative

attention (Emama, 2025; Emama & Mede, 2024; Mede & Emama, 2024; Emama, 2022). Existing sketches agree on basic SVO order, obligatory aspectual auxiliaries, and a bipartite negative concord system. Tone also carries functional load at the clause level: a final Low tone on the verb can mark perfect aspect, whereas a floating High following the object licenses definite reference. These interactions between tone and syntax invite further research into the extent of tonal morphology in Igboid. Collectively, the literature portrays Ukwuani as a richly tonal, mildly agglutinative language whose phoneme inventory and morphological processes both align with and diverge from canonical Igbo. Documentary gaps persist in syntax, semantics, socio-phonetics, and language ecology. However, the studies reviewed furnish a solid empirical baseline for comparative Benue-Congo work and for community-oriented language maintenance efforts.

## Data and Procedure

The Primary data are derived from English nominal groups and their Ukwuani equivalents, which are translated into English for analytic convenience. The translations are based on the expertise of English- and Ukwuani-speaking competent bilinguals. Derived nominal group structures are grouped and structurally analysed using the framework of Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar. The literal translations of the test items also provide context for the structural divergence between the substrate and English.

## Data Presentation, Analysis, and Discussion

### Head Components

The head components of a nominal group are its essential elements, conveying the primary meaning or reference. According to Halliday (2014), nouns and pronouns typically realise these head components, serving as the central elements of the group. For instance,

Nouns

H

1a: This job requires experience

H

1b: Mmadu abuifeadu (no man lives forever)

Lit: Human is not something forever

H

2a: Light travels faster than sound.

H

2b: Anwu nawaosautu (the sun rises every morning)

Lit: Sun can rise every morning

Pronouns

H

3a: She was beside herself with rage.

H

3b: Mmebuonyeokaiwu (I am a lawyer)

Lit: I am someone expert law

H

4a: They placed their papers in front of them

H

4b: No je ogo (he/she goes to farm)

Lit: He/she go farm

Based on the analysis in 1a to 4b above, both English and Ukwani exhibit similar head structures in nominal groups, where the head noun or pronoun is the core element. This similarity highlights the universal aspects of language structure, as noted by Croft (2003), despite the linguistic differences between the two languages.

### **The Modifier Components:**

In a nominal group, modifiers provide additional information about the head, which precedes them and takes various forms, such as deictic elements. Modifiers are optional, allowing for varying degrees of specificity and detail.

#### **Predeterminers**

Predeterminers are words that come before main determiners in a noun phrase, adding context or emphasis on quantity, degree, or specificity. Examples include words like "all," "both," and "half," which provide further detail to the noun phrase.

	M	M	H
5a:	<b><u>Half</u></b>	the	time
	M	M	H
5b:	<b>Osa</b>	nde	Ndokwa

Lit : All                    the                    Ndokwa

So, when we look at English and Ukwani, we see that they both use predeterminers similarly. These words, like "all" or "both", help quantify or emphasise noun phrases (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 253). It is interesting because this structural similarity shows that, despite their differences, the two languages share some common grammatical ground (Biber et al., 1999, p. 280).

### **DOEN (determiners, ordinals, epithets, and nominals) Structure**

The DOEN structure breaks nominal groups into their constituent parts: Determiners, Ordinators, Epithets, and Nominals. This systematic approach reveals how each component contributes to the overall meaning of the nominal group.

#### **Determiners**

Determiners provide context and clarity by expressing the relationship between a noun or noun phrase and other sentence elements. According to Quirk et al. (1985), determiners include articles ("the," "a"), demonstratives ("this," "that"), possessives ("my," "your"), and quantifiers ("some," "all")

	M(det.)	H
6a:	<b><u>The</u></b>	music
	M(det.)	H
6b:	<b><u>Osaasusu</u></b> (all languages)	
Lit:	All	language
	M(det.)	H
7a:	A	vase
	M(det)	H
7b:	<b><u>Nde</u></b> Ndokwa (the Ndokwas)	

Lit: The Ndokwa

Both English and Ukwani follow a similar structural pattern with modifiers, in which determiners precede the noun or noun phrase, effectively grounding the referent in context and clarifying its scope, as seen in the examples above.

### Ordinals: cardinal and ordinal numerals:

In the context of nominal groups, numerals serve distinct functions. Cardinal numerals denote quantity, specifying the number of items being referred to. Conversely, ordinal numerals indicate position or rank within a sequence, functioning as enumerators that provide essential information about the ordering of items. Both types of numerals play crucial roles in clarifying the meaning and context of nouns and noun phrases.

