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CONCORD ERRORS IN POSTGRADUATES' DISSERTATIONS AND THESES



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ABSTRACT

The concept 'concord', which signifies agreement between the different elements that are used in a sentence, has been extensively discussed by scholars. It has usually been assumed that concord only poses problems for secondary school students and undergraduate students in tertiary institutions. Postgraduate students are thought to be immune to this problem. This paper examined the dissertations of eight postgraduate students in Linguistics Department, University of Ibadan with the aim of either substantiating or debunking this claim. Forty-six sentences are extracted from five master's projects, one M.Phil dissertation and two Ph.D theses. The basic concept of Error Analysis which is a key element of the systemic grammar formed the theoretical basis of this work. Grammatical errors as a result of poor mastery of the rules of concord are responsible for these forty-six faulty constructions. These errors could broadly be classified into two – grammatical and notional. Most of them result from lack of agreement between the subject and verb, pronouns and antecedents, demonstratives and nouns, articles and nouns, the use of the copula 'is' and the auxiliary 'have' which do not agree with the subjects of the sentences in which they are used. Postgraduate students are not immune to the problem of concord. Thus, the researcher recommends that the teaching of the General Studies Programme 'Use of English' at the undergraduate level should be intensified and that a similar course should be introduced at the postgraduate level to complement what is taught at the undergraduate level to improve the quality of the use of English of undergraduate and graduate students.

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Contribution/ Originality

This study contributes to the existing literature on the rules of concord. It is the first of its kind that demonstrates practically the problems postgraduate students face in their attempt to observe the rules of concord. It also explains how these problems could be overcome by students in their writings.

1. INTRODUCTION

The English language occupies a very important position in the linguistic terrain of Nigeria. It is the official language of the country, the language of education, commerce, the media and the judiciary. Its role as a lingua franca, which makes communication possible among the over 450 ethnic groups (with over 500 distinct languages), is indisputable. Its role in education, as the medium of instruction, from the primary to the university level of education,

as well as its being taught as a subject at all levels of education makes it an important subject of research to scholars. In fact, it is often said that “if you want to get ahead in Nigeria, get an English head.” With all these important roles played by English, one would expect a good mastery of the language by every Nigerian. However, its falling standard has been a subject of concern to scholars. Some of the scholars who have expressed their concerns along this line are: [Banjo \(1971\)](#); [Bamgbose \(1982\)](#); [Adesanoye Festus \(2004\)](#) and [Jowit \(1991\)](#) to mention just a few. The consensus assertion is the fact that the standard of the English language is progressively dwindling among Nigerians and there is an urgent need to remedy the situation. Our intention in this paper is therefore to identify one of the problem areas in the use of English in Nigerian universities and suggest ways by which the situation could be remedied.

Concord is one of the basic rules which a user of the English language, either as a first or second language must acquire or learn as the case may be. Its centrality to a good mastery of the English language has been underscored by scholars over the years. Some of these scholars are, [Babajide \(1996\)](#); [Ogunsiji and Sunday \(2005\)](#); [Afe and Afe \(2002\)](#) and [Tomori \(1977\)](#) to mention just a few. As a result of its technicality, it presents a serious problem to speakers and writers alike. The high failure rate of students in English Language in crucial examinations like The West African Examination Council (WAEC), General Certificate of Education (GCE) and National Examination Council (NECO) has been attributed to the poor mastery of the rules of concord, tense and aspect in English, along with other problems. To a great extent, we can say the same thing about the poor performance of students in Use of English, a course in General Studies (at the university level). Moreso, a lot of educational activities are tied to the use of English. This makes it expedient for students at all levels of education, particularly at the tertiary level to master its basics for effective use. Experience has also shown that students’ problem with their long essays, variously called project, dissertation and thesis at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels of University education can be traced to the poor mastery of the rules of concord.

