

**SYNTACTIC AGREEMENT IN ENGLISH GRAMMAR : A PALATABLE HUB FOR AFRICAN
DEVELOPMENT: A STUDY OF STUDENTS IN ALVAN IKOKU FEDERAL COLLEGE OF
EDUCATION, OWERRI**

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Abstract

Syntactic agreement in English grammar is relatively imperative and it is a powerful linguistic element. Its useful and significant roles make impact in everyday usage both in written and spoken English as it greatly affects second language users of English. The paper is geared towards highlighting the meaning of syntactic agreement and some of the numerous types of syntactic agreement. Specifically, the study dwells more on the rules governing subject verb agreement. It brings to light the purpose and relevance of subject verb agreement. It also projects to discuss how syntactic agreement poses problems to the second language users of English. Copious local and international literature were reviewed. Principles and parameters theory by Chomsky (1981) and Binarity principle by Mbah (2016) were the theories that anchor this study. In principles and parameters, Chomsky's claims that human grammars are constructed entirely of principle, not of rules because rules are construction specific but principles are universal, with some degree of parameterization. Binarity principle relies more on the principle of constituent commanding. This implies that, the head of a construction determines the type of verb it will take. Two research questions were used. 100 students from 3 schools in Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education, Owerri, were sampled using structural questionnaire. The results of the data were analyzed using simple percentages. The findings reveal that students were not conversant with the use of subject verb agreement. We recommend that great attention should be paid to the nuances of grammar, especially with regard to subject verb agreement.

INTRODUCTION

Education is a universal aspiration and also an instrument for development and social integration. Maduewi,(2015). Language occupies a significant place in the life of any nation. It is one of the most effective and efficient means of communication. Language is a carrier and transmitter of culture and the culture of globalized society requires the use of a single language of communication which will serve as a visa that provides an opportunity to join the world without borders.

Despite all the existing languages, English language is that, which occupies the palm championship, hence, it is used globally for various activities such as politics, education, business, security and the rest of others. English language is regarded as one of the easiest language in the world because it is analytic in nature. That is to say, it is a language with inflectional morphemes. The word order is very important while trying to understand the meaning of a sentence. This projects us to the word, syntax. Syntax has to do with the

structural regulation for combining words into larger meaningful units (Lung, and Duchain, 1992). Combining words of ideas are communicated with distinctive syntactic structures. To indicate a specific entity (eg the pencil), we have to combine a noun that names the general class of entity (pencil) with words that identify the specific object (eg this blue). The structure of the resulting statement (this blue pencil) is a noun phrase. To convey something about the pencil rather than simple identifying it, we need a clause, such as: The blue pencil belongs to Mary. Here, we have a clause consisting of a subject and predicate.

Syntax involves organization of utterance on different levels. The clause, subject and predicate are expressed with noun phrase and verb phrase, each of which has distinctive phrase structure organization. The structure of sentences has to do with the stringing together of smaller syntactic units, according to the grammar of the language in order to form the sentential units (Egbe, 2003).

Grammar is perceived as the ideal native speaker-hearer's competence in the use of a language (Lamidi, 2008). It is an intuitive knowledge which enables the native speaker of a language to judge sentences as grammatical or ungrammatical. Obviously, grammar is the study of rules governing the grammaticality of a sentence. These rules are known as syntactic rules and they are innately acquired by the native speakers but for non native speakers, they are learned. Thus, grammatical rules also govern subject- verb- agreement which is the paradigm of this paper.

OBJECTIVES

The study is aimed to:

- i. examine the extent the second language learners of English have problems in the use of syntactic agreement, especially, subject-verb agreement
- ii. investigate the extent the students in tertiary institutions have problems in the use of proximity agreement/concord.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the second language learners' areas of difficulties in the use of syntactic agreement; especially in subject-verb agreement?
2. To what extent do second language learners of English have problems in the use of proximity agreement/concord?

