



An Analysis of Morpho-syntactic Errors in the Narrative Essays of First-Year Undergraduate Students of English in Southwestern Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Academic writing has consistently posed a significant challenge for second-language (L2) learners of English. This paper examines essays written by first-year students of English at the University of Lagos, Osiele, Abeokuta Campus, with the aim of identifying and classifying errors committed in the morphosyntactic component of the target language (English). This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach. Thirty (30) ENG103 examination scripts were purposively selected, from which sixty-one (61) structures were extracted and analysed. The study is grounded in Chomsky's (1981) Government and Binding Theory, with a particular emphasis on the sub-theories of X-bar, Case, and Government. The analysis revealed that Spec-Head Agreement was frequently violated in the structures, as the specifier and head failed to agree in number, tense, and aspect. Most sentences lacked explicit subjects, thereby violating the Extended Projection Principle (EPP). Additionally, some nouns and pronouns exhibited incorrect case markings, violating the Case Filter. Morphological inaccuracies were also observed, characterised by redundant duplication of inflectional morphological features and omission of inflectional markings. These errors may compromise the effectiveness of academic writing. To address these challenges, educators and instructors should emphasise grammatical accuracy, provide targeted support, and offer extensive writing practice with constructive feedback. Additionally, explicitly highlighting differences between spoken and written English grammar will prevent learners from transferring spoken language features to written language.

Keywords: Morphosyntactic errors, academic writing, second-language Learners, head spec agreement, English language learning.

Introduction

It is an undeniable fact that the English language has become a cornerstone of academic and professional success in Nigeria. Oyedele and Afolayan (2013) assert that English language proficiency is a crucial determinant of students' academic performance, as it enables them to comprehend complex texts, engage in critical thinking, and express their ideas effectively. Apart from being a tool for academic achievement, the English language is also a vital skill for professional advancement, as it facilitates communication, collaboration, and knowledge sharing among individuals from diverse linguistic backgrounds. It is the common denominator that unites professionals across various disciplines (Salami and Alabi, 2015:12).

The English language necessarily serves as a catalyst for socio-economic development; therefore, it has a profound impact on individuals' career prospects and economic mobility. The majority of multinational corporations and international organizations require English language proficiency as a prerequisite for employment, and it is widely used in business, science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields, (Adebayo and Olaniran, 2018:34)

In light of the importance of effective writing and the challenges faced by Nigerian university undergraduates in developing their writing skills, this study seeks to investigate the morpho-syntactic errors in the narrative essays of first-year undergraduate students of English in southwestern Nigeria. Specifically, the study aims to examine the factors that contribute to these errors and provide recommendations for improving writing instruction and support.

Literature Review

Error Analysis

Error analysis is a methodological approach used in linguistics and language teaching to examine and interpret the errors made by language learners in their spoken or written language production. It involves identifying, analysing, and explaining the errors in order to understand the language learning process and to improve language teaching practices. According to Crystal (1999), it involves the study of unacceptable language forms produced by

learners, particularly those learning a foreign language. Similarly, James (2001) views error analysis as the investigation of linguistic ignorance, where learners attempt to cope with their lack of knowledge.

Moreover, Corder (1967) emphasises the value of errors in language learning, benefiting teachers, researchers, and learners themselves. Errors provide teachers with insights into students' progress, researchers with evidence of language acquisition, and learners with resources to improve their language skills. In addition, Brown (2000) defines error analysis as the process of observing, analysing, and revealing the language systems used by second-language learners. Likewise, Abisamra (2003) views error analysis as a type of linguistic analysis focusing on learner errors.

Furthermore, error analysis identifies two sources of errors: interlingual (interference) errors, resulting from the influence of the learner's first language, and intralingual errors, resulting from partial learning (Brown, 2000; Keshavarz, 2003). Notably, intralingual errors can be attributed to overgeneralisation, ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete application of rules, and false concept hypothesised (Richards, 1972). Additionally, Stenson (1974) suggests that errors can also result from incomplete acquisition of target grammar, teaching/learning situation exigencies, and normal language performance problems.

Morpho-syntax

Morpho-syntax is a branch of linguistics that studies the relationship between the internal structure of words (morphology) and the external structure of sentences (syntax) (Babalola, 2024). According to Ajiboye (2015), morpho-syntax examines how the internal structure of words, including their morphological properties, affects their syntactic behavior. This includes the study of how words are formed from morphemes and how these morphemes contribute to the overall meaning of the word. By examining the internal structure of words, morpho-syntax provides insights into how words function within sentences.

Olaniran (2018) notes that morpho-syntax is concerned with the study of how morphological processes, such as inflection and derivation, interact with syntactic processes, such as phrase structure and sentence formation. This interaction is crucial in determining the meaning of sentences and the relationships between words. For example, the morphological process of inflection can affect the syntactic behaviour of a word, and the syntactic process of phrase structure can affect the meaning of a sentence. In essence, morpho-syntax provides a framework for understanding how the internal structure of words contributes to the external structure of sentences and how this relationship affects the meaning of language.

Morphosyntactic error

Ajiboye (2015) attributes morphosyntactic errors to a lack of understanding of the syntactic rules of the language or to the influence of the speaker's native language. This suggests that language learners may struggle to grasp the complexities of the target language's syntax, leading to errors. Additionally, the influence of the speaker's native language can result in language transfer, where learners apply the syntactic rules of their native language to the target language, leading to errors. Also, this language transfer can be a major obstacle for language learners.

