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A Syntactic Study of Existential and Equational Processes in English and Fulfulde Spoken in Adamawa State, Nigeria

[1]BAMANGA ALIYU, [2]PROF. ADAMU ISA HALIRU, [3]DR. SUMAYYAT IBRAHIM GAMBO
[1] General Studies Department, Federal Polytechnic, Bali, Taraba State, Nigeria.
[2,3]Department of Languages and Linguistics, Faculty of Arts, Taraba State University, Jalingo, Nigeria.

ABSTRACT: *This study investigates existential and equational processes in English and Fulfulde spoken in Adamawa state, Nigeria, using a syntactic approach. The aim is to explore how these processes are realized in both languages, focusing on points of similarity and divergence. Specifically, it seeks to identify the nature of existential and equational syntactic processes, describe their structural patterns with reference to sentence constituents, and categorize them according to their linguistic forms. A descriptive research design was employed, with data collected from native speakers of Fulfulde in Adamawa and systematically compared with English equivalents. It is anchored on Principles and Parameters Theory by Chomsky and refines within the Minimalist Program. It highlights the universality of predication while accounting for parametric variations. Analysis reveals that English existential constructions obligatorily employ the expletive 'there' and the copula 'is', whereas Fulfulde relies on the particle 'ɗon' often without an expletive subject. In equational constructions, English consistently uses the copula 'is', while Fulfulde alternates between 'ɗum', 'woni' or simple juxtaposition, demonstrating structural flexibility and derivational economy. The findings show that while both languages operate under universal syntactic principles, Fulfulde encodes these processes more economically, in contrast to English's stricter word-order constraints. These outcomes have theoretical implications for cross-linguistic syntax and validate the application of generative frameworks to African languages. Practically, the study provides insights for linguistic research, language teaching, translation, and computational modelling of under-documented languages.*

KEYWORDS: *Fulfulde, English, Existential Constructions, Equational Processes, Cross-linguistic Syntax.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In multilingual contexts such as Adamawa state, Nigeria, where English functions as the official language and Fulfulde serves as a major indigenous lingua franca, understanding the syntactic processes of both languages becomes essential for effective communication, education, and linguistic research. However, these processes remain under-researched, particularly from a comparative syntactic perspective. This gap forms the central research problem: a lack of systematic analysis and description of existential and equational syntactic processes in English and Fulfulde, especially as spoken in Adamawa state, Nigeria. To address this problem, the study sets out the following specific objectives:

i. To identify the nature of existential syntactic processes in English and Fulfulde.
ii. To identify the nature of equational syntactic processes in English and Fulfulde.
iii. To describe these processes structurally, focusing on sentence constituents.

These objectives are interconnected, as identifying the processes lays the groundwork for structural description, which in turn informs accurate categorisation. Through this step-by-step analysis, the study aims to provide a detailed and coherent syntactic account of how these constructions function in both languages.

The significance of this study is multi-dimensional. Firstly, it contributes to the field of comparative syntax by highlighting both the convergences and divergences between English and Fulfulde in the expression of existential and equational meaning. Secondly, it serves as a valuable resource for linguists, language educators, curriculum developers, and second-language learners by clarifying common structural challenges. Thirdly, it supports language documentation and preservation efforts for Fulfulde, an indigenous language at risk of marginalisation in formal domains. Finally, by focusing on language use in Adamawa state, the research offers insights into the dynamics of linguistic diversity, language contact, and bilingualism in a region where both languages play vital social and educational roles. In summary, this study not only bridges a scholarly gap but also reinforces the relevance of syntactic research in multilingual and multicultural societies.

2. CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

This section reviews syntax and syntactic processes, comparing English and Fulfulde. It highlights generative and usage-based approaches as follows.

2.1. SYNTAX

Chomsky proposes a universal syntactic system through generative grammar, though this position has been critiqued for its abstractness and limited empirical grounding [11, 34]. Construction Grammar emphasizes learned form–meaning pairings [17], a view challenged for lacking formal precision [28]. The Simpler Syntax Hypothesis integrates semantics and pragmatics into syntactic analysis [15], though its universality remains debated [7]. Broad overviews of syntactic theory highlight its central concepts while giving limited attention to non-generative approaches [8]. Syntax, therefore, remains a diverse and evolving field. Based on this, syntax is simply defined as a branch of linguistics that studies the rules governing sentence structure; in other words, it concerns the principles that determine the ordering of words in phrases, clauses, and sentences.

