



Selectional Restrictions as a Semantic Problem for a Second Language Learner in the Generation of Igbo Sentences

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Abstract

This paper examines selectional restrictions as a major semantic challenge faced by second language learners in generating grammatically and meaningfully acceptable Igbo sentences. Selectional restrictions refer to the semantic constraints that govern which lexical items can co-occur within a syntactic structure. While learners of Igbo as a second language may master the grammatical rules, they often violate semantic compatibility between verbs and their complements, resulting in semantically odd expressions. The study adopts a descriptive approach to analyse examples of selectional restriction violations in the Igbo language. Findings reveal that second language learners' errors stem from inadequate semantic awareness, first language interference, and insufficient exposure to native Igbo usage. The study recommends pedagogical emphasis on meaning relations and contextual learning to enhance semantic competence in the second language acquisition of Igbo.

Keywords: Selectional Restrictions, Semantics, Second Language Learning, Sentence Generation, Meaning Compatibility.

1. Introduction

Language learning entails more than acquiring grammatical competence; it involves understanding how words combine meaningfully in context. In Igbo, words co-occur according to semantic rules that specify compatible combinations. This semantic constraint, known as selectional restriction, determines the acceptability of sentences. For instance, while a native Igbo speaker naturally says *Nwoke ahn riri ann* (The man ate meat), a second language learner might erroneously say *Nwoke ahn nnrn ann* (The man heard meat), which is grammatically correct but semantically ill-formed.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Second language learners of Igbo frequently violate selectional restrictions because they focus primarily on grammatical correctness without adequate understanding of semantic appropriateness. This leads to expressions that lack semantic coherence or sound unnatural to native speakers. Such semantic deviations hinder effective communication and distort intended meanings.

1.2 Aim and Objectives of the Study

The main aim of this study is to investigate selectional restriction as a semantic problem among second language learners in generating Igbo sentences. The specific objectives are:

- a. To identify common selectional restriction violations in Igbo sentences produced by second language learners;
- b. To analyse the semantic causes of these violations;
- c. To examine the communicative implications of selectional restriction errors, and



d. To recommend pedagogical strategies for improving learners' semantic competence.

1.3 Research Questions

- a. What types of selectional restriction violations are common among second language learners of Igbo? What semantic factors cause these violations?
- b. How do these violations affect the naturalness and intelligibility of Igbo sentences?
- c. What instructional approaches can help minimise these errors?

2. Literature Review

Selectional restrictions are semantic constraints on how words combine based on meaning features (Katz & Fodor, 1963). They define which lexical items can occur together in a syntactic structure. For example, in English, *drink* selects [+liquid] nouns, while *eat* selects [+edible] nouns. Similarly, in Igbo, the verb *rie* (eat) requires objects with the semantic feature [+edible]. (Uwasomba, 2022). Hence, *rie ann* (eat meat) is acceptable, but *rie akwa* (eat cloth) violates selectional restrictions. Various scholars such as Emenanjo (1978), Nwachukwu (1983), Okeke (2019), and Uwasomba (2024) (a) have analysed verb complementation and semantic constraints in Igbo syntax. Their works establish that while grammar governs sentence formation, semantics ensures meaningfulness.

3. Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on Generative Semantic Theory (Katz & Fodor, 1963) and Componential Analysis. Generative Semantics posits that meaning is generated from deep structures and that each lexical item carries inherent selectional features determining its semantic compatibility within a sentence. Componential Analysis explains meaning in terms of semantic features such as [+animate], [+edible], and [+liquid]. Violating these leads to semantic anomalies.

4. Research Methods

The study adopts a descriptive qualitative design to analyse naturally occurring errors in Igbo sentences produced by second language learners. Data were collected from twenty (20) students learning Igbo as a second language. Their oral and written outputs were analysed using componential analysis to identify selectional restriction violations and semantic mismatches.

5. Data Analysis and Presentation

The lexical categories such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, Adverbs and prepositions are assigned heads in their phrases (Uwasomba, 2023, p. 130). The verb 'ri' *eat* selects the NP as its complement. The data selected for this research show that verbs have strong inherent complements with their NPs. The strict selectional rules in Igbo are rooted right from the deep structures level of the language. The lexicon of each language is scattered in the internal dictionary of every native speaker of that language. The native speaker who knows his or her language naturally selects the words and combines them semantically and syntactically in an utterance.

