| **RESEARCH ARTICLE**

Grammaticality and Acceptability in the Urhobo Language

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| **ABSTRACT**

This paper examines grammaticality and acceptability in the Ulrhobo language. Grammaticality has to do with well formedness of syntactic structures; grammaticality is usually considered as the structure of sentences and the order in which they are combined together to form sentences. A sentence can conform to the syntactic rule if it is constructed in a grammatical form. The study adopts the truth conditioning theory of meaning as a theoretical framework. The truth conditioning theory of meaning deals with the grammaticality and acceptability of sentence structures. The study reviews that the basic grammar of the Urhobo language conforms to the standard paradigm of a language structure such as Qualifier + Noun + verb + modifier + Adjective, etc and that when these sentences are not properly ordered according to the grammatical rules of the Urhobo language, they are systematically deformed (by inversion, suppression or addition of non-terminal elements in its production rules) to produce a series of grammars generating grammatical, semantically acceptable, semi-grammatical or ungrammatical sentences. It also reviewed that the sentence structures of the Urhobo language conform with the constraints of a sentence structure rule and are, therefore, rule, accepted, while others that don't are, therefore, rule unaccepted. The study further reveals that a sentence must have a string of words that conform to the rule of syntax, such as subject and predicate, which form the basis of grammaticality or acceptability of the sentence. Finally, the study reveals that grammaticality and acceptability can occur in both written and spoken language. It is also a finding that acceptability is more basic rather than grammaticality since all hearers of the Urhobo language can understand or interpret what the speakers convey in a given structure of the language.

1. Introduction
1.1. *Background to the study*
The evolution and development of human natural language showed that they depend on one another at every point in time (Nwachukwu and Imu, 2023). One of the characteristics of natural language is that it contains a large number of expressions of imprecise meaning, which could be grammatically accepted or unaccepted. The concept of *acceptability* was introduced into linguistics in 1965 by Noam Chomsky to denote the specific feature of an utterance that makes that utterance agreeable to the language users, i.e., making it understandable and meaningful to them. The term acceptable is used to refer to utterances that are perfect, natural and immediately comprehensible without paper-and-pencil analysis (Chomsky, 1965).

Contrary to grammaticalness, which is related to competence, Chomsky (1965) considers acceptability to be a feature of language performance, and he does not identify it with grammaticalness alone. Like acceptability, grammaticalness is, no doubt, a matter of degree but the scales of grammaticalness and acceptability do not coincide. Grammaticalness is only one of the many factors that

interact to determine acceptability (Chomsky 1965). However, a given structure may be grammatically incorrect but semantically acceptable. Consequently, grammatical acceptability may not necessarily correspond to semantic acceptability.

A phrase can be regarded as grammatically unacceptable when it is incorrect grammatically. It is stylistically awkward, for instance, maintaining many relative clauses. A phrase can also be considered semantically unacceptable when it is semantically contradictory; it includes content inconsistency with our knowledge about the world. Based on this distinction, Ida Kurcz (1987) distinguished four types of sentences, namely: sentences acceptable grammatically and semantically, sentences acceptable grammatically but unacceptable semantically, sentences acceptable semantically but not grammatically accepted and sentences unacceptable both grammatically and semantically.

In this study, we will look at the grammaticality and acceptability of phrase and sentence structures syntactically and semantically under the shade of well formedness (acceptable or unacceptable) in compliance with the Urhobo language's grammatical and stylistic norms.

2. Literature review
Word formation and Lexical semantics are aspects of linguistics studies that have generated a lot of interest among linguists(Christopher and Imu, 2023).The truth conditioning theory of meaning deals with the grammaticality and acceptability of sentence structures. Scholars have unanimously agreed that semantics is the study of meaning. Such scholars include Imu, F. O. (2019), and Palmer (1976). Cruse (1990) and Yule 1976, Sentential semantics is the study of sense relationships among sentential structures. The theoretical semanticists carry out research into how they can arrive at a unified account of meaning.

