

A Syntax-Based Analysis of the Aspects of Deviation in the Narrative Writings of Students of the Ritman University, Ikot Ekpene: The Syntactic-Verbal Factor

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ABSTRACT

This paper takes a look at a syntax-based analysis of the Aspects of Deviation in the Narrative Writings of Students of the Ritman University, Ikot Ekpene: The Syntactic-Verbal Factor. It examines the syntactic deviation, ungrammaticality, and unacceptable constructions associated with the verb, one of the classified parts of speech across all languages. Cases of verb abuse by students of higher institutions in Nigeria have continued to rise, and new errors in communication patterns are observed daily in the written essays of university undergraduates. This study aims at discovering the factors that are responsible for deviations syntactically. This study is within the theoretical frameworks of Contrastive Analysis and Error Analysis approaches to seek similarities and the differences inherent in the students' source and target languages and account for the reasons behind such deviations. Verb factor is a cause of syntactic breakdown in the students' writings. Based on this, there is the need for teachers to study the verb-related errors made by their students in a much more comprehensive way to fill the gaps inherent in this direction.

Keywords: Deviation, Narrative Writings, Ritman University, Syntactic-Verbal Factor

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is a country made up of many ethnic nation-states with multilingualism and multiculturalism as its posture. This posture constitutes a problem, in the first place, to communication and in the second place, to nationhood. Presently, English has gained an unprecedented higher value in Nigeria. Nigeria is developing and the achievement and the certainty of such development are dependent in part on the level of English language proficiency among Nigerians. English is the language of science, trade, communication and technology. Consequently, Nigerians need to be competent in the English language to keep abreast with current developments and

advancements. Teaching the English language is an uphill task in Nigeria as the standard of English among Nigerian students and the populace alike is on the decline despite of the number of years put in for English learning.

In Nigeria, the percentage of people who learn English with a firm grasp of the grammatical rules is very negligible due to the lack of emphasis on the teaching of the aspect of grammar. At most, the main concern of the teachers of English in our primary and secondary school levels is to teach the use of English for communication while grammatical competence receives little or no attention; whereas grammatical competence which gives the forms and structures of the language is a major component of the communicative competence and so, should receive greater attention. According to Bloor (1986), *“formal grammar is an important aspect and with all its faults, which are grievous, traditional grammar is better than no grammar at all”*. Consequently, this lapse in teaching is the realization of errors by the learners of English in Nigeria, a condition that may soon lead to a total breakdown if not given prompt or immediate attention. Burt and Kiparsky (1975) argue that there are error types that generally lead to the overall breakdown of the sentence structure. These error types constitute the various aspects of deviation, some of which are predominantly syntactic and they hamper communication adversely. From the above explications, it could be ascertained that English has remained in Nigeria for a considerable length of time and requires to be reappraised.

The Status of English in Nigeria

Even in England itself, English was long neglected mainly because it did not have any ‘grammar’. Writers such as Dryden of the latter half of the 17th century were said to have complained of the ‘barbarity’ of the English tongue, by which he meant the absence of ‘grammar’ in the form of set rules which were to have been patterned after the Latin grammar of the day (Boadi, 1981) cited in Enang (2020). Today, English is used by more speakers than its native speakers. This development has called for a reassessment of the status of English. The rate at which English spreads has brought many consequences upon it. Its status has changed so considerably that it can no longer conveniently be referred to as the language of England. English has justifiably undergone a metamorphosis, a kind of re-coloured social painting which characterizes the different cultures of the world Enang (2020).

English Language usage in Nigeria has been traced to the “pre-Atlantic slave trade era”, specifically in 1553 when some British were said to have paid

what scholars have described as “very brief visits to the Nigerian coasts especially the ports of Benin and the Old Calabar”. At the initial stage, the medium of communication between the English men and the natives was a kind of English-based pidgin. Therefore, the candidature of the English language in Nigeria as a language that was to be chosen and or embraced for use as a tool for communication and transaction could be said to have been purely circumstantial. This is because Nigeria is a multilingual nation. According to Eka (2000:59),

The history of the use of English in Nigeria may be traced to the first part of the 19th century, though English-based pidgin is known to have been in use as far back as the 16th century. That was the time of the great influx of colonizers, missionaries, and even undisguised exploiters to the coast of West Africa. A specific instance here may be cited of Missionaries who arrived in Badagary in 1842.