The listener who knows his or her language is in a position to accept or reject what he or she hears. This is applicable in all languages of the world. The inherent semantics complements in Igbo are determined by the sub-categorisation of the verb for the NP complement (Uwasomba, 2024 (a)).

A learner of Igbo finds it difficult to select different words that can go together with a particular verb. The wrong selection of lexical items in the formation of Igbo sentences renders the sentences ungrammatical.

Examples of violations include:

1. **O nnrn nri ahu* (He drank the food) instead of

2. *O riri nri ahu* (He ate the food);
3. **O kporo akwa ahu mmiri* (He called the cloth water) instead of
4. *O sachara akwa ahu' mmiri* (He washed the cloth in water); and
5. **Anu ahu juru oku* (The meat rejected fire) instead of
6. *Anu ahu juru oyi* (The meat became cold).
7. *O riri ji* ‘He ate yam’.
8. *Chikwe gburu ewu ahu.* ‘Chikwe killed the goat’.
9. **O gburu oche ahu.* ‘He killed the chair’.
10. *O zutara azu.* ‘He bought fish’.
11. **O zutara ugwu.* ‘He bought mountain’.
12. **O zutara Osimiri.* ‘He bought sea’.

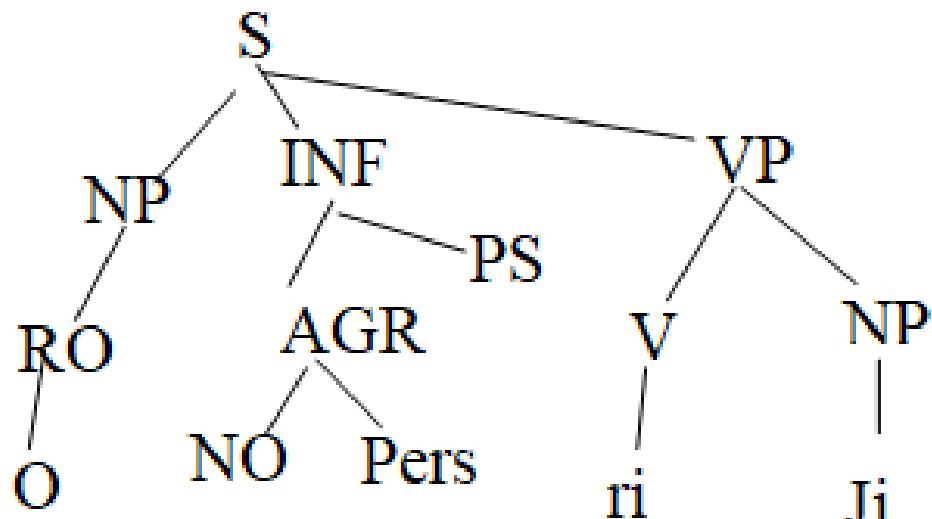
Mountain, sea, valley, are not marketable; they are deviant. A second language learner does not know how to combine the NPS for meaningful sentences

- ri rie eat → [edible]
- gbu gbuo kill → -[+animate]
- zuta buy → [+marketable]

These errors arise from first language interference and poor understanding of semantic compatibility.

