

A CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS OF NEGATIVE CONSTRUCTIONS IN ENGLISH AND KANURI

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Abstract

This study investigated the structure and use of negative statements in Kanuri using the theoretical frameworks of Lado's Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) and Chomsky's Universal Grammar (UG). It aimed to examine negative construction patterns in English and Kanuri and this was achieved by examining ways of negation in Kanuri which are present in English, ways of expressing negation in English which are not present in Kanuri and other ways of negation in Kanuri which are absent in English. The research employed qualitative data analytical approach and purposive sampling technique to get twenty sentences as data for the analysis from the educated bilingual speakers and the monolingual aged Kanuri speakers. Findings reveal that Kanuri employs negation markers (g'yin), lexical negators (ganama, aiyima, nnduma), and particle-based tag questions (wa, la ayi) to construct negation through post-verbal particles and integrated lexical forms, while English relies on auxiliary verbs and independent negators. At the same time, the data demonstrated universal grammatical tendencies which included binary opposition (Chida waz3na vs. Chida waz3yin) and structural dependency in negation (Nngla ro biske farz3yin) which supports UG's claim that all languages share deep-seated principles despite surface variation. The study concluded that effective language learning requires explicit instruction on structural contrasts alongside opportunities to activate innate grammatical principles through exposure and practice as exemplified in this research.

Keywords: *second language learning, negation variation, Kanuri, lexical and sentential level*

Introduction

Negation is a universal grammatical category that languages employ to express contradiction, denial or non-existence of something. It enables a language user to contradict all or part of the meaning of an expression. In Linguistics, this process is referred to as negative construction. Negation can occur at different grammatical levels such as the lexical and sentential levels. This present study aimed to examine negative construction patterns in English and Kanuri and this was achieved by examining ways of negation in Kanuri which are present in English, ways of expressing negation in English which are not present in Kanuri and other ways of negation in Kanuri which are absent in English. There are three critical questions which are relevant to this study and they are as follows:

- i. What are the ways of expressing negation in Kanuri that are also present in English, and how do these similarities reflect universal principles of grammar?
- ii. Which forms of negation are found in English but absent in Kanuri, and what challenges might these differences pose for Kanuri speakers learning English?
- iii. What unique strategies of negation exist in Kanuri that are not present in English, and how do these highlight the distinct structural features of Kanuri grammar?

The research questions outlined above served as the framework guiding the data analysis in this study.

English Language

English Language is an Indo- European tongue within the Germanic branch, historically shaped by successive stages from Old English through Middle and Early Modern English to its present global form. Its spread was driven first by British colonial expansion from the 17th century onward and later by American economic, political, and technological influence, particularly after World War II. Today, English is spoken by over 1.5 billion people worldwide,

serving as the dominant language of international business, science and diplomacy. English has continued to diversify into regional varieties and dialects around the world and these are referred to as “World Englishes”. (Crystal, 2012; Jenkins, 2015).

Kanuri Language

Kanuri Language belongs to the Saharan branch of the Nilo- Saharan phylum and is historically tied to the Kanem–Bornu Empire, which flourished around Lake Chad between the 9th and 19th centuries. Kanuri is spoken in north-eastern Nigeria, Niger, Chad, Cameroon and Sudan, with major dialects including Yerwa (Maiduguri), Manga, Tumari, Bilma, and Kanembu. It is a tonal, agglutinative language with verb- final word order. It once served as a lingua franca in northern Nigeria but its role has currently diminished in favour of Hausa during and after colonial rule. Today, Kanuri remains a national language in Nigeria and Niger, taught in schools and used in the media, though bilingualism with Hausa and Arabic is widespread (Cyffer, 1998; Hutchison, 2021).

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Noam Chomsky's Universal Grammar

The theory of Universal Grammar (UG henceforth), developed by Noam Chomsky, has played a pivotal role not only in language acquisition research but also in shaping approaches to language learning. Chomsky’s early work (Syntactic Structures, 1957) challenged behaviorist models by proposing that humans are born with an innate linguistic faculty. This faculty, UG, contains a set of principles common to all languages and parameters that vary across them. In the context of language learning, UG suggests that learners do not start from zero; rather, they rely on an internalised grammar blueprint that guides their ability to learn new languages.