AGREEMENT

There is a controversy by the linguists over whether Agreement and concord should be used synonymously. Crystal, (1997), is of the opinion that, concord as a term, has been used more frequently than agreement, which, according to him has found new application within generative linguistics. That concord is used in the study primarily while agreement is the term used across linguistic and typological research. A linguist, like Lebrmann (1982) based his argument on etymological relation, as he affirms that agreement is an asymmetrical relation, where *X* agrees with *Y*, but *Y* does not agree with *X*. He stipulates that concord is symmetrical as *Y* agrees with *X* and *X* agrees with *Y*, that shows symmetric C-command. Quirk et al (1985) make reference in semantics and syntax. To them, agreement and concord should be used synonymously. The modification of form of one element to match the properties of another element is what is known as agreement and this study is based on their view. We concur that both phenomena should be used synonymously. Agreement occurs when one word is inflected to match certain grammatical properties of another word, using agreement of number and person as an instance.

Mary comes here daily.

Here, Mary is a singular subject and it takes a singular verb, *comes*, so, the word the writer or the speaker uses must align both in number and person with the verb it refers to.

Kroeger, (2006), asserts that agreement is a general term used to account for the grammatical features of the noun or noun phrase that determines the morphological features of the head. The non head elements of the phrase carry the properties of the head and they are dependents of the head. Consider this phrase.

The smart old man.

The above phrase is a noun phrase (NP)

The head of the phrase is the noun, *man*.

Other elements of the phrase are dependents of the *head- man*. This implies that, agreement involves sharing, that is, the head shares features with the dependent elements.

Agreement is very crucial in communication processes. It introduces redundancies to linguistic signal, thereby making the receiver to decode the message appropriately. It also has a semantic origin. Agreement keeps track referent and this is clearly seen in the use of personal pronouns like I, he, she, it, etc. The antecedents like gender and number in personal pronouns also play significant roles. Subject-verb agreement unifies a sentence and this facilitates the listeners to decode the message easily.

TYPES OF AGREEMENT

Agreement occurs when a word changes form, depending on the other words to which it refers to and it has numerous types, among them are Subject- Verb- Agreement, Demonstrative Pronoun Agreement, Noun- Pronoun Agreement, Proximity Agreement etc.

SUBJECT- VERB- AGREEMENT

This type of agreement occurs when the subject of sentence agrees in number and person with the verb it refers to. In this aspect, a singular subject aligns with a singular verb while a plural subject agrees with a plural verb. Consider the following

1a. John loves pounded yam.

1b. *John love pounded yam.

The suffix *s* in *love* is a third person singular suffix that is present and this is needed in order to indicate grammatical relation which exist between the verb, *loves* and its third person singular subject, *John*.

The second sentence indicates the absence of correct inflectional endings and this accounts for its ungrammaticality.

2a. The girls like oranges

2b. *The girls likes oranges

In the above sentences, 2a is grammatical because the subject of the sentence and the verb are in harmony. The subject *girls* is plural noun and the verb *like* is also a plural verb. Therefore, the sentence is grammatical. 2b with asterisks is ungrammatical because the subject noun, *girls*, which is a plural noun, is supposed to align with a plural verb, *like*, but the reverse is the case. So, since the subject is not in alignment with the verb, the sentence is ungrammatical.

DEMONSTRATIVE PRONOUN AGREEMENT

Demonstrative Pronoun Agreement is the next grammatical relation this paper looked into. This is the agreement that takes place between demonstrative pronouns and the objects they refer to. Demonstrative pronouns are used to account for the relative distance between the speaker and entity in which the speaker refers to. The singular forms of the demonstrative pronouns in English are *this* and *that* while the plural forms, *these* and *those* are used to express the relative distance. For the demonstrative pronouns to be used appropriately, they have to agree with the objects in which they refer to in number. For instance;

3a. This is my book (very close) (singular)

3b. That is the car (distance) (singular)

In the above, sentences, 3a and b show that singular demonstrative pronouns *this* and *that* are used for singular objects, such as *book* and *car* respectively. The sentences are grammatical because they agree with the objects in which they refer to, in number.

4a. These are my books (close) plural

4b. Those are the cars (far) plural

The demonstrative pronouns in 4a and b, *these* and *those* are used for *books* and *cars*. They are properly used because *these* and *those* agree with the objects, books and cars. The sentences are grammatical.

