

Pronominal Errors in written English of Students of Tertiary Institutions in Ekiti State: A case of Yoruba and English Bilinguals

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Abstract

English has a predominant status as a second language in Nigeria where it is learned and used in conjunction with the mother tongue. This paper assessed the pronominal errors in written English of tertiary institution. The aims of the study were to examine the kinds of pronominal errors in the written English of the L2 learners and ascertain the extent to which the errors are made. To this end, a descriptive survey research design was employed. Three hundred (300) Yoruba-English bilingual respondents were randomly selected from three tertiary institutions in Ekiti State. They wrote essays in English which were analyzed for the occurrence of pronominal errors using the Binding Principles. One hundred and sixty sentences were discovered in which the errors occurred. The analysis revealed the errors committed by respondents to include: lack of pronoun agreement; wrong insertion of pronouns; the use of pronouns without antecedents; and others. The study also advanced possible remediation to include, among others, assisting learners to internalize the systems of the language they are learning; understand those syntactic features which do not exist in, or, differ in some respects from those of their mother tongue; and so on.

Introduction

The status of English as a second language in Nigeria, especially to the educated Nigerians is an established fact. Just as it is with many other countries of the world, English is learned and used to a great extent in addition to the MT in Nigeria (Ogunsiji, 2004). Ariyo (2004) has claimed that English serves as a medium of communication among Nigerians from different linguistic backgrounds. What we categorize as English as a second language (ESL) is the language in which a bilingual conducts his/her everyday activities but we need to know that English in this situation shares this role with another language (that is, the Mother Tongue - the language in which the bilingual has more intuitive knowledge). Thus, at this point, the fact is that the system of the MT of the bilingual would always be getting in the way of the bilingual as he/she attempts to use the second language. It is therefore, notable that ESL is marked with errors of interference.

In a second language situation, learners use two different linguistic systems alternately. Language contact arises when the same individual uses two languages alternately. Such an individual therefore, becomes the locus of the contact. An average language learner brings his/her knowledge of the mother tongue (MT) into the learning process of the second language. In an attempt to learn the second language or when he/she is faced with pressures of communication, the learner may translate the structures in his/her MT to the L2 (Lado 1959). In this kind of situation, interference occurs, since the rules, which generate correct sentences in the MT, may not always generate correct ones in the L2.

In the use of English, there is a natural awareness among educated users concerning correct and incorrect usages. Despite this awareness, many incorrect forms are used. Studies have shown that most learners, in an attempt to represent indigenous thoughts and ideas in English, naturally form ungrammatical and acceptable sentences. Scholars like, Afolayan (1968), Banjo (1996) and Akinbo (1993) have shown much concern in finding solutions to the English language problems of Nigerian learners. In fact, current interest in interlingual studies has concentrated on the inherent problems engendered by the interference of the mother tongue of the learners in the acquisition of English. This shows that tremendous efforts have been made at improving the quality of the English language acquisition and use in the L2 situation like Nigeria.

However, instead of having the problems solved there is the feeling that the situation has gone worse. It is the common feeling today that the level of performance in the language at all levels has remained low. This study is, therefore, out to identify and tackle the problems of learners with the use of the English pronouns.

Statement of the Problem

The English language is a second language to most Nigerian learners. It is observed that most second language

learners have already acquired the ‘formational rules’ or code of their mother tongue before they are exposed to the second language. In other words, they have acquired an ‘implicit’ knowledge of the mother tongue and to some degree even explicit knowledge (Corder, 1973).

Some pronominal errors still occur in the English of some learners. In L2 situations, it is observed that the features of the mother tongue of the learners usually influence their use of the second language.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To examine the kinds of pronominal errors in the written English of L2 learners.
2. To ascertain the extent to which the errors are made.

Research Questions

The study seeks to provide answers to the following research questions.

1. What kind of pronominal errors are found in the written English of students of tertiary institutions in Ekiti State?
2. Are there many pronominal errors in the written English of the subjects?

Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive survey method. The targets were to collect essays of students of three tertiary institutions in Ekiti state which were selected through purposive sampling, to detect pronominal errors in the written English of the students and to find areas in which learners of English find the use of English pronominals difficult. The population of this study consists of 300 students from the following tertiary institutions: Ekiti State University, Ado Ekiti; Federal Polytechnic, Ado Ekiti; and College of Education Ikere Ekiti.

All the subjects were Yoruba-English bilinguals, randomly selected to write essays in English. The essay questions were directly selected from past questions of the West African Examination Council (WAEC). The students were grouped into three and each group was asked to write essays on each of the following:

1. Narrate a story that ends with “It was a bitter experience but I learnt my lesson”
2. Describe what you find interesting about customs, food, dress and way of life of the people of another part of the country that you have visited.
3. Write a short story on an experience you would like to have again.

Presentation and analysis of Findings

There are 300 respondents in all. A total of 295 answer scripts were collected. Each answer script was analyzed for the occurrence of pronominal errors using the Binding Principles. Our point of interest in this study is centred on the pronominal errors found in the written English of the respondents. There were 160 sentences in which the errors occurred. The following have been selected from the 160 sentences for analysis and to identify the error types:

- Sentence (1) *When a Hausa man wants to eat, they eat with their family.*
(2) *My brother achieved her aim.*
(3) *She go to herbalist.*
(4) *I went to collect my admission letter but they did not give me.*
(5) *The man that we came together is my father*
(6) *I visited Gombe state. They love accommodating people from other tribes.*
(7) *I have a friend called Segun. We like ourselves very much.*
(8) *I introduced the man to my pastor and they loved him.*

It is observed that the above sentences exhibit some degree of ungrammaticality in relation to pronoun usage. The errors occur because some rules have been broken in each sentence. Thus, it is important to examine the types of errors according to the broken rules. It is necessary to state that the selection of the personal pronoun is dependent on the features of the antecedent in terms of number, gender and person. The rules state that when the NP is singular, the verb is singular and when the NP is plural, the verb is plural. A pronoun must agree with the gender feature of the antecedent and when an NP (especially pronoun) occurs in first, second or third person form, the verb agrees with it.

In sentence (1) *When a Hausa man wants to eat, they eat with their family*, plural pronoun *they* was made to stand for singular antecedent *a Hausa man*. This resulted in lack of number agreement between the antecedent and the pronoun. Since the antecedent *a Hausa man* is singular, it should agree with the pronoun *he* and not *they*. Thus, the error in (1) is because of lack of number agreement between the antecedent NP and its pronoun. Sentence (2) *My brother achieved her aim* broke the rule that establishes gender agreement in English sentences. Since *my brother* has the features [+ person], and [+masculine] the pronoun referring to it should agree in feature with the antecedent. The use of *her* does not show such agreement. In sentence (3) *She go to*

herbalist, it is expected that *she*, a third person singular pronoun, should be in agreement with the verb. The error in (3) is as a result of lack of subject – verb agreement.

In sentence (4) *I went to collect my admission letter but they did not give me, they* (like *awon* in Yoruba) was used to stand for indefinite person or group of people. *They* in this sentence is lexically empty as it has no antecedent. The clause in which *they* occurred could be passivized in order to avoid such error:

- 1a. I went to collect my admission letter but I was not given
- b. I went to collect my admission letter but it was not given to me.

The rule of passivization applies here as follows:

Clause 2 in (1a): passive: I was not given me
 NP AGR Tns neg be-en

Clause 2 in (1b): passive: It was not given to me
 NP AGR Tns neg be-en pp

Sentence (5) *The man that we came together is my father* is considered ungrammatical because it broke the rule associated with relative usage. It should be noted that for sentence (5) to be grammatical the choice of element and their arrangement ought to be considered. The sentence may be derived as follows:

- 2. The man who came with me is my father.

