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Convergence and Divergence in Feature Checking: A Contrastive Minimalist Analysis of Selected Morphosyntactic Structures in English and Ebira

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Abstract- Languages differ in how they express tense, agreement, number and case, yet the Minimalist Program holds that every language must check and value its grammatical features before a derivation is complete. Contrastive work on English and Nigerian languages has concentrated mainly on sounds, vocabulary and isolated grammatical categories, and Ebira has received very little attention within formal syntax. This study therefore examined the points of similarity and difference between the morphosyntactic structures of Standard English and Ebira Tao in relation to feature checking. A qualitative, descriptive and contrastive design was adopted. Thirty Ebira constructions were elicited from three competent Ebira–English bilinguals in Okene, each was paired with an English equivalent drawn from BBC English, and all were analysed within the TP, vP and CP domains using Chomsky's Minimalist Program. The findings show that both languages share a basic subject–verb–object order, check tense and agreement features in the T domain, license accusative case inside the verb phrase, and place negation in a functional head. They differ in how these features are realised. English marks tense, agreement, number and pronoun case on verbs, nouns, pronouns and auxiliaries, whereas Ebira keeps the verb unchanged and spreads the same information across a number-marking subject clitic, aspectual particles, a negative particle and time adverbials. The study concludes that feature checking is universal, but its surface realisation is language-specific.

Keywords- Feature checking; Minimalist Program; contrastive analysis; morphosyntax; English; Ebira Tao.

I. Introduction

Every language has to tell its listeners who did what, to whom and when, and languages differ a great deal in the tools they use to do so. Some rely on endings attached to verbs and nouns, some on small free-standing particles, and some on the order in which words appear. These differences matter most in a country such as Nigeria, where more than 500 indigenous languages exist alongside English (Eberhard et al., 2023). English is the official language and the main language of instruction at every level of formal education, so most Nigerian children meet a second grammatical system, often a very different one, when they begin school.

Ebira is one of the indigenous languages that meet English in this way. It belongs to the Nupoid group of the Volta-Niger branch of the Niger-Congo family (Williamson & Blench, 2000; Blench, 2019) and is spoken mainly in central Kogi State. Ebira speakers acquire English through schooling and urban life, and, as Lado (1957) argued, learners tend to carry the grammatical habits of their first language into the second. Whether those habits help or hinder depends on how closely the two grammars match (Ndimele, 1992; James, 1980). Any serious attempt to understand that match needs a precise account of how each language builds its clauses.

Modern syntactic theory offers such an account through the idea of feature checking. In the Minimalist Program (Chomsky, 1995, 2000), words enter a derivation carrying formal features such as tense, person, number and case. Some features are interpretable, which means they contribute to meaning, while others are uninterpretable and must be checked and removed before the sentence is handed over to the interfaces. A derivation that leaves such features unchecked is said to crash (Radford, 2004). In *She loves him*, for example, the verb must agree with a third-person singular subject, and the pronouns must appear in their nominative and accusative forms. All languages are assumed to meet this requirement, but they meet it by different routes. English has fairly light inflection and a strict word order (Carnie, 2013), while many African languages use tone, particles or clitics to signal the same relationships.

Despite this theoretical interest, contrastive studies of Nigerian languages and English have leaned towards widely spoken languages such as Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa, and towards phonology, lexis and single grammatical categories. For Ebira,

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Isiaka (2017) examined the phonology of Ebira English, Onmoke (2016) compared personal pronouns in English and Ebira within a parametric approach, and Saliu (2014) compared predicate–argument structure. Adive (1989) remains the main descriptive source on the Ebira verb. None of these works asked how features are checked in the functional domains of the clause. It is therefore still unclear what English and Ebira share, and where they part ways, when both are viewed through the same theoretical lens. This paper takes up that question.

The Ebira Language and the Ebira Tao Variety

Ebira is spoken in the central part of Kogi State, particularly in Okene, Adavi, Okehi, Ajaokuta and Ogori-Magongo Local Government Areas, and in smaller communities in neighbouring states. It is not a single uniform variety. Several dialects are recognised, including Ebira Tao (the Okene variety), Ebira Koto, Ebira Panda, Ebira Agatu and Ebira Etuno (Onmoke, 2016). Ebira Tao is the most widely spoken and has the most developed written tradition, so it serves as the reference dialect for linguistic study. This paper therefore uses Ebira Tao, and the word *Ebira* below refers to this variety unless stated otherwise.