Furthermore, demonstrative pronouns have to be in harmony in number when referring back to their antecedents of the previous phrases or sentences. A singular antecedent requires a singular demonstrative pronoun and a plural antecedent accounts for a plural demonstrative pronoun. Consider these sentences.

- 5a. That was his first day in school
5b. These were their goats.

NOUN-PRONOUN AGREEMENT; Number and Gender Alignment

While replacing singular nouns with a pronoun, it is pertinent that the two words should agree both in number and in gender. Any contrary to the rule, render the sentence ungrammatical. Consider the following

- 6a. The man greeted his colleague
6b. *The man greeted her colleague

In sentences above, 6a is grammatical because it accounts for the rule of agreement. Since *man*, which is a singular male noun, is in agreement with *his*, which is singular male pronoun, the sentence is appropriate. The sentence 6b is ungrammatical in the sense that *man* which is a singular male noun takes *her* which is a singular female pronoun. Based on that, the sentence is not grammatical.

NOTIONAL/ COLLECTIVE NOUN AGREEMENT

Omorodion, (2011), is of the opinion that the above is an agreement of a verb with subject according to the idea of number, rather than the actual presence of the grammatical marker for that idea. This is the agreement that operates in collective noun. The number, whether singular or plural of collective nouns strictly depends on the notion the speaker or writer has in mind. This implies that collective nouns may take singular or plural verb based on the speaker's or writer's view. If the speaker or writer views it as a unit, the singular verb is used but if the speaker or writer views it as individuals that make up the group, a plural verb is an ideal. Consider these sentences.

- 7a. The government is debating its issue (viewed as a unit)
7b. The government are debating their issue (viewed as individual members of the government).
7c. *The government is debating their issue.

Considering the above sentences, it is observed that sentences in number 7a and b are grammatical, hence they obey the rule of notional agreement. The verbs and the pronouns are in harmony with their pronouns and they are inconsonance with the view of the speaker or writer. 7c is ungrammatical because the verb did not agree with the pronoun. This is because the noun government which the speaker views as a unit is supposed to take both singular verb and singular pronoun but the pronoun takes the plural form, thereby rendering the sentence ungrammatical.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews both form and extant view on syntactic agreement as well as its practical application in syntax, especially with reference to agreement. The idea is to observe that, the head of construction determine the form the verb will take.

Odinogwei, (2015:500), asserts that agreement features are person, number and gender. He opines that person and number are obligatory features that contribute greatly to grammaticalness or well formedness of syntactic derivation. Citing Chomsky, Radford and Zwart, (1997), the determination of grammaticalness of derivation depends wholly on the appropriate checking of agreement features. For instance:

- 8a. A boy leaves the class
8b. The boys leave the class.

Considering the above sentences, 8a with the subject *boy* has a singular number feature and the verb, *leaves*, has a singular agreement feature. As a result, the sentence is grammatical. 8b has a subject, *boys*, also has a plural feature, and the verb, *leave*, has a plural agreement feature. The sentence is also grammatical. He affirms that in order to authenticate the features, the features have to be checked and confirmed grammatically correct. When the morphosyntactic features are confirmed and licensed, the derivation is deemed to converge. If they fail to converge, it means that, they crash at the logical form (LF). Therefore feature checking is very important.

Craft, (2009:106) postulates while writing on syntax, that agreement is virtually all generative treatments, beginning with subject-verb agreement. He posits that, there seems to be typological (near) universal, such that some languages do not have agreement with direct objects, unless, they also have agreement with (at

least some) subjects. Those subjects agreement are the kinds found in most accessible and best studied languages (eg. Indo- European languages) where, generative linguists have typically started. He advises that, we have to be precise to find out what syntactic element that is agreeing with the subject, it may not be the verb precisely, because not all verbs agree with the subject in Indo- European languages. Rather, only tense marked finite verbs agree, as in:

9a. "I expected Mary to come/ *comes" and

9b. "I hope that Mary comes/ *come"

Similarly, in auxiliary- plus participle constructions containing more than one verbal element, subject agreement in Indo- European languages appears only on the auxiliary verb, the same one that is inflected for tense.

THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK

Two theories- Principles and Parameters by Chomsky, (1981) and Binarity principle by Mbah, (2016), are the theories that anchor this study. The two theories are relevant to the study because they recognize that, the head of construction determines the verb that collocates with it.

