

OVERT WRITTEN GRAMMATICAL ERRORS OF SOME UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS AS A REFLECTION OF WRITING ON SOCIAL NETWORKS

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Abstract

The paper aims at analyzing some overt written grammatical errors identified in examinations scripts of some undergraduate students of three universities in Katsina State and to compare the errors with those found in written communications on social networks. The data for the research were purposively obtained from examinations scripts of students from the three universities and two social networks: whatsapp and Facebook. The data were analysed qualitatively by means of description. The study is underpinned by Herring's (2004) Computer Mediated Discourse Analysis Framework and Transfer Theory of Contrastive Analysis. The common and prominent grammatical errors identified are omission of grammatical units or vital sentence elements, use wrong verb forms, disregarding rules of concord, writing ambiguous expressions, writing interrogative sentences inform of declarative sentence, combining personal pronouns with their antecedent in the same phrase and combining auxiliary verb express ability in the same phrase in both data obtained from examination scripts and data obtained from social networks. These identified errors revealed that all the grammatical problems found in the students' examination scripts studied reflect the common grammatical errors found in written interactions on social network. This is not surprising because language is best learnt or acquired through interaction and these days social networks serve as a easy means of interaction. Furthermore, in the area covered by this study, social media interaction on social media is mostly in English.

Key word: Grammatical errors, interaction, social networks, whatsapp, facebook, Computer Mediated Discourse Analysis /Transfer theory

Introduction

An important obvious development in the last century was the proliferation of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). In fact ICT has found its way into all aspects of human endeavour. One of the contributions of ICT is that it has brought digital means of communication through text messages, emails, social media etc. These electronic means are easily accessible and affordable. In fact their use is pervasive as it seems to have dominated the functions of the print media, such as greeting cards invitation card, advertisement bill boards, political campaign posters etc. The pervasive use of ICT has attracted the attention of many researchers in the fields of Communication, Sociology, Psychology, Education, Linguistics etc. Hence, several studies investigating different aspects of ICT have been carried out. It is obvious that most of these modern means of communication allow users to express their thought in written form. This attracted many scholars in the field of Applied Linguistics as well as communications via the ICT.

Given the fact that ICT has become part and parcel of life, there is the need to study all aspects relating to it. Social Networks is one of the gifts of ICT. Social networks have important role to play in education in general and specifically language learning. The issue of concern however, is how youths use the sites. Furthermore, there is an outcry by stakeholder that academic performance of students, especially languages kills, is affected by indiscriminate use of social media. Thus, this study examines the influence of the grammatical features of writing on social networks on grammatical use in formal writing of students in English which is the medium of instruction and a core subject in Nigeria's Education.

Methodology

The research adopts qualitative design to describe the grammatical structure of writing on social networks and grammatical errors in examination scripts. The data of the research were purposively obtained whatsapp and facebook and also examinations script of students of the three universities in Katsina State, Nigeria

namely: Umaru Musa Yar'adua University, Katsina; Federal University Dutsinma, Katsina State and Al-kalam University, Katsina..

Literature Review.

Barnett (2011) traces the development of Social networking to 1971, when the first email 'qwertyuiop' was sent via two computers which were next to one other. He adds that there are 'Bulletin Board System' (BBS) followed later in 1978. This system was the first internet enabled for interaction. He again adds that Usenet was founded in the same year by Jim Ellis & Tom Truscott for posting news, articles and funny posts. 'Geocities' was created in 1994 and in 1995 the 'Globe.com' was made available for public use especially people who have common hobbies and interests. Similarly, in 1997 'AOL Instant Messenger' and 'SixDegrees.com' were launched. Several other social networking sites such as 'Classmates', 'Friendzy', 'Hi-5', 'AsianAvenue', 'BlackPlanet' followed. MiGente.com for Hispanic servers was however lunched in 2000. By 2003 Social Networking was in full force with the lurching of Friendster, MySpace and LinkedIn. The approach of LinkedIn is more professional and business in nature.

A study by Uhumwagho (2009) investigated whether the type of English used in text messaging is a variety of English language in Nigeria. He studied some text message sent and received by some students and teachers in Nigeria. He concluded that the type of language used in sending text messages typically reflects a variety of the English in Nigeria. He expressed the view that the issue of concern is the context

and situation that determine when and how to use the form of the language.

