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8.

A Transformational Generative Approach to Passivisation Problems Exhibited by Selected Students of Polytechnics

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Abstract

In this paper, the author reported an investigation into the difficulties encountered by some Nigerian polytechnic students in the construction of passive sentences. The researcher constructed twelve (12) questions which were administered to test the competence of one hundred respondents randomly selected from the four colleges of Waziri Umaru Federal Polytechnic (WUFED), Birnin Kebbi. The errors identified were analysed and classified using the Descriptive Method of error analysis within the frameworks of Chomsky's Transformational Generative Grammar (TGG). The study revealed that the respondents exhibited the following errors: random selection between the auxiliary verb "been" and "being", dropping of tense marker or using improper form of tense, omission of plural marker in the process of swooping of linguistic items, insertion of extraneous items, derivation of unrelated conversion, and wrong assignment of semantic interpretation to noun phrases contained in passive sentence. Stemming from these findings, the author calls the attention of stakeholders to curriculum design, production of language materials, and creation of teaching/learning environment. Considering the fact that our respondents are users of English as a Second Language (ESL), it is believed that if attention is given to such issues that are germane to the exhibition of relevant language

skills, improvement in learners' performance would be remarkable.

Introduction

The linguistic reality of multilingualism in Nigerian terrain makes virtually every citizen bilingual; a situation made more intricate by the adoption and entrenchment of English in Nigeria. It is unarguable that English has succeeded in overriding the expansive indigenous languages which could not resist its supremacy. Interestingly, English is the nexus that ties members of the various linguistic communities in Nigeria. Odebunmi (2001) identifies official domain, educational domain, media domain, religious observance domain and informal interpersonal domain as the five domains where English language functions in Nigeria. Nevertheless, not minding the benefits of English in Nigeria, language contact and bilingualism in such a complex linguistic context is not without some implications on second language learning. When describing the reality of language contact, Saporta (1966, p.377) calls attention to what he calls "the potential forms of interference in the given contact." Sotiloye (1999, p.191) vividly captures this situation when she says: "In a bilingual situation, one's mother tongue (MT) or L_1 automatically influences the learning of a Second Language. The effect of L_1 on L_2 could be positive or negative."

The phenomenon of negative transfer technically called "interference", according to Oloruntuba-Oju (1999, p.135), occurs "when the learner transfers the structure and concept of his mother tongue inappropriately into the target Language, leading to the production of incorrect forms in the target language." In a bilingual or multi-lingual setting, the learner of a second language is constrained to import the linguistic elements of his native language and ignorantly exhibits these elements on the internal elements of the target language. The learner does so because of his lack of awareness of the inexistence of corresponding structural affinity between his L_1 and L_2 in all linguistic situations. Consequently, the improper application of L_1 knowledge on the structures of L_2 which leads to commission of errors, is the inevitable occurrence.

The passive construction is one of the binary syntactic routes (active or passive voice) via which the user of English Language can express the same idea. The selection between the routes depends on how the user wishes to arrange the elements in the sentence to convey his intended message.

Knowledge of these two routes is what users of English cannot afford to dispense with. However, what has been observed in the linguistic manifestation at the syntactic level, by the polytechnic students, who are users of English as a Second Language, is the production of improper forms. Applied linguists and sociolinguists such as Afolayan (1995), Babatunde (2001) and Fatusin (2004) have attempted to advance the teacher-student and teaching-learning environments as strong factors posing great challenges to a learner's level of acquisition of the target language. The thrust of this paper is therefore, to examine the various aspects of passive construction which pose difficulties for the respondents and identify the causative factors of their low performance in this syntactic level with a view to suggesting panacea to the problems identified.

Purpose of the Study

The study hinges on Transformational Generative Grammar as a theoretical underpinning in the investigation of errors related to passive constructions by 100 respondents who are polytechnic students. Thus, the study:

- a. explores the various syntactic components of passive constructions with a view to discovering the aspects which pose difficulties for the respondents;
- b. identifies the possible causative factors for the respondents' low performance of relevant language skills, especially, in the construction of passive sentences; and
- c. advances possible explanations for the errors identified, with a view to suggesting certain remedial measures which would enhance the learners' competence in the construction of passive sentences.