In a similar vein, Olaniran (2018) notes that morpho-syntactic errors can also be caused by cognitive processing limitations. Furthermore, these limitations can affect learners' ability to process and understand complex linguistic structures. Cognitive processing limitations can lead to errors in sentence planning and execution, resulting in ungrammatical or nonsensical sentences.

Moreover, Adegbite (2019) observes that linguistic factors, such as sentence complexity, can also contribute to morpho-syntactic errors. Also, the presence of ambiguous or unclear linguistic structures can increase the likelihood of errors. Linguistic factors can lead to errors in sentence interpretation and production, resulting in morpho-syntactic errors.

Notably, Babalola (2024) points out that morpho-syntactic errors can have significant consequences for communication, particularly in formal or professional settings. Furthermore, errors in sentence structure or grammar can lead to misunderstandings or misinterpretations, which can have serious consequences in fields such as law, medicine, or business.

The studies by Ajiboye, Olaniran, Adegbite, and Babalola demonstrate that morpho-syntactic errors are a complex phenomenon that can be attributed to multiple factors. Overall, the scholars' views on morpho-syntactic errors share some similarities but also have distinct differences. Also, their studies collectively emphasise the importance of understanding the causes and consequences of morpho-syntactic errors for developing effective strategies for language teaching and learning.

Subject verb agreement

Subject-verb agreement is a fundamental aspect of grammar, where the verb must agree with the subject in number, person, and gender. However, grammatical discrepancies can arise when there are exceptions to this rule or when language users deviate from standard language norms.

According to Huddleston and Pullum (2002:503), subject-verb agreement can be affected by various factors, including the type of subject, the verb phrase, and the clause structure. They note that "the agreement of the verb with the subject is not always straightforward." Similarly, Quirk et al. (1985) observe that subject-verb agreement can be influenced by the proximity principle, where the verb agrees with the nearest noun phrase. They argue that this principle can lead to grammatical discrepancies, particularly in cases where the subject is a complex noun phrase.

Furthermore, grammatical discrepancies in subject-verb agreement can also arise due to language contact or language change. As noted by Trudgill (2010), language contact can lead to the transfer of grammatical structures from one language to another, resulting in discrepancies in subject-verb agreement.

Moreover, research has shown that language learners may also exhibit grammatical discrepancies in subject-verb agreement due to cognitive or linguistic factors. According to Ellis (2008), language learners may use simplified or modified grammatical structures, including subject-verb agreement, due to limitations in their linguistic knowledge or processing capacity.

Previous Studies

Previous studies have investigated morpho-syntactic errors in the written English of Nigerian students. For instance, Gunn (2017) conducted a syntactic analysis of the written English of Isoko users of English, identifying nine types of errors common among second language users of English. Similarly, Gunn and Ishaya (2018) examined verbal errors committed by secondary school students in Delta State, finding a prevalence of tense and grammar errors. Ridha (2012) analysed written English samples of EFL college students, categorising errors into grammatical, lexical/semantic, mechanical, and word order types. The study revealed that L1 transfer was a significant contributor to errors, with learners relying heavily on their mother tongue to express ideas.

Adegbite (2015) investigated errors in the written English of Nigerian university students, finding that grammatical errors were the most frequent. Similarly, Osisanwo (2017) examined errors in the narrative essays of Nigerian secondary school students, identifying tense and subject-verb agreement errors as prevalent.

Additionally, Ajadi (2018) analyzed morpho-syntactic errors in the written English of Nigerian undergraduate students, revealing that errors were largely influenced by L1 interference. Furthermore, Ojo (2020) investigated errors in the written English of Nigerian university students, finding that lexical errors were the most common.

Moreover, Alabi (2019) conducted a study on the morpho-syntactic errors in the written English of Nigerian senior secondary school students, finding that errors were more frequent in the use of verb tenses and subject-verb agreement. Also, Oyewole (2020) examined the effects of L1 interference on the morpho-syntactic errors in the written English of Nigerian undergraduate students, revealing that L1 interference played a significant role in the errors committed.

Ansaldo (2015) analysed the composition errors in the written English of Nigerian university students, finding that errors in cohesion and coherence were the most frequent. Similarly, Eke (2017) examined the composition errors in the essays of Nigerian secondary school students, identifying errors in paragraph organisation and sentence structure as prevalent.

Furthermore, Okoro (2020) conducted a study on the composition errors in the written English of Nigerian undergraduate students, revealing that errors in grammar and vocabulary usage were the most common. The study also found that errors in composition were influenced by factors such as L1 interference, lack of practice, and inadequate instruction.

The present study aims to contribute to this body of research by analysing morpho-syntactic errors and composition errors in the narrative essays of first-year undergraduate students of English in Southwestern Nigeria.

Methodology

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to analyse morpho-syntactic errors in the narrative essays of first-year undergraduate students of English at the University of Lagos, Osiele, Abeokuta Campus. The study adopted a qualitative research design, which involved the collection and analysis of data from a sample of examination scripts.

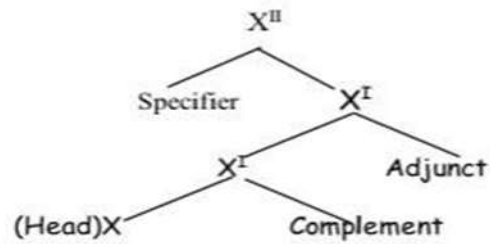
The participants were first-year undergraduate students of English. Thirty (30) ENG103 examination scripts were purposively selected for this study. The scripts were selected based on their availability and relevance to the research topic.

