

## NOMINAL COMPOUND IN IGBO: EVIDENCE FROM IZHI

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### **Abstract**

The assertion by Onuoha (1990) that there are no nominal compounds in the Igbo language has polarized scholars into two camps: those who support this claim and those who oppose it. Both sides have presented extensive data to bolster their arguments, yet the debate remains unresolved. This paper examines the arguments from both perspectives, acknowledging their strengths and weaknesses. Rather than acting as an arbiter, this study introduces a new dimension by exploring the issue from a dialectal perspective, specifically the Izhi dialect. Our analysis establishes that nominal compounds do exist in the Igbo language when viewed through this dialectal lens.

### **Introduction**

Compounding, the process of creating new words by combining two or more existing ones, is a common and frequent method for expanding vocabularies across languages, as noted by Fromkin and Rodman (1981). Numerous scholars have studied or commented on the concept of linguistic compounds in various languages, including Longe (1961), Levi (1961), Nwachukwu (1970, 1973), Stageberg (1971), Hartmann & Stork (1973), Welmer (1973), Lord (1975), Altmann (1988), Onuoha (1990), Nwaozuzu (1991, 2005), Anagbogu (1995), Oluikpe & Nwaozuzu (1995), Madugu (1995), Pereltviag (1998), Mbah (1999, 2004, 2005), Akmajian, Demer, Farmer, and Harnish (2001), Crystal (2003), Yule (2006), and Fabb (2017). The widespread attention given to compounding is likely due to its universal importance for capturing new concepts lexically in languages. The extensive studies on compounds and compounding in linguistics have led to a better understanding of the concept, but they have also sparked controversies. Even in well-studied languages like English, numerous contentious issues and debates have arisen, ranging from conceptualization to the orthographic representation of compounds.

Since 1990, following Onuoha's assertion that "there are no noun compounds in Igbo language" (Onuoha, 1990), Igbo linguistic studies have turned into a battleground between scholars who vehemently repudiate this assertion and those who support it. With ample data, Nwaozuzu (1991), supported by Anagbogu (1995) and Oluikpe and Nwaozuzu (1995), argues that "there are, indeed, Igbo nominal compounds." On the opposing side, Mbah (1998, 1999, 2004, 2005) supports Onuoha's view. Using strong data, morphosyntactic, and syntactic demonstrations, Mbah discredited the examples provided by the "Nwaozuzuians," describing them as mere phrases and labeling the term "compound words" a misnomer.

Although this paper will comment on the positions of the two schools of thought, it is not intended to serve as an arbiter between them or to take sides. Instead, the paper aims to point scholars to another possible perspective on the issue at hand—the dialectal perspective. Therefore, we will examine the concept, process, and characteristics of compounding in Igbo from the perspective of the Izhi dialect. Using the testing devices proposed by both schools of thought, we will analyze what appear to be nominal compounds in Izhi to determine the extent

to which the assertion that “there are no noun compounds in the Igbo language” holds true in this dialect.

## COMPOUND IN LINGUISTICS

Compounds and the process of compounding have been studied extensively across various languages. According to Mbah (2004), the concept of a compound is familiar in both morphology and syntax. Hartmann and Stork (1973) define compounds as “the combination of two or more words to form new words,” a definition that Oluikpe and Nwaozuzu (1995) describe as “mundane.” Crystal (2003) refers to a compound as “a linguistic unit composed of elements that function independently in other circumstances.” Despite their differing views, these scholars agree on the existence of compounds and the process of compounding.

In characterizing compounds, Altmann (1988) draws an analogy between linguistics and chemistry, suggesting that the principles of compounding are not unique to linguistics. Mbah (1999) supports this view by noting that compounding is also fundamental in other disciplines, such as chemistry, where a compound is defined as:

“...a substance which contains two or more elements chemically combined together (where an element is a substance which cannot be split into simpler substances by any physical process)”.

