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A STUDY OF SEMANTIC INTERLINGUAL ERRORS: THE CASE OF YORÚBÁ LEARNERS OF ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

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Abstract

The aim of this paper analyses some semantic interlingual errors in the performance of Yoruba learners of English as a second language. Therefore, using Error Analysis (EA) as a theoretical framework, the paper presents samples of lexico-semantic interlingual errors committed by a group of Yorùbá pupils learning English as a second language in some selected secondary schools in Ilorin, Nigeria. The paper also highlights some pedagogical implications of our findings for teachers and learners of English as a second language, curriculum developers, material writers and authors.

1.0 Introduction

One of the obvious advantages of Error Analysis (EA) as a methodological tool in second language teaching and learning is the fact that some of its tenets (most especially recognition, description and explanation of errors) provide sufficient clue in tracing the cause or source of learners' errors in performance (Richards, 1974).

As a teacher of both languages (i. e English and Yorùbá), this writer has been able (through teaching and research) to observe, interpret and trace the cause/source of the learners' errors in performance. Such

types of errors are due to negative transfer from Yorùbá¹ (L1) to English (L2). Such a negative transfer as this is considered normal in a given second-language learning process. It was on this note that Lado (1957:2) makes the following assertion:

...individuals tend to transfer the forms and meanings and the distribution of forms and meanings of their native language and culture to the foreign language and culture – both productively when attempting to speak the language and act in the culture, and receptively when attempting to grasp and understand the language and culture as practised by natives.

1.0 Method of Data Collection

The data used for this study were taken from a pool collected from English essays written by Yorùbá pupils in Junior Secondary School (JSS III) and those in Senior Secondary School (SSS I, II, III) in some selected secondary schools in Ilorin. The schools include: Government Secondary School, Ilorin, Government High School, Ilorin, Ilorin Grammar School, Ilorin, and Baboko Community Secondary School, Ilorin. The first two are public schools established by the Kwara State Government, while the other two are owned by the communities in which they are located. One of the objectives of selecting the two sets of schools is to be able to compare the academic performances of their students; given the fact that government schools are better equipped, in terms of educational facilities, like libraries and laboratories, than the community schools. However, the focus of this paper is on the semantic interpretation and explanation of the interlingual errors committed by the subjects.

The data presented as (A) and (B) below consist of ungrammatical English words, phrases and sentences identified in the written essays of the chosen subjects for this study. In order to determine the written English language errors of the subjects, the researcher instructed the secondary school students to write on selected topics. Students in the JSS section, in each of the schools, were given four different essay topics from which they were to choose and write on any two topics of their interest. Students in the SSS section in the selected schools were also instructed to choose one essay topic and one other topic on letter writing.

After having collected the answer scripts, they were carefully read and marked by the researcher. Grammatical errors were later identified and pulled out for classification into different headings, for the purposes of linguistic description and explanation.

2.0 Error Analysis and Language Teaching

Error Analysis (EA) as a methodological tool in language teaching and learning consists of the following tenets or procedures:

- (i) recognition of errors;
- (ii) description of errors;
- (iii) classification of errors;
- (iv) explanation of errors; and
- (v) correction of errors.

However, Corder (1974:126) makes the assertion that the most important stages in EA are those of recognition, description and

explanation of errors. It is the belief of Error Analysts that errors are studied in order to find out the learning processes and the procedures or strategies employed by second language learners. Expressing a similar view, a 'contrastivist', James (1980:148), remarks that:

An important ingredient of the teacher's role as monitor and assessor of the learner's performance is to know why certain errors are committed. It is on the basis of such diagnostic knowledge that the teacher organises feedback to the learner and remedial work. Even the learner should know why he has committed errors if he is to self-monitor and avoid these same errors in the future.

In other words, users of EA as a methodological tool in second language teaching do not frown at errors committed by second language learners, but consider such errors as being potentially facilitative, rather than inhibitory, in the learning process. Thus, a second language learner is viewed as one who interacts actively with the target language he is learning. Stevens (1969), as quoted in Richards (1974:4), also hypothesises that,

Errors should not be viewed as problems to be overcome, but rather as normal and inevitable features indicating the strategies that learners use. He conjectured that if a regular pattern of errors could be observed in the performance of all learners in a given situation, and if a learner were seen to progress through this pattern, his errors could be taken as evidence not of failure but of success and achievement in learning.

Unlike Contrastive Analysis (CA), EA concentrates on those parts of learner's performance that diverge from whatever norm this

performance is compared with. Therefore, proponents of EA are of the view that we are likely to get better results by collecting and analysing the errors committed by second language learners rather than predicting such errors.