The author further posits that during the period under review, it was naturally authentic that no known Nigerian could speak English acceptable to users, whether native or nonnative audience of English. Secondly, it is a fact that the only varieties of English for communication at that time were “Broken English”, “Minimal Pidgin” and “Middle Arts” English which dominated Nigerians’ daily communicative traffic.

From the foregoing English has come to Nigeria and has co-existed in Nigeria with its background languages as far back as the 19th century. It follows that the number of years by which English co-existed with Nigerian indigenous languages and its consistent use in representing every Nigerian experience and situation has led to the development of prototypes that have identified and recognized it as a divergent variety of the world Englishes.

The European imperialists were confronted with some problems and difficulties of communicating with the large groups of indigenous speakers of West African languages (Eka, 60). The first obstacle confronted by the visitors was the communication barrier between the natives and the English men. Therefore, there was then a pressing need to dislodge this obstruction, hence the need to use the teaching of Basic English to the locally sourced interpreters for communication, business transaction, missionary activities and other official functions.

It could be explained from the foregoing that the cornerstone of the British introduction and use of the English language in Nigeria was not based on the evolution of “accepted” English but the emergence of fairly communicative English largely because the traders, colonial administrators were not willing to learn the indigenous language(s). This is why English language had to be imposed

and taught to train clerks, interpreters, stewards and messengers to help white men in administrative and domestic activities. It is this humble beginning of English language usage in Nigeria since the 16th century that has enabled it (English) to settle down, and co-exist with a large corpus of uncounted background languages to this day.

Effective communication guarantees comprehension. Both communication and comprehension are the bottom lines of efficient language usage. Today, the narrative writings of the students under study are rippled with lots of syntactic errors. This development not only distorts the intended output of effective communication but also exposes a flagrant depiction of their low linguistic and eventual appalling communicative competence in English. The bulk of the aspects of syntactic deviations hinges on their poor knowledge of verb use.

In the first place, it is a clear fact that the verb is an indispensable factor in every discourse; and whenever it does not exist, at least by implication, it is not possible to say that there is language use or communication. Secondly, where it is wrongly used, it mars the progression of comprehension in a discourse. That is to say, the verb factor is a major cause of the syntactic as well as the overall breakdown in students' writings. These verb errors affect every aspect of the English verb system- tense, verb conjugation and a whole lot more. Therefore, a breakdown in communication caused by errors in the syntactic structures of the students concerning their use of the verb constitutes the spur for this study.

Theoretical Frameworks

In second language learning, learners are bound to exhibit various forms of error that take different proportions. Some approaches have been applied to the study of these various error types and each approach has tended to yield different outcomes. This study is fixed around two frameworks: Contrastive Analysis and Error Analysis.

Contrastive Analysis Approach

According to Umaru (2008), Contrastive Analysis can also be referred to as "linguistic aprion" "strong hypothesis" or "predictive linguistics". This approach is an offshoot of the behaviourist theory of language learning with a "transfer" concept introduced by Robert Lado (1957). Linguistically, Contrastive Analysis is based on the works of Structuralist linguists such as Bloomfield and Fries. This is supported by Weinreich (1953) and Haugen (1953) with their concept of

“Interference” which is further explained by Bright (1992) who states that “just as old habits can interfere with the learning of new skills, so one’s native language can affect the learning of foreign language”. The Contrastive Analysis approach to language learning is capable of predicting in a straight forward way that “where the learner mother tongue and target languages’ syntax differ, mother tongue syntactic habits would show up in the form of interference”. Therefore, the differences between learner’s L₁ and L₂ may be held accountable for misproductions in L₂ learner’s performance in the target language and similarities between the two languages may be considered to be learning-enhancing. Differences and Similarities between the learner’s L₁ and the target language may also result in either negative or positive transfers.