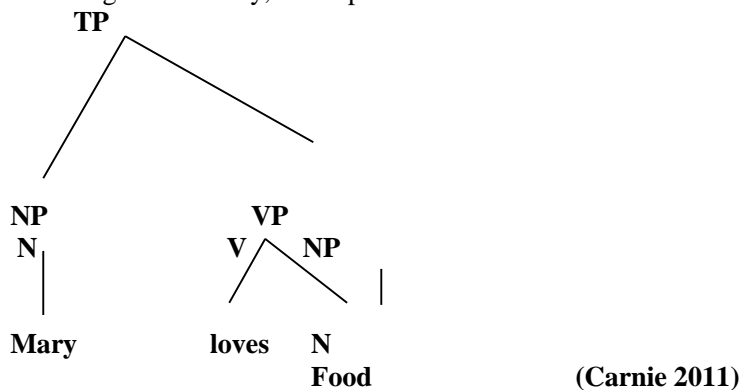
In Principles and Parameters, Chomsky's claim is that, human grammars are constructed entirely of principles not of rules because rules are construction specific but principles are universal. He captures the variations between languages in terms of the head parameters, which make languages different. Some languages like Japanese sets her head parameters last while English sets hers first. As a result, the head determines the verb that collocates with it. Eg,

The tall black man speaks with him always.

Here, it is the head of this phrase, *man*, that determines the form of the verb. Since the head, *man*, is singular, the verb, *speaks*, is in agreement with the noun, *man*.

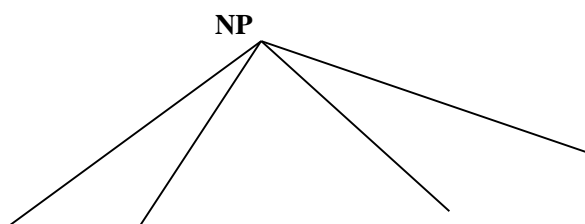
Mbah, (2016), contends that binarity principle is a syntactic requirement which states that syntactic diagram has two branches. Binarity principle is germane to this study because the principle relies wholly on the principle of constituent commanding, which we usually refer to as C-Command. A constituent A c-commands constituent B, if and only if constituent A does not dominate constituent B and constituent B does not dominate constituent A. The first branching node dominating A also dominates B. eg.

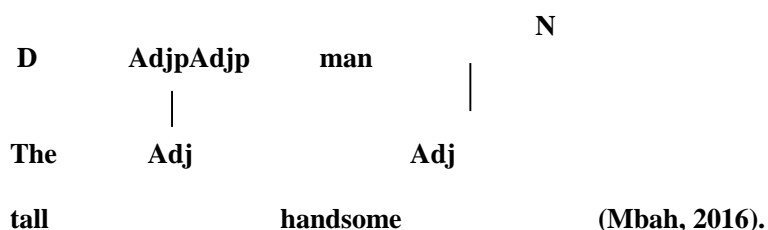
Mary loves food. Diagrammatically, it is represented thus:



The 'TP' is the mother of NP and VP and it immediately dominates them NP is the sister to VP. So, NP c-commands 'VP' which is her sister and it also c-commands 'V' and NP which are her niece.

The binarity principle also requires that the immediate constituent of a phrase bifurcates in two way contrast, for example, the phrase: The tall handsome man, is illustrated diagrammatically thus:





The illustration above shows binarity of each branching nodes in obedience to the binarity condition, which according to Kroeger, (2006), the agreement is a general term used to account for the grammatical features of the noun phrase that determines the morphological features of the phrase. The non head elements of the phrase carry the properties of the head which are dependence of the head.

The knowledge of syntactic agreement generally enhances the co-existence of Africans globally. It facilitates mutual and effective interaction among the nations and it brings about development in all spheres of life, such as economy, politics, social, physical, mental, and the rest of others. It also paves way for security purposes.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The study adopted a description survey, using a syntax based questionnaire for the collection of data.

POPULATION OF THE STUDY

The population of the study comprises 100 first year degree students of school of general studies which include male and female students from Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education, Owerri.

