

## DEFECTIVE PAST TENSE MARKING: AN UNRESOLVED CONFLICT IN IGBO-ENGLISH BILINGUALS' INTERLANGUAGE MORPHO-SYNTAX

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### Abstract

*This study mainly focused on the defective marking of tense in modal and lexical combinations. The study findings showed that errors involving wrong marking of verbs for tense and to a large extent aspect are pervasive among L2 users of English. A total of ten data sets were used. The ten data sets were spread across four syntactic-pragmatic contexts, namely, declarative, interrogative, participial and small clauses. However, the errors were dominant in declarative clauses followed by interrogative while the rest had one data set each. The study concluded that more drills should be incorporated into the teaching of those aspects English syntax that pose serious challenge to the L2 users.*

**Keywords:** bilingualism, defective marking, morphosyntax, interlanguage, tense, aspect, etc

### Introduction

Defective past tense marking refers to some form of variability as well as optionality usually witnessed in the speech or writing of second language learners. This has been attributed to some representational impairment in their interlanguage morphosyntax (Hawkins and Liszka, 2003; Ionin, 2013). It is a situation where an L2 learner fails to overtly mark past tense on a verb or does so using the wrong word form. One feature of this phenomenon is that the learner in most cases may be able to select the right form in some words while still struggling to achieve the same degree of success in others.

Consequently, it is believed that learning a second language (henceforth L2) is a herculean task. The awe that many people hold for language partly stems albeit unconsciously from the difficulty they encounter each time they try to learn an additional language. This is in sharp contrast with what obtains in the case of acquiring a first language (henceforth, L1). The explanations normally given to this difficulty vary but prominent among them is that the L2 learner faces enormous challenges modifying his or her already formed linguistic habits to accommodate the new language because old habits, they say, die hard. Thus, having developed a set of linguistic habits in one's L1 changing them to suit the demands of the target L2 becomes difficult.

The most shared view in the current generative approach to second language acquisition is that learner's difficulty is locatable at the functional categories since cross-linguistic variations occur at the lexicon (White, 2003). The lexicon is divided into substantive and functional lexicon. Between these two types of lexicons, the functional lexicon specifies categories relevant to aspect, mood, tense, etc. Among them, tense seems not just to be the most problematic to Igbo learners of English but also to excite many controversies among Igbo scholars. Thus, there are varied opinions regarding the status of tense in Igbo grammar ranging from those who deny its existence (Emananjo, 1975, 1980, 1985, 1991, 2015) to those who accept it but maintain that it exists marginally as the realization of tense by inflectional means in Igbo is more concretely established in some select dialects such as Ezinihite Mbaise while the so-called standard Igbo lack overt tense marking (Uwalaka, 1988).

### **The Concept of Morphosyntax**

Morphosyntax is the procedure of language for representing syntactic features by morphological means. This is usually done through the use of bound inflectional morphemes. The morphosyntax of English is established through an inflectional process involving verbal conjugation and nominal declension (Chukwu, 2007). Morphosyntax, therefore, studies the role of inflectional morphology in syntactic coding and analysis as opposed to using purely combinatory processes that indicate the syntactic feature of a linguistic expression by its position or by its combination of free morphemes (e.g. compounding).

Morphosyntax is the system of the internal structure of words and the way in which words are put together to form phrases and sentences. It involves the study of grammatical categories or linguistic units that have both morphology and syntactic criteria. Hence, morphosyntax is derived from morphology which is the study of word formation and syntax which is the study of how words combine into larger units such as phrases and sentences. According to Crystal (2008: 315), the term “morphosyntactic” is used to refer to grammatical categories or properties for whose definitional criteria morphology and syntax both apply such as in describing the characteristics of words. Crystal (2008) observes that any distinction following the heading of number in nouns constitutes a morphosyntactic category. On the one hand, number of contrasts affects syntax (e.g. add-s for plural).

Based on the foregoing, it can be argued that word formation which is the concern of morphology has relationship with the syntactic structure. The word ‘cooks’, for example, is formed from the morpheme ‘cook’ and the morpheme –s. The word ‘cooks’ is influenced by another word with which it can form a larger structure called syntactic structure. Thus, the verb “cooks” occurs in the syntactic structure called “sentence” which has a third person singular subject and a simple present tense form. These two pieces of information determine agreement features that will be assigned to both the subject and the verbs as shown in (1) to (4) below:

- (1) My mother *cooks* every morning.
- (2) She *cooks* every morning.
- (3) My sisters *cook* every evening.
- (4) They *cook* every evening.