Error Analysis Approach

Error Analysis, according to Amoke (2011:26) can as well be referred to as “post mortem”, “linguistic a posteri”, or “weak hypothesis”. This hypothesis proceeded from the mentalist theory of language learning which was propounded by Chomsky (1957). It holds that man has an innate endowment of Language Acquisition Device (LAD) that helps him learn through his natural ability to organize the laws of his language. This theory contends that in trying to learn a language, errors are inevitable input that adds positively to the second or target language learning. The foundation of this theory, the mentalist theory encourages and disposes language teachers to expect and accommodate errors for errors that reflect various stages in the development of the learner.

However, the above claims fault the theory of the Behaviourists, who believe that errors in second language learning are evidence and have no positive effect on language learning. The Behaviourists insist that learners do not imitate properly because language learning is better through imitation. The theory sees errors as potentially facilitative rather than inhibitive in the second language learning process.

Therefore, the reason for fixing this study in Error Analysis Framework is because it is concerned with the errors which the second language learner commits while trying to come to terms with the devices of the target language. This is made possible because Error Analysis is a process to observe, analyze and classify the deviations of the rules of the second language and then reveal the systems operated by the learner in his source language.

Across the globe, a lot of researches have been conducted in the field of errors made by learners of English as a second language and it has been shown that Verb-

form errors have contributed to the highest percentage of errors are committed by nonnative bilinguals. This shows how significant the verb is in the syntactic structures of every language. This is why poor knowledge of the verb mars students' language ability. This section of the study is, therefore, dedicated to the exploration of existing literature related to the aspects deviations from the students' writings generally.

Mbah (2011) cited in Amoke (2011:2) points out that it was Dionysius Thrax, a Greek philosopher, who, in his publication; "Techne Grammatike" popularized the concept of the parts of speech and categorized them into eight. The original parts of speech include the Onoma (Noun), Rhema (Verb), Metoche (Particle), Althorn (Article), Antonymia (Pronoun), Prothesis (Preposition), Ephirrhemia (Adverb), and Syndesmos (Conjunction). Of the eight parts of speech listed above, the verb remains the most significant in every language. There is, therefore, no gain in stating that one's knowledge of a language should among other things, include a critical diagnosis of the language's verb system. This is because the verb is the engine and essence of a language.

In a study undertaken to explore the verb-based errors encountered by some Malaysian higher institution students who have been exposed to English early in their kindergarten and primary school days, Jalaluodin (2008) cited in Amoke (2011:30) indicated that these learners' proficiency level was not satisfactory because they have not yet mastered the basic grammatical rules. He asserts that:

The quality of writing is often evaluated by the number of errors; the numerous verb-form errors made by the learner inevitably contribute to the poor quality of writing produced. Basic knowledge of grammatical rules proves to be an area of great difficulty for many students in the above study areas and so, was no exception.

From the above, it is clear that errors manifesting in students' learning process show the extent the students have gone in the process and play significant roles in the teaching and learning processes in the second language learning tasks.

Another study was carried out with the sole aim of examining and identifying errors in descriptive (nonscientific) writing of the graduate students of Singapore's Nanyang University in science and mathematics by Eliot (1983) cited in Amoke (2011:30). The results show that learners' attempt to learn the correct verb forms of the second language (L_2) became a difficult task because that is an environment where the learners had become fixated with the wrong use of the first language (L_1) and a deviant form of the L_2 in their writings right from their primary, secondary and the early years of their undergraduate school levels. The standard form of the L_2 only existed in the classroom such that the nonstandard

English produced by a majority of the population outside the class had a tremendous influence on the standard form of their L₂ production. The researcher, therefore, concluded that “in Singapore, communication in English is often achieved without the use of the grammatically correct verb forms”.