The Principles and Parameters model (Chomsky, 1981) is particularly relevant to language learning. It posits that while principles such as structure dependency are universal, learners must reset parameters (e.g., word order, null subject) when encountering a new language. This explains why some aspects of learning are relatively easy and that it is because they follow universal principles while others are more challenging and require learners to

adjust parameters that differ from their first language. For example, English learners of Kanuri must adapt to Kanuri's negation system, which places markers differently than English, but both languages share the universal principle of binary opposition in negation.

In language learning pedagogy, UG has been influential in highlighting the poverty of the stimulus argument: learners acquire complex grammar despite limited input. This has encouraged teaching approaches that emphasize exposure to authentic input and opportunities for learners to activate their innate grammatical competence. However, UG has also faced criticism in language learning contexts. Usage-based theorists argue that learners rely more on general cognitive skills and frequency of input than on innate grammar. Despite this, UG continues to inform teaching practices, especially in explaining why certain errors persist across learners and why some grammatical structures are universally easier to grasp.

Recent scholarship, such as Roberts' Oxford Handbook of Universal Grammar (2016), situates UG within broader discussions of multilingual learning, showing how it interacts with cognitive and social factors. Touqir, Nasir, and Pervez (2022) emphasize that UG remains a valuable lens for understanding how learners approach new languages, even if it must be complemented by sociocultural and cognitive perspectives. Thus, in language learning, UG provides a theoretical foundation for explaining both the universality of certain learning processes and the variability in learners' outcomes.

2.2 Robert Lado's Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH)

The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) emerged in the mid- 20th century as a central framework in second language acquisition research. Its roots can be traced to Charles Fries (1945), who argued that foreign language teaching should be based on a systematic comparison of the learner's native language and the target language. Building on this foundation, Robert Lado (1957) articulated CAH in his seminal work *Linguistics Across Cultures* where he proposes that similarities between languages would ease learning while differences would predict learners' errors. This strong predictive claim was heavily influenced by behaviorist psychology, which viewed language learning as habit formation and transfer. Early applications of CAH focused

on phonology and grammar and attempted to forecast specific difficulties learners would encounter. However, by the 1970s, scholars began to challenge the hypothesis noting that not all errors could be explained by cross-linguistic differences. Researchers such as Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982) emphasized the role of developmental processes and learners' creativity. This weakness of CAH led to the rise of Error Analysis and Interlanguage Theory. Despite these critiques, CAH has not disappeared; instead, its weak version that suggests that contrastive analysis can explain rather than predict errors, remains influential. Contemporary studies highlight its continued relevance in phonological analysis, pragmatic differences and cross-cultural communication (Brown, 1987; Djiguimkoudre, 2020). More recent reviews (Erzin, 2026) argue that CAH, when integrated with cognitive and usage-based approaches, still provides valuable insights into multilingual learning contexts. Thus, while the strong version of CAH has been largely abandoned, its analytical utility persists, making it a flexible tool for understanding how language differences shape acquisition.

2.3 Previous Studies on Contrastive Analysis between English and Kanuri

Contrastive analysis between Kanuri and English has received increasing scholarly attention, particularly in the areas of phonology and syntax. Overt Writes (2021) conducted a comprehensive study comparing sentence structures in Kanuri and English, noting that Kanuri's relatively flexible word order contrasts sharply with the stricter syntactic rules of English. This difference often leads to transfer errors when Kanuri speakers attempt to learn English, especially in forming imperative and declarative sentences. The study also emphasised the role of verb forms in Kanuri and their implications for English tense usage and recommended pedagogical approaches such as communicative and grammar-translation methods to address these challenges.

In phonology, Muhammad-Gombe (2025) analysed the vowel systems of Kanuri and English. The study revealed that English vowel length contrasts are frequently neutralised by Kanuri speakers due to the absence of vowel length distinctions in Kanuri. Central vowels such as /ʌ/ and /ɜ:/ are often replaced with Kanuri equivalents, while diphthongs are simplified or broken with epenthetic segments. These findings underscore the impact of L1

interference and highlight the need for targeted pronunciation instruction for Kanuri learners of English.