INSTRUMENT FOR DATA COLLECTON

Structured questionnaire based on syntax, was used for the study. The research instrument tested the competence of the students in the areas of agreement, specifically in subject verb agreement and proximity agreement.

METHOD OF DATA ANALYSIS

The method of data analysis is simple percentages. The instrument is relevant because it is meant to test the receptive knowledge of syntactic agreement on the students and it is objective and therefore free from bias. The formula for percentage is

$$\frac{F1 \times 100}{N \times 1}$$

Where F1 is frequent of respondents

N= total number of sample used

DATA PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION

The data presentation and discussion was based on the research questions formulated for this study. It discussed score from agreement, precisely on subject verb agreement and proximity agreement test given to 100 students in the school of General Studies. The results were summarized in two tables below.

FINDINGS

Research Question 1

What are the second language learners' areas of difficulties in the use of subject- verb- agreement?

The man _____ to Anambra state every weekend.

A travelling, B travel, C travels, D travelled.

Table 1. On the use of subject verb agreement

N= 100

Options	N	%
A	10	10%
B	24	24%
C	20	20%
D	46	46%
Total	100	100%

From the above, it could be seen that option A, was chosen by 10 subjects, reflecting 10%, option B, was chosen by 24 subjects, yielding 24%, option C, was chosen by 20 subjects, yielding 20% while option D, was chosen by 46 subjects yielding 46%. This shows that our subjects are not conversant with the use of subject verb agreement. Out of 100 subjects who sat for the test, only 20 subjects chose option C, which is the correct option. It indicates that they have not properly learnt the subject- verb agreement.

Research Question 2

To what extent do second language learners of English have problems in the use of agreement especially proximity agreement?

The research question is tested using the following:

Either the teacher or the students _____the bell often.

Options: A removes B remove C removing D removed

N=100

Option	N	%
A	18	18%
B	22	22%
C	24	24%
D	36	36%
Total	100	100%

The table shows that option A, was chosen by 18 subjects, yielding 18%, option B, was chosen by 22 subjects which yields 22%, option C, was chosen by 24 subjects, yielding 24%, while option D, was chosen by 36 out of 100 subjects, yielding 36%. The results recorded on the table showed that only 22 out of 100 subjects who returned their test paper chose option B, which is the correct option.

This reveals that they are not conversant with the use of proximity agreement

DISCUSSION

From the analysis starting from table 1, we observed that one of the problems of the subjects is their inability to master English language at their early childhood.

Table 1 and table 2 reflect the syntactic agreement especially subject- verb- agreement and proximity agreement/concord respectively. Table 1 showed the response of our subjects in the use of subject- verb agreement. Given the research question tested on subject- verb agreement.

The man _____to Anambra state every weekend. With option

A travelling, B travel, C travels, D travelled

Looking at the sentence above, it is observed that, simple present tense is used to express habitual action.

Option A, travelling cannot fit-in, in the slot because it is a progressive tense. The slot requires simple present tense. Option B, is in plural form which requires plural subject in order to make it grammatical.

Option C, is the appropriate option that will fit-in, in the slot. This is because the phrase- *the man* is singular subject which requires a singular verb to make it grammatical. The verb *travels* is a singular verb tense which requires singular subject to make it grammatical too.

Option D, travelled is not accepted in the slot because the verb is in the past form. What it requires is a singular present form of the verb in order to make the sentence grammatical.

So, travelling, travel and travelled are unacceptable but travels is accepted because it fits-in, in the slot above.

Table 2 shows the responses of our subjects in the use of proximity agreement. The crux of the matter is that proximity agreement unlike others, agrees with whatever noun or pronoun that is closely precedes it, especially when it is correlated by either ... or, neither ... nor. That is, if one of the subjects correlated is singular and the other is plural, the verb agrees with the subject which immediately precedes it.

Here, the subjects were tested based on the proximity agreement/ concord. From the analysis, the results showed that, the subjects are not yet imbibed the principles guiding the use of proximity agreement.

The evidence is seen in their choices from various options based on the sentence below.

Either the teacher or the students the bell often

Options: A. removes, B remove C removing D removed.