According to Eze (2005) in a study of verb-related ungrammatical sentences among senior secondary 3 students in the Nsukka education zone, the errors concerning concord of the number between the subject and the verb ranked highest, revealing that there is a relationship between gender and performance in English in the study environment, thereby concluding that school location has effects on the performances of students as those in urban areas commit less number of errors than those in rural environs.

The researcher, therefore, concluded that the “prevalent verb-related errors are on the omission of verbs, wrong words used as verbs, concord, tense and infinitive-based errors”. Other researches also confirm the influence of L₁ on the acquisition of English as a second language. The acquisition of SVA by Cantonese speakers was studied by Law (2005) cited in Amoke (2011:33). She indicates that learners show very obvious evidence of the influence of their L₁, Cantonese. It is shown, therefore, that these grammar errors related to the SVA sentence pattern included number-related types of plural/singular (11.33%), tense (31.55%), negation (4.64%) and interrogative (4.17%) making up more than 50% of the errors made. Thus, SVA is also one of the most difficult areas encountered by Cantonese learners of English.

Apart from the above instances, another research included those carried out on the mistake culminated in errors, which according to Corder (1974) and cited in Amoke (2011:21) includes minor lapses which occur in the course of language learning due to nervousness or uncertainties or when attention is divided or one is absorbed to non-linguistic activities. This could also be seen as a slip of the tongue or pen. But according to Brown (1986), mistakes are common features of the language use of both native and nonnative language users. Mistakes, for Brown, are performance errors that are either randomly guessed or a slip in that it is a failure on the part of the user to utilize a known system correctly.

The above explication further attests to the fact that mistakes could be regarded as an inconsistent deviation that the learner sometimes “gets it right” but sometimes wrong. In reality, a mistake is made by a learner when writing or speaking which is caused by lack of attention, fatigue, carelessness, or other aspects of performance. It could generally be concluded that mistakes are made by a learner largely because he does not apply the rule (s) that are available for use in

that language, which culminates in a nonsystematic deviation from the norms of the language.

The present researcher holds the opinion that both mistakes and errors are an unconscious deviation from the linguistic status quo. What differentiates them is the singular fact that the person who commits an error is ignorant of the error/s he has committed and so cannot correct himself even if a chance is given, but the person who makes a mistake has the tendency or capacity to correct himself if he notices it.

On the other hand, the concept of error refers to errors as systematic deviations from the rules guiding the use of a language. It is the flawed side of the learners' speech or writing. There are those parts of conversation or composition that deviate from some selected norms of mature language performance. Parents and teachers, who are concerned about the errors their children and students make have come to realize that making errors is an inevitable part of learning and that people cannot learn a language without first systematically committing errors (Amoke 2011:17). Chomsky (1981) in his view establishes that:

errors are faulty representations of competence caused by psychological restrictions such as memory lapse, distractions, change of direction halfway through a sentence, hesitation, etc.

The implication of Chomsky's postulation above is that native speakers also commit many errors while performing, in spite of the fact they have the competence. The present researcher stands to agree with Chomsky because an error is a reflection of the competence of the second language learner's inter-language learning shortcomings.

It is Jain (1973) cited in Enang (2020) who says that there are a system underlying learner's errors despite of their apparent arbitrariness in performance data. He observes that the native and the nonnative speaker, (now learning the target language), use a developmental process of speech reduction at one stage or the other in their learning. According to him:

The second language learners' error is important for the understanding of the processes of second language acquisition, and the planning of courses incorporating the psychology of second language learning. ...learning strategies, different training procedures, individual differences, different dispositions on the part of the teachers, learners, textbooks – all these add up to make each learning situation different from the other.

It is not an overstatement to say that error is a permanent companion of a second language learner and the second language teacher embarks on error analysis to

identify the recurrent deviations in the speech and writings of his students. This posture on the part of the second language teacher helps him to correct them. Errors should be seen as efforts to make communication effective by employing strategies in language and should therefore be exploited. Errors should not cause havoc to both the learner and the teacher for they signal the student's developmental stage in the target language learning.

