

A Contrastive Analysis of Inflectional Morphemes in English and Igbo

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36347/sjahss.2026.v14i08.004>

| Received: 09.06.2026 | Accepted: 22.08.2026 | Published: 29.08.2026

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Abstract

Review Article

This research investigates inflectional morphemes in English and Igbo, aiming to identify their forms, functions, similarities, and differences. Contrastive Analysis and Morphological Theory are employed as frameworks to explain how both languages express grammatical categories. The findings indicate that English primarily utilizes a fixed system of suffixes, such as *-s/-es*, *-ed*, *-en*, *-ing*, *-er*, and *-est*, to mark number, possession, tense, agreement, aspect, and comparison. In contrast, Igbo employs a broader array of verbal suffixes, prefixes, auxiliaries, tonal patterns, and syntactic devices, with forms like *-rV*, *-ghị*, and *-la/-le* expressing completed action, negation, and perfective aspect. Both languages mark comparable grammatical meanings, yet they differ significantly in their structural mechanisms. The research concludes that these differences may contribute to learning challenges among Igbo learners of English and recommends increased emphasis on comparative morphology in language instruction, further investigation of other morpheme types, and enhanced development of Igbo linguistic materials to improve learners' grammatical competence and reduce first-language interference in English usage.

Keywords: Inflectional Morphemes, English Language, Igbo Language, Contrastive Analysis, Morphological Theory, Grammatical Categories, Language Interference.

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INTRODUCTION

Inflectional morphology constitutes a key aspect of word structure, as it involves modifications to words that express grammatical information without generating new lexical items or altering grammatical classes. Inflectional morphemes mark grammatical categories such as tense, number, person, aspect, possession, comparison, mood, and polarity. While English typically employs relatively fixed suffixes, such as *-s* for plurality and *-ed* for past tense, Igbo utilizes a combination of affixation, tonal patterns, verbal modifications, and other grammatical devices.

This research is motivated by the need to compare the realization of grammatical categories in English and Igbo. It specifically aims to identify the morphemes used in both languages, examine their functions, and establish their similarities and differences. The study contributes to comparative morphology by demonstrating that, although inflection is a universal feature of human language, individual languages may realize it through substantially different structural mechanisms.

Conceptual Review

Inflexion is presented in the study as a morphological process through which grammatical functions are expressed without changing the grammatical category of the base word. Malmkjær (2002) explains that inflexion generally occurs after derivation and compounding and marks categories such as tense, number, person, aspect and mood. Inflectional categories are morphosyntactic because they affect both the word carrying the inflexion and its grammatical relationship with surrounding elements in the sentence.

Inflectional morphemes are consequently described as bound grammatical elements which modify the grammatical form of words rather than create new words. Their major characteristic is that they preserve the word class of their bases. Thus, *boy* → *boys*, *talk* → *talked*, and *talk* → *talking* represent different grammatical forms of the same lexical items rather than entirely new words.

English Inflectional Morphemes

The thesis identifies eight inflectional affixes in modern English, all of which occur as suffixes. They are *-s* for third-person singular present tense, *-ed* for past

tense, -ing for progressive aspect, -en for past participle, -s/-es for noun plurality, -'s for possession, -er for comparative degree, and -est for superlative degree. They express grammatical distinctions without changing the basic lexical category of the affected word.

English may also realise inflexion through internal or suppletive changes, as in sing → sang, write → wrote, give → gave and drink → drank. Nevertheless, suffixation remains the dominant mechanism of English inflectional morphology.

Igbo Inflectional Morphemes

Igbo inflexion differs considerably from English because it employs a combination of prefixes, suffixes, auxiliaries, tone and modifications within the verbal system. Nwachukwu (1983), as reported in the thesis, identifies the harmonising vowel prefix **E-**, realised as **e-** or **a-**, as an inflectional prefix occurring particularly in negative verb forms, perfective affirmative forms and sequential constructions.

Emenanjo (1978) describes Igbo inflectional suffixes as grammatical elements that operate with vowel prefixes, auxiliaries and tonal patterns to mark verbal forms and aspect. Examples presented in the work include the harmonising open-vowel suffix **-a/-e**, the perfective **-le/-la**, negative markers and indicative suffixes. The study's own analysis later identifies forms such as **-la/-le/-na/-go** for perfective aspect, **-ghị** for negation, and vowel suffixes associated with emphasis, demonstrating that Igbo uses a broader combination of morphological devices than English.

