

Article

# Negation in Ngor-Okpala Dialect of Igbo

Emmanuel Lucas Nwachukwu <sup>1,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> National Institute for Nigerian Languages;

\* Correspondence: [nwachukwuemmanuel@gmail.com](mailto:nwachukwuemmanuel@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** Negation is a morpho-syntactic operation that exist every human natural language and is sine-qua-non for everyday human communication. As a universal linguistic phenomena used in everyday conversation, it is poorly captured in Ngor-okpala dialect of Igbo. Some notable scholars like Uba-Mgbemena (1981), Ndimele (1995, 2004), Obiamalu (2004) and Onuora (2017) have written on negation in Igbo without considering the differences with reference to dialectal variation within the Igbo language. This study aims at reviewing negation in Ngor-okpala dialect of the Igbo language and how negative markers (fu, -m, la, and ghi,) are unique to Ngor-okpala dialect and used in various constructions. The study will review how these various negative markers in Ngor-okpala dialect have morpho-semantic impacts, the study also highlight some functions of negation in the linguistic framework of Ngor-okpala dialect. The study adopts the Optimality theory to investigate the underlying issues in the study. The study adopts descriptive analysis and data for the study were gathered from both primary sources such personal communications and secondary sources such as journal articles, Youtube videos and textbooks. Findings reveal that Ngor-okpala dialect has its unique negative markers which are used in everyday communication to convey contradiction, opposition, or disagreement of previously stated assertions. The study also revealed the various forms of negation such as ghi, la, fu, -m, are suffixation of different forms to simple verb root and sometimes to a verb root that has already taken an extensional affix. The study therefore concludes that suffixation of different negative markers such as ghi, la, fu to verb root are unique forms negation in Ngor-okpala, and they exist both at the, morphological and semantic levels, which impacts on the structure and meaning of any expression in the dialect.

**Citation:** Nwachukwu, Emmanuel L. Negation in Ngor-Okpala Dialect of Igbo. 2023 JLLANS Vol. 02 No. 02 August 2023, p44-50.  
<https://doi.org/10.56855/jllans.v2i2.638>

Academic Editor: Mohammad Umar Fakhrudin

Received: 20 August 2023  
Accepted: 30 August 2023  
Published: 31 August 2023

**Keywords:** *Dangling Modifier, Writing, Final Project*



**Copyright:** © 2022 by the authors. Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

## Introduction

Negation is language universal and exists in one form or the other in natural languages, because at one point or the other, the need to negate, refute, deny, contradict or lie arises. (Iwula & Imu, 2021) This implies that in the domain of linguistics, negation is a sine-qua-non for everyday human communication. Negation is a morpho-syntactic operation in which a lexical item denies or inverts the meaning of another lexical item or construction (Crystal, 1991) In other words, negation is a grammatical construction that contradicts (or negates) all or part of the meaning of a word or sentence. It is also known as a negative construction or standard negation. While negation is broadly discussed in Igbo language, it is poorly captured in the various dialects such as Ngor-okpala dialect of Igbo, therefore, this study examines how negation is constructed in Ngor-okpala dialect of Igbo, and this will be achieved through examining the different negative markers in the dialect. The study also aims to determine the morpho-syntactic construction of negation in Ngor-okpala, which are the implications these markers have for meaning and structure.

The unique element of negation in human language helps to shape human communication and plays a vital role in shaping meaning and adding nuance to everyday utterances. Negation serves several functions within a language, the study will also highlight some functions and implications of negation in the linguistic framework of Ngor-okpala dialect.

## **Literature Review**

### **Negation**

Mgbemena (1982) defines negation as a process which affirmative sentences are changed to negative constructions. Fundamentally, negation allows users of a language to deny or negate propositions.

Similarly, Crystal (2008) defines negation as a process or construction in any grammatical semantic analysis which expresses the negation of a sentence. It is a process that alters meaning and structures.

In the submission of Horn, (2020), negation is in the first place a phenomenon of semantic opposition. As such, negation relates an expression that refutes another expression with a meaning, that is, it opposes the meaning of another expression. This relation may be realized syntactically and pragmatically in various ways.