It is assumed that postgraduate students must have attained a high level of competence and mastery of the English Language and so should be immune to concord errors due to a long period of exposure to the language from pre-primary to the university level of education. However, a general observation, suggests that the majority of these postgraduate students still have great difficulties with the rules of concord in English. The fact that considerable efforts have been put into research on English as a Second Language (ESL) in Nigeria is incontrovertible. However, in spite of this, students at the university level, including the postgraduate ones, still commit unpardonable errors. This problem has often led to poor grading of their dissertations and theses by their supervisors. There is a great need to remedy this situation. In this paper, an attempt is made to suggest ways through which the problem could be surmounted.

This paper underscores this point and emphasises that more efforts should be devoted to the teaching of Use of English in Universities. This should not only be limited to the undergraduate level; it should also be introduced at the postgraduate level. This paper shows clearly that even at the postgraduate level, the majority of students still battle with the problem of concord.

The present study was designed to diagnose and investigate the errors of concord that are commonly found in the long essays of postgraduate students in order to suggest answers to the following: (i) What are the common areas of concord in which students have difficulties (ii) Whether such errors are consistent in the writings of students, and (iii) What could be done to remedy the situation. [Dulay and Burt \(1974\)](#) assert that ‘the making of errors is unavoidable and it is not possible for learners to learn without goofing.’ According to them, teachers need to know the recurrent errors in learners work and address them year after year with different groups of learners. It is very doubtful if the majority of teachers are doing this. This observation (the need to identify learners errors and offer remedial learning) motivated our present investigation.

The theoretical framework used for this work is error analysis. Error analysis is the systematic interpretation of the unacceptable forms used by someone learning a language. This approach plays a central role in the cognitive

dimension of language learning. According to the principle, errors are likely to emerge when learners make the wrong deductions about the nature of the L₂, such as assuming that a pattern is general, when in fact, there are exceptions. Many errors are explicable or analysable in terms of overgeneralisation within the L₂, many are traceable to improper training methods. Such errors provide positive evidence about the nature of the learning process, as a learner gradually works out what the L₂ is. While some scholars see Contrastive Analysis (C.A.) as a necessary component of error analysis; do not see CA and error analysis as merely complementary. According to him, there are two kinds of CA, a predictive variety typified by classical CA, and a diagnostic variety which is used in the analysis of students' errors.

Since the 1970s, cognitive approaches to second language learning have been on the increase, and error analysis, in particular, has attracted a great deal of attention. Some errors are due to the influence of the mother tongue, as contrastive analysis claims. Some come from external influences, such as inadequate teaching or instructional materials (Lado, 1954). A close observation reveals that the errors identified in this paper could be traced to both sources.

Our data for this study consist of forty-six (46) faulty expressions extracted from dissertations and theses of eight postgraduate students, five of whom are Masters students, one M.Phil student and two Ph.D students. These students were allocated to the researcher for supervision in the 2012/2013 academic session in the Department of Linguistics and African Languages, University of Ibadan, Nigeria. This research is purely an academic exercise, the ultimate goal of which is not to condemn the students involved, but to point the attention of teachers, especially at the postgraduate level of education in Nigeria as a nation, as well as Anglophone Africa to the fact that students still battle with the problem of concord, and the need to introduce a remedial course at the postgraduate level.

For this purpose, the errors involved are categorised into six major groups. These are:

- (1) Errors associated with subject verb concord.
- (2) Errors associated with compound subjects.
- (3) Errors associated with auxiliary verbs 'has' and 'have
- (4) Errors associated with the copula 'is'.
- (5) Errors associated with specific figures and numbers.
- (6) Errors associated with pronouns and their antecedents.

The faulty expressions are asterisked to indicate that they are not grammatical. The researcher discusses each sentence by explaining what makes it ungrammatical and then proposes the correct form each of them should take.

1.1. Data Presentation/Analysis

According to Oriaku (2006) concord problem usually arises as a result of complex constructions in which the subjects and the verbs do not follow each other directly in a straightforward manner. This happens when the subject is separated from the verb by an intervening phrase or clause and one mistakenly makes the verb to agree with the noun in the intervening phrase or clause. This is very true. However, as will be shown in our data, students also have problem with simple constructions in which the subjects and the verbs follow each other. Let us now look at the data below. An asterisk is put before each faulty sentence to signify its ungrammaticality; then the problem is identified and the correct form of the expression is proposed.