Sources or Causes of Error

According to Corder (1974) cited in Amoke (2011:20), five sources of error are identifiable during language learning. These include:

- Language transfer,
- Transfer of training,
- Strategies of second language communication,
- Strategies of second language communication
- Overgeneralization of target language (TL) linguistic materials".

Language transfer is responsible for more than 1/3 of the deviant sentences constructed by second language learners. Overgeneralization which is associated with redundancy reduction covers instances where the learner creates a deviant structure based on his experience of other structures in the target language. It may be the result of the learner reducing his linguistic burden.

Ignorance of rule restriction involves the application of rules to contexts to which they do not apply; incomplete application of rules, Semantic error such as building false concepts, systems and or faulty comprehension of distinctions in the target language. The sociolinguistic situation has to do with motivation (instrumental or integrative) and the setting for learning (compound or coordinate bilingualism) may affect second language learning. Modality of exposure to the target language and modality of production can induce error. Age is another source since learning capacities vary with age etc.

Omojuwa (1979) cited in Bassey (1990:30) identifies three stages of errors as follows: (i) identification of the errors (ii) the explanation of the error (iii) planning of a strategy to eliminate them. He claims that some errors occur because the learner has not yet understood the appropriate rule which generates the error-free or correct forms of the sentences. He states that errors can be classified linguistically and psycho-linguistically. The psycho-linguistic classification, according to Omojuwa (1979) cited in Bassey (1990:30) helps the teacher to map out three categories of errors:

- *errors which the learner-maker can detect and correct himself,*
- errors which the learner cannot by himself detect but can alone*

correct, errors which the learner cannot by himself detect and cannot by himself correct

Omojuwa proposes two basic ways to eliminate the errors that are psycholinguistic, which include the following: the teacher should return the books to the students to identify the errors and correct them. The teacher marks the scripts, identifies the errors, and then returns them to the learners to correct the errors.

Other contributors to errors identification and corrections include Ngara (1983) who tries to differentiate between errors that are associated with Competence and Performance. According to Ngara, Competence Errors reflect the limit of the learner's competence in using the target language. They show the areas which the learner has not yet mastered in his second language. He states that errors can be caused by internal and external factors. Ngara further observes that in such cases, certain areas of English do not receive sufficient attention from textbook writers and teachers while some other areas are neglected. Performance, on the other hand, includes slips of the tongue, omissions, etc. These are mistakes that native speakers and competent speakers can make and do not reflect the degree to which the learner has mastered the target language.

Opata (1984) states that the errors made by undergraduates result from over-generalization, deriving from the influence of the pidgin form of the language and the ignorance of the correct usage form. He observes that good spelling is lacking in the essays of undergraduates. Opata opines that students pronounce words poorly and this results in poor spellings. He suggests that students should be exposed to error patterns by other students before the new set of students makes the same mistakes.

Anasiudu (1983) observes that researches have been carried out on the sources of errors in Nigerian English. It is a controversial issue that borders on whether the cause of these errors was intrinsic or extrinsic. The result of this controversy is that it showed that Contrastive and Error Analyses are two approaches that have a complementary function in second language pedagogy. It is now a truism that there are errors that emanate from the nature of English as a language, as well as those which emanate from extraneous influences such as the first language of the learner.

Anasiudu notes that the problem of poor performance in English is traceable to the primary schools where a poor foundation was laid. The exposure of teachers is limited, the teachers are poor models; hence the students in turn will be poor performers. Since this problem starts from primary school, the solution has to

start from there. He concludes that it is relevant to study all the factors in language teaching and learning: the teachers, the learners, the texts and the methodology.