The position of Ebele & Adioha (2021) echoes the submission of Horn, that negation as a concept in linguistics is basically known to be the denial of an assertion.

From these submissions, negation is a linguistic transformation that alters the underlying form of a sentence, resulting in the expression of denial or contradiction, allowing for a wide range of meanings and interpretations.

### **Theoretical review**

The domain of negation in linguistics have been investigated by some linguists and thus have yielded theories to address myriad of issues arising from interrogating the phenomenon of negation in human language.

Theory of Alternatives- it is a central theory in philosophical-linguistic investigation; it is believed to be postulated by Gottlob Frege. This theory states that the focus alternatives are limited to the meanings of lexical expressions that satisfy one of two (somewhat) novel semantic conditions and structure of an expression. The import is that linguistic expression or utterances convey meaning that must be negated or interpreted against alternative meaning in order to be fully meaningful or in order to be fully informative or comprehended. (Repp & Spalek, 2021)

According to the theory of alternatives, the meaning of a negative sentence is not simply the negation of the meaning of the corresponding affirmative sentence. Instead, the meaning of a negative sentence is determined by the set of alternatives that are available in the context. For example, the sentence "Jacob didn't eat the corn" does not simply mean that Jacob did not eat the corn. It also means that Jacob did not eat the corn, and that he did not eat any other corn. It is noteworthy that the set of alternatives that are available in a context of negation can be determined by a number of factors, including the previous discourse, the interlocutors existing knowledge of what is said and why, and the speaker's intentions. This theory highlights the importance of negation in human language, the alternative to a linguistic expression helps in shaping communication beyond the surface into the speaker's intentions, however, this study is limited to the denial or contradictive element of negation in human language, specifically in Ngor-okpala dialect of Igbo.

The Optimality Theory- In linguistics, Optimality Theory has its origin in a talk given by Alan Prince and Paul Smolensky in 1991. Optimality Theory (OT) is a linguistic theory that models how negation in human language applied in expressions will yield higher level communication, how negation can be placed in a variety of linguistic expressions,

such as before the verb, after the verb, or between the subject and verb. Enabling users in understanding the semantics of natural language.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study adopts Optimality Theory to account for negation in a cross-linguistic perspective. Optimality Theory (OT) as a model of grammar and a linguistic theory explain how negation is used in expressive and optimization of morpho-syntactic interface. The focus of this theory is on the language change and meaning. Prince and Smolensky (1997) explored the implications of optimality theory for linguistic meanings, structures and new grammatical architecture. Prince and Smolensky's conceptualization of linguistic theory through optimization principles is embedded in the application of negation to achieve explicit higher-level communication.

Optimality theory is a mirror image of semantics, morphology and syntax, and spells out a process of interpretive optimization that goes beyond an utterance to its negation. The input negation in human language give new form and the output involves a set of new meanings as well. The OT integration of negation in human language expresses meanings is a dynamic structure, function and interpretations.

### **Empirical Studies**

Negation is a universal linguistic phenomenon that affects the performance of human natural language. Absent from otherwise complex systems of animal communication, negation is a *sine qua non* of every human language, allowing for the uniquely human capacities of denial, contradiction, misrepresentation, lying, and irony. (Horn, 2022) It follows that negation is at the nucleus of the human natural language performance.

As an empirical phenomenon, the study of negation is driven by the assertion that it is a universal category of natural language (Dahl 1979). It has been claimed that no animal communication system has a notion of negation (Horn 1989, Jackendoff 2002) This means that it is only unique to human natural language. This is why in another interesting observation by Arian et al. (2021), negation is a core construction in natural language.

Negation is at the core of the mental faculty of language, this include morphology, syntax, semantics, etc, as Horn (2022) describes, negation interacts in significant ways with principles of morphology, syntax, logical form, compositional semantics, and processes of language acquisition and sentence processing, hence the prominent role played by negation in linguistics. Similarly, Miestamo, (2007) notes that in natural language negation is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that shows complex interaction with many aspects of meaning and structure. There is much more to negation than just adding a negative marker to an affirmative sentence. But in the context of this study, we will limit it to adding negative marker to affirmative words or sentences in Ngor-okpala dialect of Igbo.