2.2.1. THE NOTION OF SYNTACTIC PROCESS

The Minimalist Program introduces Merge as a core syntactic operation, though it has been criticized for limited empirical testability [13, 30]. Key processes such as movement, including wh-movement and head movement, are identified as central to generative syntax [8]. Additional operations such as insertion, deletion, substitution, and agreement are highlighted through cross-linguistic illustrations [31]. Discourse-oriented approaches further emphasize processes such as fronting and clefting [19]. While usage-based and constructional approaches focus on learned patterns [17], their formal rigor has been questioned [22, 28]. Consequently, syntactic processes are understood as grammatical operations that build and modify sentence structures.

It is against this background that this paper focuses specifically on existential and equational processes in English and Fulfulde. These structures hold significant functional and comparative value because they express emphasis, information structure, and speaker attitudes, which are key aspects of the syntax–pragmatics interface. Their underrepresentation in Fulfulde research motivates this targeted investigation.

SYNTACTIC PROCESSES

This subsection surveys key syntactic processes in natural languages, including both well-known and less-studied types such as existential constructions, topicalization, clefting, modality, passivization, wh-movement, insertion, deletion and equatoial process.

EXISTENTIAL PROCESS

Existential constructions exhibit language-specific structural markers. Early accounts emphasize their contextual dependence while noting limited attention to tense and aspect interactions. Subsequent studies examine dialectal variations across African languages and call for more detailed syntactic analysis [33]. Research on Hausa identifies a principal existential marker expressing presence or existence. More recent analyses explore pragmatic and negative forms of existential constructions, revealing gaps in understanding their functional and structural roles [27]. In summary, an existential process refers to a sentence structure that indicates the existence or presence of an entity, often introduced by expressions equivalent to "there is" or "there are."

TOPICALISATION

Topicalisation involves fronting sentence elements, often accompanied by resumptive pronouns or topical particles. Earlier studies document the use of topical particles in Hausa and their discourse functions [23]. More recent research examines structural variation and dialectal strategies across African languages, highlighting syntactic flexibility [33]. Further findings show the interaction between topicalisation and focus marking as well as its communicative significance in discourse structuring. In summary, topicalisation is a syntactic process that foregrounds a sentence element to emphasize its discourse relevance through language-specific constructions.

CLEFTING PROCESS

Clefting employs morphological or particle-based focus markers to emphasize sentence elements. Earlier analyses show how Hausa uses specific focus markers to highlight constituents. Recent studies examine cleft constructions from perspectives such as pragmatic emphasis, ambiguity resolution, and syntactic variation across African languages [16, 27]. These findings reveal that clefting plays a crucial role in information structuring and discourse prominence. In summary, clefting is a focus-marking syntactic strategy that isolates a sentence element to enhance communicative salience.

MODALITY PROCESS

Modal expressions often occur in prominent syntactic positions, marking the speaker's stance or degree of certainty. Studies highlight contrasts between African modal systems and English modal placement. Subsequent analyses emphasize the pragmatic prominence and discourse functions of modals, noting the need for more comparative research [27]. In summary, modal expressions are clause-level operators expressing necessity, possibility, or obligation, occupying structurally salient positions.

WH-MOVEMENT PROCESS

Wh-movement involves the displacement of interrogative elements to the clause-initial position. This process is formalized within minimalist syntax and governed by structural constraints [13]. Further elaborations demonstrate how syntactic boundaries restrict permissible movement [3]. English and African languages exhibit both universal principles and language-specific variations in wh-fronting [32]. In summary, wh-movement is a syntactic operation relocating interrogative elements under universal and language-specific constraints.

PASSIVATION PROCESS

Passivization alters argument structure by promoting the object and suppressing the agent. Foundational discussions examine its discourse and morphological dimensions across languages [18, 9]. Extended analyses show how passivization interacts with applicative constructions and information structure in African languages [25]. In essence, passivization is a syntactic operation marked by language-specific morphology reflecting typological variation.

INSERTION PROCESS

Insertion introduces elements to satisfy grammatical or interpretive needs, such as dummy subjects or auxiliary support [32]. Studies emphasize the role of insertion in tonal disambiguation and discourse contrast across African languages [2, 29]. In essence, insertion involves adding syntactic or morphological elements to meet structural or interpretive requirements.