Many other scholars have a consensus that the students are not adequately prepared for expressive language skills in English medium Universities as we have in Nigeria. From various researches carried out so far, when asked how much competence in written expression should be demanded of a student in Nigerian University, for instance, before he is allowed to graduate, they opined that it is relevant to determine through a structured test, the level of proficiency of students in English at the time they enter the university and what they show at the time of graduation Odejiele and Unoh (1987) Oluikpe (1974), Tswanya (1982), Afolanya (1984), Ofuokwu (1984), Okezie-Ugbor (1984).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This paper takes a look at A Syntax-Based Analysis of the Aspects of Deviation in the Narrative Writings of Students of the Ritman University, Ikot Ekpene: The Syntactic-Verbal Factor. It has painstakingly carried out a review of related literature on errors in language acquisition/learning and works on errors, theoretical frameworks of Contrastive Analysis and Error Analysis approach as means of sorting out similarities and the differences inherent in the students' source and target languages and accounting for the reasons behind such deviations. It was concluded that the verb factor is a major cause of this syntactic as well as the overall breakdown in the students' writings. Based on the findings, recommendations were made among others, that to overcome these shortfalls, there is the need for teachers to take time and study the errors made by their students to enhance their teaching work; study the verb-related errors in a much more comprehensive way to fill the gaps inherent in earlier studies in this direction.

It has also taken a look at the multilingual posture of Nigeria, carefully sorted out the quality of teachers and meticulously accounted for the students' performance; it has examined what constitutes the freshmen's problems in using the English language and made observations on the factors that constitute the problems of English.

It has variously been observed that there is an alarming fall in the standard of the English Language at all levels of the nation's educational system. Furthermore, mention has been made that the percentage of passes in the English language in the West African School Certificate Examination was so appalling. It is also possible to conclude, by way of contrast that what the French Language does for Nigeria and substantial agreement on the chief role of Nigerian

background languages towards the enlistment of the country among the comity of nations cannot overemphasize. It has been concluded that the varied and conflicting functions that the English language currently performs in Nigeria are at the root of the teaching and learning problems in the language. It has offered recommendations as listed below.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For there to be any significant improvement in the use of the English language by freshmen in any Nigerian higher institution and or the University, the problem has to be tackled right from the primary schools. Against this background, it is pertinent to establish a specialist post in the teaching of the English language to teachers in training in the teacher training institutions.

The government on its part and the ministries in charge of education should endeavour to supply the schools with the necessary equipment such as libraries, laboratories, audio-visual aids, regalia and other instructional materials which teachers and pupils had never physically beheld one. It is not an act of mockery to mention here that a great many of our teachers ranging from those in the primary, secondary and up to the University dons fall short and neck deep of the errors identified with the freshmen with a relief abandonment. It is a concern that teachers should check and continuously improve their command of and confidence in educated English usage. To achieve this purpose, the practicing teachers of the English language should be constantly exposed to refresher courses, Seminars Conferences and Workshops.

There should be a stop to the allocation of English language course to non-specialist teacher to teach. The Federal Government should seriously frown at this type of re-assignment to teachers by school head and where it is done, punitive measures should be taken against culprits. The government and its Ministry of Education at both State and Federal levels should make they monitor the posting of teachers of English to schools both to urban and rural schools, in order to maintain a balanced circulation of qualified teachers to schools across the country. The country is blessed with Language Development Centre which was set up by the Federal Ministry of Education to be operational within the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC). This centre should fulfil its objectives such as:

- > giving professional impetus to language teaching;
- > pioneering a new approaches and encouraging innovations to enhance effectiveness of the English language teaching;

- > developing of materials for both the English language and the various Nigerian background languages;
- > stimulating the production of supplementary or improvised reading materials for classes at all levels;
- > conducting conferences, seminars, special short courses to support the training of language specialists and teachers (Bassey, 1990:75).

This study holds a strong belief that the parents, students, teachers and the government who severally have their roles to play are by this research work seen as powerful agents that will effect a turnaround in the performance of the freshmen in our tertiary institutions. These various bodies automatically are the factors or variables whose roles, if played properly, will go a long way to reversing the negative downtrend of the errors our freshmen commit in their spoken and written use of the English language.

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