This definition implies that, like chemical compounds, linguistic compounds consist of two or more words fused together, losing their independent existence in both structure and meaning within the new context. Matthews (1978) echoes this sentiment, stating:

“...if we say that A is a compound, we mean that it has some structures of the general type BC, where B and C can be related to other words which exist independently. The content of A, B, and C is irrelevant.”

Akmajian et al. (2001) offer a slightly different perspective, suggesting that the orthographic form of the compound (whether single, hyphenated, or spaced) is immaterial. They provide examples such as:

- (a) bathroom (no space)
- (b) ape-man (hyphenated)
- (c) living room (space between)
- (d) WordPerfect (capitalized second component)
- (e) community centre finance committee (sequence of words)

Akmajian et al. note that English conventions for writing two-word compounds are inconsistent, challenging Altmann’s strict chemical analogy. Additionally, Akmajian et al. introduce the concept of “heads” in compounds, asserting that the rightmost member (the “head”) determines the part of speech of the whole compound. For example, in “high chair,” the noun “chair” makes the entire compound a noun.

In contrast, Mbah (2004) rejects the idea that compounds have internal heads. He argues that positing a head within a compound contradicts the notion of a lexical item’s indivisibility. Mbah states: “...our argument is that no compound word has a head within it, unless such a head is the word itself (2004:266).”

On the orthographic conventions of writing compounds, Mbah (2004) views the inconsistencies in English as a result of its derivation from multiple languages. He argues that any structure whose constituents can be questioned or relativized is not a compound. This orthographic and syntactic confusion is particularly problematic when adapting Igbo syntax to English, as noted by Williamson (1979).

Fabb (2017) provides a more recent definition and perspective, defining compounds as linguistic forms where two or more elements combine to create a new meaning distinct from the individual elements' meanings. This definition aligns with traditional views but emphasizes the distinctiveness of the compound meaning, underscoring that the creation of new semantic entities is a key feature of compounding.

Recent linguistic research provides various insights into the formation and interpretation of noun-noun compounds. According to Bauer (2017), noun-noun compounding remains one of the most productive and flexible means of word formation in English. Bauer emphasizes the role of cognitive processes in understanding and producing these compounds, highlighting how familiarity and frequency of use influence their acceptability and interpretation.

Libben (2014) discusses the psycholinguistic aspects of compound processing, suggesting that noun-noun compounds are processed through both their individual components and as whole units. This dual processing mechanism helps explain how speakers can quickly understand and create new compounds even if they have never encountered them before.

Gagné and Spalding (2014) explore the semantic transparency of noun-noun compounds, showing that compounds with more transparent meanings (where the relationship between the nouns is clear) are easier for people to understand and use. Their research indicates that semantic transparency plays a crucial role in the productivity and evolution of noun-noun compounds in the lexicon.

Concluding this section, noun-noun compounds are a prevalent and productive feature of the English language, allowing speakers to create new terms and convey specific meanings efficiently. The study of these compounds involves examining their structure, semantics, and cognitive processing, with recent research providing valuable insights into how they are formed and understood. As Bauer (2017), Libben (2014), and Gagné and Spalding (2014) illustrate, noun-noun compounding is a dynamic area of linguistic inquiry that bridges morphology, semantics, and psycholinguistics.

## **NOMINAL COMPOUND IN IGBO**

The foregoing discussion has shown that the controversial characterization of compounds is not peculiar to any one language. In Igbo language studies, the primary controversy surrounds nominal compounds, particularly noun-noun (N+N) compounds. Onuoha (1990) sets the stage by asserting:

- ...I have said that there are no noun compounds in the Igbo language but rather evidence of genitival construction influenced by the Igbo writing system. Therefore, although
- (a) ulo akwukwo 'school'
  - (b) ulo ogwu 'hospital'
  - (c) ulo aku 'bank'

represent single concepts, they are not single words. What I perceive is a chain of descriptive words representing concepts without lexical equivalents in the Igbo language (Onuoha, 1990:19).