Research Methodology

The data used for this study are twelve questions constructed by the researcher. The questions cover the various transformational processes involved in the derivation of the passive sentence from the active sentence. The method used in the collection of useful information was the administration of the test on one hundred students randomly selected from the four Colleges of Waziri Umaru Federal Polytechnic (WUFED), Birnin Kebbi. The respondents were Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba speakers of English.

representing the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria. Our respondents comprised 50 female and 50 male students drawn from all levels to ensure fair representation. The errors identified were analysed and classified using simple percentile and frequency tables. The descriptive method of error analysis was done from the purview of Transformational Generative Grammar. The choice of this model among others (such as the Traditional Grammar, Systemic Functional Grammar and other Models) is due to its adequate treatment of transformation processes which generate passive constructions.

Theoretical Framework

This investigation hinges on the deployment of methodological tools from the purview of Transformation Generative Grammar, henceforth, TGG. This model of grammar, whose proponent is Noam Chomsky, has many versions (Extended Standard Theory, Trace Theory, Government and Binding Theory and Minimalist Theory) each of which evolves from the earlier version. Within the purview of TGG, two surface structures are recognised. Valin van, Roberts TR and Lapolla (1997, p.17) submit:

One of the most important claims Chomsky made in his earlier works was that no theory of grammar could approach descriptive or explanatory adequacy if it is recognized only on single level of syntactic representation namely the overt or surface form.

Banjo (1999, p.105) buttresses the above assumption when he says: "the most revolutionary aspect of Chomskyan linguistics was the distinction... between surface and deep structure." Cook (1988, p30) attempts to explain the two levels as follows: "GB requires two levels of syntactic representation: D-structure at which all elements in the sentence are in their original location, and S-structures at which they have been moved."

In the recent versions of TGG, the transformation process involves the application of move alpha (α) which is defined as moving any grammatical constituent from its original or canonical place called extraction site to a new site called a landing site. Lamidi (2000, p.44) asserts: "These transformational rules include those for passive constructions, relative constructions, negative constructions, indirect object movement, etc."

The various submissions of the exponents of TGG discussed above reveal that a basic sentence (simple active declarative and affirmative sentence) is convertible to other syntactic constructions such as passivisation, relativisation, etc. This is exemplified thus:

- | | | |
|----|---|-------------------|
| 1. | <u>The man</u> <u>slapped</u> <u>the Woman</u> | (Active
form) |
| | NP ₁ VP NP ₂ | |
| 2. | <u>The woman</u> (was) <u>slapped</u> (by) <u>the man</u> | (passive
form) |
| | NP ₂ VP NP ₁ | |

In sentence 1, (in TGG's term, representing the D-structure: active sentence) we have all the elements denoted by NP₁ and NP₂ in their original positions, while in sentence two (representing the S-structure: passive form) we perceive the swapping of positions by the two elements. Wales (1989. p341) states that "There is obviously a close complementary relationship between the active and passive sentence: they appear to have the same propositional meaning to be paraphrase of each other". Since the constructions in the D-structure (active form) and the S-structure (passive form), such as we have in the above sentences share the same semantic affinity, the user of English language is provided opportunity to choose between the two routes as constrained by certain communicative factors. The choice may be motivated by attitudinal factor, structural preference, or pragmatic intentions. Yusuf (1997, p.73) states:

The speaker may decide to express his meaning in such a way to emphasize some item over another. His intention may be for stylistic effect or a more serious need. Whatever the reason, transformation will work on the basic sentence as generated by base phrase maker (i.e. in the D-structure) to map such phrase maker unto a surface phrase marker.

The application of move- α and rules or transformational rules for the derivation of a new structure from the basic structure involves any of the following processes, namely, addition or insertion, deletion, re-arrangement and substitution. For illustration, let us consider the following sentences.

3. The goat ate the yam. (basic active form)
- NP₁ VP NP₂
4. The yam was eaten by the goat. (derived passive form)
- NP₂ VP NP₁

A careful observation of the sequential arrangement of words or the configuration of lexical items in sentence labelled 4, derived from sentence labelled 3 above, reveals the following transformation processes in the passive construction:

- (a) The swapping of the syntactic positions involving the subject (NP₁) and the object (NP₂) of the sentence. (Transformation by rearrangement is employed).
- (b) The addition of the auxiliary verb “was” and the preposition “by” (Transformation by addition or insertion is involved).
- (c) The conversion of the main verb from past to participle realised via participle marker “ed” = en (eat + ed = eaten). (Transformation by addition or insertion is applicable). Wales (1989, p.341) sums these up when she says that “In the passive, the affected object is the grammatical subject and the agent is expressed in a prepositional phrase.”