Like many Niger-Congo languages, Ebira is tonal, with high, mid and low tones that separate words and may also carry grammatical information (Adive, 1989). Its basic clause order is subject–verb–object, the same as English. In the data examined here, however, the verb stays the same whatever the tense, aspect or subject, and grammatical information is carried by small elements placed before it. This difference in strategy is what makes English and Ebira a revealing pair for the study of feature checking.

Objectives of the Study

The general objective of this study is to investigate the similarities and differences between the morphosyntactic structures of English and Ebira in relation to feature checking. The specific objectives are to:

1. identify the points of similarity in the way tense, aspect, number, case and negation features are checked in English and Ebira;
2. identify the points of difference in the structures through which these features are realised and checked; and
3. explain these similarities and differences in terms of the Minimalist notions of functional heads, probes, goals and feature valuation.

The study is guided by one research question: What are the similarities and differences in the morphosyntactic processes of English and Ebira with regard to feature checking?

Significance of the Study

The study contributes to ongoing efforts to understand how syntactic features are checked, licensed and interpreted across languages within the Minimalist Program. English has been analysed extensively in terms of agreement, case, tense and movement, but comparative work that tests whether the same principles hold in less documented languages remains scarce. Data from Ebira Tao provide new empirical evidence that may support or challenge current assumptions, and they widen the typological range of the data used in English syntax research. The study also has practical relevance for the teaching of English grammar in Nigeria, because a clear account of where the two systems converge and diverge gives teachers and materials developers a sound starting point for treating interference between the two languages.

II. Literature Review

Contrastive Analysis as a Method of Comparison

Contrastive analysis compares the structures of two or more languages in order to describe how they resemble and differ from one another. It grew in the middle of the twentieth century out of structural linguistics and behaviourist views of learning. Fries (1945) argued that the best teaching materials rest on a scientific description of the target language set beside a matching description of the learner's first language. Lado (1957) turned this idea into the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis: elements of the second language that resemble the first should be easy to learn, elements that differ should be hard, and the difficulties can therefore be predicted by a systematic comparison.

This strong version of the hypothesis drew criticism. Schachter (1974) observed that learners from different backgrounds do not always make the errors that the comparison predicts, and that they may avoid difficult structures altogether. Wardhaugh (1970) described the strong claim as unrealistic and proposed a weak version, in which the comparison is used to explain errors after they appear instead of forecasting all of them in advance. A moderate position later emerged. It accepts that some difficulties can be predicted but insists that they be confirmed against learner data (Fisiak, 1981; James, 1980), and it recognises that frequency, learnability and markedness also affect whether a difference leads to negative transfer (James, 1980).

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This paper takes the weak, explanatory view. Its aim is not to claim that every difference between English and Ebira will produce an error. Its aim is to set the two feature-checking systems side by side, mark where they converge and diverge, and offer a principled description of both. Contrastive work of this kind also serves linguistic theory, because comparing languages supplies evidence on how parametric variation appears within a universal grammar (Cook & Newson, 2007; Ndimele, 1992).

Morphosyntax and Feature Checking

Morphosyntax covers the grammatical categories, such as tense, aspect, agreement, number and case, that are expressed both inside words and across the structure of the clause (Payne, 1997). Lamidi (2008) notes that it allows linguists to connect information at the word level with structure at the sentence level. The contrast between *She walks* and *They walk* shows the connection: the ending -s is a morphological marker, but it appears only when the syntactic subject is third-person singular. Morphological processes are also not uniform across languages. Some depend heavily on affixes, while others rely more on tone, reduplication or word order to do the same grammatical work (Payne, 1997). Comparisons between unrelated languages are therefore a natural place to look for the effects of such differences.