Generally, syntactic analysis begins with the process of “assigning words to parts of speech with their appropriate accidents” (Matthews, 2007:287). The word, “accident” in this regards refers to the variable properties of the words such as those which indicate tense, number, case, etc. These properties relate more appropriately to the inflectional morphology of the language and the choice of each property depends on syntactic domain to which an item belongs. Thus, while the properties tense and aspects relate more to the verbal domain that of case and number relate more to the nominal domain. However, agreement between these major domains is maintained by the interconnectedness of the morphosyntactic features. Tense in particular is used to relate time to the event structure of the verb.

However, keeping abreast of the intricate tense and aspectual systems of English is often a challenge to the Nigerian learners of English as L2. This is owing to the differences between English and Igbo morphosyntax. For instance, while the English language uses inflectional forms to reflect tense, number, person and other grammatical notions Igbo does not necessarily follow the same order. Hence, when the Igbo-English bilinguals encounter some irregular verbs or nouns forms, they tend to regularise them using the norm inflectional processes found in the regular English words or lexemes. Thus, learners who have been exposed to the regular patterns of forming past or plurals in English usually have a hard time reworking the rules when the encounter the exceptional cases where English has borrowed from other languages such as in the following cases: radius – radii; cherub-cherubim; etc.

### **Bilingualism and Inter-Language Competence**

The term “bilingualism” refers to both the ability and the process of using more than one language to a more or less degree. There is loose and strict use of the term. Some scholars view bilingualism as having

minimal competence in language even if it means knowing just few phrases in the language while others consider bilingualism as only applicable to a situation active double or multiple language usage. A significant number of Nigerians are largely bilinguals by default owing to the country's colonial history and the entrenchment of English as the language of wider communication among various tribes and in important government and corporate business transactions. Users of English in Nigeria have one or more active indigenous languages as part of their linguistic repertoire. This makes Nigeria a country with a fair amount of bilingual or multilingual citizens.

However, it is difficult to state with certainty the exact bilingual profiles of many Nigerians. This is because while some are actively bilingual (or multilingual), others are passively bilingual (or multilingual). Active (or functional) bilinguals are those who can function significantly in two or more languages while passive (or dormant) bilinguals function mainly in one language even though they are passively competent in another language. Ovu and Anyanwu (2019:14) capture the complexity involved in characterizing the bilingual profiles of Nigerians as follows:

In Nigeria, functional bilinguals include school children and adults who can reasonably and consistently use English with at least one Nigerian language. However, there is yet to be any demographic and linguistic data to establish the bilingual profiles of the citizens. Thus, the number of individuals who fall under functional and dormant bilinguals in Nigeria is not clear. Secondly, there is no yardstick for measuring the extent of functionality in the language for one to pass as a dormant or functional bilingual except for the fact that functional bilinguals are in the main those who make use of their bilingual repertoires on regular bases while dormant bilinguals are those who no longer use their bilingual skills owing to relocation to a new environment or other factors that make it impossible for them to still use both languages. One may then ask if a person who studied French in the secondary school as part of fulfilling the requirements of the Nigerian National Policy on Education qualifies as a functional or dormant bilingual.

There is, therefore, a causal link between an individual's bilingual profile and their interlanguage competence. The idea of an inter-language comes from Larry Selinker. Selinker (1972) used the term to show that learners of second or any additional language are not passive participants in the learning process. Instead, such learners hypothesise about the available language data before them from which they try to mirror the grammatical rules of the target second language. However, the interlanguage process does not usually result in the perfect acquisition of the grammar of the second language. Rather, it leads to a blend of the rules of the first and the second languages. Hence, Ovu (2021), citing Gass and Selinker (2008), observes that the inter-language grammar is systematic, dynamic, simple and contextual. The fact that the resultant grammar has its own rules makes interlanguage systematic. Also, the dynamic nature of interlanguage is seen in the fact that its rules can be modified to accommodate new realities while the simplicity of inter-language implies that its shades off the more complex morphosyntactic rules of the target language. Lastly, inter-language rules most times change according to the learner's cognitive and linguistic profiles as well as the prevailing conditions surrounding the acquisition process.