In another research on the features of text messages sent and received by students in Nigeria, Egbe and Ekpe (2009) describe text messages as "digital literacy", characterised by deviation from conventional writing. They maintain that text messages are used for all purposes except "for very formal correspondences which may require headed paper" (p. 39). They also claim that they discover peculiar spellings used in text messages while marking essays in Senior Secondary School Certificate Examination of West African Examination Council and National Examination Council. They therefore called on ESL teachers to pay attention to this new variety of English in Nigeria with a view to considering context and situation in language use. This view is in concurrence with the opinion of Uduk (2009) in which he claims that students now use this type of language in assignments, test, examinations etc. He further claims that teachers have been complaining that ICT seems to be negatively influencing students' thought, speech and writing. He thus, draws the attention of English teachers in Nigeria to this phenomenon.

All the researches above claim, but have not provided any empirical evidence or analysis of students' use this type of language in formal settings. This is essential if students, especially in ESL situation are to be helped. Furthermore, while their subjects are secondary school students, the subjects for this research are undergraduate students.

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

Table 1 **Grammatical Features of Writing on Social Networks**

S/No	Sample	Probable Correct Version
1	Good NUC <u>approve</u> 21 Part-Time <u>degree</u> for BUK.	Good news! NUC has approved 21 part-time degree courses for BUK.
2	Infact, <u>am</u> more touched <u>where SHE said she could have been my wife if not that am</u> already baba Ali	In fact, I was more touched when she said that she could have been my wife if I had not already been baba Ali.
3	I <u>can't see</u> why members of <u>that classes</u> be <u>excluded organisation made up of</u> old boys.	I see no reason why members of that class will be excluded from the organization of the old boys.
4	How much <u>did your father got</u> as his retirement benefit	How much did your father get as his retirement benefit?
5	But like I said <u>can</u> be used for judgement	But like I said, it can be used for judgment.
6	<u>My wife she has deliver</u> a bouncing baby Boy,	My wife has been delivered from a bouncing baby boy.

	mother and baby <u>in</u> good health	Both the mother and the baby are in good health.
7	No wonder nowadays <u>always</u> <u>complained</u> stomach upset	No wonder! Nowadays always complain about stomach upset.
8	<u>it my pleasure to a</u> member of this group	It is my pleasure to be a member of this group.
9	<u>can not be able</u> to come	cannot come or will not be able to come.
10	neither me nor <u>ibrahim</u> <u>in</u> hostel ystday	Neither I nor Ibrahim was in hostel yesterday.

Table 2 Grammatical Errors from Students' Examination Scripts

SN	Sample	Probable Correct Version
1	The politics should be study scientifically	The politics should be studied scientifically.
2	According to malan aminu Kano hi sai that is a man management o come From Greek word Political science is a system oF government which is a process oF government of According to kas moc his sai that system oF government in the countries today.	According to Malam Aminu Kano man management originates from Greek word. Political Science is a system of government which is a process of government. According to Kas Moc that is the system of government in some countries today.
3	Behaviourism is an approaches which deal with attitude of man.	Behaviourism is an approach which deals with attitude of man.
4	I do not forgetted	I did not forget.
5	he was get another wife	he got another wife.
6	Am here in other to write	I am here in order to write
7	Ramatulaye she write a letter to her friend	Ramatulaye wrote a letter to her friend
8	So many rural area has be transformed	So many rural areas have been transformed
9	if these chemicals are not properly used, can cause law yield	if these chemicals are not properly used, they can cause law yield
10	Arugungu fishing festivals that taking place yearly	Arugungu fishing festival that takes place annually

DISCUSSION

This discussion will be in two broad heading: Grammatical Problems of Writing on Social Networks and Grammatical Problems in Students' Examination Scripts. Under each of the broad headings, there are subheadings as follows:

Grammatical Problems of Writing on Social Networks

The data obtained from social networks are discussed below under different subheadings:

Use of Sentence Fragments

Under this category the first sample to be discussed is: *Good NUC approve 21 Part-Time degree for BUK*. Its serial number is 1. In this construction, there are omissions of sentence elements and concord. It seems the writer was trying to say *Good news! NUC has approved 21 part-time degree courses for BUK*. The later sentence compared with the former, shows that there are a lot of issues that made the former ungrammatical. In the first instance *news* which

is the noun to be modified by *good* was omitted. Then, present perfect tense should have been used but simple present tense was used. Even the simple present tense was not used correctly because the verb *approve* ought to have taken an *s* since its subject *NUC* is a third person singular.

Our next sample of consideration is: *Infact, am more touched where SHE said she could have been my wife if not that am already baba Ali*. It is number 2 in the list. The expression is a complex sentence comprising three clauses. The first clause is a main clause while the second and third are subordinate clauses. As can be seen from the expression, the subject of the verb *am* in the main clause and the second subordinate clause, which should have been the personal pronoun *I* are omitted. This is a clear demonstration of writing sentence fragments in communications via social networks. The clauses are incomplete because in English at least a verb and a subject are required

to make a complete sentence. Apart from subject omission in the second subordinate clause, the clause was not properly constructed. It was supposed to have taken this form *if I had not already been baba Ali* or *had I not already been baba Ali*.