Within the Minimalist Program, morphosyntactic features are more than labels. Lexical items enter the derivation from the lexicon with formal features, and these must be matched, valued or removed before the derivation reaches the interfaces (Chomsky, 1995, 2000). Several kinds of feature are distinguished. Interpretable features contribute to meaning at Logical Form, whereas uninterpretable features have a purely syntactic role and must be eliminated. Features may be strong or weak: a strong feature forces overt movement, while a weak one can be checked without it (Chomsky, 1995). Features may also be valued or unvalued. The tense head T, for example, carries unvalued agreement features that receive their values from the subject (Ouhalla, 1999). The operation that accomplishes this is Agree, in which a probe with unvalued features searches its c-command domain for a goal with matching valued features and copies the values (Chomsky, 2000; Pesetsky & Torrego, 2007). After valuation the uninterpretable features are deleted and the derivation converges.

Feature checking also helps to explain why languages differ. Carnie (2013) points out that functional heads vary across languages in the features they carry and in how those features are checked. English T is described as having a weak tense feature, which is why the main verb does not move to T in declarative clauses (Chomsky, 1995). A language whose functional heads are spelled out as independent particles, instead of as endings on the verb, will look very different on the surface even though the same abstract checking takes place.

Earlier Studies on English and Nigerian Languages

Several studies bear on the present topic, although none addresses it directly. Onmoke (2016) compared personal pronouns in English and Ebira within a parametric framework. English was found to mark case distinctions overtly on subject and object pronouns, while Ebira marks them far less visibly. The study gave a clear picture of surface differences, but it did not use tree-based analyses in the Minimalist tradition, so the link between pronoun position and checking operations was left unexplored. Saliu (2014) gathered data from native speakers to compare predicate types and verb–object alignment in English and Ebira. Its data were rich, but the analysis leaned on traditional grammar and did not consider feature checking, phases or movement. Isiaka (2017) investigated Ebira English from a sociolinguistic and phonological angle, with attention to vowel shifts and tonal adaptation, and agreement and case licensing fell outside its scope.

Work on other languages shows what a theory-driven comparison can achieve. Kwokwo (2012) used X-bar and Minimalist assumptions to analyse functional categories in English and Izon and presented careful syntactic trees for tense and aspectual markers. Its findings cannot be extended to Ebira without a separate investigation, however, and it did not go as far as the checking of uninterpretable features. Akinmurele (2019) approached morphosyntax from a clinical direction, examining features in the speech of bilingual aphasic and autistic speakers in south-western Nigeria and arguing that irregular morphosyntactic behaviour can be diagnostic. Taken together, the studies reviewed here leave a clear gap: none compares English and Ebira through the mechanisms of feature checking. The present paper addresses that gap.

Theoretical Framework: The Minimalist Program

The study adopts the Minimalist Program introduced by Chomsky (1995) and developed in Chomsky (2000, 2008). The Program assumes that the human language faculty follows principles of economy and optimal design, so that a derivation should use as few and as short steps as possible. A

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derivation starts from a lexical array, applies the operations Merge, Move and Agree in narrow syntax, and passes its output to two interface levels: Phonetic Form (PF), which connects to pronunciation, and Logical Form (LF), which connects to meaning (Chomsky, 1995). Only derivations that satisfy the conditions at both interfaces are grammatical. If an uninterpretable or unvalued feature remains, the derivation crashes (Radford, 2004).

Merge combines two syntactic objects into a new one. External Merge brings items in from the lexicon, while Internal Merge, also called Move, re-merges an item that is already in the structure. Agree links a probe and a goal so that features are valued and checked. Transfer sends completed parts of the derivation to the interfaces at phase boundaries (Chomsky, 2008). Economy principles such as Shortest Move, Greed and Last Resort restrict these operations (Chomsky, 1995; Hornstein et al., 2005).

The framework suits a contrastive study for three reasons. First, it supplies a shared vocabulary, made up of T, v, C, probe, goal and valuation, for describing two typologically different languages. Second, it separates abstract syntax from the way features are finally pronounced, which is what a comparison of an inflecting language and a particle-using language requires. This separation is also central to Distributed Morphology, where features are assigned in the syntax and given form in the morphological component (Harley & Noyer, 1999). Third, it allows claims about universality and variation to be tested against data from a language, Ebira, that has not been examined in this way before.