#### Cardinal numerals:

	M(det.)	M(card.)	H (noun)
8a:	His	<u>one</u>	sister
8b:	M(card.)		H (noun)
	Ofu		ego (ten kobo)
Lit:	One		money
	M (det.)	M (card)	H (noun)
9:	His	<u>two</u>	brothers

Here comes a slight difference between English and Ukwani. In English, cardinal numerals like "one" and "two" clearly function as modifiers, coming before the noun and specifying quantity (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 261). However, Ukwani is different - only the cardinal numeral "one" can occupy the modifier position, while other numerals follow a distinct syntactic pattern (Oghiator, 2024). So, Ukwani has a restricted pattern for cardinal numerals, where only "one" can modify the noun.

### Ordinal numerals and general ordinals:

	M (det.)	M (ord.)	M(card.)	H (noun)
10:	His	<u>last</u>	two	books
	M (det.)	M (card.)	M(ord.)	H(noun)
11:	His	two	<u>last</u>	books

Here is another difference between English and Ukwani. In English, ordinal numerals function as modifiers to indicate position or rank (Quirk et al., 1985). However, Ukwani operates differently, with ordinal numerals not occupying the modifier position (Oghiator, 2024).

### Epithets:

Epithets are linguistic constructs that attribute qualities or characteristics to nouns or noun phrases, often realised through adjectives or adjective phrases that provide descriptive or evaluative information (Quirk et al., 1985; Biber et al., 2021).

M(epth) H

12a: **Timid** soldiers

M(ept.) H

12b: **Akwa** mmili (bridge)

Order: bed water

M(det.) M(ept.) H

13a: A **brave** student

M (ept.) M(det.) H

13b: Okunde aka (the old saying)

Lit: saying the old

Both English and Ukwuani exhibit similar structural patterns in the use of epithets as modifiers, with both typically placing them in a prenominal position (Quirk et al., 1985; Okoro, 2015; Biber et al., 2021; Oghiator, 2024). However, an exception is observed in data 13b, where the determiner "the" postmodifies the epithet, diverging from the standard structure.

### Nominals

Nominals play a vital role in both English and Ukwuani, functioning as heads or modifiers to convey meaning and context. English nominals include nouns and pronouns (Quirk et al., 1985), while Ukwuaninominals serve similar functions (Okoro, 2015; Oghiator, 2024).

M(nom.) H

14a: **Canadian** paper

M(nom.) H

14b: **Onuasusu** (language)

Lit: Mouth language

M (nom.) H

15a: **Chinese** history

M(nom.) H

15b: **Nwunyeoku** (feminine word)

Lit: Feminine word

From the above, both English and Ukwuani possess nominals at the modifier position, a pattern evident in English studies by Quirk et al. (1985) and Biber et al. (2021), and in Ukwuani research by Oghiator (2024) and Okoro (2015), as supported by the recent data analysis.

### Quantifiers:

Quantifiers in both English and Ukwuani function as modifiers to specify quantity or amount in nominal groups. In English, Quirk et al. (1985) and Biber et al. (2021) identify various types of quantifiers (universal, existential, and degree quantifiers) that convey precise meaning. Similarly, in

Ukwuani, quantifiers provide crucial information about quantity or amount (Oghiator, 2024; Emenanjo, 2015). Example:

M(det.)      M(quan.)      H(noun)  
 16a:    A      **few**      biscuits

M(Quan)      H  
 16b: **Mkpomkpo**      efa (many names)

Lit: Many names

M(det.)      M(quan)      H(noun)  
 17a:    A      **little**      butter

M (Quan)      H  
 17b: **Nkebe**      oku (Half sentence)

Lit: Half sentence

### Nominal group with HQ structure

Relative clauses provide additional information about a noun, enhancing clarity and meaning (Quirk et al., 1985; Huddleston & Pullum, 2002). They typically start with a relative pronoun (who, which, that) and contain a finite verb (Quirk et al., 1985). In languages like Ukwuani, relative clauses help form complex nominal groups and play a crucial role in sentence structure (Oghiator, 2024; Emenanjo, 2015). Example;

H      Q (Rel. Cl.)  
 18a: Car      **that one drives fast**

H      Q (Rel. Cl.)  
 18b: **Okwunatuegu** (news that triggers fear)

The data in 18 shows that both languages employ relative clauses to provide additional information about the noun, highlighting their similar grammatical structures. This similarity underscores the importance of relative clauses in facilitating clear and meaningful communication in both English and Ukwuani.

### Prepositional Phrases

Nominal groups often use prepositional phrases as postmodifiers to specify details like location, time, or direction, thereby enhancing the meaning of the head noun (Crystal, 2004; Carter & McCarthy, 2006).

