

THE ABUSE OF ENGLISH BY VISTA STUDENTS

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1. INTRODUCTION

Jane Austen he is very much wanting to show characters relationships here. Due to the fact that every cloud has a silver lining the heart of Darcy is not angry and he show remorsefulness when Elizabeth appeared to be understanding.

Needless to say, the second year student who wrote this in a test failed dismally; she had, in effect, prejudiced her chances by horrendous grammatical errors, and any possible accurate insights could hardly have saved her.

Fraenkel (1967:11) notes that in any language 'most people believe that grammar is more resistant to change than vocabulary'. This view can be adapted and applied to individual ability, too: the second language user can learn vocabulary easily enough; it is the grammatical aspect that thwarts him most often. This is true for both casual conversation and formal writing. Although the more formal the situation is, the more standard English forms the second-language user is likely to produce (cf. De-Stefano 1973:6), the fact is that many such users are generally incompetent and cannot produce acceptable English under any circumstances.

Habitual language use, or abuse, by a person or a group of people is often dependent on social and cultural factors, of switching to or interference from the mother language (cf. Fishman 1972:77, 109; Mawasha 1976b:42-44). Therefore, it is agreed that

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 (Lado 1957:2)

This has proven to be the case with the majority of students on the Mamelodi campus of Vista University.

Sterling research has been carried out by Mawasha (1976a; 1976b; 1979; 1984) on the English used by North Sotho pupils, and Bedford (1985) has examined the use of English by tyro first year Black students at the Sebokeng College of Education.

The study undertaken here has examined the writing of sophomores taking English II at Vista University (Mamelodi campus); in other words, those who have been able to pass at first year level, even if it was insight rather than language ability that allowed them to pass. Therefore, those students should have overcome many of the mistakes that they and their fellows made at school. However, few are capable of writing flawless English, and although some have the skill to pass English II, most fail half-way through the year because of their inability to write with sufficient control.

The question is: Which errors remain? In other words, which are the most persistent? As expected, many abuses listed by Mawasha and Bedford (for instance, incorrect spelling, and misuse of negatives, plurals and degrees of comparison) do not feature as major discrepancies at this level, whereas others (such as tense and concord aberrations) remain.

2. METHOD

In this study, an informal type of error analysis was conducted, the purpose being to determine what errors are generally made and how and why they occur. The test and examination scripts of sixty-five students were considered. Although no rigorous statistical analysis was undertaken, common mistakes were regarded as those having been made any number of times by at least half of the students. Moreover, a contrastive analysis of the North Sotho and English syntactic systems was made to account for some of the abuse, North Sotho being the most common first language of students on the Mamelodi campus of Vista, and also being syntactically related to Tswana - the second most common.*

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EXAMPLES OF ABUSE

3.1 *Pronouns*

As the noun and pronoun can be used together with the subjectival concord in North Sotho, a superfluous combination results when this is translated literally into English, and it is obvious that such a literal or direct translation is the cause of most errors. Consequently, we receive sentences such as 'God He is with us' and 'John he is here'. This incorrect form comes from the construction 'Monna o reka kgomo' ('The man he buys a cow'), the 'o' being the pronoun used in North Sotho as a rule.

The pronoun causes further problems in that in North Sotho 'o' is used for both masculine and feminine, thus giving one the construction 'Elizabeth saw his father' or 'When I saw John, she said', there being no distinction of gender.

3.2 *Tenses*

Another failing of Vista students is the incorrect use of the continuous present tense. As examples, we have 'This is making Chantecler to have a prophetic dream' and 'It is now old and he might be having money to buy another one'. The students' propensity for using stative verbs as active ones probably arises from the practice in North Sotho of using an auxiliary verb in forming a compound predicate. As a result, stative verbs are literally translated as active ones, with the following typical outcome: 'Yena o bile a ba le bothata' becomes 'He was having a problem' instead of 'He has had a problem' (which the students certainly have as far as this construction is concerned).

Another problem is the mixing of tenses, as in 'She went to the farm and then she milks the cows', a direct translation of 'O ile polaseng gomme a gama dikgomo', the 'O ile polaseng' being a perfect tense and 'gama' being present. This springs from the usage of a narrative tense in North Sotho when a consecutive action is described. In this case, the earlier action indicates that events took place in the past; therefore, 'gama' ('milks') is used and not 'gamile' ('milked'). (The Afrikaans 'toe melk sy die koeie' and not 'toe het sy die koeie gemelk' also comes to mind here.)

3.3 *Concord: subject-verb agreement*

In North Sotho, no distinction is made in the number of person in the verb. Whereas in English we say 'She goes home' but 'They go home', in North Sotho the verb in both cases is 'ya': 'O ya gae' and 'Ba ya gae'. This is why students make mistakes

such as the following: 'The ladies turns to him', 'The day does not matches the beauty of his love', 'Modern English also have adopted certain words or phrases from Middle English', and 'He provide this ladies with many things'.

3.4 *Articles*

As no definite or indefinite article is found in any Black language in this country, problems arise with article usage. Buthelezi (1983:28) points out that

both definiteness and indefiniteness can be derived from the context. In isolation the noun almost invariably denotes indefiniteness. Where definiteness is desired pronouns such as the absolute or personal pronoun, the demonstrative or enumerative pronoun can be used. Sometimes change in word-order can be used to foreground a noun as subject.

As a result, 'The hero arrives' becomes 'Hero he arrives' (from the North Sotho 'Mogale o tlile') with the weakest students, and 'Hero arrives' with stronger but still not fluent ones. Similarly, confusion is evident in sentences such as 'It is to be found in the nature' and 'He uses image of great strong materials'.