Sixty-one (61) structures were extracted from the selected examination scripts and analysed for morpho-syntactic errors. The analysis was done using the Government and Binding (GB) theory, specifically the X-bar, Case, and Government sub-theories. To ensure the reliability and validity of the study, the data were analysed by the researchers, and the findings were verified through a re-analysis of the data.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the Government and Binding (GB) theory, a generative grammar framework developed by Noam Chomsky (1981). GB theory posits that language is an innate faculty of the human mind and that grammatical structures are generated through a set of universal principles and parameters. Within the GB framework, this study draws on three sub-theories: X-bar theory, case theory, and government theory.

X-bar theory, which was developed by Jackendoff, posits that all phrases are headed by either a lexical head or a functional head. This theory provides a hierarchical structure for phrases, consisting of a head, complements, and specifiers. X-bar theory is essential for this analysis as it enables the identification of phrase structure errors. See the diagram below:



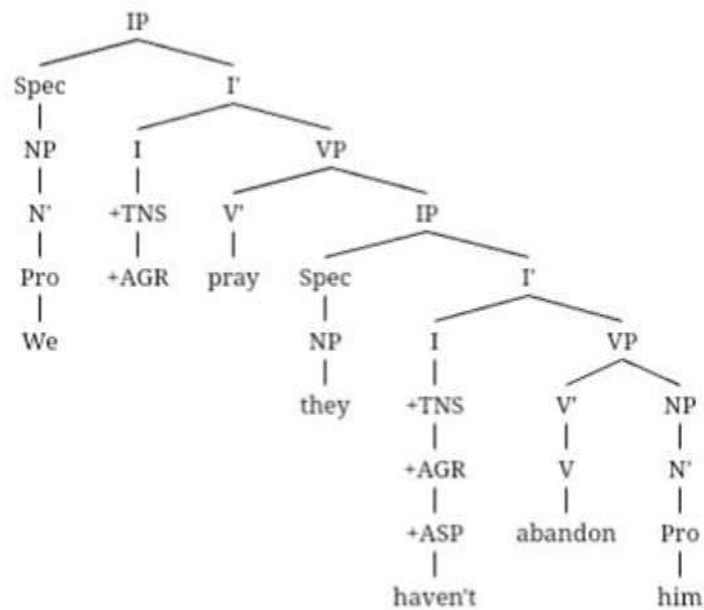
Case theory explains how nouns and pronouns are assigned case (nominative, accusative, genitive, etc.) based on their grammatical function. Case theory is crucial for this analysis as it helps to identify errors in case assignment.

Government theory, also developed by Chomsky (1981), explains how grammatical relations are established between constituents. Government theory posits that a governor (usually a verb or preposition) assigns case to its governed element (usually a noun or pronoun). This theory is central to this analysis as it provides the conditions for principles of other theories to apply, enabling the identification of errors in grammatical relations.

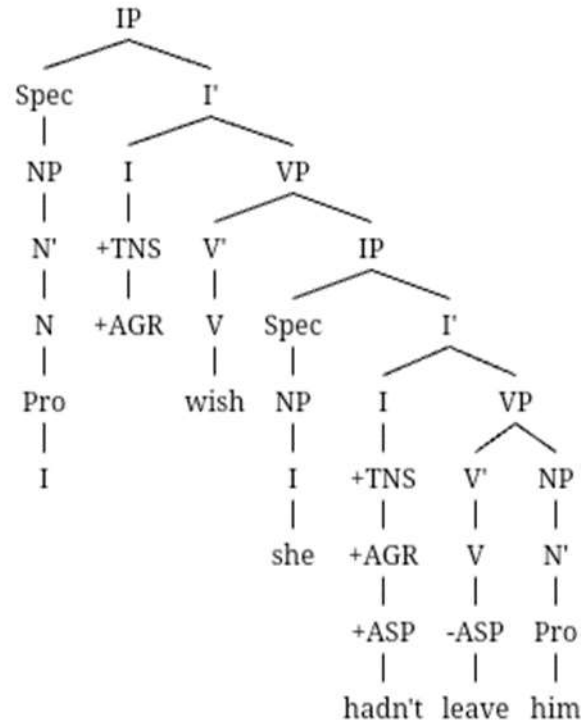
The X-bar, Case, and Government sub-theories are valid for this analysis because they provide a comprehensive framework for analysing, identifying, and classifying morphosyntactic errors in narrative essays. By utilising these sub-theories within the GB framework, this study aims to analyse morphosyntactic errors in narrative essays, identify and classify these errors, and provide insights into the nature and types of morphosyntactic errors in narrative essays.

Analysis of Sample Data

1. *We pray they haven't abandon him.