Table 1 also provides us with a sample whose serial number is 5. It reads thus: *But like I said can be used for judgment*. The sample began with a conjunction. It was a response made by a participant in a continuous chat. It was purposely sampled out to show where a subject is completely omitted in a sentence or clause. This has made the clause ambiguous. As can be seen, the subject of the verb in this clause (*can be used*) was omitted. Hence, *what can be used for judgment is not known* since the sentence is grammatically incomplete. Another expression with grammatical problem is serial number 8 which is: *it my pleasure to a member of this group*. In this sentence, two linking verbs have been omitted. In the first instance *is* which was required after *it* was omitted. The second omission case happened after *to* where *be* was required to make the sentence grammatically complete.

Lack of Concord

This is a very common feature of language use identified in the data for this research. A number of issues are identified from many samples like the one whose serial number is 3. The sample is: *I can't see why members of that classes be excluded organisation made up of old boys*. It is not clear whether this construction is a simple or compound or complex sentence. However it seems to be a simple sentence whose direct object is a very long noun clause. That is to say *why members of that classes be excluded organisation made up of old boys* is a noun clause and object of the verb *see*. The first noticeable feature of this sentence is that there is no concord between *that* and *classes*. That is to say *that* is demonstrative denoting singularity but *classes* is a plural noun. The question therefore is: was the writer referring to single class or more than one classes. Again using *be* only as the verb in this clause has further confused everything about the tense used. Was the writer trying to say that *members were already excluded* or that *they would be excluded*. Still in the sentence, omission

of prepositions is another issue noticed. As can be seen, a preposition, probably *from* is required after *excluded* but it was omitted.

Again sample number 7 in table 1 further illustrates concord problem. This sample is: *No wonder nowadays we always complained stomach upset*. The sample illustrates a kind of concord problem which aroused as a result of misuse of a verb form. This sample seems to be in simple present tense because *nowadays* and *always* have been used. These are adverbs which denote that an action is habitual. But the verb *complained* was used in its past form. In this regard there is no agreement between the verb form written and the adverbs written.

Another sample to be discussed under this category is: *neither me nor ibrahim in hostel ystday*. It is number 10 in the list. This sample demonstrates lack of concord between a compound subject and its verb. It is clear that when *either –or* or *neither – no* are used, the verb should conform to the number or case or gender of the last noun. In this case the last noun, Ibrahim is singular. As such the verb was supposed to be singular. But erroneously a verb denoting plural subject *were* was used instead of *was*.

Use of Wrong Verb form

Closely related to concord issue is use of wrong verb form. The following sample typically shows that feature: *How much did your father got as his retirement benefit*. It is number 4 in the list. The construction seems to be an interrogative simple sentence after which there was no question marks. The single obvious grammatical problem with this sentence is misuse of verb form. In this sentence, instead of using the past form of the auxiliary verb *do*, (*did*) only, both the main verb *get* and the auxiliary verb *do* have been used in their past forms.

Tautology

Another interesting discovery was made from the sample which reads: *My wife she has deliver a bouncing baby Boy, mother and baby in good health*. Its serial number is 6. It is one of the posts that combines all the variables we are investigating. This expression can be seen as a compound sentence conjoined by *and* after *boy*. It can also be taken as two simple sentences separated by a full-stop after *boy*. In any case, the

comma placed after *boy* is inappropriate. The correct version ought to be: *My wife has been delivered of a baby boy: both mother and baby are in good health.* The unique feature revealed by the first part of this expression is use of a personal pronoun along with its antecedent. Here, instead of writing only *my wife* as a noun phrase as the subject in this construction both *my wife* and *she* have been written. Furthermore, use of wrong verb form can be noted in this expression. The tense used was present perfect. In this case since the main verb *deliver* is a regular one, it needs to take *ed* at its end to make the past participle form of it (*delivered*). The verb however remained in its present form. In the second part of the expression problems of omissions have been identified. To be candid, a determiner, probably *both* is required before *mother*. Similarly a linking verb probably *are* is needed after *baby*. These identified features have made the whole construction ungrammatical and has affected the flow of the formation.

Sample number 9 is as follows: *We can not be able to come.* This sample typically shows where two modal auxiliaries both expressing ability have been used in the same verb phrase in a simple sentence. It can be clearly seen that *can* along with *be able to* have been used simultaneously in this sentence.