This assertion was met with criticism from Anagbogu (1995) and Oluikpe and Nwaozuzu (1995), who argued that Onuoha's claims lacked the depth of investigation expected from an undergraduate work, labelling them as "baseless and contradictory in places." In contrast, Mbah (1999, 2004, 2005) supported Onuoha, arguing that the proponents of nominal compounds in Igbo were misguided by attempting to translate the Igbo worldview expressed in its syntactic structures directly into English, leading to the erroneous conclusion that Igbo must have equivalents for English forms.

The divergence in the positions of these two schools of thought is rooted in their theoretical assumptions. Nwaozuzu (1991) approaches the issue from a semantic perspective, defining a nominal compound as a compound with two or more isolatable free constituents whose overall meaning adheres to at least three of the following criteria:

- (a) Unity of concept
- (b) Semantic specialization
- (c) Permanence
- (d) Unitary representation of concept

With these criteria, Nwaozuzu argues that once the overall semantic output of a nominal structure represents a single concept, a nominal compound is present. Supporting this, Oluikpe and Nwaozuzu (1995) propose the polysemy theory, illustrating that the structure "ulo aku" can have multiple semantic realizations:

"Aku's house,"  
"house of wealth," and  
"bank."

While the first two expressions are genitival, they argue, the third is a compound.

From a morphosyntactic and syntactic perspective, Mbah (2004:273) dismisses these illustrations, contending that the expression of meaning alone does not determine the lexicality of a structure. He proposed a paradigm-based rule to determine the syntactic pattern of Igbo words, arguing that any deviation from this paradigm is questionable. For instance, he questioned why "ulo akwukwo" is written as a compound word while other similar structures, like "ulo elu" and "ulo uka," are not.

In our opinion, "ulo akwukwo," "ulo elu," and "ulo uka" do not strictly belong to the same paradigm, despite superficial similarities. While it is true that the convention of writing such structures in Igbo is not well defined, "ulo elu" falls out of the paradigm as "elu" (up) qualifies "ulo" (describing the type of house), whereas "akwukwo" and "uka" describe the use of the house. Thus, "ulo akwukwo" and "ulo uka" should be treated differently from "ulo elu."

Mbah (1999, 2004) also proposes a syntactic test for compounds, arguing that any structure whose constituents can be questioned, relativized, or accessed by a syntactic operation of any kind is not a compound.

Mbah's argument against the existence of nominal compounds in Igbo also raises questions about similar combinations in other languages like English, Hausa, and Yoruba. He refers to N+N combinations that satisfy the chemistry analogy given by Matthews (1978), which states:

"...if we say that A is a compound, we mean that it has some structure of the general type BC, where B and C can be related to other words which exist independently. The content of A, B, and C is irrelevant."

These combinations are typically exocentric, possessing idiomatic meanings. Insisting that every compound must meet this condition is an extreme requirement, as only a few nominal compounds in any language conform to this strict definition. If this condition applies without modifications, it means that, for instance, the following combinations in various languages, commonly referred to as compounds, are essentially phrases:

**English:**

chess table  
strawberry jam  
diesel motor  
bookshelf

**Hausa:**

*jirigi* (vehicle) + *sama* (sky) = *jiriginsama* 'aeroplane'  
*kudi* (money) + *gida* (house) = *kudingida* 'house rent'  
*riga* (cloth) + *sanyi* (cold) = *rigansanyi* 'cardigan/sweater'

**Yoruba:**

*aya* (wife) + *oba* (king) = *ayaba* 'queen'  
*omo* (child) + *ale* (concubine) = *omaale* 'bastard'

Even if we accept the strict condition proposed by Matthews (1978), there are still a few nominal compounds in Igbo that meet this criterion. Therefore, the assertion that there are no noun compounds in Igbo is an extreme stance. Examples of Igbo compounds that satisfy Matthews' condition include:

*Isi* (head) + *ike* (power) → *isiike* 'stubborn'  
*Aka* (hand) + *ike* (power) → *akaike* 'highhanded'  
*Oku* (fire) + *elu* (up) → *okuelu* 'wayward'  
*Anyia* (eye) + *mmiri* (water) → *anyammiri* 'tears'

The core issue is the lack of a unified theoretical perspective. Until the differing theoretical bases and approaches between the two schools of thought are reconciled, the ongoing controversy is unlikely to be resolved.