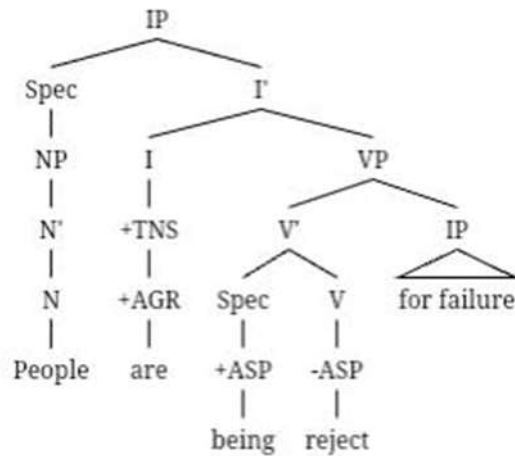


2. *I wish she hadn't leave him



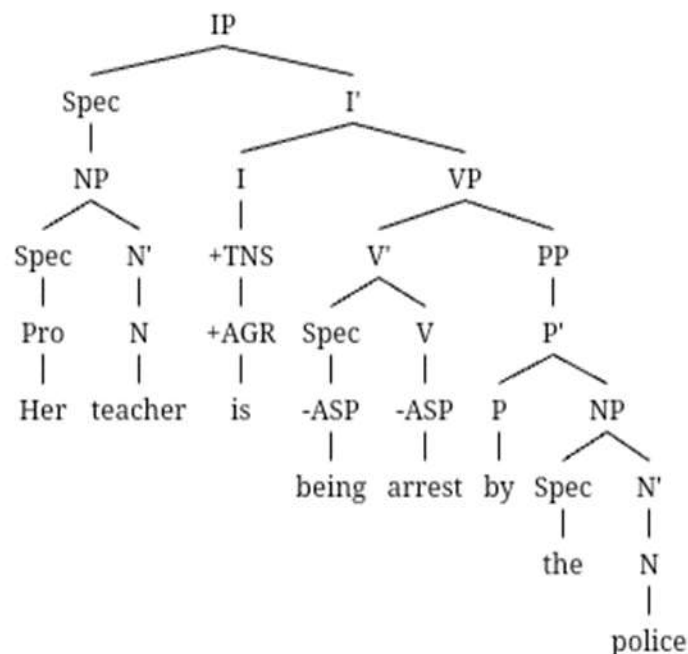
In sentences (1) and (2) above, the analysis examines the structural relationship between the auxiliary verbs *had* and *have* and the lexical verbs *leave* and *abandon*, where the lexical verbs should agree with the auxiliary verbs in terms of aspect. However, the structures become ungrammatical when they violate the Spec-Head agreement principle, which requires specifiers and heads to share the same structural features, including tense, number, and aspect. This principle is illustrated in Sentence 2, where the lexical verb should be in the aspectual form but is incorrectly presented in the simple present tense.

3* People are being reject for failure.



The lexical verb *reject* violates the Spec-Head agreement principle of the X-bar. The auxiliary verb *are being* marks the present continuous passive aspect, but the lexical verb *reject* fails to agree with this aspectual feature, instead appearing in the simple present tense form.

4 *Her teacher is being arrest by the police



The lexical verb *arrest* also violates the Spec-Head agreement principle of the X-bar module of GB theory. The auxiliary verb *is being* marks the present continuous passive aspect, but the lexical verb *arrest* fails to agree with this aspectual feature, instead appearing in the simple present tense form. This disagreement between the auxiliary verb and the lexical verb results in the ungrammaticality of the sentence. More similar grammatical discrepancy sentences are exemplified below:

5*[IP We VP,ASP-PERF have V° arrange it.]

6*[IP He VP should ASP-PERF have V° marry her.]

7*[IPI VP,ASP-PERF am V° please]

8*[IP You VP might ASP-PERF be V° carry way.]

9*[CP C, ASP-PERF Has [IP he VP, V° correct it?]]

In the above structures, the lexical verbs *arrange*, *marry*, *please*, *carry*, and *correct* lack aspectual marking (ASP) inflection, specifically the *-ed* morpheme, which is required to indicate the perfective aspect. Despite the use of ASP auxiliary verbs like *am*, *have*, *has*, and *be*, the lexical verbs remain uninflected.

Further, the writing exhibits errors in tense usage, as seen in the following sentences.

10*[CP, Spec How C did [IP you TNS,PST finished it?]]

11*[IPI VP, MOD would TNS, PST stopped my cousin.]

12*[IP[Who TNS,PR bring the thief CP who IP VP TNS,PST stole my wallet?]]

13*[IP My mother TNS,PST said [she TNS,PRS want to beat the thief.]]

14*[IP She TNS,PST said [IP the thief TNS,PRS make her feel bad.]]

The structures above reveal inconsistent expression of tense. The errors indicate a lack of understanding of tense consistency and the correct use of auxiliary verbs. For example, in sentences 10 and 11, the verbs *finished* and *stopped* are incorrectly inflected, failing to agree with the past tense auxiliary verb *did* and the modal auxiliary verb *would*, respectively. Similarly, in sentence 12, the verb *bring* is incorrectly used in the present tense instead of the past tense *brought*, which *would* agree with the past tense verb *stole*. Furthermore, in sentences 13 and 14, the reported speech requires the past tense form of the verbs *want* and *make*, respectively, which is not observed. Additionally, these errors also violate the spec-head agreement, where the specifier and head of a phrase must agree in features such as tense, number, and person. The incorrect use of tense in these sentences disrupts this agreement, leading to ungrammatical constructions. See the exemplifications below:

15*[IP, Spec {+PLR} They VP {+SGL} hopes for the best.]

16*[IP, Spec {+PLR} You VP {+SGL} looks so unkempt.]