The man (the man came with me) is my father
 NP NP2

The above process is followed by WH- attachment to the second NP. The relative pronoun to be selected is determined by the features of the NP. This means that for heads that are [+Human] *who* is appropriate and for heads that are [- Human] *which* is appropriate. Relative *that* can also be appropriate since it has the features applicable to [+ Human] and [- Human]. Sentence (5) may also be derived as:

- 3. The man with whom I came is my father

The relative clause is introduced by the preposition *with* which is used as part of a prepositional verb. Without this, the meaning intended changes in the deep structure.

They in sentence (6a) *I visited Gombe state.* (6b) *They love seeing other people from other tribes* was intended to refer to the people of Gombe state and not the state. The use of *the* therefore has rendered the intended meaning of the structure unclear. This is because of the use of pronoun without antecedent or inaccurate reference. *They* could refer to the people of Gombe state or people elsewhere. To avoid the error, sentence (6b) could be realized as follows:

- (4) *The people love seeing people from other tribes.*

In sentence (7) *I have a friend called Segun. We like ourselves very much,* the intended pronoun was a reciprocal pronoun *each other* which is used when the action expressed by the verb are shared. Reciprocal structures are somewhat similar to a reflexive but they are different in their semantic roles within sentences. A reflexive is used where there are two co-referential NPs in a structure. The second NP becomes a reflexive. The action in such structure is effected only by the same NP with which the reflexive is co-referential. In the case of reciprocal pronoun, when the action of the verb is shared by two antecedents, *each other* is used but where more than two are involved *one another* is often appropriate.

In sentence (8) *I introduced the man to my pastor and they loved him, they* refers to *my pastor*. This does not conform to the rule that says that pronouns must agree with their antecedents in number.

Table 1: The Frequency of Occurrence of Error Types.

Error Types	Instances
Lack of pronoun agreement	56
Wrong insertion of pronouns	19
The use of pronouns without antecedents or accurate references	36
The use of reflexives in place of reciprocals	25
The use of honorific pronouns	11
Problems with the use of relative pronouns.	13

Thus, from the above analysis, the problems posed for Yoruba English bilingual shall be discussed under the following:

Discussion

Lack of Pronoun Agreement

From the findings, it was discovered that one of the learners' problems is in pronoun agreement. There are 56 instances of this error. From the analysis, it was observed that there were more occurrences of this error type than any other in the scripts analyzed for this study.

Pronoun agreement has to do with number agreement, subject/ verb agreement and gender agreement. Observation from the essays of the students involved in this study shows that some of the learners did not

observe number agreement between the NPs and the pronouns that substitute them. This type of error is common in embedded sentences where the NP of the matrix sentence is in the plural. It appears that learners did not always remember number in the anaphoric pronoun where the pronoun should be the same as the antecedent NP in terms of number.

In Yoruba, there is number distinction in pronouns and this follows simple process in simple sentences but in embedded sentences, process is more complicated.

Wrong Insertion of Pronouns and Relativization Error

The cases of wrong insertion of pronouns mostly resulted from incorrect arrangement of words in sentences, passivization and relativization errors. There are sometimes the cases of transfer of pronoun “*awon/won*” in Yoruba into English “*they*”. In the observation of Ojetunde (2013), this type of deviation is used by Nigerian users of English to mean somebody or an indefinite group of people in a context. There are 19 instances of wrong insertion of pronoun while there are 13 instances of problem with use of relative pronouns.

The use of Pronouns without Antecedents or Accurate Reference

It is expected that the antecedents of all pronouns be clearly expressed. However, in sentence (6) *I visited Gombe state they love seeing people from other tribes*, there was the use of pronouns without antecedents, which made the ideas expressed not clear enough. In some cases, there were inaccurate references.