Empirical Review

The empirical literature reviewed in the thesis shows that Igbo generally possesses fewer overt inflectional markers than English and frequently uses syntactic, lexical, contextual and auxiliary devices to express grammatical meanings. Williamson (1989) found that Nigerian languages such as Igbo often employ syntactic and lexical strategies instead of extensive inflectional morphology to mark tense, number and aspect.

Similarly, Green and Igwe (1963) found that Igbo relies considerably on compounding, reduplication and affixation and possesses fewer inflectional markers than English. They observed that tense, aspect and plurality may be expressed through context, particles or auxiliary elements rather than morphological changes alone. However, their study did not directly compare English and Igbo inflectional systems, creating a gap addressed by the present research.

Ozoekwe (2017) investigated difficulties associated with English inflectional morphemes among Igbo learners of English. The study reported that Igbo lacked direct inflectional equivalents for English

pluralisation, genitive marking and third-person singular present tense. Structural differences between English and Igbo were consequently identified as an important source of learners' difficulties and first-language transfer.

Other empirical studies supported the significance of first-language structure in mastering English inflexions. For example, Akande (2003) analysed essays from 60 secondary-school students and reported difficulties with past participles, possessives, plurals and past-tense forms, attributing many of these problems to first-language interference. Although Akande studied Yoruba learners rather than Igbo learners, the thesis uses the study to demonstrate the pedagogical consequences of differences between English inflexion and indigenous Nigerian language systems.

The appraisal of the empirical literature concludes that previous studies have often concentrated on individual languages, individual grammatical categories, learner errors, or languages such as Yoruba, Tiv, Ikwerre and Kirika. Comparatively little attention had been devoted to a comprehensive direct comparison of English and Igbo inflectional and derivational morphology. This constituted one of the major gaps the present study attempted to address.

Theoretical Framework Contrastive and Morphological Theory

Contrastive Analysis (CA) is associated particularly with Robert Lado's *Linguistics across Cultures* (1957). The theory systematically compares two languages to establish their structural similarities and differences. Its basic position is that similarities between a learner's first language and target language may facilitate learning, whereas substantial structural differences may result in difficulty and negative transfer. In this study, CA provides a framework for comparing the English and Igbo systems and identifying similarities and differences in how they realise inflectional grammatical categories.

Morphological Theory, associated in the thesis with scholars including Chomsky (1965) and Aronoff (1994), deals with the internal structure of words and the manner in which morphemes combine to create lexical and grammatical forms. Within this theory, inflectional morphemes mark grammatical categories such as tense, number, person and case without fundamentally altering the lexical identity of a word. Thus, the theory provides the structural basis for identifying, describing and analysing the individual morphemes occurring in English and Igbo.

The two frameworks complement each other: Morphological Theory explains the internal structure and grammatical functions of the morphemes, while

Contrastive Analysis provides the basis for comparing how those morphemes operate in English and Igbo.

Table 1: Types of Inflectional Morphemes in English

S/No.	Morpheme	Part of Speech	Function	Meaning	Example
a.	-s / -es	Noun	Plural	More than one	book → books
b.	-'s / -s'	Noun	Possessive	Ownership	John → John's
c.	-s / -es	Verb	Third person singular	Verb agreement	write → writes
d.	-ed	Verb	Past tense	Past action	jump → jumped
e.	-ed / -en	Verb	Past participle	Perfect or compound verb form	walk → walked; eat → eaten
f.	-ing	Verb	Present participle	Ongoing or continuous action	walk → walking
g.	-er	Adjective	Comparative degree	Comparison	tall → taller
h.	-est	Adjective	Superlative degree	Highest degree	tall → tallest

English possesses eight major inflectional morphemes, which are primarily attached to nouns, verbs, and adjectives to serve grammatical rather than lexical functions. The addition of an inflectional morpheme typically does not create a new word or alter the grammatical class of the base; instead, it conveys grammatical information such as number, possession, tense, agreement, aspect, and degree of comparison.

Analysis of English Inflectional Morphemes

The plural morphemes **-s/-es** are attached to countable nouns to indicate more than one entity. Thus, *book* becomes *books*, *church* becomes *churches*, and *box* becomes *boxes*. The document observes that English normally requires explicit number marking on countable nouns, as shown in *three books* rather than *three book*. The variant *-es* commonly occurs after sibilant sounds, as in *boxes*, *buses*, *churches*, and *judges*.