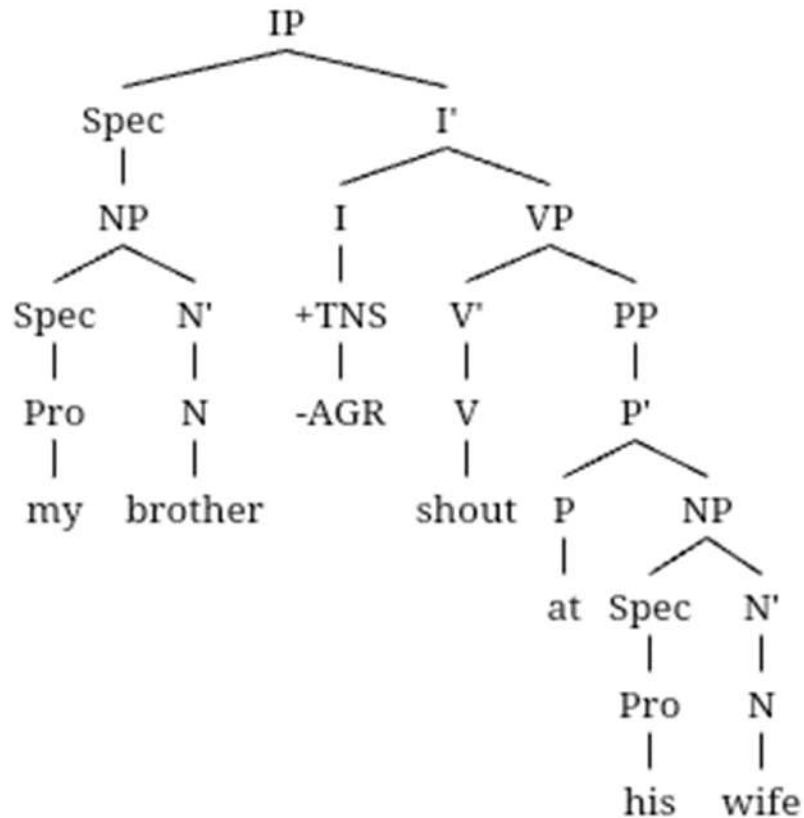
17*[IP, Spec {+PLR} **People** VP {+SGL} believes the man]

18*[IP, Spec {+PLR} **They** VP {+SGL} sees his good deeds.]

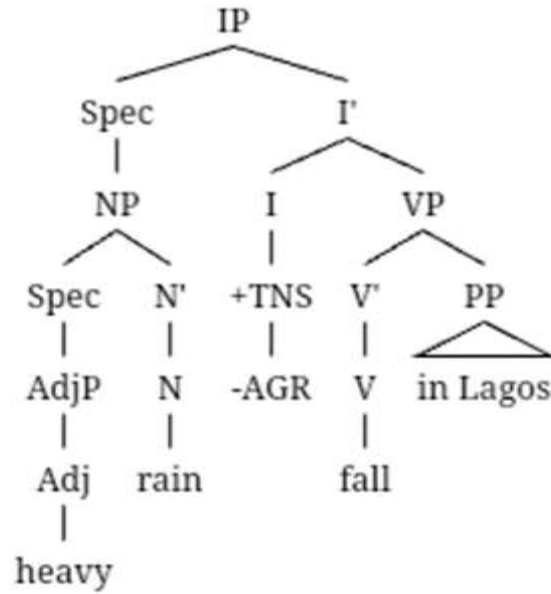
19*[IP, Spec {+PLR} **men** VP {+SGL} loves honesty.]

The structures above demonstrate a violation of the Spec-Head agreement in terms of number features. Specifically, the subject-verb agreement is inconsistent, where plural subjects are incorrectly paired with singular verbs. For instance, in sentences (15-19), the plural subjects *they*, *you*, *people*, *they*, and *men* are incorrectly paired with the singular verbs *hopes*, *looks*, *believes*, *sees*, and *loves*, respectively. These errors suggest a lack of mastery of the English number system and the structural relations between verbs and nouns.

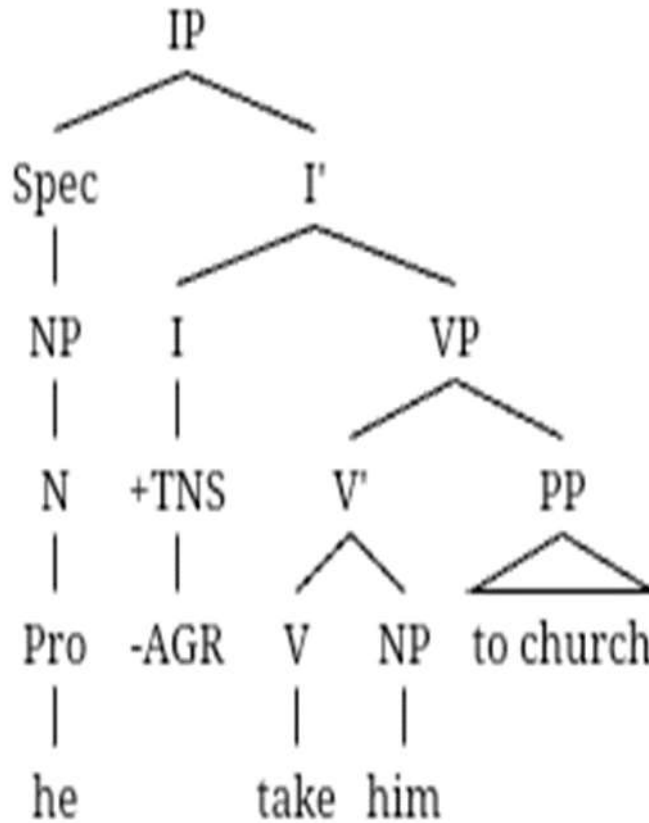
(20). *My brother shout at his wife



(21).* Heavy rain fall in Lagos.



(22). * He take him to church



(23)* [IP, Spec {+SGL}]It VP {+PLR}give me joy.]