A more complex transformation process in the construction of passive sentences is that involving transformation by deletion. This could be illustrated thus:

- (5) Armed robbers killed two passengers. (Active sentence)
- NP₁ VP NP₂
- (6) Two passengers were killed (by armed robbers). (Passive sentence)
- NP_s VP NP_i

In sentence 6, the elements denoted NP_i enclosed in the bracket may be deleted, so that we have an elliptical construction such as: "Two passengers were killed." This implies that passive constructions permit an elliptical process involving transformation by deletion of the agentive structure (the doer of the action). Transformative expression such as this demonstrates that

the speaker may decide to suppress certain information, or fail to reveal the identity of the doer of the action for certain reasons or for stylistic purposes in the derivation of passive construction.

More so, the passive construction is capable of realising dissimilar structures which are not semantically different from the basic active form when it contains triadic predicates. A sentence having triadic predicates (unlike the one with dyadic predicate where two nouns or noun phrases flank the verb in both sides; see examples 1,2,3,4, above) contains three nouns or noun phrases. Lamidi (2000, p.55) explains that "Triadic predicate involves a relation between a verb and three arguments within the same sentence". Within the framework of TGG, argument is otherwise known as "Noun Phrase". The examples that follow illuminate this concept.

(7) Musa gives Aminat a ring. (Basic sentence:
Ditransitive)

NP₁ VP NP₂ NP₃

(8) Musa gives a ring to Aminat. (Derived sentence 1: To-
dative)

NP₁ VP NP₃ PP NP₂

(9) Aminat is given a ring by Musa (Derived sentence 2: Passive)

NP₂ VP NP₃ PP NP₁

(10) A ring is given to Aminat by Musa. (Derived sentence 3:
Passive)

NP₃ VPPP NP₂ PP NP₁

The verb "gives" and its variant "is given" in different syntactic location co-occur with three noun phrases which are displaced or extracted from their original positions (in sentence 7) to the new locations or landing sites (in sentence 8 and 9 and 10). The transformation process which converts sentence 7 to 8 is not as complicated as the ones converting sentence 7 to sentence 9 and 10. Nevertheless, these do not alter the semantic import inherent in all the constructions. Frederick (1980, p.78) points out that "while many transformational rules preserved meaning not all did". The present study does not intend to capture the rivalry camps within the TGG over transformation processes.

A close observation of the element denoted "VP" (Verb Phrase) in all the above passive constructions equally reveals that certain elements which are

not originally presented in the basic active form are inserted to generate the various derived sentences. The element in TGG is called “INFL” = inflection which according to Lamidi (2000, p.103) “subsumes verbal element like tense, model; agreement and aspect.” The INFL, through the application of Affix Hopping Rules, ensures that the verb takes the appropriate form in conformity with the tense and in agreement with the subject of the active sentence generated. Table 1 illustrates the corresponding form which the verb must take in the new site.

Table 1: Table Showing the Tenses in Relation to Active-passive Construction

Tense	Active Sentence	Derived Passive Sentence
Simple present	The man <u>kills</u> the goat.	The goat <u>is killed</u> by the man.
Simple past	The man <u>killed</u> the goat.	The goat <u>was killed</u> by the man.
Present continuous	The man <u>is killing</u> the goat.	The goat <u>is being killed</u> by the man.
Past continuous	The man <u>was killing</u> the goat.	The goat <u>was being killed</u> by the man.
Past perfect	The man <u>had killed</u> the goat.	The goat <u>had been killed</u> by the man.
Future perfect	The man <u>will kill</u> the goat.	The goat <u>will be killed</u> by the man.
Future continuous	The man <u>will be killing</u> the goat.	The goat <u>will be being killed</u> by the man.

The user of English language is provided with various tenses contained in the first column of the table above; his choice must suit the time of the action he intends to convey. Adegbija (1998, p.127) states that “time constant is represented in the English language by particular forms of the verb”. The sentences in column B in the table above correspond to the time stated in column A, and the derivations in column C are equally in conformity with the tense of sentences in column B.