III. Methodology

The study used a qualitative, descriptive and contrastive design. This design was chosen because the aim was to interpret linguistic structures in depth, not to count occurrences. The Ebira variety studied was Ebira Tao, spoken in and around Okene in Kogi State. The English used for comparison was Standard British English, which remains the reference variety for formal and academic work in Nigeria.

The population consisted of educated native speakers of Ebira Tao who are functionally bilingual in English. Bilingual informants were chosen because the task requires people who can reflect on both grammars and judge the acceptability of sentences. Purposive sampling was used to select constructions that bear on feature checking. The sample comprised 30 Ebira constructions elicited from three native speakers in Okene, and each construction was paired with an English equivalent so that the two sets of structures were parallel. The informants were born and raised in Okene, had spent little time living outside the Ebira-speaking area, and were competent users of English. Table 1 summarises the design.

Table 1: Summary of the data and sampling procedure

Item	Description
Ebira variety	Ebira Tao (Okene, Kogi State)
English variety	Standard British English (BBC English)
Sample	30 Ebira constructions, each paired with an English equivalent
Informants	Three native speakers of Ebira Tao from Okene Local Government Area
Selection criteria	Born and raised in Okene; little long-term residence outside the Ebira-speaking area; competent users of English
Data collection	Structured elicitation, introspective judgement and text analysis
Glossing	Leipzig Glossing Rules
Framework and domains	Minimalist Program; TP, vP and CP domains

Data were collected through structured elicitation, introspection and text analysis. The informants responded to model sentences aimed at subject–verb agreement, tense marking and pronoun use, among other areas. The English data were drawn from written and spoken BBC English, which offers a widely recognised model of Standard English. All data were recorded, transcribed and glossed according to the Leipzig Glossing Rules.

The analysis applied the principles of the Minimalist Program (Chomsky, 1995). Each construction was analysed within the TP, vP and CP domains to establish where interpretable and uninterpretable features are licensed, and syntactic trees were drawn

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to represent the derivations. Five features were examined: tense, aspect, number, case and negation. For each feature the English and Ebira structures were first described separately and then compared, and the similarities and differences reported below come from that comparison. The scope was limited to declarative and interrogative sentence types, and relative clauses and ellipsis were not covered.

IV. Analysis and Discussion

This section reports the findings on the study's central objective, that is, the points at which the feature-checking systems of English and Ebira converge and diverge. The features examined are tense, aspect, number, case and negation. Similarities are presented first, then differences, and a discussion follows. In the Ebira examples, 3SG and 3PL mark the third-person singular and plural subject clitics, PROG marks the progressive particle, PERF the perfective particle and NEG the negative particle.

Points of Similarity

Basic constituent order

In simple declarative sentences, both languages place the subject before the verb and the object after it. English is a strict subject–verb–object language, and the Ebira data follow the same order, as (1) and (2) show.

(1) *The minister addresses the nation every month.*

(2)

Òmínísítà	*ó*	*nà*	*tù*	*ìkàìn*	*òkwù*
minister	3SG	PROG	address	nation	every.month

'The minister addresses the nation every month.'

The similarity also has a structural side. In both languages the subject is a DP in the specifier of TP, the verb heads a VP inside the clause, and the object is merged as the complement of the verb. This shared skeleton gives the checking operations a common site to work on.

Checking in the T domain

Both languages check the tense and agreement features of the clause in the domain of T. In English, T carries tense and agreement features that probe downwards, find the subject and are valued by it. In Ebira, the head T hosts the pronominal clitic and the aspectual particles, and these are matched with the subject DP. In each language the clause is grammatical only if the relevant features are matched and none is left unchecked, so both obey the requirement that a derivation converge at the interfaces (Chomsky, 1995; Radford, 2004).

The encoding of time

Both languages distinguish past, present and future, and both can place an event before, during or after the moment of speaking. English does this through inflection and auxiliaries, while Ebira uses particles, preverbal markers and temporal adverbials. Adverbials such as *yesterday* in English and *òhiè* in Ebira behave alike in one important respect. In the structures analysed, they supply time information as adjuncts and take no part in feature checking in either language.

Structural licensing of case

Accusative case is licensed in both languages inside the verb phrase. An object DP merged as the complement of the verb is recognised as an internal argument and licensed by its position, and in Ebira this operation works independently of the subject clitic and the aspect particle. Nominative case is likewise tied to the position of the subject in relation to T. In both languages, then, grammatical roles are determined by structural configuration, which is why word order is important to each of them.