Forest (1993) maintains that negation is a function that has been universally grammaticalized in the human natural languages. This is so because no language has ever been reported to lack a grammaticalized expression of negation. Some languages may show a stylistic differences for the expression of negation, but are always found and Ngor-okpala dialect is not an exception to the fact.

De Clercq (2020) stated that negative markers are not a uniform category. They come in various types and, depending on their type, they take scope over a clause, a phrase, or just a word. This is similar to negative markers in Ngor-okpala, they applied and best understood within its meaning and structure. Thus, there is morphology-syntax mutual-ity when it comes to the treatment of negative markers in Ngor-okpala.

### **Summary of Literature Review**

The concept of negation has been established as fundamental to the structure of human languages because it serves as a linguistic tool to express the absence or denial of a

proposition, allowing for a wide range of meanings and interpretations. It has generated theories such the theory of alternatives and optimality theory which investigates negation and its importance in human language and communication, the study adopted the optimality theory as it suits the objectives of the study. While empirical studies show that negation is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon in linguistics, it also shows complex interaction with many aspects of meaning and structure in human language.

### Negation in Ngor-okpala

The fact that all human languages have distinction between affirmative and negative statements is the starting point of the investigation in this section of the study. It is an established fact in human language studies that negation is a universal feature of human natural language which is employed as a linguistic device to express negation or reverse the truth value of a certain sentence, and this affects the comprehension of a spoken or written expression. While negation is a universal feature of human language, it is a heterogeneous phenomenon. That is, it is common but not same in all human languages. Negation as a heterogeneous phenomenon is one that exhibits variation or diversity within its components in different languages or with the same language, that is among the dialects of a mutually intelligible language. Negation is a heterogeneous phenomenon in the Igbo language because it can be expressed in a variety of ways, depending on the dialect in context, in this study, it is examined from the Ngor-okpala dialect of Igbo. The way that negation is expressed in a language can also be influenced by the culture of the speakers of that language.

Some scholars have investigated negation in Igbo but this study establishes that their studies are not exhaustive because various dialects in Igbo have unique negative markers for linguistic expressions. Ndimele (2004) exemplifies some Igbo dialects with four strategies: negative inflectional affixes, inherently negative auxiliary verbs, tonal alternation and contrastive focus; while Obiamalu (2014) claims that Igbo employs only two negative marking strategies: affixation and tonal melody. This reveals that while negation is universal linguistic phenomena used in everyday communication, it is not captured in Ngor-okpala dialect of Igbo.

Negation in Ngor-okpala dialect like it is in Igbo, is a predicate operator. In other words, negation is dependent on the verb and therefore marked by verbal affixes. In Ngor-okpala dialect, negation is marked by the following morphemes: *ghi*, *fu*, *la*, and *-m*. The application or use of these negative markers impact on the structure and meaning of words and sentences.

This study examines some words and sentence constructions, and their negation in the Ngor-okpala dialect

The *ghi* negative marker

Words	meaning	Negation	Meaning
Ga	go	gaghi	did not go
Gwa	tell	gwaghi	did not tell
Ria	climb	riaghi	did not climb
Dé	write	dégghi	did not write
Ba	enter	baghi	did not enter

To further understand the application of negation in Ngor-okpala dialect, the above words are used the following sentences:

Agaghim ahia ta- I did not got the market today

Agwaghim Chineme nghe egwaram – I did not tell Chineme what you told me

From the above analysis negation and its application in sentence constructions, we noticed that negation at word level in Ngor-okpala dialect is formed through affixing inflectional negation marker to simple verb root and sometimes to a verb root that has already taken an extensional affix.