Consequently, there are at least five reasons why interlanguage competence differs from native language competence. First, interlanguage competence is often transitional as the learner keeps drawing from his or her native language resources. This can be minimal or significant depending on the individual's ability. Also, it involves a transfer of training in that the quality of instruction given to the learner plays a huge role in determining the overall shape of the learner's interlanguage competence. Hence, while native language competence depends mainly on "biological and physiological tools of acquisition" as well as the primary linguistic data, inter-language development varies according to the training in which second language (L2) learners has received (Ovu, 2021 p.190). Also, avoidance is a common in inter-language development while success in the learning process depends largely on the committed use of resources like bilingual dictionaries, audio-visual materials, flash cards, etc as ways of facilitating acquisition process. Perhaps what is more radical in inter-language development is the fact that learners tend to over-generalise

the rules of the target language and at the same time struggle with fossilization of the learners' first language habits.

### **Data Presentation and Analysis**

The data sets for the study were collected through personal and virtual interactions between the researcher and the research subjects. To ensure the integrity of the data, the surreptitious recording of the data was first made before the research then sought the permission of the individual participants to use the data collected from them while keeping their identity anonymous. Those who withheld their consent were included from the study and at the end of the exercise a total of ten data sets (which represent different aspects of defective marking) were collected.

#### **(5) Data 1**

Subj. X: Sir, I was in your office yesterday.

Researcher: Really? To do what?

Subj. X: To submit my assignment.

Researcher: Why did you have to wait so long before bringing it?

Subj. X: No, Sir!

Researcher: What did you say?

Subj. X: .... *but Sir I was here, Sir. I came but I did not **met** you.*

Researcher: (*chuckles*)

Subj. X: (*perplexed*)

Researcher: Where is the assignment now?

Subj. X: (*struggles to fetch it from her bag*)

(*Friday, 22nd January, 2016, 10:38-10:47am*)

#### **Comment**

From the interaction between the student and this researcher, it was obvious that the student had some idea of past tense marking. However, her major problem was caused by her inability to understand that when there is a modal auxiliary verb in a mono-clausal construction, the tense is marked on the modal leaving the main verb unmarked. But in her case she marked both the modal auxiliary and the main verb as past.

#### **(6) Data 2**

Researcher: B̄ja nwa! Ga z̄tara m mmiri.

Subj. Z: Sir, Oh! Amagh̄i m na ì na-asu Igbo!

Researcher: Pardon?

Subj. Z: I didn't **knew** you can speak Igbo

(*Monday, 25 January, 2016. 1: 24PM*)

#### **Comment**

This is a shorter interaction than that of Data Set 1. Yet, the problem persists. Even though the conversation involved a different student and a different main verb, the scenario and the event structure are fairly similar. Hence, this second students' inability to mark the verb properly shows that the problem is pervasive.

#### **(7) Data 3**

Subj. Z: Basil! Did you later **sent** the application yesterday?

Researcher: Sir?

Subj. Z: I was asking if you were able to *submit* the application before the deadline.

Researcher: Yes, Sir!

(*Tuesday, 16th February, 2016. 3:45PM*)

### **Comment**

The subject in this case is a senior member of staff who well-grounded meta-linguistic knowledge of English syntax. His case might be seen as a slip rather than an established case of error. However, while it appears that he was aware of the error, he could not immediately correct it. Instead, he employed an avoidance strategy in which he deftly changed the erroneous structure and adopted the one that he felt more comfortable using. Some scholars (cf. Shen, 2000; Vazquez, 2005; Saville-Troike, 2012; Sara and Mohammaderza, 2013, etc) have all reported avoidance as part of L2 learning strategy. Specifically, Sara and Mohammadreza (2013: 238) attribute the persistence of avoidance strategy in L2 interactions to situations in which the L2 user feels that the target form is too complex. Other times, it could be that the target form is too elusive for the language user to retrieve it through online memory. In the instant case, it appears that the speaker knew what the target form should be but still found it difficult to use owing to memory load.

#### **(8) Data 4**

Don't mind them my brother. The truth is naked. This government **didn't prepared** for governance at all. They were interested in taking power. I'm waiting for May 29 for their score card.

*(A Facebook Comment on Fuel Scarcity - Tuesday, 19th April, 2016)*

This particular data set came from a written source. Although social media interactions come close to oral conversation because the tone is often relaxed and colloquial, there is still a possibility for people to edit or proof read their comments before posting them. The person that made this comment was lamenting over what he felt inconsiderate and elitist policy of the government. So far, the writer followed the same tense marking pattern found in the previous data sets in which both the modal auxiliary and the main verb were marked for tense.

#### **(9) Data Set 5**

Watch and be blessed by Official Videos for "Jesus Be Lifted Higher". Written and **sang** from a heart full of love.