Grammatical Problems in Students' Examination Scripts

This section of the survey is concerned with grammatical problems in the examination scripts studied for this work. The data conveying these problems are presented in table 2. These issues include omission of core sentence elements which resulted to use of sentence fragments, misuse of tenses, use of wrong verb forms, lack of concord and so on. They are discussed under the following subheadings:

Use of Sentence Fragments

The most prominent issue regarding grammar identified in students' writing in examination scripts is omission of essential sentence element or elements. As a result of this a lot of sentence fragments are seen in this data. This was often noted to hamper the entire structure and eventually jeopardise its meaning. For example, in sample 6 (*Am here in other to write*) the subject was left out. In other words, the

sentence was constructed without a subject. There is yet another example of omission of a grammatical element. Now it was seen in sample 9 (*if these chemicals are not properly used, can cause law yield*) which is a complex sentence. The subordinate clause was grammatically complete.

Use of Wrong Tense

Sample 5 is a typical example of wrong tense use. This sample which reads: *he was gate another wife*, is grammatically wrong as a result of wrong tense use. Besides, writing *gate* instead of *get* further compounded the problem in the sentence. In fact, the sentence ought to be *he has got another wife*. Similarly, sample 10 (*Arugungu fishing festivals that taking place yaerly*) ought to be in simple present tense because the writer was talking about an annual event, yet he used present continuous tense. Even the present continuous tense was not used correctly, because an auxiliary verb *is* was left out.

Use of Wrong Verb forms

One issue noticed closely related to use of wrong tense is use of wrong verb forms. This was found to be very common among the students. In this regard some verbs which are supposed to be used in their past, or present, or participle forms are frequently observed to be used in other forms. The first example is in sample 3. Here, *study* as a verb ought to be in its past participle form *studied* but it was used in its simple present form. In sample 4 too, *forget* was erroneously written as *forgetted* instead of remaining as *forget* since an auxiliary verb *do* was already used in its past form *did* in the verb phrase.

Lack of Concord

Let us now turn to the issue of lack of agreement between grammatical elements. This is yet another irregularity noticed in the data. A common issue identified in this regard was lack of agreement between verbs and their respective subjects. Disagreement between pronouns and their respective antecedents are also frequently seen. There are even instance of disagreement in number between nouns and articles or determiners modifying them. A typical example of this is shown in sample 3. In this sample, *an*, as an article indicating singularity, came with *approaches* which was used as a plural noun. As

regards disagreement between verb and their respective subjects, so many examples have been discussed above while discussing misuse of verb forms. So many examples are used to show that verbs are often seen to disagree with their subjects in number. In so doing, it was pointed out that many verbs are observed to be used in their simple present forms instead of their third person singular simple present forms when their respective subjects are third person singular nouns or pronouns. Likewise an example of wrong use of a third person singular simple present form of a verb was presented.

Sample 8 has a peculiar problem. The sentence was written as: *so many rural area has be transformed*. In this case *many* as a determiner expresses plurality. Thus, the noun it modifies should be plural. Hence, *area* ought to be *areas*. Then *areas* as a plural subject required an auxiliary verb *have* instead of *has* used in the construction. Furthermore, the auxiliary verb *be* used erroneously should become *been*.

Redundancy

The issue of using a personal pronoun along with its antecedent in the same phrase also appeared in our data. For instance in **sample 2**, *malam aminu kano hi saiy* was written. In this phrase what is required was either *Malam Aminu Kano* only or *he* only but the two are combined. Similarly, sample 7, which is assumed to be quoted from a novel *The African child*, a noun *Ramatulaye* was written along with the personal pronoun *she* that was supposed to take its place. Lastly, **sample 2** was deliberately taken to show an example of what may be assumed to be a paragraph written full of punctuation errors, spelling error, misuse of lexical items and

grammatical problem. In fact it will be difficult to identify all the problems in this piece of writing and reconstruct it. Of course, so many paragraphs of this nature are seen in the course of taking this data.

Summary of Findings

Analysis and discussion of our data reveals that use of sentence fragments, lack of concord, use of wrong tense and redundancy are the most common and obvious grammatical problems of the students whose scripts were studied. These are the same grammatical problems observed in our data from social networks prominent among which are omission of grammatical units or vital sentence element, use wrong verb forms, disregarding rules of concord, writing ambiguous expressions, writing interrogative sentences inform of declarative sentence, combining personal pronouns with their antecedent in the same phrase and combining auxiliary verb express ability in the same phrase.

Conclusion

Considering these findings, it can be concluded that there is transfer of features of writing on social networks (an informal situation) to examination which is a formal situation that demands formal writing. These identified errors revealed that all the grammatical problems found in the students' examination scripts studied reflect the common grammatical errors found in written interactions on social network. This is not surprising because language is best learnt or acquired through interaction and these days social networks serve as an easy means of interaction. Furthermore, in the area covered by this study, social media interaction on social media is mostly in English.

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