The negation marker *fu*

Word	Meaning	Negation	Meaning
Mé-	to do	emefu	cannot do
Gbu-o	to kill	egbufu	cannot kill
Wu	to be	awufu	cannot be
Shié	to cook	shifu	cannot cook
Nwu ọ męę	drink wine	Anwu fum męę	I cannot drink wine

When used in a sentence construction, the suffix *fu* negates the sentence and a new structure and meaning is derived:

Aga m emefu ya.	I cannot do it.
Aga m egbufu ya.	I cannot kill it.
Aga m awufu onye nkuzi	I cannot be a teacher
Kasarchi aga-eshifu nri	Kasarachi cannot cook food
Lucas anwufu mee	Lucas cannot drink wine

The negative marker *-m*

There is also the *-m* negative marker that is used in some sentence constructions such as :

I ga bia- will you come ?  
A gam abià- I will not come  
This shows A ga+ *-m* which negates the original question asked, others are:  
Ga chuo ya na ime igbe akwa- Go and look for it in the box of clothes  
A gam chuo ya na ime igbe akwa- I cannot look for it in the box of clothes  
I ga kpo Okoro echi – will you call Okoro tomorrow ?  
A gam akpo ya echi- I will not call him tomorrow  
I ga aga ugbo – will you go to the farm?  
A gam aga- I will not go

The negative marker *la*

Rié - to eat - erikwala - do not eat  
ibĩa – “to come” - Negative imperative form: abĩala -Do not come  
ijé – “to go” - Negative imperative form: ejela Do not go  
iga – to go- agala – do not go  
Ijé and igá are variations of the phrase “to go” used interchangeably in Ngor-opala dialect depending on the part.

icho- to find- achola- do not find  
mmepe- to open- emepela- do not open  
Ikpà-to weave- akpala- do not weave  
Ita – to chew/bite- atala – do not chew/bite  
Ibu- to carry- ebula- do not carry

It is also used in sentence constructions such as :

Gbu-o ewu kill the goat  
Egbula ewu – do not kill the goat  
Ga ahia- go to the market  
A gala ahia- do not go to the market

The above reveals the impact of negation on the structure and meaning of word and sentences; and this is why Ndimele (1999) posits that human language is unique and dynamic and brings about changes in meaning. In his words this changes could be at the level of lexical, phrasal and structural. Deducible from the above analysis, negation in Ngor-okpala like other human languages is a morpho-syntactic operation in which a lexical item denies or inverts the meaning of another lexical item or construction, and this section of the study has used some examples to express this. Also, negation in Ngor-okpala dialect help speakers and writers to be more precise in their communication, making utterances clear, even if it is implied, and the way negation is expressed in the dialect can also vary depending on the context and social situation, this is outside the scope of the study, but further studies can be done to explore how social situations affect the use of negation in Ngor-okpala.

### **Functions of Negation in Ngor-Okpala of Igbo**

The function of negation is fairly straight-forward, it negates parts of or the entire sentence or clause. The formal realization, however, is more complex and varies across languages, across speakers, and even in the same speaker across contexts. Variation across languages is mostly beyond the scope of this thesis, as the focus here is on negation in Ngor-okpala. Negation serves several functions within the Igbo language and various dialects of Igbo, Ngor-okpala in this study. Primarily, it allows speakers or writers of the dialect to deny or negate propositions, indicating the non-existence or non-occurrence of an event or state. For instance, the negation “ a gwaghim Iniedo ihe gbasara dim” which translates to “I did not tell Iniedo about my husband” contradicts the positive statement “ A gam a-gwa Iniedo ihe gbara dim” I will tell Iniedo about my husband. The negation in the example given, alters the meaning and structure of the initial expression conveyed. This supports the finding already established that negation in Ngor-okpala dialect of Igbo is used to convey contradiction, opposition, or disagreement, enabling speakers and writers of the dialect to refute or challenge previously stated assertions. In this sense, negation plays a crucial role in everyday communication of the Ngor-okpala people.