A major milestone in the study of negative patterns in Kanuri is that of Cyffer(1998) who discussed negative patterns using scale and category grammar. He proposed that negation categories in Kanuri are achieved through the application of the negative suffix *nyi* in nominal clauses and in the verbal complex except in the imperfective and command form. According to him, negation in Kanuri can also be constructed by applying the negative suffix *ba*. He is also of the opinion that the process of grammaticalisation play significant role. In order to conceive the whole complex of negation, aspects of language change must be accounted for. He explains further that the locative concept of the imperfective explains that TAM applies a different negation strategy. He found out that Kanuri rejects the clash of negation and focus. In order to bring together a focus construction in a negative clause, indefinite pronouns are inherently affirmative.

In this present study, both the use of *ba* and *g'yin* to form negative patterns are looked into just like we have in Cyffer (1998). Other negative patterns such as *ganama* (none), *aiyima* (nothing), *nnduma* (nobody) and so on are also included. Also, negation at the lexical level (polarity) are also included. This research also makes use of the Head parameters in Universal grammar to analyse the data.

3.0 Research Method

The research employed qualitative data analytical approach and purposive sampling technique was used to get adequate data for the analysis, two sets of Kanuri speakers were consulted. The first set are the educated bilingual speakers while the second set are the monolingual aged Kanuri speakers. The reason for choosing these set of speakers are that: the aged monolingual speakers are more fluent in the language and are familiar with deep expressions in the language, the educated English-Kanuri bilingual speakers, on the other hand, are familiar with English expressions and can provide exact use of such expressions in Kanuri. The analysis of data extracted from the speakers is guided by the tenets of UG and CAH.

4.0 Data Analysis and Presentation

While Chomsky's UG focuses on similar characteristics of different languages, Lado's CAH emphasises that differences between languages predict learners' difficulties. This analysis integrated the two theories to highlight how Kanuri expresses negation.

i. The use of *g'yin* as a negation marker in Kanuri

Examples:

- Kanuri: *U Fati g'yin* = "I am not Fati"
- English: I am not Fati"

Here, Kanuri uses a post-verbal negation particle *g'yin*, while English uses auxiliary negation (*not*).

ii. The use of *g'yin* as a verb negation in sentences

Example:

- Kanuri: *Sanbiso g'yin Fati ye shankawa dajin*
- English: "Fati doesn't cook rice everyday

Here, English requires auxiliary *does not*, while Kanuri inserts *g'yin* before the subject or verb.

iii. The use of *nnduma* (nobody) for lexical negation

Examples:

- Kanuri: *Nnduma lorsa d3ro is3yin*
- English: Nobody attended the wedding
- Kanuri: *Nnduma daram ba*
- English: Nobody is perfect

Here, Kanuri integrates these aforementioned lexical negations with verb negation while English allows them to stand alone.

iv. The use of *wa* in question tags formation

Examples:

- Kanuri: *Nozana wa?*
- English: Do they know it?
- Kanuri: *Nozayin wa?*
- English: Don't they know it?

Here, Kanuri uses *wa* as a tag, while English uses auxiliary inversion.

v. The use of *na* and *nyin* to express binary opposition

Kanuri alternates between *na* (affirmative) and *nyin* (negative) to express binary opposition in negation.

Examples:

- Kanuri: *Chida waz3na*
- English: She's lazy
- Kanuri: *Chida waz3yin*
- English: She's not lazy

vi. The addition of *Nngla* to verbs or subjects to express negation

Kanuri negation markers attach to verbs or subjects depending on sentence hierarchy order.