The above exploration into the philosophy of TGG has revealed the processes relating to passive transformational constructions. An extensive discussion of all the syntactic constituents that enter into the construction of passive sentences is a major motivation for preferring TGG above other syntactic models earlier mentioned.

Data Analysis and Findings

The errors observable in the test administered to the respondents are analysed and presented in the tables that follow.

Table 2: Frequency of Errors of Random Choice between Auxiliary “Been” and “Being”

Tenses tested	No of Occurrence of correct form	No of Occurrence of incorrect form
Present continuous	28	72
Past continuous	17	83
Present perfect	11	89
Past perfect	08	92

It becomes relevant to present the textual examples of the error types observable in the scripts of our respondents. These errors include the following:

1. The judge is dismissing the case. (test administered)
(a) *The case is been dismissed by the judge. (response) 70%
(b) *The case is been dismiss by the judge. (response) 2%
2. The police man was arresting the thief. (test administered).
(a) *The thief was been arrested by the police man. (response) 66%
(b) *The thief was been arrest by the police man. (response) 17%
3. The police man has arrested the thief. (test administered)
(a) *The thief has being arrested by the police man. (response) 68%
(b) *The thief has being arrest by the police man. (response) 21%
4. The judge had dismissed the case. (test administered)
(a) *The case had being dismissed by the judge. (response) 69%
(b) *the case had beingdismiss by the judge. (response) 23%

It is obvious from the above responses that more than average students were just arbitrarily using the auxiliary “being” and “been” because of their ignorance of the appropriate syntactic contexts in which the verbs must occur. The improper usage of these auxiliary verbs occurs as the respondents interchanged the auxiliary verb “been” for “being”. The auxiliary “been” must be used in the context of perfect tense where there is the occurrence of

perfect auxiliary verbs such as “has”, “have” and “had”. See examples 1 and 2 above. More so, our respondents used the “auxiliary “being” in place of “been.” The auxiliary “being” must be used in the context of continuous or progressive tense where it must be preceded by any of the verb-to-be such as “is”, “am”, “are”, “was”, and “were.” See examples 3 and 4 above. These errors indicate that many respondents are deficient in using the correct form of auxiliary verbs relating to “being” and “been” in their proper contexts. Errors such as these may be traceable to the phonological affinity which the two words share in their oral production.

Table 3: Frequency of Error Related to Tense Markers

Tenses Tested	No of Occurrence of Correct Form	No of Occurrence of Incorrect Form
Simple Present tense	19	81
Simple past tense	14	86

The textual examples of the above error-types include the following:

5. The man helps the woman. (Test administered)
(a) *The woman is help by the man (response) 64%
(b) *The woman is helps by the man. 17%
6. The man destroyed the book. (test administered)
(a) *The book was destroy by the man. (response) 73%
(b) *The book was destroying by the man. 13%

The various responses such as the ones given above indicate that many students had difficulties of (1) assigning appropriate inflectional suffix to the main verbs which must take participle marker in the passive constructions (2) using the correct form of auxiliary verb which must agree in terms of tense with the original verb, and in number with the preceding subject. It is obvious from the errors listed above that our respondents either dropped the participle marker of the main verb or used a wrong form. It is assumed that errors such as these are traceable to their ignorance of basic grammatical rules applicable to tense systems in English Language.

Table 4: Frequency of Errors Related to Plurality

Tenses Tested	No of Occurrence of Correct Form	No of Occurrence of Incorrect Form
Present perfect	17	83
Past continuous	21	79

The textual examples of the above error-types are presented as follows.

7. The teacher has graded the students. (test administered)
 - a. *Thestudents has being/ been graded by the teacher. 60%
 - b. *Thestudent has been graded by the teacher. 10%
 - c. *Thestudent has being graded by the teachers 13%
8. The man was cutting the trees. (test Administered)
 - a. *The trees was being/been cut by the man. 51%
 - b. *The trees was being/ been cutting by the men (Reponses) 19%
 - c. *The trees was being/been cut by the man. 9%

The data presented above demonstrate how some subjects wrongly used or misused the plural marker. Three errors observable are (1) Lack of agreement between the new subject and the verbs, as they retained the original verbs forms in the test administered. (2) The omission or deletion of the plural marker from the new subject that is moved from the object position to the landing site with the intention to conform with the singular feature inherent in the old subject which has swapped for the new subject. (3) Pluralisation of the original subjects in the new site (object position) with the intention to conform to the plural feature inherent in the old object which has swapped for the new object. The errors affirm that most of the subjects have difficulties with arrangement of items in the structure of passive forms, using the correct form of plural markers.