Option A, *removes*, is not appropriate and cannot fit-in, in the above grammatical slot because the verb is only in agreement with the initial subject NP, the *teacher*, but it is against the proximity agreement/ concord principles. Actually, the *teacher*, would have c-commanded the verb *removes*, but due to the use of the correlative conjunction, either... or, which goes with two subject NPs, designated NP¹ and NP² respectively. It is the subject NP² that collocates with the verb *remove*, rather than the subject NP¹. So, the *teacher*, which is the subject NP¹ cannot govern or c-command the verb phrase (VP).

Option B, *remove* is the correct option that fit-in, in the above grammatical slot.

This is because the subject NP², *the students*, agrees with the VP. Also, it is inconsonance with the proximity agreement/concord principles. The construction is in the present habitual form. *The students*, is in the plural form, therefore it agrees with the verb, *remove*, which is the simple plural verb form.

Judging from the minimalist programme point of view, option C, is ruled out, it fails to converge after checking has taken place, hence, it crashes at logical form of interface level. Option C, though, is in the present form, it is in the aspect progressive form while the entire construction is in the present habitual form. As a result, the subject NP², *the students* fails to agree with the verb, *removing*. Option D, also is not the appropriate option. This is because the verb, *removed* is not in agreement with the subject NP², *the students*, hence, the verb is in the past form while the construction is in the simple present habitual form, the verb that will fit-in, in the above grammatical slot, must be in the simple present habitual form, otherwise, it will crash at the logical interface level.

Consequently, the above analysis proves that, the subjects have not learnt the use of proximity agreement/ concord properly. This is in line with Omorodion, (2011), who confirms that the subjects are not conversant with the use of proximity agreement/ concord, hence they fail to understand that, the verb actually agrees with whatever noun or pronoun that closely precedes it, especially, when it is corrected by: either... or. That is if one of the subject NPs correlated is singular and the other subject NP is plural, the verb agrees with the subject NP which immediately precedes it. Correlative conjunctions are usually in pairs and the immediate preceding subject NP agrees or c-commands the verb.

Based on the above findings, it is pertinent that students must be taught the syntactic agreement so as to enable them stand tall before other people globally.

From the analysis above, we observed that the subjects did not perform well in the syntactic test given to them. The crux of the matter is that, the second language users of English are awash with some of the syntactic rules by which items collocate. Our subjects are not conversant with the subject- verb agreement. The infelicitous use of the sentences below accounts for the ungrammaticality among the second language (L²) users of English.

*John and Mary loves each other

The sentence above is ungrammatical. This is because the NP (Noun Phrase)which is the head of construction is in the plural form, therefore, it must take a plural verb, otherwise, it renders the sentence ungrammatical.

Dikiya, (1991), asserts that plurality is generally marked by adding a suffix to a noun: *John* and *Mary* does not agree with the verb *loves*. Since *John* and *Mary* is a plural subject, it must take a plural verb, *love*, for it to remain grammatical. The grammatical form yields:

John and Mary love each other.

Conclusion

Based on the investigation so far on the area of syntactic phenomena with particular reference to syntactic agreement, we deduce that proper teaching and learning have to be done in areas of English syntax. There is no doubt, our subjects have their source language which differs from English language, therefore the tendencies to carry over the features of their source language to the target language, which is English. The inter-language also hinders them to a large extent from grappling the tenets of English syntax.

Recommendations

The paper, therefore, recommends that proper and adequate teaching and learning of these syntactic nuances of English should be emphasized at the level of the use of English clauses for tertiary students. Lecturers who handle the use of English sentences at tertiary institutions should emphasize on both structural and grammatical relations in English language.

English language teachers are encouraged to attend seminars and workshops regularly where updates on pertinent topics in English language teaching approaches will be discussed; such as the use of relevant sites that teach speaking and writing practices especially on the subject-verb agreement.

Parents should not only provide the necessary materials for effective teaching and learning of English language, but also checkmate their wards interest for positive change. Home videos watched by children should be censored, and approval given only to those that the characters language are well formed, so that their abilities to write and speak good English will be enhanced from the formative age.

According to Egbe, (2000), language is power. When English language being Nigeria's lingua franca is adequately and properly taught, the students with the help of the other language skills acquired, will do exploit.

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