Negation as a functional element

Both languages have a dedicated way of negating a clause, and in both the negative element is a functional item merged within the clause structure, in a NegP or within the functional structure of T. In each case the main verb remains unmarked beneath it: in English the verb stays in its base form after the auxiliary and *not*, and in Ebira the verb stays invariant after the negative particle. The negative feature must also be licensed within its own clause in both languages, so an embedded clause has its own checking operation. Table 2 summarises the points of convergence.

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Table 2: Summary of similarities in feature checking between English and Ebira

Area	Shared property
Constituent order	Subject–verb–object order in simple declarative clauses
Site of checking	Tense and agreement features are checked in the T domain
Time reference	Past, present and future are distinguished; time adverbials act as adjuncts that do not take part in checking
Accusative case	Licensed by the object's position inside the VP
Nominative case	Tied to the position of the subject in relation to T
Negation	Expressed by a functional element; the main verb remains unmarked

Points of Difference

Tense and agreement

English marks tense and agreement on the verb itself. Lexical verbs in the present take an overt -s only with third-person singular subjects and appear in the base form elsewhere, while the past is formed with -ed or an irregular form. The auxiliaries *be*, *have* and *do* show fuller agreement across person and number. In (3), T carries a present-tense feature and a third-person singular agreement feature. These features probe the subject, are valued by it, and the -s affix is inserted under T and lowered onto the verb stem at PF, giving *adjusts*. The verb does not move to T.

(3) *The Central Bank adjusts interest rates regularly.*

Ebira works differently, as (4) illustrates. The lexical verb is completely invariant. It carries no ending for tense, person or number in any context. Every finite clause instead contains a preverbal pronominal clitic generated in T, *ó* for singular and *á* for plural subjects, and this clitic expresses number only. It is not sensitive to person beyond the singular and plural contrast, and it says nothing about tense. Ebira also does not drop the subject in finite clauses. A full subject DP appears first and is doubled by the clitic, so the clitic is the only element in the clause that carries information about the subject.

(4)	*Òhú ènyò*	*ó*	*zàgwà*	*èzòmà*	*ìhìnè*
	journalist	3SG	report	news	every.day

'A journalist reports the news daily.'

Time is therefore established in other ways. When no tense or aspect particle is present, the clause receives a default present or non-past reading. The particle *nà* is added for ongoing or overtly habitual situations, and time adverbials such as *ìhìnè* 'every day' fix the reading further. Ebira has no copula, so stative predicates are treated exactly like dynamic ones. The past tense follows the same logic, as (5) shows. The clitics *ó* and *á* appear in past and present clauses alike, and the past reading comes from the adverbial *òhìè* 'last' and the wider context.

(5)	*Òmínísítà*	*ó*	*nyì*	*òzìnyì òkò*	*òkwù òhìè*
	minister	3SG	visit	flood-affected region	week last

'The minister visited the flood-affected region last week.'

One further detail shows that Ebira agreement can follow meaning. In the data, the noun for 'government' takes the plural clitic *á*, which the analysis explains as a collective, semantically plural reading. In feature-checking terms, then, English checks tense and agreement together on a verbal element in T, while Ebira checks number on the clitic and leaves tense to be expressed independently. Figure 1 sets the two derivations side by side.