Example:

- Kanuri: *Nngla ro biske farz3yin*
- English: She didn't dance well

Different ways of expressing negations in Kanuri are presented in the table below:

Table 1: sentence types and negative constructions in Kanuri and English

Sentence Type	Kanuri Example	English Equivalent	Analysis
Identity negation	<i>U Fati g'yin</i>	I am not Fati	Post-verbal negation particle vs. auxiliary negation.
Habitual action	<i>Sanbiso shankawa dejin</i>	She cooks rice everyday	Kanuri word order differs (SOV-like).
Habitual negation	<i>Sanbiso g'yin Fati ye shankawa dajin</i>	She doesn't cook rice everyday	Kanuri inserts <i>g'yin</i> before subject/verb.
Lexical negation	<i>Nnduma lorsa d3ro is3yin</i>	Nobody attended the wedding	Both use lexical negation, but Kanuri integrates with verb negation.
Tag question	<i>Guz3na la gulz3yin</i>	She said it, didn't she?	Kanuri uses <i>wa</i> or <i>la ayi</i> instead of auxiliary inversion.
Adjective negation	<i>Fero falma shawa g'yin</i>	None of the girls is beautiful	Kanuri negates adjectives directly.
Universal negation	<i>Nnduma daram ba</i>	Nobody is perfect	Shared universal principle of negation.

Discussion of Findings

The analysis of Kanuri negative statements, when viewed through the dual lenses of Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) and Universal Grammar (UG), reveals several important insights into language learning.

To start with, the data show that Kanuri employs a distinct negation marker (*g'yin*), which often appears after the subject or verb, unlike English where negation is expressed through auxiliary verbs such as *do not* or *is not*. For example, *U Fati g'yin* ("I am not Fati") contrasts with English's auxiliary-based negation. This structural difference supports CAH's claim that learners

face difficulty when their native and target languages diverge. English speakers learning Kanuri must adapt to a new syntactic placement of negation, while Kanuri speakers learning English must acquire auxiliary-based negation.

Similarly, the dataset highlights Kanuri's reliance on lexical negation terms such as *ganama* (none), *aiyima* (nothing), and *nnduma* (nobody). These terms are similar to English equivalents but are often integrated with verb negation (*Nnduma lorsa d3ro is3yin* = "Nobody attended the wedding"). This integration illustrates how Kanuri structures negation more holistically, whereas English allows lexical negators to stand independently. From a CAH perspective, this difference may lead to transfer errors, while UG explains it as a variation in parameter settings within a universal principle of negation.

Furthermore, Kanuri's tag question system (*wa* or *la ayi*) differs significantly from English auxiliary inversion. For instance, *Nozana wa?* ("Do they know it?") and *Guz3na la gulz3yin* ("She said it, didn't she?") show that Kanuri uses particles rather than auxiliary verbs to form tags. This supports CAH's prediction of learner difficulty, but UG accounts for the universality of tag questions as a pragmatic device across languages, even if their forms differ.

Finally, the dataset demonstrates binary opposition in adjectives and verbs, such as *Chida waz3na* ("She's lazy") vs. *Chida waz3yin* ("She's not lazy"), and *Nngla ro biske farz3na* ("She danced well") vs. *Nngla ro biske farz3yin* ("She didn't dance well"). This aligns with UG's principle of binary opposition and shows that negation universally operates by contrasting affirmative and negative forms. The findings reveal that while Kanuri and English differ in word order, negation placement, and tag formation, they share universal grammatical categories such as negation, binary opposition, and structural dependency. CAH explains the surface-level differences that cause learning challenges, while UG explains the deep-level similarities that make language learning possible across diverse linguistic systems.

Conclusion

The findings from the analysis of Kanuri negation, interpreted through the frameworks of the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) and Universal Grammar (UG), demonstrate the interplay between language-specific structures and universal principles. Kanuri's use of the negation marker *g'yin*,

its integration of lexical negators (ganama, aiyima, nnduma), and its particle-based tag questions (wa, la ayi) highlight structural differences from English that can pose challenges for learners. These differences confirm CAH's assertion that cross-linguistic contrasts predict areas of difficulty in language learning.

At the same time, the data reveal that Kanuri conforms to universal grammatical tendencies, such as binary opposition in affirmative and negative forms (Chida waz3na vs. Chida waz3yin) and structural dependency in negation placement (Nngla ro biske farz3yin). These features align with UG's claim that all languages share deep-seated principles, even if their surface realizations differ. Thus, while CAH explains the source of learner errors, UG explains the possibility of successful learning by grounding Kanuri's system in universal grammar.

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