DELETION PROCESS

Deletion omits contextually recoverable elements to enhance communicative efficiency. In English, this includes ellipsis and related processes [26]. In African languages, deletion relies on contextual and morphological cues, promoting pragmatic economy and discourse coherence. Therefore, deletion is a syntactic and pragmatic mechanism that omits redundant elements to improve fluency and cohesion. Therefore, deletion can be defined as a syntactic and pragmatic mechanism that strategically omits redundant or inferable components to promote fluency, cohesion, and naturalness in discourse.

EQUATIONAL PROCESS

Equational constructions express identity or equality between noun phrases. In African languages, these structures often rely on particles rather than copulas [24]. Comparative studies illustrate diverse equational strategies across languages, emphasizing their semantic and pragmatic roles [35]. Further analyses highlight how equational constructions establish identity and focus. In summary, equational constructions link entities in relations of sameness or definition through language-specific syntactic strategies.

Therefore, this overview highlights key syntactic processes such as topicalization, clefting, modality, wh-movement, passivization, insertion, deletion and equative constructions in African languages, emphasizing their structural diversity and communicative functions. Contributions from recent scholarship reveal both universal patterns and language-specific strategies shaped by discourse needs. These processes not only fulfill grammatical requirements but also enhance clarity, focus, and cohesion in conversation. Further comparative research is essential to deepen our understanding of how African languages employ syntax to manage information structure and achieve communicative efficiency across diverse linguistic contexts.

3. EMPIRICAL REVIEW

[1] Represented a significant advancement in the study of syntactic theory and analysis, tracing the evolution of syntax over time. The work underscored the dynamic interaction between syntactic theory and practical analysis, particularly in the last fifty years, where their interplay has fostered a surge in linguistic research and theoretical innovation. Rather than emphasizing divisions among theoretical schools, the handbook adopted a unified perspective, highlighting how debates and comparative analyses have collectively deepened understanding. By examining cross-linguistic syntactic phenomena, it demonstrated how syntax interacts with phonology, morphology, semantics, pragmatics, and the lexicon, emphasizing the interdisciplinary nature of syntactic inquiry. The contributions by leading scholars offer both descriptive insights and theoretical evaluations, revealing consensus on key syntactic phenomena while allowing for comparative perspectives. However, while comprehensive, the work focuses on general syntactic theories and does not delve into specific processes such as insertion and deletion, a gap addressed by the present study through contrastive English–Fulfulde analysis.

Similarly, [2] explored the role of syntax in language comprehension and production, emphasizing its centrality in facilitating accurate communication and linguistic proficiency. Using a systematic literature review, the study examined how syntactic

knowledge influences both sentence formation and understanding, revealing a strong interdependence between comprehension and production processes. The research integrated perspectives from second language acquisition theories, highlighting the contribution of perceptual-motor skills and cognitive abilities to syntactic competence. Findings showed that syntax is fundamental to language proficiency and communicative effectiveness. However, the study remained broadly theoretical and did not address specific syntactic constructions such as existential and equational processes, or insertion and deletion mechanisms that shape structural variation across languages. The present study addresses this limitation through contrastive syntactic analysis.

More recently, the influence of theta roles and noun phrases within the syntactic structures of selected Nigerian newspapers. The study adopted a qualitative descriptive design and revealed that the strategic deployment of theta roles significantly shapes narrative framing and reader perception. While the findings contributed to understanding the relationship between syntax and media discourse, the study was limited to written, formal newspaper language and excluded spoken varieties of English and indigenous languages. It also focused narrowly on media discourse, neglecting interpersonal and bilingual communication contexts.

In another related study, [3] examined students' linguistic competence in the use of the simple present tense in English. Using a qualitative descriptive approach anchored in generative grammar, the study identified recurrent errors such as subject–verb disagreement and auxiliary omission, attributing them to L1 interference and inadequate grammatical instruction. Although the study offered valuable insights into tense usage, it focused on a single grammatical category, relied on elicited data, and excluded natural spoken language, thereby limiting its scope and generalizability.

Likewise, [4] analysed syntactic structures in a selected poetic text and demonstrated how sentence types and ellipsis contribute to thematic development and stylistic effects. Despite its contribution to literary stylistics, the study was limited to a single poetic work and literary discourse, excluding everyday communication and bilingual speech environments. This restriction further limits the applicability of its findings to broader linguistic contexts.