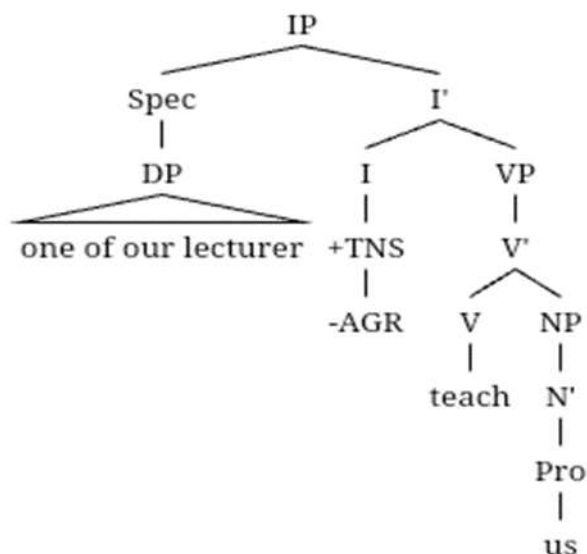
(24)*[IP, Spec {+SGL}The sun VP {+PLR rise.}]

(25)*[IPsec {+SGL}The chief VP {+PLR}accept him.]

(26)*[IP, Spec {+SGL} Plan VP {+PLR}fail.]

(27)*[IP, Spec {+SGL **My father** VP {+PLR}reject the envelope]

(28). * One of our lecturer teach us



(29)*[IP, Spec {+SGL}He VP {+PLR} continue the journey]

(30)*[IP, Spec {+SGL}She VP {+PLR} decide to surrender the weapon]

(31)*[IP, Spec {+SGL}He VP {+PLR} want grace]

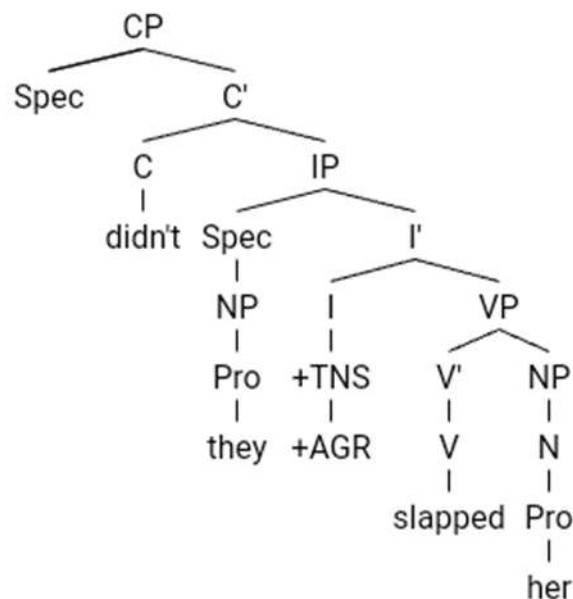
(32)*[IP, Spec {+SGL}He VP {+PLR}take his life]

(33)*[IP, Spec{Φ} am fine[IP, Spec {INDEF= SGL} everyone VP know.]]

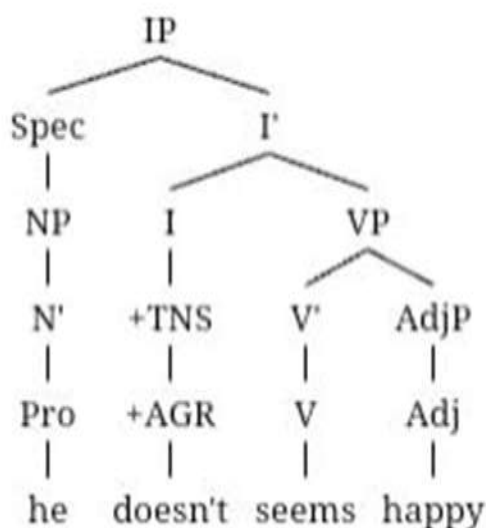
The structures above demonstrate a violation of the Spec-Head agreement in terms of number features. Specifically, the subject-verb agreement is inconsistent, where singular subjects are incorrectly paired with plural verbs. For instance, in sentences (20-33), the singular subjects *it*, *the sun*, *the chief*, *plan*, *my father*, *he*, *she*, *he*, and *he* are incorrectly paired with the plural verbs *give*, *rise*, *accept*, *fail*, *reject*, *continue*, *decide*, *want*, and *take*, respectively.

Sentences (20-33) perhaps show a lack of mastery of the English number system and the structural relations between verbs and nouns. The ungrammaticality of the sentences above is not only in their violation of Spec-Head agreement but also in the subcategorisation frame, where the verb's number feature does not match the subject's number feature.

From the foregoing, it is observed that structures (20-33) have +SGL Spec, IPs, and the agreement relation between arguments and verb INF is determined by the external arguments. Despite the consistent number feature of the Spec, IP, the agreement condition is violated in all the structures. Furthermore, the ungrammaticality of the sentences above is not only in their violation of Spec-Head agreement. Sentence (33), for instance, also violates number agreement in the sub-categorisation frame in that the phrase 'everyone' implies plurality of the noun in the complement of the verb; hence the DP construction is faulty. However, another errors related to Inflection are exemplified below:



(34) * Didn't they slapped her?



(35). * He doesn't seems happy

The sentences (34-35) demonstrate a phenomenon where the auxiliary verb, which is morphologically marked for tense, co-occurs with a main verb that is also marked for tense or an adjective that agrees with the subject in number. This results in an error of "feature duplication" or incorrect subject-verb agreement.

In sentence (34), the auxiliary verb *did* is marked for past tense, but the main verb *slapped* should be in its base form *slap* to agree with the auxiliary verb. Similarly, in sentence (35), the auxiliary verb *does* is marked for present tense, but the verb *seem* should be in its base form *seem* to agree with the auxiliary verb, or the adjective *happy* agrees with the subject *it*, which is singular. This error suggests that the writers may not have a thorough understanding of English verbal morphology, particularly with regards to the use of auxiliary verbs and the distribution of tense features.