The use of pronouns without antecedents in sentence (6) may cause the reader to pause and ponder on what the pronouns may be referring to. This slows down reading, creates ambiguity and may lead to ungrammaticality. However, it is possible to deduce the meaning intended because the verbs used suggest the possible antecedents. For instance, in the sentence *they* can only be referring to *the people of Gombe* and not *the State*. *The State* cannot *love* but *the people* can. Despite the fact that the NPs for which the pronoun stands can be deduced, it is always better to avoid such usage in good writing or speech in order to avoid confusion and ungrammaticality. Passive construction may be employed. There are 36 instances of this error type.

The Use of Reflexive Pronouns In Place Of Reciprocal Pronouns

There are 25 instances of wrong usage of reflexive pronouns. This problem could be attributed to direct linguistic transfer. In Yoruba, only one reflexive pronoun *araawon* is used to express three types of actions for which English uses three separate pronouns. This explains the reason for the errors found in sentence (7). In the sentence, *ourselves* is used as *araawa* is used in the Yoruba structure expressing the same idea:

7. Mo ni ore kan ti a n pe ni Segun. A feran araawa

This is usually transferred directly into English thereby causing error. Note that in Yoruba reflexives such as *araawon*, *araawa* and *araayin* are used as reciprocals (*each other* and *one another*) used in English. This type of deviant use of pronoun has also been observed by Raji (2012) and Ojetunde (2013).

The Use of Honorific Pronouns

In Yoruba speech, some plural forms of pronouns are used to show politeness or respect for a single person like one's boss or an elderly person. Most of the time, this is transferred into English. Thus, some ungrammatical sentences are produced. This is accountable for the error found in sentence (8) *I introduced the man to my pastor and they like him*. *They*, in the sentence, was used to refer to *my pastor*. This error is due to cultural differences. In Yoruba culture, politeness and respect for elder are held in high esteem. To express these virtues a Yoruba person uses the pronoun plural forms such as *e*, *won*, *awon*, *eyin*, *yin* (Raji, 2012). This is not done in English. This has been observed in sentence (8). There are 11 instances of the error.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has dealt with some pronominal errors made by most Yoruba-English bilinguals as they use English. This has been primarily undertaken because of some observed wrong usages of English pronouns, which has always caused grammatical errors, confusion, ambiguity and complete alternation of intended meanings of utterances by learners.

As pointed out in this study, the errors occur primarily because of overgeneralization of rules; direct linguistic transfer of some features of the mother tongue to the second language; discourse problem, which usually occurs when some thoughts peculiar to the bilingual's culture is externalized in the L2, as in the case of the honorific use of some plural pronouns; and inappropriateness caused by wrong insertion of pronouns in sentences.

From the analysis of the data, it has been discovered that the kinds of pronominal error made by the subjects are:

- Lack of pronoun agreement
- Wrong insertion of pronouns

- The use of pronouns without antecedents or accurate reference
- The use of reflexives in place of reciprocal
- The use of honorific pronouns
- Problems with the use of relative pronouns.

In case of English and Yoruba, Omoniyi (2004) points out that there is rarely any point of convergence between syntactic structures of the two languages. Such structural differences normally lead to interference. One major cause of interference is interlingual identification whereby the bilingual equates separate elements of the two languages in contact. It is also important to note that problems are caused for the learners when they come across some patterns that make the differences between the L1 and L2.

In order to solve the problems that have been identified in this study so far, there is the need to give more attention to how L2 learners could be helped do the following

1. Internalized the systems of the languages they are learning
2. Understand those syntactic features which do not exist in or differ in some respects from those of their mother tongue.
3. Understand the distribution, forms and use of pronominals in English language and the mother tongue.
4. Get familiar with the words that are pronouns in the L2 and study the examples of their users.
5. Understand the points of inconsistency in the use of pronominals in the L2. For instance the use of *You*, there is no gender, person nor case distinction as there is in the use of other personal pronouns.
6. Avoid overgeneralization of rules.
7. Understand the syntactic ordering in the language.
8. Disengage from the subject of the L1 while using the L2.
9. Understand those linguistic features of the L2 that have been domesticated and acceptable in context of the learner's speech community.

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