Therefore, [3] focused narrowly on tense errors within a small institutional sample, [4] was confined to literary discourse, and only written media texts. Collectively, these limitations reveal a gap in syntactic studies that incorporate broader syntactic processes, natural spoken data, and bilingual contexts. The present study addresses this gap by providing a contrastive analysis of English and Fulfulde across diverse syntactic processes.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on Principles and Parameters Theory (PPT), proposed in [5], which posits universal grammatical principles alongside language-specific parameters accounting for syntactic variation. While principles regulate core structural properties, parameters explain differences such as word order flexibility. The framework is applied to examine how Fulfulde encodes existential and equational constructions in contrast to English. In addition, the Minimalist Program, which emphasizes derivational economy and structural efficiency, provides analytical tools for explaining movement and optimization processes across the two languages.

5. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a descriptive research design and qualitative approach, which helps to analyse syntactic processes in English and Fulfulde. It focuses on Adamawa, Yola, Nigeria and parts of Cameroon where the eastern Fulfulde dialect is actively spoken. The population comprises the syntactic structures of both languages, not human participants, which allows for a purely linguistic analysis. Purposive sampling is employed, following precedents such as [3] to select representative linguistic data. Data are collected through direct observation, native speaker intuition, and secondary sources like journals and grammar texts. Analysis is guided by [11], which emphasizes operations like Merge, Move, and Feature Checking under economy principles. This theoretical model facilitates a systematic comparison of syntactic processes such as existential and equational constructions, which highlight structural similarities and differences between English and Fulfulde, and provides insights into how surface forms are derived from universal grammatical principles.

6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the data are presented, analysed, and discussed systematically, highlighting key findings, interpretations, and their implications for the study. The analysis of existential processes in Fulfulde and English reveals both shared syntactic principles and parameter-driven variation. As shown in Table 1, Fulfulde consistently employs the existential marker ɗon, which functions to assert the presence of an entity within a given location. For instance, in sentence (1), Koromwal ɗon nder suudu corresponds to There is a chair inside the house. The principle of existential predication is therefore universal across both languages, supporting [11] claim of shared structural rules.

TABLE 1 Data and analysis on existential process

Fulfulde	English
Koromwal ɗon nder suudu.	There is a chair inside the house.
Taafaare mawnde ɗon dow laawol ngol.	There is a big rock on the road.
Ndiyam ɗon nder tummude nden.	There is water in the calabash.
Goɗɗo gooto ɗon haa luumo ngon.	There is one person at the market.
Debbo ɗon nder suudu ton.	There is a woman in the room.
Sollaare ɗon dow laawol ton.	There is dust on the road.
Ɗowdi ɗon les leggal ngal ton.	There is shade under the tree.
Leggal ɗon kommbi suudu ndun.	There is a tree beside the house.
Ɗongel yani nder ngaska.	It is calf that falls in a hall.
Ndiyam on nder jollooru ndun.	It is water that is in the jug.

However, variation emerges in how these structures are realized. English requires the expletive subject there plus the copula is, while Fulfulde relies on ɗon without an overt expletive subject. This aligns with the parameter-setting mechanism of PPT, where English fixes subject position (SVO), whereas Fulfulde exhibits greater flexibility, often omitting subjects or copulas depending on context. For example, sentence (9) Ɗongel yani nder ngaska ("It is a calf that fell in a hall") illustrates an equational variant where the copula is absent, yet the structure remains grammatical in Fulfulde. English, in contrast, obligatorily uses the copula (It is).

Structurally, both languages anchor existential constructions around locative constituents, but the derivational economy emphasized in the Minimalist Program [11] explains Fulfulde's reduction strategies. By using ɗon and dropping expletives or copulas, Fulfulde achieves economy of derivation and movement, in contrast to English's heavier reliance on auxiliary structures. In summary, the findings demonstrate that while both languages share universal existential principles, Fulfulde encodes them more economically and flexibly, highlighting the interaction between universal grammar and parameter-specific syntactic choices.

TABLE 2 Data on equatorial/ equative process

Fulfulde	English
Aisha ɗum gamoowo ɓunduɗo.	Aisha is the best dancer.
Abdullahi woni hooreejo na'i.	Abdullahi is the head leader.
Fatima woni cooroowo kosam.	Fatima is the milk seller.
Zainab woni ɓurduɗo famɗugo.	Zainab is the youngest child.
Bello woni doggowo ɓurduɗo.	Bello is the fastest runner.
Nagge ngen woni dabbawa ɓurdunga mawnugo.	The cow is the biggest animal.
Goɗɗo on o pilotooɗo.	The man is a trader.
Dewel ngel ɗum minyiraawo am.	The girl is my sister.
Banndiraawo am ɗum gaynaako moyƴo.	My brother is a good hearder.
Mallumre woni marɗo na'i ɗin.	Mallumre is the owner of the cattle.