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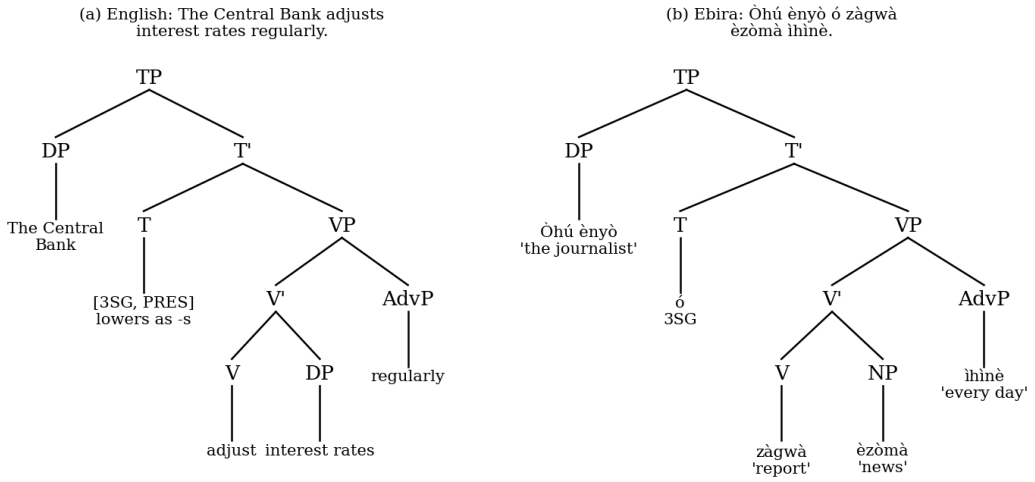

Figure 1: Feature checking in the TP of an English and an Ebira present-tense clause

Aspect

English expresses aspect through auxiliaries and participial forms. The progressive combines *be* with the -ing participle, and the perfect combines *have* with the past participle. The auxiliary occupies T and hosts tense and agreement features while the main verb is non-finite, so tense, agreement and aspect are closely linked. In *The Prime Minister is speaking at the press conference*, the auxiliary *is* carries present tense and third-person singular agreement, and -ing sits in the aspect head.

Aspect in Ebira is entirely analytic. It is shown by preverbal particles, *nà* for the progressive and *kà* for the perfective, which follow the subject clitic and precede the invariant verb in a fixed order, as in (6) and (7). Each function is assigned to a separate element: the clitic marks number, the particle marks aspect, and the verb carries only lexical meaning. Aspectual particles do not encode tense or agreement, and the verb is never modified to show aspect.

(6)	*Àkòtá*	*ó*	*nà*	*fè*	*ùwà òzògù*	*ìrèyì ònàhìpà*
	economy	3SG	PROG	show	sign recovery	this quarter

'The economy is showing signs of recovery this quarter.'

(7)	*Òzì ìhùmà*	*á*	*kà*	*kànyì*	*òhì ènyí*
	scientists	3PL	PERF	discover	disease potential

'Scientists have discovered a potential cure for the disease.'

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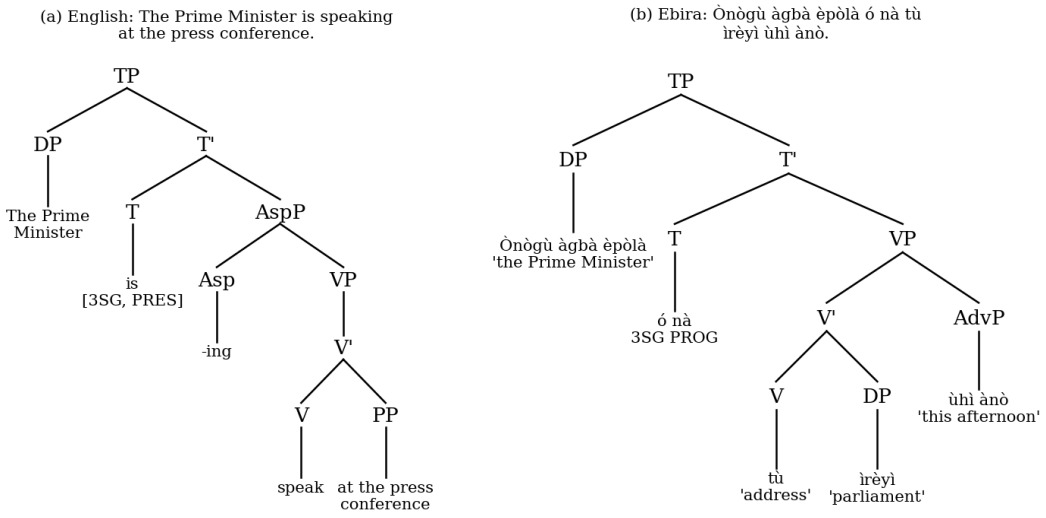

Figure 2: The progressive aspect in an English and an Ebira clause

A related difference appears in longer verbal sequences. English can stack auxiliaries, as in *He may have been questioned by the committee*, so that modality, perfect aspect, passive voice and agreement are all organised in a hierarchy. Ebira has no equivalent construction in the data, since its aspect and negation elements are simple particles that sit in a single fixed sequence before the verb.