### **Summary of findings**

The study revealed that Ngor-okpala dialect has its unique negative markers which are used in everyday communication to convey contradiction, opposition, or disagreement of previously stated assertions. The study also interrogated the various forms of negation such as *ghi*, *la*, *fu*, *-m*, are suffixation of different forms to simple verb root and sometimes to a verb root that has already taken an extensional affix. It also revealed that negation marking in Ngor-okpala dialect exhibits rich morpho-syntactic and phono-syntactic frameworks which aid nuanced and higher level communication, this implies that the difference in the affirmative verb root, sentence construction and the negation lies in the tone of the verb to which the negative marker *suh* as *fu*, *-m*, and *là* are attached. The finding of this study is expected to have a strong impact on the development of future accounts of negation in Ngor-okpala dialect of Igbo, and encourage more research on the grammatical architecture of Igbo language.

### **Conclusion**

The study investigates negation in Ngor-okpala dialect, and the various unique forms of negation such as *fu*, *-m*, and *là* in Ngor-okpala dialect, revealing that negation in the dialect exist both at the, morphological and syntactic levels, that is, it impacts on the structure and meaning of any expression. Negation is a universal linguistic tool that plays

a fundamental role in Ngor-okpala dialect of Igbo, as it shapes meaning, conveying contradiction to previously expressed word and sentences, and adds depth to Ngor-okpala everyday communication.

## References

- Arian, H., Siva, R., Dzmitry, B., Devon, H., Alessandro, S., & Aaron, C. (2021). Understanding by Understanding Not: Modeling Negation in *Language Models*. In *Proceedings of the 2021 Conference of the North American Chapter of the Association for Computational Linguistics: Human Language Technologies*, 1301–1312.
- Crystal D. (2008): A dictionary of linguistics and phonetics vol. 4. Blackwell publishers.
- Crystal, D. (1991). A dictionary of linguistics and phonetics. (3rd edition). Basil Blackwell.
- Dahl, Östen (1979). Typology of sentence negation, *Linguistics* 17: 79-106.
- De Clercq, K. (2020). Negation in morphology. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Linguistics*. <https://oxfordre.com/linguistics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199384655.001.0001/>
- Ebele & Adioha (2021). Tone and prefixation: A paradigm shift in negation in orsu dialect of Igbo. *Interdisciplinary Journal of African & Asian Studies*, 7(2), 151-157.
- Forest, R. (1993). *Négations: essai de syntaxe et de typologie linguistique*. Klincksieck
- Horn, L. R. (2020). Negation. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/negation/>
- Horn, L. R. (2022). A natural history of negation. (2nd edition). *Center for the Study of Language and Information*.
- Horn, L. (1989). A natural history of negation. University of Chicago Press.
- Iwuala, Z. C. & Imu, F. O. (2021). Negation in languages: A Urhobo perspective. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 12(3), 437-443.
- Jackendoff, R. (2002). *Foundations of language: Brain, meaning, grammar, evolution*. Oxford University Press.
- Miestamo, M. (2007). Negation-An overview of typological research. *Language and Linguistics Compass*. 1(5), 552–570.
- Mohsen, K. H. (2011). Negation in English. Masters Thesis. <https://uia.brage.unit.no/uia-xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/139290/EN>
- Ndimele, O. M. (1999). Morphology and syntax. M. & J. Grand Orbit Communications Ltd.
- Ndimele, O. M. (2004). Negation marking in Igbo. In Ndimele, O. M. (ed.), *Languages and culture in Nigeria: A festschrift for Okon Essien*. NINLAN and M & J Grand Orbit.
- Obiamalu, G. O (2014). Negation and V-movement in Igbo: A minimalist perspective. *SKASE Journal of theoretical linguistics*, 11(2), 42-58.
- Prince, A. & Smolensky, P. (1997). Optimality: From neural networks to universal grammar. *Science*, 275, 1604-1610.
- Prince, A. & Smolensky, P. (2004). *Optimality theory: Constraint interaction in generative grammar*. Blackwell.
- Repp, S. & Spalek, K. (2021). The role of alternatives in language. *Frontier Communication*, 6.
- Uba-Mgbemena, A. (1981). *Simple grammatical negatives: A surface structure study*. Institute of African Studies.