(A) Errors Associated with Subject Verb Concord

The rule stipulates that a singular subject should select a singular verb, while a plural subject takes a plural verb. Students mistakenly pair singular subjects with plural verbs or vice versa.

Let us look at the following data:

- (1) *The Hausa language belong to the Chadic language family.

- (2) *The Yoruba language happen to be a non-indigenous language in the society.
- (3) *Ferguson (1975) suggest a series of societal language choice questions.
- (4) *Linguistic variation manifest across levels.
- (5) *The first message point to the target population.
- (6) *The message work on the reader's psychology.

Every sentence in the examples mentioned above contains a singular subject and should attract a singular verb e.g. belongs, happens, suggests, manifests, points and works, but the students selected their plural counterparts instead.

- (7) *Some other languages exhibits SOV word order.
- (8) *Children acquires their first language while they learn the subsequent ones.
- (9) *Features which relates to interference are noted.
- (10) *Their attitudes towards language reflects their opinion.
- (11) *The interlocutors makes use of utterances that are straightforward.
- (12) *Tag switches involves the use of tags as exclamatory elements.
- (13) *Our male respondents speaks Yoruba fluently.
- (14) *People from far and near always pays tribute to the Oba.
- (15) *The present day Benin East and West corresponds to it.
- (16) *The speakers of the language hears and understands it clearly.
- (17) *The circumstances that gives rise to communication are paramount.
- (18) *Traders sells some varieties of goods there.
- (19) *Respects begets respect.
- (20) *The social contexts determines the kind of language that is used.
- (21) *Their responses show that the message is quite effective.
- (22) *Some people that hawks are there.

A look at examples 7 – 22 shows that the subjects are plural, so the plural forms of the verbs e.g. exhibit, acquire, relate, reflect, make, involve, speak, pay, correspond, hear/understand, give, sell, beget, determine, show and hawk should have been selected, but the students selected their singular counterparts.

(B) Errors Associated With Compound Subjects

In the selected examples, the students use singular verbs with compound subjects instead of selecting plural verbs to agree with compound subjects. Let us examine the examples:

- (23) *Dadzie and Awoniyi (2004) presents two types of schools.
- (24) Owolabi and Dada (2012) gives a comprehensive report on the language situation in Nigeria.
- (25) *Igboanusi and Wolf (2009) posits that the marriage institution is an important agent of socialisation.
- (26) *Beever and Zeevat (2004) makes a distinction between semantic and pragmatic presuppositions.

Examples 23 – 26 have compound subjects and should normally attract plural verbs e.g. present, give, posit and make; but the students selected their singular counterparts instead.

(C) Errors Associated with the Auxilliary verbs has and have

The form has is singular while have is plural. Concord rule demands that when we are dealing with singular subjects, has should be selected, while have should go with plural subjects. The students however violated this rule.

Examples:

- (27) *The efforts made on such provision has faced strong objections.
- (28) *Yoruba and Hausa has mutual effect on each other.

- (29) *Many linguistic innovations has taken place.
(30) *Bamgbose (2004) confessed that he himself have found out that he codemixes.
(31) *Ikotun market have some well laid out shops.

Examples 27 – 29 have plural subjects, so they should have attracted have which is the plural form, but the students selected has instead. Examples 30 and 31 have singular subjects, so they should have attracted has, but the students selected have.

(D) Errors Associated with the Copula is

The copula 'is' has 'are' as its plural counterpart, so when singular objects are involved, is should be selected, while plural subjects should attract are but this rule is violated by students.

Examples:

- (32) *The two major languages of this research is Hausa and Yoruba.
(33) *The objectives of this research is to highlight the effect of code mixing on language competence and discuss them.
(34) *Various scholarly works which is in line with this research are reviewed.
(35) *Intersentential switches is referred to as code mixing.
(36) *Their children is involved in conversation.
(37) *English and Yoruba is the most preferred codes.
(38) *The children's mother tongues is not well used.