2.1 Defining Interlingual Errors

In defining interlingual errors, Schacher and Celce-Murcia (1977:443) state that, “The interlingual or interference errors are those caused by the influence of the learner's mother-tongue on his production of the target language in presumably those areas where the language clearly differs”. Simply put, interlingual causes of errors are those due to language transfer from the mother-tongue (L1), which is Yoruba language in this case, into the target language (English), in the context of this study. McGregor (2009: 353) also defines language transfer or interference as “the carrying over of grammatical patterns from a person's L1 to L2”. For instance, we have observed in this study that many of the lexico-semantic interlingual errors committed by the learners resulted from 'negative transfer' from **Yorùbá** while trying to produce semantically equivalent sentences in English language. Such types of un-English expressions were identified in data A below by italicizing the erroneous constituents within each of the given sentences having direct translation from **Yorùbá** to English.

2.2 Identification of the Learners' Errors in Performance

The following erroneous sentences were extracted from a pool of written essays produced by the subjects in each of the selected schools.

Some of the ungrammatical expressions, which are semantically deviant, were identified as shown in italics in data (A) below, with their correct versions in brackets:

DATA "A"

- (i) *I have seen *the bottom of the case*.
(I have seen the cause of the matter.)
- (ii) * The husband must *pay the head fees*.
(The husband must pay the dowry.)
- (iii) * Come and see things *with your eyes*.
(Come and see things for yourself.)
- (iv) * We spent all the money *on the head* of our father in the hospital.
(We spent all the money in taking care of our father in the hospital.)
- (v) * He always *shows me the way* whenever I misbehave.
(He always advises or guides me aright whenever I misbehave.)
- (vi) * He is a *long* man. (He is a tall man.)
- (vii) * The smelling is very *sweet*.
(The odour is very attractive/pleasant.)

We also observed that the use of 'honorific' or 'polite' pronouns as a sign of respect in Yorùbá culture constitutes a major sociolinguistic cause of interlingual errors in the performance of the learners, in each of the selected schools. Each of the ungrammatical English expressions in data (B) below contains negatively transferred 'honorific pronoun(s)' from Yorùbá to English. Such pronouns are written in italics as shown below.

DATA "B"

- (a) * The Principal asked the Governor for *their* help.
(The Principal asked the Governor for his help.)
- (b) *I asked my daddy if *they* have paid my school fess.
(I asked my daddy if he had paid my school fees.)
- (c) **They* told me *they* will pay it.
(He [daddy] told me he would pay it.)

- (d) *My brother, who is the husband, called *their* friends to follow *them*.
(My brother, who is the husband, invited his friends to keep his company.)
- (e) *My mother was very happy that I met *them* in good condition.
(My mother was very happy that I met her (my mother) in good condition.)

3.0 Explanation of the Learners' Errors in Performance

As could be observed in data (A) (i-vii) above, the italicized ungrammatical word(s) and phrases resulted from direct translation of some Yorùbá ideas and expressions into English. In other words, each of the erroneous sentences is a product of *negative transfer* from the source language (Yorùbá) to English.

On the need for explanation of errors, Corder (1974:128) remarks that "Our object in error analysis is to explain error linguistically and psychologically in order to help the learner to learn". To this end, an attempt will be made in this section to give detailed explanation of the cause or source of the semantic error(s) in each of the erroneous sentences given in data (A) & (B).

For instance, as could be observed in sentence (i) data (A), the English word 'bottom' literally means "*idi*" in Yorùbá. Idiomatically, the same word "*idi*" in Yorùbá connotes 'the cause of a matter' (i.e, *ìdí òrò* or *ìdí*

ejó). As a result, the learners erroneously equate the literal meaning of "idi" (bottom) with its idiomatic meaning (cause) and thereby produced the ungrammatical English expression - **the bottom of the case*, instead of the correct form - 'the cause of the matter'.

In sentence (ii), the erroneous phrase **head fee* is a direct translation of Yoruba expression - "*Owó Ori*" 'money head' (i.e. dowry).

The un-English expression **head fee* semantically refers to the money paid for marrying a woman in Yorùbá culture. Based on this idea, the learner erroneously/ negatively transferred the English translation of the Yorùbá expression to English, instead of using the appropriate English word - 'dowry'.

Similarly, the ungrammaticality of sentence (iii) resulted from 'negative transfer', as evident in the **Yorùbá** expression:

Wá fì ojù ara à rẹ rí i
 come instr. eyes body-poss.- your see it

which literally means 'to take one's own eyes to see things'.

This idea was negatively transferred to English by the learner and thereby produced the un-English expression - **Come and see things with your eyes*: instead of the appropriate grammatical English sentence - 'Come and see things for yourself'.

The interference error in sentence (iv) also has a semantic origin. In Yorùbá culture, to spend money in taking care of someone (i.e. *náwó lé*

lórí) translates into spending that money 'on the head' of the beneficiary, that is,

<i>ná</i>	<i>owó</i>	<i>lé</i>	<i>ní</i>	<i>orí</i>
spend	money	upon	on	head

'To spend money in taking care of someone'.