The analysis of equational or equative constructions in Fulfulde and English further highlights the interaction between universal principles and parameter-driven variation. As presented in Table 2, both languages express identity or attribution between subject and predicate, but their strategies differ. For example, sentence (1) Aisha *ɗum gamoowo ɓunduɗo* translates to Aisha is the best dancer. Both languages share the universal principle of predication, where a subject (NP) is equated with a complement.

English consistently requires the copula to link the subject and predicate, a reflection of its fixed SVO order and obligatory verb requirement. In contrast, Fulfulde alternates between *ɗum* and *woni* as equational markers, sometimes omitting overt copulas altogether depending on context. For instance, in (7) *Goɗɗo on o pilotooɗo* ("The man is a trader"), the structure omits *woni*, relying on the subject-predicate juxtaposition. This demonstrates parametric flexibility within Fulfulde's grammar compared to English's rigidity.

Structurally, both languages require that the predicate complement follow the subject, but Fulfulde allows more variation in the use of equational markers. The Minimalist Program [11] explains this economy: Fulfulde minimizes derivational complexity by either deploying *woni/ɗum* strategically or relying on direct juxtaposition, while English obligatorily introduces the copula, adding to structural weight. These findings also reveal cultural and linguistic encoding: Fulfulde equatives often highlight social roles and attributes (e.g., *Fatima woni cooroowo kosam* "Fatima is the milk seller"), reflecting pastoralist traditions,

while English equivalents are more neutral in expression. In summary, both languages converge on the universal principle of equational predication but diverge parametrically, with Fulfulde favouring economy and contextual omission of copulas, in contrast to English's syntactic rigidity.

7. DISCUSSION

The findings from both existential and equational constructions in Fulfulde and English reveal clear evidence of universal principles alongside parametric variation. Existential processes in Fulfulde are marked by the particle *don*, which asserts presence without requiring an expletive subject, as in *Koromwal don nder suudu* ("There is a chair inside the house"). English, however, obligatorily introduces the expletive there with the copula is, reflecting its stricter SVO constraints. This contrast illustrates how universal existential predication is encoded differently, with Fulfulde favouring derivational economy and English emphasizing structural obligatoriness.

Similarly, equational processes show parallel universality in predicating identity between subject and complement. English consistently employs the copula is, while Fulfulde alternates between *ɗum, woni,* or simple juxtaposition, depending on context. For example, *Fatima woni cooroowo kosam* ("Fatima is the milk seller") highlights role attribution, while *Goɗɗo on o pilotooɗo* omits a copula entirely yet remains grammatical. This reflects Fulfulde's syntactic flexibility and cultural embedding, contrasting with English's fixed reliance on the copula. Above all, the analysis demonstrates that while both languages share universal grammatical principles, their differences arise from parameter settings and derivational strategies.

7.1. RESEARCH IMPLICATION

Theoretically, they affirm the explanatory power of Principles and Parameters Theory [11] in analysing African languages, particularly by demonstrating how Fulfulde achieves economy through copula omission and flexible constituent order while English maintains stricter syntactic constraints. This advances the broader linguistic debate on how universal grammar manifests differently across languages.

8. CONCLUSION

This study examined existential and equational constructions in Fulfulde and English within the framework of Principles and Parameters Theory and the Minimalist Program. The findings reveal that while both languages share universal principles of predication, they diverge significantly in their structural realization. English relies on expletive subjects and obligatory copulas to mark existential and equational processes, reflecting its fixed SVO word order and syntactic rigidity. Fulfulde, on the other hand, employs markers such as *don*, *ɗum*, and *woni*, with flexible constituent order and frequent copula omission, thereby achieving economy in derivation. These patterns highlight the interaction between universals and parameters in cross-linguistic syntax. The study contributes theoretically by reinforcing the applicability of generative grammar frameworks to African languages and practically by offering insights for teaching, translation, and computational modeling. Above all, the research underscores the value of comparative syntax in deepening linguistic understanding.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

A competing interest exists when a secondary interest, such as financial gain or personal considerations, has the potential to influence professional judgement regarding the validity of research. The authors Bamanga Aliyu, Prof. Adamu Isa Haliru, and Dr. Sumayyat Ibrahim Gambo declare that there is no conflict of interest concerning the publishing of this paper.

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