In examples 32 – 38, plural objects are involved, so the plural form are should have been selected but the students selected the singular form is instead.

(E) Errors Associated with Specific Figures and Numbers

When specific numbers and figures are mentioned, the nouns that follow should agree with the numbers and figures, whether singular or plural.

Examples:

- (39) *This is a situation in which an individual or a society makes use of two or more language.
(40) *This is one behaviours that violates the identified pattern.
(41) *The mother tongue of the child should be used for the first three year of education.
(42) *English should be used in the last three year of primary education.

Examples 39 – 42 involve specific figures and numbers.

- 'Two or more language' should read 'two or more languages'.
- 'One behaviours' should read 'one behaviour.'
- 'The first three year' should read 'the first three years.'

(F) Errors Associated with Pronouns and their Antecedents

- (43) *Of paramount interest are these lexical innovations and its processes.
(44) *Nigerian Hip Hop musicians have adopted this lexical innovations.
(45) *These were meant to keep the girls in chastity, purity and obedience to her parents.
(46) *None of them speak Ebira.

43 above has lexical innovations as the antecedent of the pronoun its. It is wrong in that context because it is singular since the antecedent is plural, their should have been selected to read "Of paramount interest are these lexical innovations and their processes.

In 44, 'lexical innovations' serves as the antecedent of 'this'. The plural 'these' should have been selected to read:

"Nigerian Hip Hop musicians have adopted these lexical innovations."

The pronoun 'her' in 45 has 'the girls' (which is plural) as its antecedent, therefore, 'their' should have been selected to read:

"These were meant to keep the girls in chastity, purity and obedience to their parents."

46 has 'none' (an indefinite pronoun) as the subject of the verb 'speak'. The rule says an indefinite pronoun should select a singular verb, thus 'speaks' should have been selected to read:

"None of them speaks (Ebira).

2. DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION

The fact that the errors highlighted above are committed by postgraduate students is worrisome. This is because postgraduate students are expected to have mastered the rules of concord at this level. The fact that some of these errors are committed by postgraduate students, most of whom are lecturers and teachers of the English language/literature at different levels of education, is a big shocker. What then is the implication of these facts? The simple implication is that the standard of English Language is falling at an alarming rate and this calls for an urgent action to remedy the situation. Teachers of Use of English at the university level should therefore intensify their teachings. They should devote more time to the teaching of the basic rules that guide correct use of English language. The findings of this study suggest certain crucial areas that should be addressed in order to help students overcome some of the concord errors found in their dissertations and theses. One, recurrent errors should be identified and distinguished from mistakes. Two, students and teachers should familiarise themselves with these errors and adopt appropriate remedial methods to correct them while involving the learners too in self-error correction activities. Three, assumptions of what learners had learnt in their previous learning years should be ascertained before building on them. Revisiting what has been assumed to have been taught may be necessary even at the postgraduate level.

Corder (1974) advised that we should be aware that different types of written material may produce different distribution of error or different set of error types and that the recognition of error depends crucially upon the analyst making a correct interpretation of the learners intended meaning of the context. Myles (2002) explains that feedback is of utmost importance to the writing process without individual attention and sufficient feedback on errors, improvement will not take place. Teachers must accept the fact that ESL writing contains errors; it is their responsibility to help students to develop strategies for self correction.

Another recommendation which may sound embarrassing to some is that a similar course (Use of English) should be introduced at the postgraduate level, maybe, 'GES 701' and this course should be compulsory for all the different faculties in Nigerian universities and without at least a pass in it, no student should be awarded a postgraduate certificate. Furthermore, experienced teachers should be allowed to teach the course to ensure effectiveness. Students (undergraduate and postgraduate) at their own end should pay serious attention to their use of the English language. They should make diligent efforts to master the rules that matter in concord. Details of these rules could be obtained in the cited references and related others. Concord is a topic better dealt with in practice. Although there are several materials on the rules of concord, writing itself can only be mastered by writing. You learn to write well by writing.

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