In second language contexts, crucial linguistic features are often overlooked, leading to ungrammaticality in written language. This neglect is evident in the sentences extracted from the narrative essays. According to Government-Binding (GB) theory and X-bar theory, all clauses must have subjects, as stipulated by the Projection Principle. However, this principle is frequently violated in the sentences extracted. The sentences are exemplified below:

(36)[IP Now Spec{Φ} VP am a worthless boy]

(37)[IP, Spec{Φ} VP am reading to pass my exams.]

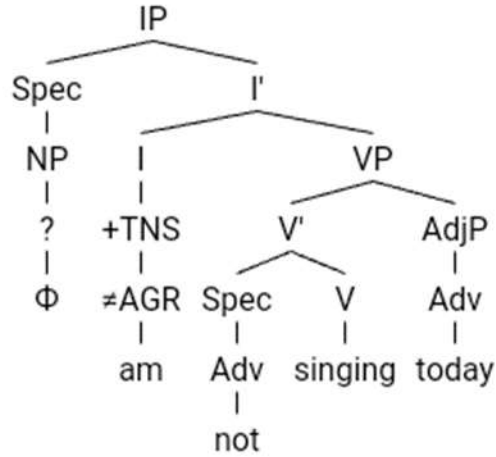
(38)[IP, Spec She knows IP, Spec{Φ} V Pam honest.]]

(39)[IP, Tolu Spec{Φ}VP am with you.]

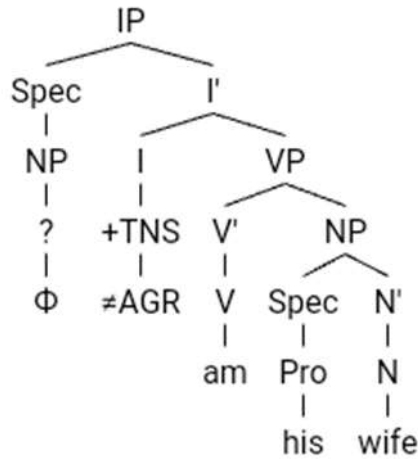
(40)[IP, Spec{Φ}VP am about to do something stupid.]

(41)[IP, Spec{Φ}VP am upset right now.]

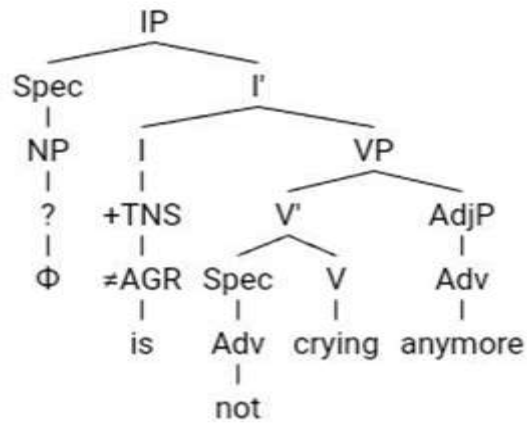
(42) Am not singing today.



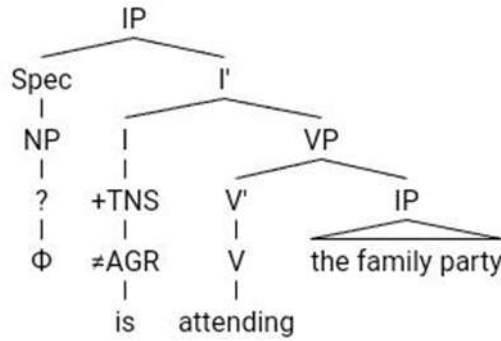
(43)Am his wife.



(44) Is not crying anymore.



(45) Is attending the family party.



(46) Is a teacher who loves students

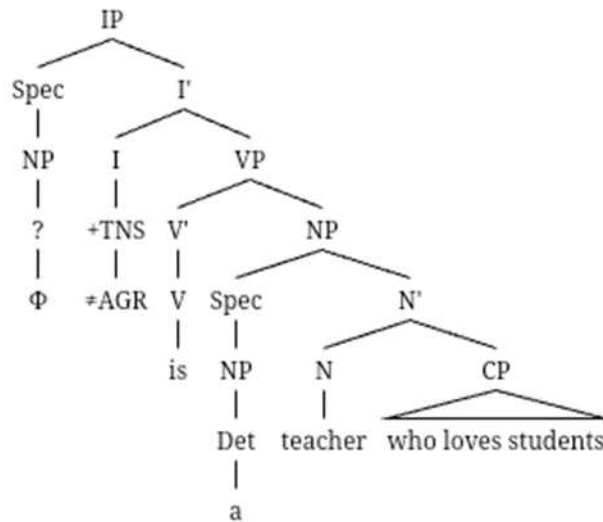
The above structures exhibit a consistent lack of properly projected subjects in the Spec,IP position. Sentences (36-46) demonstrate this absence, while sentences (36-43) are incomplete, lacking the subject *I* before the verb *am*. Sentences (44-46) are also complete, lacking the subject *he/she* before the verb *is*. This neglect of crucial linguistic features, particularly subject-verb agreement and clause structure, results in ungrammatical sentences. In Government-Binding (GB) theory, the Projection Principle requires all clauses to have subjects, but these sentences violate this principle, highlighting the importance of proper subject projection in constructing grammatically correct sentences.

(47)[Take your time, [IP, Spec{Φ} VP am not going now.]

(48)[IP, Spec{Φ} VP am so glad he came.]

(49)[IP, Spec{Φ} VP is you who disappointed her.]

(50)[IP, Spec{Φ} VP is a good teacher.]