Transferring this idea to English, the learner produced the un-English expression: *We spent all the money on the head of our father in the hospital.

Sentence (v) is considered erroneous simply because the meaning of the expression – '*shows me the way*' in that context is different from the intended meaning. As could be interpreted, what the learner actually had in mind was -receiving '*advice*' or '*guidance*' from somebody. To advise or guide someone aright translates into the Yoruba expression:

<i>tǒ ènìyàn</i>	<i>sí</i>	<i>ônà</i>
show/direct	person to	way/road

(To guide or advise someone appropriately).

Using a direct translation approach, the learner negatively transferred the Yorùbá expression into English and thereby produced the erroneous sentence –

*He always shows me the way whenever I misbehave.

In certain contexts in Yorùbá, the adjective "*gígùn*" 'long' is synonymous with "*giga*" 'tall', hence the two Yorùbá expressions below could be used interchangeably:

(a)	<i>èniyàn</i>	<i>gígùn</i>
	person	to be long
	'A tall person'	

(b)	<i>èniyàn</i>	<i>gíga</i>
	person	to be tall
	'A tall person'	

Based on the fact that the adjective 'long' is synonymous with 'tall' in the above context in Yorùbá, the learner therefore transfers the wrong form 'long' to English to produce the un-English expression as in sentence (vi) (i.e. *He is a long man), instead of the appropriate English sentence -'He is a tall man'.

3.1 Findings

The category of errors in data (A) above could be traced to negative transfer from Yorùbá (L1) to English (L2). And the errors are mostly semantic interlingual errors that were brought about by direct translation of the affected utterances from Yorùbá to English.

On the other hand, the cause of the error in each of the sentences in data (B) could be traced to a sociolinguistic interference in the performance of Yorùbá native speakers learning English as a second language. As commonly found among the speakers of Standard Yorùbá, both the second and the third person plural pronouns are used honorifically in referring to an elderly interlocutor as a mark of respect. This is a cultural

socio-linguistic phenomenon in Yorùbá language that must be obligatorily observed by the younger speakers addressing the elderly ones.

However, whenever the idea of such honorific use of pronouns is negatively transferred to both spoken and written English, the resultant expression will be nonsensical and ungrammatical. This is evident in each of the examples given in 'Data (B) (a)-(e)' above.

4.0 Some Pedagogical Implications of the Findings

We consider the findings in this study to be of great interest and usefulness to researchers in Applied Linguistics, teachers and learners of English as a second language, materials writers, curriculum developers and authors.

Using EA as a theoretical framework, we have discovered in this study that clue to correct interpretation of the erroneous utterances that are traceable to semantic interlingual causes may require some knowledge of both the mother-tongue of the learner and the target language he is learning. In other words, a Yorùbá native speaker teaching English as a second language, with some background knowledge of linguistics or applied linguistics, will be a better English language teacher to a group of Yorùbá learners of English as a second language than an English language teacher without such background.

As evident from our findings, errors committed by Yorùbá native speakers learning English as a second language revealed some of the

strategies employed by the learners. Such strategies include direct translation of Yorùbá ideas and expressions into English. An awareness of the aforementioned strategies will afford an English language teacher the opportunity of working out ways of overcoming such errors through improved teaching methods as well as using some remedial approaches like teaching and re-teaching of the difficult areas, the use of pattern drills, etc. Another pedagogical advantage of such findings is that they may be used as basis for planning for future group of learners with the same or similar linguistic background.

5.0 Conclusion

This *paper* presents a brief report of a classroom research on EA of the performance of secondary school students (i.e. Yorùbá native speakers) learning English as a second language in Ilorin, Nigeria.

The paper focuses on learners' errors that are due to the influence of the learners' mother-tongue. To be specific, semantic interlingual errors resulting from negative transfer of Yorùbá ideas and expressions to English. Such errors are mostly lexico-semantic errors. Other types of errors discussed in this paper include errors relating to transfer of the phenomenon of honorific pronouns from Yorùbá to English.

Having provided a theoretical background, the paper presents samples of errors committed by the learners. Following the techniques of EA, the errors were identified, described and adequately explained by tracing the cause/source of each of the erroneous expressions. The paper also highlights some pedagogic implications of the findings in this study.

NOTES

¹ 'Standard Yorùbá' refers to the North-Western Yorùbá spoken in Nigeria. It is this variant of the language that has been chosen to be the **norm** because of its uniformity and wide use in schools, textbooks, and the media. Yorùbá is a tone language with **three** discrete tone levels:

High [/] Mid [unmarked] Low [\]

² Symbol & Abbreviations Used in this Paper:

- * = Ungrammatical Expressions
- instr.** = Instrument
- poss.** = Possessive Marker
- C.A.** = Contrastive Analysis
- E.A.** = Error Analysis

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