3.5 *Word order*

In discussing problems arising in article usage, Buthelezi (1983:28) mentions that word order can be changed in a Black language to 'foreground a noun as subject'. This phenomenon exists, of course, in many languages and causes most second language speakers of English difficulty, as Steedman (1985:passim) points out in his fine article on dependence and co-ordination in Dutch and English grammar.

Because of this, it is understandable that we have students writing 'Our bodies and other possessions we inherit them when we come to earth,' and 'Ability they showed much.'

3.6 *Cliches/verbosity/flowery writing/circumlocution*

Mother-tongue interference results not merely in problems of word order or concord, but also in stylistic deviance. Cliches, verbosity, flowery writing and circumlocution all appear to be a result of cultural influences and teaching at school. Idiomatic language that is used frequently in North Sotho is regarded as trite, verbose or hyperbolic when translated into English. The following is a typical example: 'He is hungry' becomes 'He is being killed by hunger' from 'O bolawa ke tlalo'. An example of circumlocution is 'Jane Austen she uses satire that is good

here' (instead of 'Jane Austen uses effective satire here') from 'Jane Austen yena o diriša satire ya e thabišago mo'.

Circumlocution and idiomatic expressions are used in North Sotho because of the relative lack of adjectives when compared to English. Therefore, if a student, in referring to Mark Antony's funeral oration in *Julius Caesar*, wishes to write 'This is a stirring speech', he may translate it directly from the North Sotho 'Ke polelo ye e thabišago' and put down 'This speech that pleases'. To be more extreme, the very weak student instead of writing 'His words impress her' might say 'Words of him they her impress' from the North Sotho 'Mantšu a gagwe a a mo thabiša'. Here the word 'mo' is a prefix with a pronominal function. One can never have 'a thabiša mo' ('they impress her'); hence the wrong order in the English sentence.

3.7 *The possessive case*

Some students have trouble using the possessive case properly, either not adding an 's' or adding it but omitting the apostrophe examples being: 'In Shakespeare poem the patron does not change' and 'The nuns priests faith is projected in his continual reference to God'.

Surprisingly, the students seem to have overcome mother-language interference here, because word order in North Sotho, for instance, would presuppose the 'of' construction as in 'The novel of Jane Austen is interesting', from 'Puku ya Jane Austen e a ratwa'. Here, the possession is always placed before the possessor, a lengthy description being employed to indicate the possessive case.

Therefore, the failure to use the apostrophe properly appears to be a lack of understanding of its function rather than of interference.

3.8 *The infinitive*

Students also have difficulty in understanding the usage of the infinitive. Their confusion leads to constructions such as 'In the end, God will make it to be revealed', 'Despite the power of external forces to can change things', 'This is making Chantecleer to have a prophetic dream' and 'Prospero wanted to accomplished all things'.

No matter how often this type of mistake is pointed out to students they find difficulty in overcoming it, probably because of their thinking in their mother-language and then translating directly. The North Sotho for 'He made him return' is 'O dirile

gore a boe', which, literally, is 'He made him so that he returned', with 'gore' meaning 'so that'. This is a conjunction now, but it developed from the infinitive, being an equivalent of 'to'; hence, the error.

3.9 *Prepositions*

Prepositions are a problem (and not only with those having English as a second language). We have students writing: 'The poet's magnitude of love to his lover', 'The addressed is still in good terms by the speaker' and 'He takes refuge into a foreign country'. Obviously, lack of contact with the language is a cause of these errors, but another is the students' reliance on their first language for the correct preposition. 'Go', for instance, means 'in/by/upon/to' in a direct translation; the student often selects the wrong word.

3.10 *Phrases/word combinations*

A major problem that Vista's second-year students have is the failure to grasp the usage of certain phrases and word combinations, the most glaring one being the 'She is too happy/beautiful/good' syndrome. This is generally a result of literal translations. For instance, 'O thabile kudu' becomes 'He is much/very much/too happy'. Similarly, 'She is no longer there' becomes 'She is no more there' from 'Ga a sale gona', as 'longer' is not found in this context in North Sotho.

Finally, there is the 'other ... other' combination: 'One man is ill, the other well', becomes 'The other man is ill, the other is well' because of the same form being used for both constructions in North Sotho: 'Monna yo mongwe o a lwala. Yo mongwe o fodile'.

4. CONCLUSION

From the above it appears that the mistakes made by Vista's second-year English students are the result of mother-language interference in the main. This is in accord with Lado's (1964: 52) view that

problems are those units and patterns that show structure differences between the first language and the second

However, bad teaching, which is a related aspect, cannot be disregarded.

Possibly, many of these shortcomings or abuses are reliquiae of the failings of the students' teachers (Black language speakers

who, in turn, received their second-language input from non-native speakers (cf. Buthelezi 1983:42.) As Mawasha (1976a: passim; 1979:46) points out, most English second-language teachers are inadequately qualified for their posts. Therefore, unless a mediocre or poor university student receives intensive remedial instruction it is likely that such ingrained language abuse will be rectified.

Although Mawasha (1984:12) contends that despite a 'serious deterioration in proficiency in spoken English', he does not 'think the same argument holds as firmly for written English', the examples cited in this article belie this view. There is little hope for any improvement in written English, particularly under the present socio-political system (cf. Lanham 1963:153-154), with the only real chance of Blacks receiving instruction from a mother-tongue English speaker being at tertiary level - and by then it is in all likelihood too late.

This lack of ability can lead to all round poor educational performance, as comprehensive as well as expressive adroitness is impaired.

Vista does have some excellent English students. But unless it introduces a relevant and intensive English language course for the poorer (and that is most) students, the picture will be a dismal one. Small wonder that at this stage a second-year student writes: 'Jane Austen he is very much wanting to show characters relationships here.'

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