Number

In English, number is marked on nouns, pronouns and verbs. Nouns form plurals with -s or -es, or irregularly, and the verb must match the subject, so a singular subject in the present takes -s while a plural subject does not. Collective nouns may be treated as singular or plural, as in *The committee is reviewing the report* against *The staff are preparing for the conference*, and compound subjects trigger plural agreement. Number is thus checked twice, once in the noun phrase and once between T and the verb or auxiliary.

In Ebira, nouns do not change form for number. Plurality is shown by the subject clitic, *ó* or *á*, and by context or quantifiers, while the verb stays invariant. Example (8) is typical. The T or aspect head probes the subject DP, and its number is valued on the clitic, so number is checked once, on a preverbal element, and not on the noun and the verb.

(8)	*Èzùwà*	*á*	*kà*	*shà*	*òvòkà*	*lùìnà àzà*
	team	3PL	PERF	celebrate	victory	with pride

'The team celebrated its victory with pride.'

Case

English has a mixed case system. Personal pronouns show overt nominative and accusative forms (I, he, she, we, they against me, him, her, us, them), but full noun phrases show no case ending, so word order does most of the work for them. Nominative case is assigned to the subject by T, and accusative case is assigned inside the verbal domain. The nominative form is even required for a predicate nominal after the copula, as in *It was I who coordinated the emergency response team*.

In Ebira, case is entirely abstract. Neither nouns nor pronouns show distinct nominative or accusative forms, and the same pronoun serves as subject and object. In the data, the form *òvè* translates both 'it' and 'him', and example (9) shows it in object position. Subjects are identified by their position before the subject clitic, and objects by their position after the verb within the VP. Linear order and structure therefore replace morphology as the signal of grammatical function.

(9)	*Èzùwà*	*á*	*nà*	*zvò*	*òvè*	*ànyàànyà*
	team	3PL	PROG	welcome	him	warmly

'The team welcomes him warmly.'

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Negation

English negation is tied to the auxiliary system. The negative marker *not* does not attach to the main verb. It follows an auxiliary, as in *The committee has not approved the new policy*, and where no auxiliary is present, English inserts the dummy auxiliary *do* to host tense, agreement and negation. The main verb then stays in its base form. The auxiliary either raises to T or combines with Neg so that tense, agreement and negative features are all checked.

Ebira needs none of this. Negation is expressed by the preverbal particle *kà*, which stands immediately after the subject clitic and before the verb, as in (10). The particle alone is enough to negate the clause. No auxiliary, no verb movement and no extra operation is involved, and the verb remains unchanged. The form *kà* also serves as the perfective particle in affirmative clauses, so the reading depends on the clause in which it occurs. Subject agreement and negation are checked independently, each at its own functional head.

(10)	*Òmínísítà*	*ó*	*kà*	*và*	*òhìò òkùrò*
	minister	3SG	NEG	comment	allegations on

'The minister has not commented on the allegations.'

Expletive subjects

English requires the specifier of TP to be filled, which is why dummy subjects such as *it* and *there* appear in sentences like *It is raining*. Expletive constructions are rare or absent in Ebira, which points to parametric variation in how the Extended Projection Principle is satisfied. Table 3 brings together the main differences.

Table 3: Summary of differences in feature checking between English and Ebira

Feature	English	Ebira Tao
Verb form	Inflected for tense and agreement (-s and -ed endings, irregular forms)	Invariant in all contexts
Tense	Marked on the verb or on an auxiliary in T	Not marked on the verb; shown through time adverbials and context, with a default non-past reading
Agreement and number	Number on nouns and on verbs or auxiliaries; person and number agreement	Number only, on the subject clitic ó (singular) or á (plural); nouns invariant
Aspect	Auxiliary be + -ing (progressive); auxiliary have + past participle (perfect)	Preverbal particles nà (progressive) and kà (perfective); no auxiliaries
Case	Overt on pronouns; positional for full noun phrases	No overt case; position alone identifies subject and object
Negation	not with an auxiliary; do-support where needed	Preverbal particle kà; no auxiliary or verb movement
Expletives	Dummy it and there fill Spec-TP	Rare or absent
Auxiliary sequences	Stacked auxiliaries organised hierarchically	No equivalent