For Aristotle, logical analysis of ordinary language could be adequately based on the subject predicate structure *subject* being understood to refer to the logical subject or theme. The subject usually consists of a noun and an imprecise quantifying adjective (e.g. few or most), while the predicate usually consists of a verb, an imprecise modifying adverb (e.g. very or slightly) and an adjective.

Similarly, Gassar (2003) proposes that the grammaticality or the acceptability can occur in the context but not appropriate, such as in an eight-year old boy speaking to his mother as follows:

1(a) when I exited the bed this morning, my hair looks like rabbit ears.
  (b) When I go out of bed this morning, my hair look like rabbit ears.

The use of exited in (1a) is grammatical but not appropriate in this relatively informal context (Gosser 2003).

Gawron (2004) proposes that a sentence may be phonologically, morphologically, syntactically, and semantically accepted but pragmatically unaccepted. Gawron (2004) provides the following examples:

2. (a) look at the cross-eyed elephant (pragmatically accepted)
(b) Look at the cross-eyed kindness (pragmatically accepted).
(c) Look at the cross-eyed from (syntactically ungrammatical)
(d) Strive for kind-ity (morphologically ungrammatical).

Record to Gawron (2004), both (2a) and (2b) are definitely pragmatically acceptable. However, (2c) is the syntactical ungrammaticality and (2d) is morphological ungrammaticality. A sentence must demand a semantics agreement since the semantic grammaticality and acceptability lie in the relationship between its sentence and the real world.

For example:

3. (a) Horses are animals
(b) Horses are plants
Sentence (3a) is grammatical and acceptable since all horses are animals. In the real-world, however, all horses are not plant as in (3b).

Another kind of acceptability is determined by the number of agreement in a sentence (Alwi et al., 1998). As in the example below, (3a) is both grammatical and accepted perfectly, while (3b) is ungrammatical but accepted by some speakers, and it is meaningful.

4. (a) this man is rather unhappy
(b) This men is rather unhappy
This means acceptability can occur in a false sentence, as proposed by Gawron (2004)

Duffield- (2000) distinguishes between grammaticality and acceptability. A sentence can be grammatical without being accepted in a particular context. In other words, grammaticality concerns what is stipulated by abstract grammar, but an acceptability concern of what is actually accepted in communication. Duffield (2000) provides some examples of this distinction between grammaticality and acceptability of using English in some cases. The first case is the word-order. In most sentences in English basic word order, the subject (s) comes before the verb (v), which in turn comes before the object (O) (Duffield (2000). In more complex sentences, in English, certain adverbs (Adv) such as *often* can appear between the subject and the verb but not between the verb and the object, e.g.

4. (a) she bought books in borders.
   (b) She often bought books in borders
   (c) She bought often books in borders.

These examples: (4a), 4b) and 4c) also show that grammaticality is different from interpretability. The ungrammatical sentence in (4c) makes sense; we can understand it perfectly- but it does not follow the rules (Duffield 2000).

2.1 Theoretical framework
The theoretical framework adopted in this study is the truth conditioning theory of meaning. Scholars have unanimously agreed that semantics is the study of meaning. Such scholars include Imu (2019), Ogden and Richards (1923), Palmer (1976), Cruse (1990) and Yule (1976).

2.2 Summary of Literature
The review of literature shows that a lot of work has been done on grammaticality in other languages, but none has been done in the Urhobo language; there is a need for the investigation of the phenomena in the Urhobo language.

3. Grammaticality and Acceptability in the Urhobo Language.
3.1 Grammaticality
A sentence is said to be grammatical when it conforms to linguistic rules or syntactic rules. According to Anagbogu, Mbah and Eme (2010), they opine that grammaticality has to do with well formedness (see Imu 2016 and Imu 2021). Gawon (2004), like Fromkin and Rodman (1998), proposes that grammaticality is usually considered as the structure of sentences, the order in which they are combined together to form sentences. A sentence can conform to the syntactic rule if it is constructed in a grammatical form, for example.