Table 5: Frequency of Error Related to Insertion of Extraneous Elements (Being/Been)

Tenses Tested	No of Occurrence of Correct Form	No of Occurrence of Incorrect Form
Simple present	11	89
Simple past	13	87

The textual examples of the above error types are as follows:

9. The boy greets the old man. (Test Administered).
 - a. *The old man is been greeted by the boy. 51%
 - b. *The old man is being greeted by the boy. 38%
- 9b. The boy greeted the old man.
 - a. *The old man was been greeted by the boy. 46%
 - b. *The old man was being greeted by the boy. 41%

The addition of auxiliary verbs such as “being” or “been” is not required in the active-passive conversion of a basic sentence having either simple present tense or simple past tense. The data above indicate that most of the respondents did not have the sufficient knowledge of the tense types that require the insertion of these auxiliary verbs. This type of error is the most prevalent among others. The lack of awareness of the restricted or specific tense types involving the insertion of these auxiliary verbs demonstrates they over-generalise the rule to every type of tense in the derivation of passive construction.

Table 6: Frequency of Error Related Improper or Unrelated Conversion

Tenses Tested	No of Occurrence of Correct Form	No of Occurrence of Incorrect Form
Simple past	36	64

The textual examples of the above error type are as follows:

10. The goat ate yam. (Test Administered)
 - a. *The yam is being eating by the goat. 20%
 - b. *The yam was been eating by the goat. 22%

c. *It was the yam that the goat eat. 15%

d. *It is the yam that the goat ate. 7%

The error type that is germane to the current discussion is contained in sentence (10 c) and (10 d) above, since the type of error in sentence (10 a) and (10 b) has been discussed in the preceding sections (cf. table 3 and 4). In an attempt to re-arrange the elements within the structures of the basic sentence (Test Administered) the subjects logically brought the object forward not realising that the logical subject of the basic form still maintains its position as the subject of the verbs ate. The respondents subtly derived the new construction by the aid of focusing markers, "it is" or "it was". Focusing construction is however unrelated to the task put before the respondents. Though the percentage of this type of error is relatively low in comparison to other errors treated, it is obvious that an appreciable knowledge of differences of structure was not demonstrated by the respondents.

Table 7: Frequency of Error Related to Interpretation

Sentence Form	No of Occurrence of Correct Interpretation	No of Occurrence of Wrong Interpretation
Passive	57	43
Active	68	32

The textual examples of the above error type are as follows:

11. The teacher is being helped by the students. Which of the nouns in the

sentence benefits from the action expressed here?

- a. The teacher. 57%
- b. The students. 43%

12. The teacher is helping the students. Which of the nouns in the sentence benefits from the action expressed here?

- c. The teacher. 32%
- d. The students. 68%

As indicated in the set of data provided above, it is apparent that though very few, some of our respondents were deficient in assigning appropriate

semantic interpretation to the various constituent structures, especially, the noun phrases that enter into the construction of passive sentence. The respondents in this category assumed that the Noun Phrase in the object position within the structure of passive sentence is the beneficiary of the action expressed. On the basis of their inability to recognize the effect that arrangement bears on meaning, they could not distinguish between the performer of the action and the beneficiary of the action; especially when both are human agents.

Conclusion

In this study, an attempt was made to show the problems which are exhibited with the English passive constructions by 100 respondents who are Polytechnic students. We have discovered that in the demonstration of language skills for the derivation and interpretation of passive constructions, the respondents exhibited many deficiencies. Those observable errors are: random selection between the auxiliary verb "been" and "being", dropping of tense marker or using improper form of tense, omission of plural marker in the process of swooping items, insertion of extraneous items, derivation of unrelated conversion, and wrong assignment of semantic interpretation to noun phrases contained in passive sentence. In accounting for these problems, it should be stressed that ignorance of basic grammatical principles for sentence derivation creates difficulty for the respondents on passive constructions. On the basis of the various errors discovered, this study intends to call the attention of stakeholders to curriculum design, language materials and teaching/learning environment which cater for these basic grammatical concepts in the various ethno-linguistic milieus. It is believed that proper attentions to these would enhance the competence of learners of English in ESL context.

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