H      Q(PpPh)  
 19a: Head      **with a hammer**  
 H      Q(PpPh)  
 19b: **Anudiniimemkpodukeu** (meat in the net)

Lit: Meat inside **net the**

H Q (PpPh)

20a: Money **on you**

H Q (PpPh)

20b: **Obododiniogafemmiliosumili** (community across the river)

Lit: Community across water river

The analysis reveals that prepositional phrases can function as qualifiers in both English and Ukwuani nominal groups, and that Ukwuani's unique word order does not alter the core structure of these phrases.

### **Determiner as qualifier**

H Q(det.)

21: **Ezeenyi** (our king)

Lit: King our

H Q(det.)

22: **Nwaaya** (his/her child)

Lit: Child his

Ukwuani's nominal group structure is distinct because determiners function as qualifiers, a feature absent in English, which showcases the language's unique grammatical structure and complex determiner system.

### **Cardinal numerals as a qualifier;**

H Q(card.)

23: **Onwaishi**

Lit: Month six

H Q (card.)

24: **Asuaeto**

Lit: Year three

Ukwuani's nominal group structure stands out for utilising cardinal numerals to denote quantity, showcasing a distinct grammatical approach to numerical modification that differs from languages like English.

### **Ordinators (ordinals) as a qualifier;**

H Q(det.) Q(ord.)

25: Ife **keodu** (The first item)

Order: Item the first

The study reveals that Ukwuani's nominal group structure features ordinators as qualifiers, a characteristic not found in English, underscoring a key grammatical difference between the two languages (Ezeh, 2003; Ikoro, 1996).

### Quantifiers as a qualifier

H Q(Quan.)

26: Eke **nta** (small eke)

Order: Eke small

H Q(Quan.)

27: Olie**ku** (Big olie)

Order: Olie big

This analysis emphasises a significant difference between Ukwuani and English, where Ukwuani nominal groups typically feature quantifiers as qualifiers, highlighting the languages' distinct grammatical structures (Ezeh, 2003; Ikoro, 1996).

### 9. Nominal group with “MHQ” structure

M M H Q (Pph)

28a: A particular book on syntax

M H Q

28b: Ndeoke-ezhienyi

Lit: The neighbour our

M H HQ (Pph)

29a: One Charlie Brown at school

M H Q(Pph)

29b: Mkpabeokukeeffa

Lit: Fragment word of name

M H Q (Pph)

30a: His hat in his hand

M H Q

30b: Ugbalaokumkpuke (simple sentence)

Order: Line word short

The interaction between modifiers, qualifiers, and heads in Ukwuani and English reveals a blend of similarities and differences, echoing the distinct features previously observed in the individual components of these languages.

## Conclusion

This study explores the structure and function of nominal groups in Ukwuani and English, highlighting both similarities and differences between the two languages. The analysis focuses on the head components, modifiers, and qualifiers that comprise nominal groups, drawing on theoretical frameworks and empirical data from both languages.

The study reveals similarities between Ukwuani and English in their nominal group structures. Both languages exhibit similar head structures, where the head noun or pronoun is the core element. Additionally, both languages employ prepositional phrases as postmodifiers to specify details like location, time, or direction, and use relative clauses to add detail to nouns, highlighting their similar grammatical structures. Furthermore, both languages also exhibit similarities in the use of predeterminers, determiners, epithets, and nominals as modifiers, showcasing commonalities in their grammatical structures. Both languages also tend to follow a similar word order in their nominal group structures. However, there are also notable differences between the two languages. Ukwuani has a restricted pattern for cardinal numerals, where only the numeral "one" can occupy the modifier position, whereas English allows various cardinal numerals to function as modifiers.

Furthermore, Ukwuani's nominal group structure features determiners functioning as qualifiers, a characteristic absent in English. Ukwuani's use of cardinal numerals, ordinals, and quantifiers as qualifiers also showcases distinct grammatical approaches that differ from those of English. Moreover, Ukwuani nominal groups differ from English in the placement of specific modifiers, such as determiners like "the", and qualifiers, highlighting a key difference in their grammatical structures. The study contributes to our understanding of the grammatical structures of Ukwuani and English, highlighting the importance of comparative linguistic analysis in revealing the unique characteristics of languages.

In conclusion, this study contributes to our understanding of the grammatical structures of Ukwuani and English, highlighting the importance of comparative linguistic analysis in revealing the unique characteristics of languages.

Further studies could investigate the implications of these findings for language teaching and learning, particularly in the context of language contact and bilingualism. A comparative analysis of nominal group structures in other languages spoken in the region would also provide valuable insights. Moreover, exploring the historical development of Ukwuani's nominal group structure would shed light on the language's evolution and grammaticalisation processes.

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