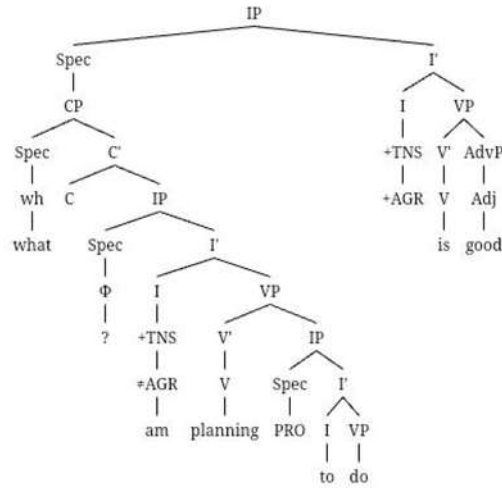
(51)[IP, Spec{Φ} VP am devastated.]

(52)[IP, Spec{Φ} VP am not leaving you.]

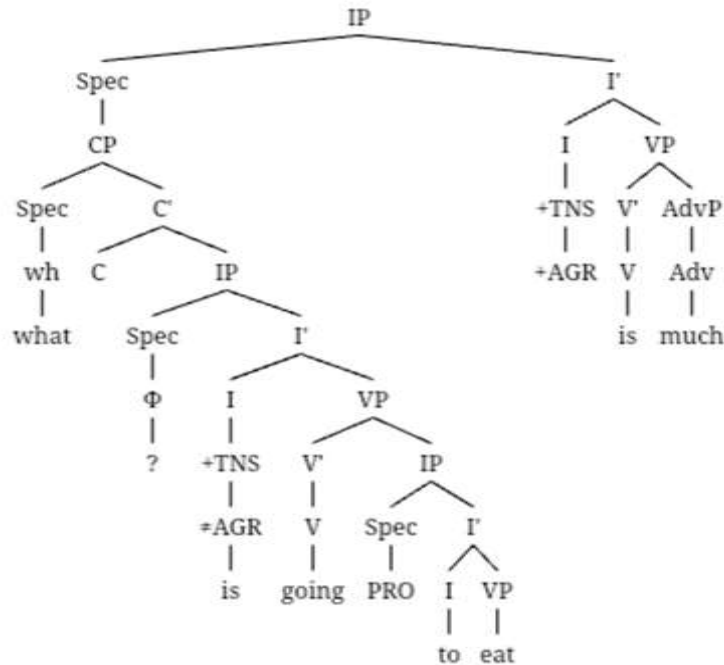
(53)[IP, Spec{Φ} VP am ready to take the risk.]

A notable feature of the above sentences is the pervasive absence of explicit subjects and verbs. Specifically, the subject *I* is consistently omitted in sentences (47), (48), (51), (52), and (53). Additionally, sentence (49) omits the subject *it* while (50) omits the subject *he/she*. This pattern of omission is consistent with spoken language tendencies, where certain words or phrases are often elided for brevity or informality. However, in written language, these omissions can affect clarity and grammatical accuracy. Additional morphosyntactic errors observed in the written text are listed below:

(54).* What am planning to do is good.



(55) What is going to eat is much



(56)*I (went) there and (take) the goods

+PAST +PRES

(57)*I (was cooking) when he (collect) the handbag.

+PAST +PRES

(58)* If I had (known) I would have (leave) it

+PAST +PRES

(59) *He (submit) the file and (left) immediately.

+PRES +PAST

(60) *He promised that he (((will) buy me the gift if I put him through.

+PAST +PRES

(61)* I (gave) him the food and he ((return) my belongs.

+PAST

+PRES

The sentences (56-61) exhibit a pervasive issue with inconsistent verb tense usage, resulting in noticeable tense errors. Specifically, sentences (56), (57), (58), (60), and (61) incorrectly switch from past to present tense or vice versa, while sentence (59) incorrectly switches from present to past tense. These errors can disrupt the coherence and clarity of the writing, making it essential to maintain consistent verb tense usage throughout the text to ensure effective communication.

Conclusion

This study examined the morpho-syntactic errors in the narrative essays of first-year undergraduate students of English in southwestern Nigeria. The analysis revealed a pervasive presence of morpho-syntactic errors, including violations of Spec-Head Agreement. Specifically, the specifier and head failed to agree in number, tense, and aspect, resulting in incorrect subject-verb agreement. The analysis also revealed morphological inaccuracies, characterised by redundant duplication of inflectional morphological features and omission of inflectional markings. Furthermore, the study found inconsistent verb tense usage, which resulted in noticeable tense errors, disrupting the coherence and clarity of the writing.

The study found that these errors compromise the clarity, coherence, and overall effectiveness of the students' writing. According to Hinkel (2004), "language learners' grammatical errors are often the result of incomplete or inaccurate linguistic knowledge.". This is evident in the students' writing, where inadequate grammar instruction and insufficient writing practice may have contributed to the errors.

Additionally, the influence of the students' native language (L1) on their English language (L2) writing may also be a factor, as noted by Ferris (2002), who states that "L1 influence can affect various aspects of L2 writing, including grammar, vocabulary, and discourse structure." Furthermore, Hyland (2003) highlights the importance of explicit instruction and feedback in improving students' writing skills, particularly in areas such as grammar and vocabulary.

To address these errors, educators and instructors should emphasise grammatical accuracy, provide targeted support, and offer extensive writing practice with constructive feedback. Additionally, explicitly highlighting differences between spoken and written English grammar will prevent learners from transferring spoken language features to written language. By providing targeted instruction and support, educators can help students develop the writing skills necessary to produce coherent, well-structured, and error-free written texts.

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