The possessive morphemes **-'s/-s'** indicate ownership, relationship, association or belonging. Examples include *John's book*, *the teacher's table*, *the children's room*, and *the boys' hostel*. The possessive inflexion does not change the noun into another word class; rather, it gives the noun a possessive grammatical function.

The third-person singular morphemes **-s/-es** are attached to verbs in the simple present tense where the subject is *he*, *she*, *it*, or a singular noun. Thus, *write* becomes *writes*, *go* becomes *goes*, and *teach* becomes *teaches*. Its major function is to indicate subject-verb agreement.

The past-tense morpheme **-ed** is attached to regular verbs to indicate actions that occurred before the time of speaking. Examples include *jumped*, *walked*, *played*, and *washed*. However, irregular verbs do not generally take this suffix and may instead undergo internal changes, as in *eat* → *ate*, *go* → *went*, and *write* → *wrote*.

The past-participle morphemes **-ed/-en** help to form perfect tenses and passive constructions. Regular verbs usually retain the *-ed* form, while irregular verbs may take different forms. The important point is that the inflexion changes the grammatical form of the verb without necessarily changing its lexical category.

The present-participle morpheme **-ing** indicates ongoing or continuous action. Forms such as *walking*, *reading*, and *dancing* often occur with forms of the verb *be*, as in *I am reading*, *She is walking*, and *They were singing*. It therefore expresses duration, progression and continuity.

The comparative morpheme **-er** is attached to many adjectives to compare two entities, as in *tall* → *taller*, *small* → *smaller*, and *fast* → *faster*. Thus, the sentence *Ada is taller than Ngozi* indicates that Ada possesses a greater degree of height than Ngozi.

The superlative morpheme **-est** expresses the highest degree of a quality among three or more entities. Examples include *tallest*, *smallest*, and *fastest*. In the statement *Chika is the tallest boy in the class*, the suffix indicates that Chika has the greatest degree of height among the boys being compared.

Table 2: Igbo Inflectional Morphemes

S/No.	Morpheme	Host/Part of Speech	Function/Category	Meaning	Example
a.	-rV	Verb	Past/Completed Aspect	Indicates completed action	ruru, riri
b.	-ghị	Verb	Negative marker	Indicates negative action	rughị, gbughị
c.	-la / -le / -na	Verb	Perfective/Completive	Indicates an already completed or achieved action	gaala, riela
d.	-o / -a / -u / -e / -i	Verb	Emphatic	Used for emphasis	gbuo, gbaa, rie

In contrast to English, where inflection is primarily suffixal, Igbo grammatical morphology involves prefixes, suffixes, and particles. The inflectional elements identified are principally associated with verbs and express grammatical notions such as completed action, negation, perfective aspect, and emphasis.

Analysis of Igbo Inflectional Morphemes

The **-rV** morpheme marks past or completed action in Igbo. The symbol **V** represents a vowel whose realisation depends on the vowel of the verb root. Examples given in the study include:

- *Ada gburu agwọ* — Ada killed a snake.
- *Mgbeke gara ọrụ* — Mgbeke went to work/farm.

In these examples, the actions occurred before the time of speaking. The morpheme is compared with English *-ed*, although the two systems are structurally different because Igbo uses vowel-sensitive suffixation.

The negative morpheme *-ghị* is suffixed to the verb to negate an action or proposition. Examples include:

- *Njoku arughị ọrụ* — Njoku did not work.
- *Mgbeke egbughị agwọ* — Mgbeke did not kill a snake.

Root	Suffix	Derived Form	Gloss
gbu	-u	gbuu	kill
gba	-a	gbaa	run/shoot
de	-e	dee	write
ga	-a	gaa	go
zu	-u	zuo	buy

According to the analysis, these forms make the action expressed by the verb more prominent or emphatic.

Comparative Analysis of English and Igbo Inflectional Morphemes

The findings show that both English and Igbo employ inflectional morphology to express grammatical meanings. One major similarity concern past or completed actions. English commonly uses **-ed** with regular verbs, while Igbo uses the **-rV** morpheme. In both cases, the morpheme is associated with the verb and does not change the basic word class. Examples include English *kill* → *killed* and Igbo *gbu* → *gburu*.