*(A Facebook Post, Advertising a New Song - Tuesday, 19th April, 2016)*

### **Comment**

This data set is a deviation from what has become the norm. It involves a tense/aspectual mismatch with a coordinate structure. The writer combined a participial with the simple past form of the relevant verbs. So, instead of "written and sung....," it was "written and sang..." This mismatch underscores the challenges that the English tense and aspectual system often pose to L2 users.

#### **(10)Data Set 6**

My brother, do you *wanna* hear the harsh truth?? The monster nursed by Northerners fed itself on the flesh and blood of them....Now the heartless ignorance of many bigots, political scoundrels and mischievous people of the North helped this monster **grew** from strength until the monster decided to feed on their flesh and licking their blood.

*(A Facebook Comment on Insurgency in the North East - Wednesday, 20th April, 2016)*

### **Comment**

The error in this data stems from a mismatch between the finite form of the verb and a non-finite form. The verb "helped" is a complex transitive verb which in this context governs an object and a small clause complement. Small clauses are usually verbless or they contain non-finite verb. Given that non-finite verbs in English can't be inflected for tense, number and person, the verb "grew" within this non-finite clause is erroneously marked for tense. This type of error is advanced unlike the one in Data Set 7 below.

**(11)Data Set 7**

Why **do** they **arrested** her. Hmmm for what, what is Nigerian government doing to better our lives. Mmmm ...only killing peaceful protesters...anyway am [I'm] a Biafran.

*(A Facebook Comment on the Arrest of a Drug Trafficker – Friday, 22th April, 2016)*

**Comment**

The error in this data set follows the same pattern found in all modal auxiliary and main verb combinations. This error is independent of the syntactic structure of the sentence in question. Rather, the error is found across the board.

**(12)Data 8**

...I would have liked this teacher we had together had told me an answer when I asked her a question. She said there was no wrong or right answer and she was not there to give her input (She gave me her opinion, but said she was not going to share it with the class because they **might had disagreed**). There was during an office appointment. From that point on, I thought I had not made an investment on [in] that class.

*(A Facebook Comment on Students' Academic Challenges– Monday, 25th April, 2016)*

**Comment**

One interesting thing about this data set is that the person who made the statement was not even a Nigerian and has never been to Nigeria. This type of tense is rarely found in many Nigerian English corpora. The error is found not in the modal auxiliary but in the second auxiliary. Generally, the verb "to have" does not inflect for tense or number after a modal auxiliary verb, but the writer forced it to inflect for tense. This led to three inflectional markings where the two auxiliaries were marked for tense while the main verb was marked for aspect.

**(13)Data Set 9**

Well everybody **have say** something but the woman no [knows] the gravity of this, if it is in Indonesia *nko* [interrogative discourse marker] is she not going to be executed.

*(A Facebook Comment on the Arrest of a Drug Trafficker– Friday, 22th April, 2016)*

**Comment**

The error in this data set emanates from the inability of the writer to mark the main verb for aspect as well as the use of the infinitive form of the auxiliary verb. This type of error though quite come among the student population is generally basic and may not be committed by the more advanced L2 users.

**(14)Data Set 10**

She's not the only person facing hardship in d [the] country, she **commit** a crime which she must face. I always ask myself. Why is it that d [the] Igbos are too money cautious [conscious]

*(A Facebook Comment on the Arrest of a Drug Trafficker– Friday, 22th April, 2016)*

**Comment**

This the last data set in this series. The error in this data set emanated from defective marking of the simple past tense.

**Conclusion**

The errors reviewed in this paper emanated from different types of auxiliary-main verb combinations. However, the majority of the errors occur in the modal auxiliary and lexical verb combination where five data sets out of the ten data sets studied in this paper all contain modal and main verb combination. Apart from the modal and main verb combination, there was an instance of aspectual mismatch leading the defective marking involving the verb to have and the main verb while there were more instances of the modals combining with the verb to have and one instance involving the simple past tense. In addition to the nature of the verb complex in which the errors occurred, the errors were spread across four syntactico-

pragmatic contexts in which there were six declarative sentences, two interrogative sentences; one participial clause and one small clause arising from the use of complex transitive verb.

The implication of the above scenario is that since the dominant errors involve double marking of modal auxiliary and the main verb, more attentions should be devoted to drilling students on the various rules guiding inflectional marking of modals and the main verb combinations. Also, more contexts and scenarios should be built into further studies in this phenomenon to ensure that all the instances of defective marking involving the various types of the verb complex reviewed during classroom instructions.

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