Tree Diagrams

Figure 1



**1. O riri ji (Igbo)
 He ate yam (English)**

Figure 2

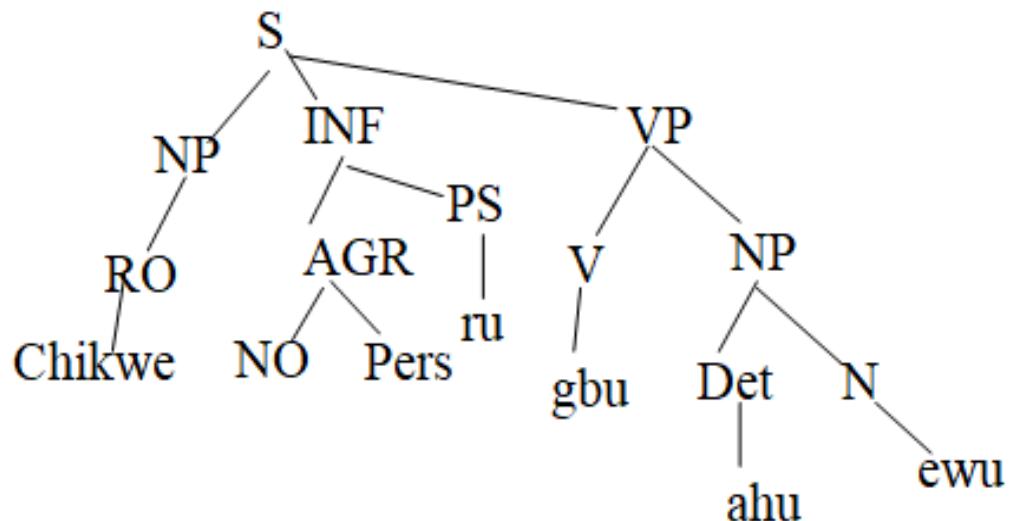
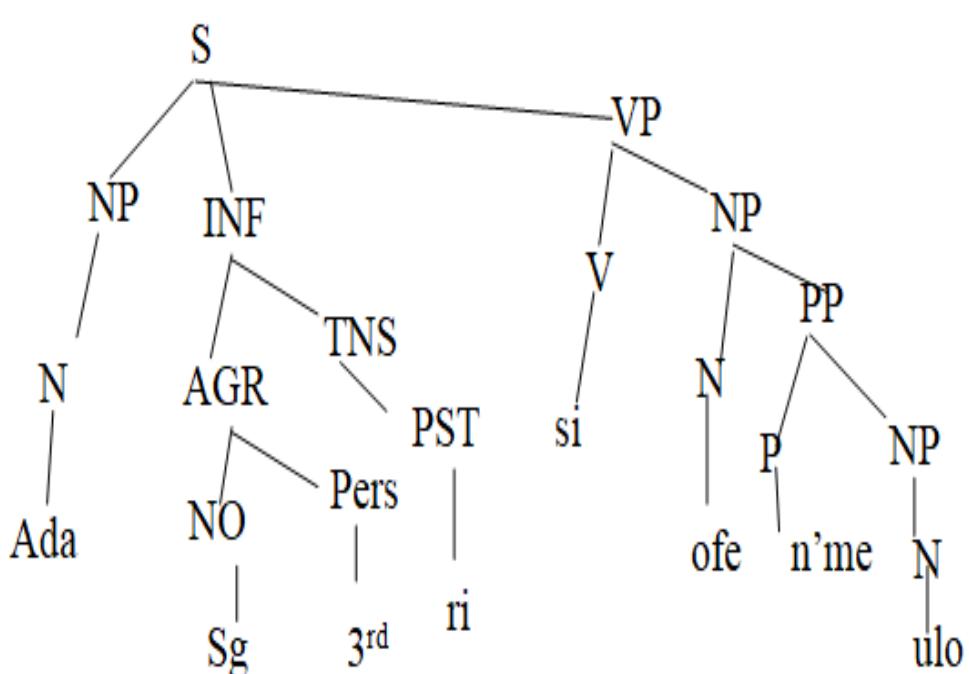


Figure 3





6. Conclusion

Selectional restrictions are an integral part of semantic competence in Igbo. Second language learners often violate these restrictions, resulting in semantically ill-formed sentences. Teachers should incorporate semantic drills and contextual learning to develop learners' awareness of word compatibility and meaning relations. A second language learner of Igbo has difficulty in selecting nouns for complementation. He transfers the knowledge he has in English to Igbo. The determiner in English, as in 'the goat', turns to 'ewu ahu' in Igbo. In English, the determiner comes first before the noun, while in Igbo, the noun comes first before the determiner. The word order arrangement comes into play for a second-language learner. Pedagogically, second language learners should first understand the word order arrangement of the particular language in question. Igbo has SVO (Subject- Verb- Object) word order arrangement just like English, but there are some deviations in the placement of words. The selectional restriction in Igbo contributes to grammaticality in the language.

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Abbreviations

ASP	Aspect
Conj	Conjunction
CP	Complimentizer
ISG	First person singular
2SG	Second person Singular



3SG	Third person singular
GB	Government and binding
NP	Noun phrase
PERF	Perfective
POS	Possessive
PST	Past tense
PT	Present tense
PP	Prepositional phrase
I	Inflection
INFL	Inflection phrase
VP	Verb Phrase

Biographical data

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