Discussion

The results support the central Minimalist claim that feature checking is universal while its surface realisation is language-specific. In both languages a derivation converges only when features are matched and valued in the functional domain of the clause. What varies is which head hosts which feature and how the outcome is pronounced. English has light but visible inflection, in which a small set of endings, auxiliaries and pronoun forms carries tense, agreement, number and case. Ebira has no inflection on the verb, and the same information is placed in small independent elements in front of it. In the terms of Distributed Morphology (Harley & Noyer, 1999), features are assigned in the syntax and given phonological form later, so two languages can share an abstract structure and still differ at the point of spell-out.

A second point concerns how the work is divided among heads. In English the auxiliary in T

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bundles tense, agreement and often aspect, so a single form such as *has* carries three features at once. In Ebira these functions are unbundled. The clitic handles number, *nà* or *kà* handles aspect, *kà* handles negation, and adverbials handle time. The comparison therefore reveals a contrast between a fusing strategy and a separating strategy, and not a contrast between having features and lacking them.

The findings agree with earlier work and extend it. Onmoke (2016) reported that English marks case overtly while Ebira does so much less visibly, and the present analysis places that observation within a structural account by showing that Ebira licenses case through position alone. Kwokwo (2012) applied Minimalist tools to English and Izon, and this study carries the same approach to a different Nigerian language, which supports the view that results for one language cannot simply be transferred to another.

For the Minimalist Program itself, the results carry a modest but useful message. The abstract mechanism of probing, valuing and deleting features applies equally well to a language that spells out its features as free-standing particles and to one that spells them out as endings, which is what a universal account predicts (Chomsky, 2000). At the same time, the analysis shows that the inventory of features and the heads that host them are not identical across the two languages. Ebira shows a separate checking relation for negation, an aspect head filled by a particle, and no visible sign of expletive insertion. Evidence of this kind is valuable because it comes from a language outside the group that has usually supplied the data for syntactic theory, and it gives the theory an opportunity to be tested against structures that English alone would never reveal.

The contrasts also matter beyond theory. Where English requires overt morphology that Ebira lacks, namely the -s ending, the past-tense suffix, plural nouns, pronoun case and auxiliary chains, a speaker whose first language keeps the verb bare must acquire forms that have no counterpart in the first-language grammar. Where the languages converge, as in constituent order and the licensing of negation, learners can draw on what they already know. In line with the weak version of contrastive analysis adopted here, these observations are offered as explanations that can be tested against learner data, and not as predictions of every error (Wardhaugh, 1970). The study also rests on 30 constructions from three speakers, so its findings describe the patterns in that sample and should be tested on a larger body of data.

V. Conclusion

This study examined the similarities and differences in the morphosyntactic structures of English and Ebira in relation to feature checking, using the Minimalist Program. The analysis showed that the two languages converge in important ways. Both use a subject–verb–object order, check tense and agreement features in the T domain, license accusative case within the verb phrase, tie nominative case to the subject's position relative to T, and express negation through a functional element that leaves the main verb unmarked.

The languages diverge in how the checked features are realised. English marks tense, agreement, number and pronoun case through verbal inflection, plural nouns, pronoun forms and auxiliaries, and it builds aspect and negation around the auxiliary system. Ebira keeps the verb invariant and assigns each function to a separate element: a number-marking subject clitic, the aspectual particles *nà* and *kà*, a preverbal negative particle and time adverbials. Case in Ebira is identified by position alone, and expletive subjects and stacked auxiliaries are absent from the data.

These findings show that feature checking is a shared requirement of the two grammars, while the way it appears on the surface is language-specific. The study contributes a theory-driven contrastive description of Ebira Tao alongside English, in an area where earlier work concentrated on phonology, pronouns or single grammatical categories. Further research could test these findings on a larger dataset, extend the comparison to other Ebira dialects and to constructions such as relative clauses that were outside the scope of this study, and examine learner data to see which of the contrasts described here actually produce errors in the English of Ebira speakers.

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