Both languages also express perfect or completed events. English generally combines the auxiliary *have* with a participial verb form, as in *He has died* or *She has cooked*. Igbo expresses the corresponding perfective meaning largely through suffixes such as *-la/-le/-na*, as in *Ọ riele* "He has eaten" and *Mgbeke agaala* "Mgbeke has gone." Consequently, both languages express completion, but they employ different grammatical mechanisms.

- *Ọ righị nri* — They did not eat.

The negative morpheme is bound to the verb and cannot normally function independently. The study contrasts this with English, where negative expressions may involve separate lexical items such as *not*.

The perfective markers **-la/-le** indicate actions that have already been completed before the moment of speaking. Examples in the study include:

- *Mgbeke eriele nri* — Mgbeke has eaten food.
- *Alozie ereela azụ* — Alozie has sold fish.
- *Ọ gaala ahịa* — They have gone to the market.
- *Ha egbule mmadụ* — They have killed a human being.

These suffixes mark the aspectual notion of completeness and are obligatorily attached to the verb. The study also mentions other perfective forms such as *-go*, *-na*, and *-ne*, though it treats some of them as dialectal or beyond its immediate scope.

The study also identifies a group of vowel suffixes functioning emphatically. Here, the vowel of the verb may be duplicated or extended in harmony with the root vowel. Examples include:

A major difference is that English has a relatively fixed set of eight major inflectional morphemes, whereas Igbo does not use the same fixed suffixal system. Igbo employs combinations of affixes, aspectual markers, mood-related markers, auxiliaries and particles.

Another important difference concerns number formation. English marks plurality morphologically by attaching **-s/-es** to many nouns, as in *boys*, *girls*, *books*, *boxes*, and *churches*. Igbo does not generally have an equivalent plural suffix attached directly to nouns. Instead, plurality is often expressed syntactically through words such as *ndị* and *ụmụ*, as in *ndị nkuzi* "teachers" and *ụmụaka* "children." Therefore, number is primarily morphological in English but largely syntactic or contextual in Igbo.

The two languages also differ in third-person agreement. English adds **-s/-es** to present-tense verbs with a third-person singular subject, as in *I write* versus *he writes*. Igbo does not attach an equivalent inflectional suffix merely because the subject is third-person

singular; the relationship is instead interpreted syntactically and contextually.

There is also a difference in the expression of the progressive aspect. English uses the -ing inflexion, as in *killing, dancing, cooking, and speaking*. Igbo does not use an equivalent -ing suffix. Instead, progressive or continuous action is expressed through the auxiliary *na*, as illustrated by *O na-aga* "He/she is going." Thus, both languages can express ongoing actions, but their morphological and syntactic methods differ.

CONCLUSION

The analysis therefore shows that both English and Igbo employ grammatical devices to express tense, aspect, and other grammatical relationships, yet they organise these devices differently. English relies predominantly on a fixed system of suffixal inflexions, including -s/-es, -ed, -en, -ing, -er, and -est. In contrast, Igbo relies more on verbal morphology, such as -rV, -ghj, -la/-le, and vowel-related suffixes, in addition to syntactic devices and auxiliaries. While both languages express comparable grammatical concepts, their primary differences lie in the linguistic mechanisms used to realise those concepts. Findings of the work, the recommendations relevant to English and Igbo inflectional morphology can be extracted as follows:

1. Language teachers should give greater attention to morphology, especially the similarities and differences between the English and Igbo inflectional systems, so that learners can recognise areas likely to cause language interference.
2. Further comparative research should investigate other morphological and word-formation processes in English and Igbo, including blending, borrowing, conversion, neologism and acronym formation.
3. Researchers should investigate additional morpheme types, including zero, suppletive, replacive, empty, unique and pseudo-morphemes, to provide a more comprehensive description of the morphological systems of both languages.

4. Comparative research should be extended beyond Standard/British English and Standard Igbo to other varieties and dialects of English and Igbo.
5. Government agencies, educational institutions and language-development organisations should support the production of textbooks, dictionaries, teaching materials and research publications on Igbo morphology and grammar.
6. Comparative English-Igbo linguistic studies should be incorporated into educational programmes so that learners can better understand the structural differences between the languages and improve their grammatical and communicative competence.

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