    5.   ọmọ̀ ná mrẹ igho ná
       Child that see pst money that
        The boy found the money

The sentence above has the string of words that conform to the rule of syntax, such as subject *omo na* (the boy) and predicate *mrẹ Igho na* (found, the money). The predicate is a transitive verb, so it must need a noun as an object, not an adjective or an adverb after such predicate (see Imu 2021).

Conversely, an intransitive verb (as the predicate) does not need a noun (as the object) after such a verb, so it must need an adverb, as could be seen in sentence 6 below:

    6.   Ovie vwérhẹ̀ rẹ sasasáá
       name sleep pst fine fine tense
        Ovie slept peacefully/soundly).

However, grammaticalness is only one of the many factors that interact to determine acceptability (Chomsky 1965). Thus, a given utterance may be grammatically incorrect but semantically acceptable. Consequently, grammatical acceptability corresponds to semantic acceptability, as could be exemplified below.

3.2 Grammatically Unaccepted Phrases
A phrase can be regarded as grammatically unaccepted when:

i. It is grammatically incorrect. For example,

7 iniọvo re orive mẹ kpọkpọ ekrú mé
Brothers prep neighbours me disturb family me
Our neighbors's bother (disturbs) me

8. inámá kpẹ eki
Cow went past market
Cow went to market

9. imọki kpẹ emu rhẹ ebró
Monkeys went pst food cut
Monkeys went for wedding ceremony.

The phrases above are grammatically unaccepted intuitively by an Urhobo native speaker.
(ii) When it is stylistically awkward, for instance, containing many relative clauses, for example.

10. Oniovo mẹ ọ re rhe na, owie owia evù rhé osipita kẹ avwaré ihùvwù nánáná
brother my came place my persons who work in house drug that gave us drug now.
"My brother who come who work in the hospital that gave us drug just now."

3.3 Semantically unaccepted phrases
A phrase is semantically unaccepted when:
(i). It is semantically contradictory, for example

11. Okẹ jé rọvwoo share royéé ohwo re Aka
name not married husband prep Benin
Okẹ not married husband from Aka
Okẹ is not married her husband is from Aka

(ii) It includes content in consistency with our knowledge of the world, for example.

12. (a) iyési éránvwe
Horses are animals
(b) ekpẹ̀n ikúta
Sands are stones
(c) iyesi irhé
Horses are trees
(d) ekpen éránvwe
Sands are animals

The phrases (12a and b) above have content consistency and are acceptable because all horses are animals, and sands are universally accepted to come from stones and vice versa. But the phrases (12 c, and d) are content inconsistence and not accepted because horses can never be trees, neither can sand be animals respectively in the real world.

To clarify the "when" of the phrases' grammaticality or acceptability and semantically, the following sentences types will be examined in the Urhobo language.

(i.)Sentences acceptable grammatically and semantically

Some sentences are accepted by native speakers' of Urhobo language both grammatically and semantically, for example:

13(a) iranko na djẹ kpo
Dog that running tense go home
The dog is running home

(b) Avwaré ùmé
We tense discussing
We are discussing

(c) Ejiro kpẹ ehwá
He go past to farm
He went to the farm

(d)   Aye na riẹ emù na
                 Woman that eat tense food that
                 The woman is eating the food.
(ii)   Sentences accepted grammatically but not accepted semantically;
         For example,
14(a)   ódá ámwá ná vwẹrẹrhẹ vẹ ophù
          Colour cloth that sleep past test angry
          The colour of the cloth slept with annoyance
(b)   ẹ̀vwe na riẹ̀ eranvwẹ na
          Goat that eat past meet that
          The goat eat the meet
(c)   ọ̀ riẹ̀ agbara na
          He eat tense chair/seat that
          He is eating the seat.

The sentences (14a - c) are grammatically accepted according to the structural syntactic rule of the language but not accepted semantically because they did not make any sense.