**NOMINAL COMPOUND IN IZHI**

We have examined the positions of the two schools of thought and appreciated the theoretical and test devices proposed by each. In what follows, we will present data drawn from the Izhi dialect to determine the extent to which the assertion that "there are no noun compounds in the Igbo language" holds true from a dialectal perspective.

<b>Noun 1</b>	<b>+</b>	<b>Noun 2</b>	<b>→ Compound Noun</b>
<i>Ne</i>		<i>madzu</i>	<i>nemadzu</i>
'Mother'		'human'	'human being'
<i>Mgbo</i>		<i>oshi</i>	<i>mgboshi</i>
'Door'		'wood'	'wooden lying board/bed'
<i>Ji</i>		<i>oha</i>	<i>jioha</i>
'Yam'		'the people'	'ancestral feeding ceremony'
<i>Ite</i>		<i>nshi</i>	<i>iteshi</i>
'Pot'		'idol'	'healing pot (concoction)'
<i>Enu</i>		<i>nshi</i>	<i>enishi</i>
'Hole'		'faeces'	'anus'
<i>Ji</i>		<i>oke</i>	<i>jioke</i>
'Yam'		'share'	'title taking ceremony'
<i>Igu</i>		<i>opoto</i>	<i>iguopoto</i>
'Flower'		'cocoyam leaf'	'beads'
<i>Ikpo</i>		<i>ozu</i>	<i>ikpozu</i>
'Heap'		'manure'	'refuse dump'
<i>Nwa</i>		<i>ne</i>	<i>nwune</i>
'Child'		'mother'	'brother/sister'
<i>Igbudu</i>		<i>ulo</i>	<i>igbulo</i>
'Fortress'		'house'	'wall (of house)'
<i>Onu</i>		<i>enu</i>	<i>onuenu</i>
'Mouth'		'bird'	'a hairstyle'
<i>Enya</i>		<i>mini</i>	<i>enyamini</i>
'Eye'		'water'	'tears'

The above examples demonstrate nominal compounds in the Izhi dialect of Igbo. None of these compounds can be questioned or relativized without producing ungrammatical or unacceptable expressions. Some compounds are so strictly formed that only one grammatical realization is possible. Examples include "nwune," "igbulo," and "enishi," which adapt their phonemic shapes to fit the phonotactic constraints of the dialect.

## CONCLUSION

From the above discussion, it is evident that the assertion that there are no nominal compounds in Igbo does not hold true for the Izhi dialect. Therefore, the ongoing debate on this issue should be limited to Standard Igbo. Since Izhi is a bona fide dialect of the Igbo language (Anyanwu 2005), a blanket statement like the one in contention requires re-examination in light of the present evidence. We have demonstrated that there are incontrovertible nominal compounds in Igbo. The correct stance on the ongoing nominal compound debate is that Standard Igbo has yet to produce evidence satisfying both schools of thought, unlike the compelling data from the Izhi dialect presented above.



However, while the strict view of compounds requiring inseparable fusion presents an interesting and rigorous criterion, it may not fully capture the dynamic and varied nature of compounding in natural languages. The broader, more flexible definitions provided by traditional linguistics and supported by cognitive research (Gagné and Spalding, 2014; Libben, 2014) better account for the diversity and productivity of compounding as a word-formation process. Therefore, while the inseparability criterion might apply to certain types of compounds and some dialects of Igbo, it is not a necessary condition for all compounds across different languages/dialects and contexts.

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