



## 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 analyze 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 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 *Nwokeahnriann* (The man ate meat), a second language learner might erroneously say *Nwokeahnnrnann* (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 analyze 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 minimize 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]. (Uwasamba, 2022). Hence, *rieann* (eat meat) is acceptable, but *rieakwa* (eatcloth) violates selectional restrictions. Various scholars such as Emenanjo (1978), Nwachukwu (1983), and Okeke (2019), Uwasamba, (2024) (a) have analyzed 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 analyze 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 analyzed 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 a 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 is determined by the sub-categorization 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:

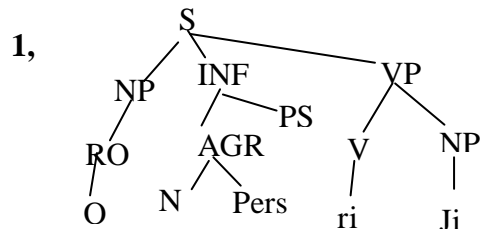
1. \**O nnrnri ahu* (He drank the food) instead of
2. *O ririnri ahu* (He ate the food);
3. \**O kporoakwa ahummiri* (He called the cloth water) instead of
4. *O sacharaakwa ahu' mmiri* (He washed the cloth in water); and
5. \**Anuahujuruoku* (The meat rejected fire) instead of
6. *Anuahujuruoyi* (The meat became cold).
7. *O riri ji* 'He ate yam'.
8. *Chikwegburuewu ahu.* 'Chikwekilled the goat'.
9. \**O gburuoche ahu.* \*'He killed the chair'.
10. *O zutaraazu.* 'He bought fish'.
11. \**O zutaraugwu.* \*'He bought mountain'.
12. \**O zutaraOsimiri.* \*'He bought sea'.

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

- ririe eat* → [edible]  
-*gbugbuo kill* - → [+animate]  
-*zutabuy* → [+marketable]

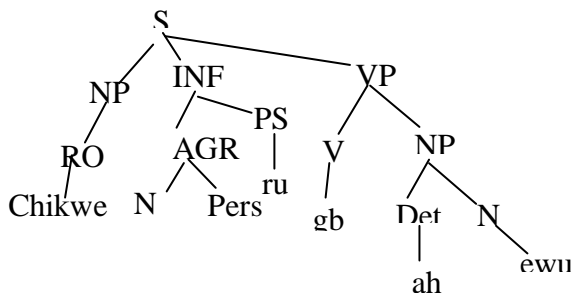
These errors arise from first language interference and poor understanding of semanticcompatibility.

Tree Diagrams



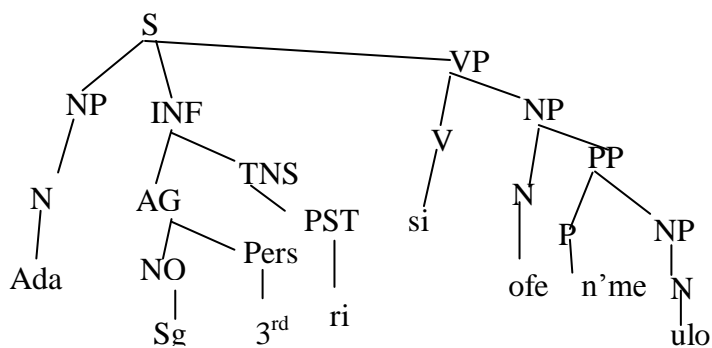
O riri ji [he ate yam]

Figure 1



Chikwegburuewu ahu.  
Chikwe killed a goat.

Figure 2



Ada Siri Ofen'imeUlo.  
Ada cooked soup inside the house.

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 the selection of 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 in second language learner 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



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