(iii)   Sentences accepted semantically but not grammatically violate syntagmatic relationships but are still accepted on the
           ground of meaning. Examples of these sentences are all proverbs, idioms, and figures of speech. For example
15(a)   obo agbẹ̀ẹ̀ oda ọ̀yẹ̀ agbẹ̀ẹ̀ ùrhe
          As tense tie cutlass tense tie tree/wood
          respect is reciprocal
 (b)   dẹ̀dẹ̀ẹ̀ oyẹ̀ akpo eyerhe
          Gentle tense life live
          Slaw and steady win the race
 (c)   ogho oye avwo riẹ̀ ikara
         respect tense eat beans cake
         Sanitation is not love

(iv). Sentences unaccepted both Grammatical and Semantically
Some sentences are unaccepted both grammatically and semantically because they cannot sound syntactically correct to native speakers and doesn't conform to syntactic rule; for example,

(16)   a.   rode uvwẹvwi na djẹ kpo kpatakpata iranko
               (Big house that sense running quickly dog)
              (house big that is running quickly dog)
                "The big dog is running home quickly"
       b. Evwe na riẹ̀ ebe rhe
           Goat that eat past grass all
           The goat ate grass all
           The Goat ate all grasses
       c.   Eranko na riẹ̀ agbara na
            dog that eat tense chair/seat that
           Dog the eat seat
           The dog ate the seat

The sentences above are completely unaccepted grammatically and semantically because they do not follow the structural word-order of the language and semantic interpretations. The propositions –the arguments and the predicators are not properly positioned. In sentence (16a), for instance, *rode (*big*)* is an adjective which should have come after the noun *house,* which is an inanimate object that is now taking the form of an animate object, by predicating the verb *dje* which is an action to be done by an animate object. The argument *Eranko* (dog) also interchanged position with the adverb *kpatakpata,* which is criminal to syntactic arguments. Therefore, a sentence that would have been "The big dog is running home quickly" turned to be "Big house is running quickly dog", which is ungrammatical and meaningless.

In the same vein, this anomalous structure of a sentence in (16a) is equally applied to sentences (16b and c).

4. Summary of Findings
This study investigated the grammaticality and acceptability in the Urhobo language. The study reveals that a structure can be accepted grammatically and semantically, accepted grammatically but not semantically, accepted semantically but not grammatically and accepted both grammatically and semantically.

The study also shows that grammaticality and acceptability can occur in both written and spoken language. It is also a finding that acceptability is more basic than grammaticality since all hearers of the Urhobo language can understand or interpret what the speakers convey in a given structure of the language.

The study further reveals that most structures in the Urhobo can be accepted without grammaticality of the structure. That is, in a construction where one can understand what the structure is referring to without necessarily the grammaticality of that structure.

5. Conclusion
This paper investigated grammaticality and acceptability in the Ulrhobo language. Grammaticality has to do with well formedness of syntactic structures; grammaticality is usually considered as the structure of sentences and the order in which they are combined together to form sentences. A sentence can conform to the syntactic rule if it is constructed in a grammatical form.

The study revealed that grammaticality and acceptability in the Urhobo language conformed to the standard paradigm of universal grammar. In other words, the grammaticality and acceptability of the Urhobo language are properly and systematically ordered according to grammatical rules. The study also revealed that there are structures in the Urhobo language that are accepted grammatically and semantically, structures accepted grammatically but not semantically, structures accepted semantically but not grammatically, and structures that are accepted both grammatically and semantically. It also reviewed that the sentence structures of the Urhobo language conform with the constraints of a sentence structure rule and are, therefore, rule accepted, while others that don't are, therefore, rule unaccepted.

The study further reveals that a sentence must have a string of words that conform to the rule of syntax, such as subject and predicate, which form the basis of grammaticality or acceptability of the sentence.

The study is very important and will contribute to the existing literature because the basic grammar of the Urhobo language conforms to the standard paradigm of a language structure, such as Qualifier + Noun + verb + modifier + Adjective, etc.

Finally, the study concludes that grammaticality and acceptability can occur in both written and spoken language and that acceptability is more basic rather than grammaticality since all hearers of the Urhobo language can understand or interpret what the speakers convey in a given structure of the language.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.
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